

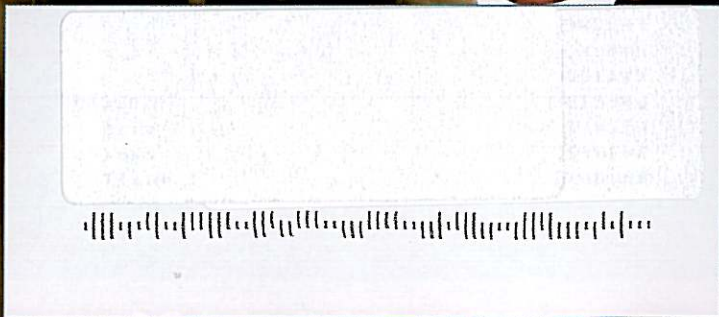
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ASSOCIATION

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MEETINGS

A MEETINGSNET MAGAZINE



How the American Volleyball Coaches Association made its convention a must-attend event.

The AVCA's Director of Operations
Jason Jones and Executive
Director Kathy DeBoer



(CHECK IN)

With Editor
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FIVE LESSONS FROM TWO THRIVING MEETINGS

This issue features two associations—the Anxiety Disorders Association of America and the American Volleyball Coaches Association—that have grown their meeting attendance and membership in recent years, despite the economy. Here are five lessons I took away from their success stories.

SEEK OUT NEW MARKETS. Both the ADAA and the AVCA expanded their reach by going after people who never had been members. For the ADAA, which was made up of professionals who treat anxiety disorders, this meant tapping a new source—researchers. For the AVCA, coaches from large universities dominated the membership rolls, so the AVCA sought high school and club coaches.

ELIMINATE OBSTACLES TO ATTENDANCE. For the AVCA meeting, most high school coaches and club coaches can't get time off during the week to attend and they have to pay their own way. So, AVCA put together a weekend package that invited these coaches to attend Friday night through Sunday at a reduced cost.

ADD COMPELLING REASONS TO ATTEND. The AVCA added competitions that attract top teams and players from around the country. Players come so they can show off their skills to college coaches. The coaches love it because they can evaluate hundreds of players in a short period of time.

VALUE YOUR SPONSORS. The AVCA has moved its instructional sessions to volleyball courts that are in the exhibit hall. When the teaching time ends, the attendees are in the expo hall already and they visit the booths. Also, the AVCA has limited the number of sponsorships. AVCA's partners appreciate this approach, because it increases the value of their investment.

INCREASE THE FREQUENCY OF CONFERENCE REMINDERS. Conceding that its members are focused on their careers, not the conference, the ADAA placed its promotions in front of the membership more often.

What are your best ideas for building membership and attendance? Your fellow readers and I would love to hear them. Visit MeetingsNet.com, search this article, and add your comments at the end of it. ■

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The American Volleyball Coaches Association's Director of Operations Jason Jones and Executive Director Kathy DeBoer

HOW THE AMERICAN VOLLEYBALL COACHES ASSOCIATION MADE ITS CONVENTION A MUST-ATTEND EVENT

BY DAVE KOVALESKI

Kathy DeBoer calls it the big-tent strategy. It's the broad principle that has helped her association, the **American Volleyball Coaches Association**, experience a 56 percent spike in attendance in the past three years, including a jump of nearly 20 percent in 2009.

"Anybody who is even mildly interested in the sport of volleyball, we want to give them a reason to come to our annual convention," says DeBoer, executive director at AVCA. "We try to offer something for everyone in the marketplace."

Through a variety of marketing initiatives, a tournament, and partnerships—including one with the National Collegiate Athletic Association that puts AVCA next to the biggest stage in the sport every year—officials at AVCA continue to bring more people into the tent.

Their success provides a lesson in how to turn a convention into a must-attend event.

MEETING ON A NATIONAL STAGE

Since the AVCA launched in 1981, the association has held its convention in conjunction with the NCAA Women's Volleyball Championships, which is the Final Four of women's volleyball, the biggest annual event in the volleyball world. It's been a great partnership, one that is beneficial to both the AVCA and the NCAA, DeBoer says.

The semifinal and championship matches, which take place Thursday and Saturday evenings, serve as AVCA's off-site entertainment. Attendees buy their own tickets to the matches, but they receive preferred seating.

For the NCAA, the partnership creates an opportunity to communicate with coaches and bring the volleyball community together, says Sharon Cessna, NCAA Division I director of championships. "Working with the AVCA gives the coaches and the NCAA a platform to collaborate on moving the championship forward, as well as the game itself," she says.

BOOKING THE EVENTS

The NCAA selects the destinations for both the championship and the AVCA convention, which run simultaneously. The AVCA sends its specs for the convention to the NCAA, says Jason Jones, director of operations at AVCA, and the specs are included in the NCAA's requests for proposals. Once the site is chosen, AVCA signs all the con-



Jason Jones, director of operations for the AVCA, is responsible for its contracts with convention properties and vendors.

tracts with the convention center, hotels, and vendors and begins the process of planning the event.

In 2009, Tampa Bay was a great fit. The convention was held at the Tampa Bay Convention Center, December 16–20, while the NCAA championships were held at the St. Petersburg Times Forum on December 17 and 19.

“We’re fortunate to have our convention center right across the street from our competition venue, the St. Pete Times Forum,” says Robert Higgins, executive director at the Tampa Sports Commission. Attendees could walk from the headquarters hotel to the convention center to the matches.

The 2009 convention set an attendance record for AVCA with more than 2,000 attendees—an 18 percent increase over the 2008 show. Since 2006, attendance has grown 56 percent. That kind of growth is good in any economy, but it’s exceptional during a recession.

WEEKEND PACKAGES BUILD ATTENDANCE

There are many elements in AVCA’s attendance-building strategy, but they revolve around a simple premise: “Look at your marketplace and see where there are opportunities to give people a reason to be there,” says DeBoer, a former women’s volleyball coach at the University of Kentucky who was inducted into the school’s athletics hall of fame last year.

That’s exactly what AVCA did when DeBoer came on board as executive director in 2006. Before that, the association had largely been for collegiate volleyball coaches only—and mostly Division I (big-school) coaches.

“Four years ago we said, ‘Let’s take the next step.’ For us, that meant attracting high school volleyball coaches,” DeBoer says. By seeking out high school coaches, its pool of potential members and conference attendees increased by 15,000.

Then the question was: What

could AVCA offer that would draw the coaches to the conference?

The biggest obstacles were scheduling and cost, DeBoer says. Most high school coaches aren’t on holiday break yet when the convention takes place and can’t get time off during the week to attend the conference. Plus, most high school coaches have to pay their own way to attend.

So, AVCA put together a weekend package that invites high school coaches to attend Friday night through Sunday at a reduced cost. The package also was designed to appeal to club coaches—people who run community volleyball leagues.

NEW MARKETS, NEW PARTNERS

Another way AVCA broadened its appeal was by courting attendees from a nontraditional corner of its industry: sand volleyball (also known as beach volleyball).

AVCA had always catered to

“court volleyball,” which is played in a gym, on a court, with six players to a side. But sand volleyball—which has similar rules and is played on sand with two players per team—is a growing sport that AVCA had no connection to prior to 2009.

AVCA formed a partnership with the Association of Volleyball Professionals—the organization that runs the professional sand volleyball tour (the AVP Pro Beach Volleyball Tour)—to have a sand court installed inside the convention center for instructional purposes. The sand court, along with two hard courts, are set up in the exhibit hall so instruction can take place in close proximity to the booths on the exhibit floor.

AVCA also reached out to USA Volleyball, which is the governing body for the sport, to offer a new accreditation program for coaches

who want to take courses and earn credits to become certified to coach sand volleyball.

To market the program to the beach volleyball community, AVCA invited the tournament directors and club coaches from the Amateur Athletic Union Beach Volleyball program, which runs amateur and community leagues, to hold its annual business meeting at AVCA.

Further, the convention received national media exposure in 2009 as the host of a press conference held by the leaders of the Women’s National Volleyball Association, which is launching a new women’s pro volleyball league this year.

“Having that press conference on site added to the idea of really trying to build the prestige of this event,” says Will Engle, assistant director, events and public relations, at AVCA.



**“LOOK AT YOUR
MARKETPLACE
AND ... GIVE
PEOPLE A
REASON TO
BE THERE.”**

—KATHY DeBOER



LIVE

FROM THE MLS DRAFT!

Like the American Volleyball Coaches Association, the National Soccer Coaches Association of America enjoyed a surge in attendance at its last meeting. The 2010 NSCAA annual convention in Philadelphia in January attracted about 8,000 people—an 11 percent increase over the 7,200 it drew to St. Louis in 2009.

And like AVCA, the NSCAA has a partnership that puts the convention in the spotlight. For the past seven years, NSCAA has held its convention in conjunction with the Major League Soccer draft—a nationally televised event where the MLS pro soccer teams draft the top amateur soccer players from around the world.

The idea to merge the two events came from MLS, which thought it made sense to hold the draft in front of a built-in audience of soccer coaches, says Geoff Hayes, vice president, special events, at MLS. For the NSCAA, the MLS draft adds some prestige and visibility to the convention and gives attendees the opportunity to attend the draft.

The draft took place in a ballroom at the Pennsylvania Convention Center in Philadelphia, a space that NSCAA books for MLS, explains Robert Robinson, convention manager at NSCAA. The NSCAA convention took place in the rest of the convention center. While NSCAA books the space for the draft, MLS handles all of the logistics and planning.

NSCAA also received a big boost from its weekend special. Similar to AVCA, NSCAA offers a weekend package for coaches who can attend only on the weekend. “We doubled our weekend-special numbers this year,” Robinson says. For a reduced rate, people could attend Saturday and Sunday sessions, plus get an annual membership to NSCAA.



Kathy DeBoer, executive director of the AVCA, is the former University of Kentucky women's volleyball coach.

ADDING COMPETITIONS TO THE CONVENTION

AVCA has added its own competitions in order to bring more people to the convention and add value for attendees.

At the 2009 convention, AVCA hosted its inaugural Holiday Juniors Tournament, which took place in the convention center in a space next to the exhibit hall.

The tournament brought about 50 high school teams from around the country. A third party ran the tournament, bleachers were brought in for spectators, and 15 volleyball courts were set up. The tournament wasn't a big revenue-generator for the association, DeBoer says, but that wasn't the point—at least for the first year.

The tournament benefits are

twofold, Jones says. First, it draws more people to the city. "Plus, it's a recruiting event for our college coaches," who have a convenient opportunity to evaluate the high school players (the top 24 high school girl players in the country are invited to compete in AVCA's annual All-America game) and determine if they should be awarded scholarships, Jones says.

"We hope to grow the tournament over the next couple of years to where it actually becomes something that people put on their calendars," he adds.

Logistically, the tournaments create more work, but it's worth the effort. "It's another reason we are giving people to go to the convention," DeBoer says.

THE EXHIBITOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Brad Underwood, president of Sports Imports, a Columbus,

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Ohio-based supplier of volleyball nets, calls AVCA one of the best shows his company attends. What sets AVCA apart from others is how education and training are integrated in the exhibit hall.

"Getting people to the exhibit hall is always a challenge, but AVCA does a tremendous job at that," says Underwood, whose company has multiple booths at AVCA. "Getting people in there is a lot easier when you have top-notch college coaches teaching on one of those courts. [Three training courts are located in the exhibit hall amid the booths.] When they break for half an hour, those people mingle throughout the trade show."

Sports Imports receives a high return on investment from the show, and Underwood credits AVCA with "protecting" their sponsorship investment.

"Their challenge, like any association with sponsorship dollars, is how you set up your sponsorships to create the most value," Underwood says. You can have more sponsorships and charge less, or fewer sponsorships and charge more. AVCA has adopted the latter approach and it has worked well for Sports Imports. "They understand it's a relationship and not a sponsorship, and that's important to us," he says.

Underwood also likes the direction AVCA is headed with its biggest strategy. "They understand that if they can get a coach to that trade show, and see the Final Four, and listen to a top coach present at a clinic, then they'll probably have that coach for the duration of [his or her] coaching career," he says.

A MUST-ATTEND EVENT

From an attendees' perspective, Mary Wise, head women's volleyball coach at the University of

Florida, says the convention has more to offer than it once did. "There was a point in time where the [NCAA] matches themselves were the only real highlights," says Wise, a longtime member and past president of AVCA. "But now it has a much greater educational component than it did the past. It's become a must-attend event.

"I would love to see the casual volleyball fans—with or without tickets to the championship matches—flock to the city like they do for the NCAA men's basketball Final Four," Wise says. "If you have any association with the sport of volleyball, it's where you want to be."

For coaches, the AVCA convention already is. ■

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