What can planners do to bring sexy back to event design? That was one of many provocative questions posed by education presenters at the National Association for Catering and Events' 2015 Experience Conference & Expo, held at Fairmont Scottsdale Princess in Scottsdale, Arizona, July 12-15. A major industry conference for anyone in the catering and events biz, Experience was chockfull of inspiration on everything from wild decor ideas to social media tricks to practical business tips. Connect’s Kelsey Ogletree spoke with Linwood Campbell, president of NACE, about what’s new and next, plus some stealworthy F&B ideas.

Were there any cool new vendors at the conference’s Marketplace Expo this year?

Our demographic ranges from students to small-business owners to catering executives. One hot topic among all of them was Zenefits, a company that manages the benefits portal for small businesses of 50 people or less. We have many business owners who have their sister doing their accounting, etc., and keep up with their own paperwork. This company does it for them and takes off the pressure.

Another one was AFR Furniture Rental. In today’s environment, it’s about connectivity. AFR designs furniture and seating with chargers built in. They run on battery packs so you don’t have to run a cord to the tables.

5 TIPS TO TRY NOW

1. Gone are the days of standing in line to check in. Use the registration feature on the Social Tables app to speed up registration, having your staff check people in via iPads.

2. Help attendees connect with at least two new people at opening reception by giving them someone else’s name badge at registration. They have to find the person who has theirs, and then find the proper owner of the other.

3. Forget standard round tables for general sessions. Rent tables in shapes like octagons, triangles and hexagons, then vary the height, with high-tops positioned in the back of the room to allow guests to see over the people in front.

4. Have fun with F&B. Try serving a lunch exclusively with foods on sticks: think caprese salad, beef kabobs, grilled vegetables and mini cheesecakes. Or play tricks on guests’ eyes with what Campbell calls “the adult version of ‘Alice in Wonderland’.” For one event, he served what looked like red velvet dessert cupcakes that were actually red corn muffins stuffed with short ribs and topped with goat cheese.

5. Look at event vendors in a new way, starting with how you refer to them. Experience keynote speaker Colin Cowie doesn’t use the word vendor, calling them “creative partners” instead—the first step toward becoming more collaborative. Campbell says it became the buzz phrase at the conference.

How do you keep things moving on the trade show floor?

We serve all breaks in the Marketplace, with no seating so people will be forced to engage with others. One thing we served was salad in a bubble. You put the dressing on the bottom and salad on top; seal it; then shake it and your salad is dressed. You can hold the salad in one hand and walk around the expo floor and not feel like you’re juggling something.

What was one of the most popular sessions with attendees?

One was about LGBT and same-sex marriage; people were waiting outside the door. The speaker was really spot-on talking about how the law has changed and how the LGBT community has to be marketed to differently. They’re not traditional thinkers, so they don’t want traditional experiences.

Tell us about the Culinary Experience portion of the event. What is the format like?

In 2008, we rebranded this conference from Education to Experience. It really is about the experiential learning people get here. With the Culinary Experience, we showcase the local food market during a brunch by bringing in top chefs from the area or city where we’re meeting. People sit at tables and experience what the chefs cook onstage, watching their techniques and then sampling the food.

Did you do anything off-site?

Our kickoff party Sunday night was at Chateau Luxe, about 20 minutes from the resort. The theme was “Bling – Dia de los Muertos” (or “Day of the Dead”). Out of more than 600 attendees, I’d say 90 percent dressed up. They were all very creative, wearing anything from traditional Mexican Day of the Dead attire to today’s version of “The Walking Dead.” We had different vodka stations, F&B pairings, aerialists, makeup artists, a booth to create your own fancy hat, parade-style props and lots of special-effect lighting. The opening band was similar to a drum line mixed with the movie “Stomp the Yard.” We also had fortunetellers. There was a big line for that.