WSAE 2025 Women's Forum Recap

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The 2025 WSAE Women's Forum explored the "Art of Influence" providing a space where participants' voices were heard and amplified, experiences were exchanged, and valuable insights were gained. This year, our community of women and allies, association professionals and suppliers, gathered at the beautiful Monona Terrace in Madison on April 1 for an inspiring, informative, and empowering day of presentations and networking.

Opening Keynote: *Courage as a Carry-on: Leading with Innovation, Collaboration, and Inclusivity in the Association Industry*

The event kicked off with an inspiring keynote **"*Courage as a Carry-on: Leading with Innovation, Collaboration, and Inclusivity in the Association Industry*"**. In this session, **sponsored by EDI**, **Lilah Jones** redefined courage in her opening keynote for the 4th annual WSAE Women's Forum.

Jones, a dynamic keynote speaker, leadership coach, and educator, shared how travel creates courage. There are countless unknowns and plan disruptions, from flight delays to getting lost in a country whose language you do not speak. But there are also new experiences, giving travelers the push to try new things and flex the courage muscle despite the fear. That's courage to Jones – not the absence of fear but using fear to ignite action.

She gave attendees five "packing cubes" to put in their daily carry-ons that can help them adopt courage in their lives:

1. Recognize vulnerability as a strength
2. Push toward growth with resilience
3. Build confidence by setting goals, following through, and bearing witness
4. Rely on community support
5. Reflect on the journey

She closed with a question: What have you done or accomplished in five-year increments since striking out on your own?

When we reflect, we notice our health and our habits, and we can better connect to who we are. And we don't have to travel thousands of miles to claim that courage – it can even be as simple as taking a different route home or to the grocery store. See what you notice and see how new experiences may change you.

General Keynote: Unlock the Power of Relationships for Leadership Growth: A Strategic Investment in Your Personal Board

The General Keynote titled **"Unlock the Power of Relationships for Leadership Growth: A Strategic Investment in Your Personal Board"** was presented by leadership coach **Melanie Stuber**. This engaging session, **sponsored by Kalahari Resorts & Conventions**, inspired participants to rethink the way they cultivate support systems for their professional development. Melanie introduced the idea of a personal board of directors—a trusted group of individuals who

can provide guidance, challenge your perspectives, and help you remain accountable on your leadership journey.

By blending real-life examples with discussion and personal reflection, attendees were encouraged to begin their journey by identifying their "why." The session then progressed to pinpointing the traits to look for in potential board members and defining their specific roles—be it as a truth-teller, cheerleader, challenger, or connector. Melanie assisted participants in visualizing what a supportive and strategic board could look like, tailored to their individual needs and leadership aspirations.

One of the most impactful takeaways was the necessity of operationalizing the personal board—making it an ongoing element of their growth strategy rather than a one-off exercise. Attendees walked away with actionable strategies to actively engage their networks, forge meaningful professional relationships, and create a sustainable support system that evolves alongside their journeys. The session was thought-provoking and empowering, reminding everyone that no leader truly grows in isolation.

Breakout 1: Brushing Up on Supplier Partnerships: RFPs, Negotiations & Event Planning

The first breakout session—**"Brushing Up on Supplier Partnerships: RFPs, Negotiations & Event Planning"**—brought together seasoned experts who shared invaluable strategies for mastering the art of influence in event planning. Moderated by **Megan Seppman**, VP of Sales for the Wisconsin Center District, the session highlighted the critical role of collaboration between planners, venues, and service providers.

The panel featured insights from **Danica Potier** of Marcus Hotels & Resorts, **Krissy Sigmund** from Chula Vista Resort, **Tracie Toth** from The Osthoff Resort, and **Angela Wolf** from Aperture Hotels.

This session provided attendees with practical tools and strategies for strengthening their event-planning skills and building powerful, lasting relationships with venues and service providers.

Breakout 2: Sculpting Success: Non-Dues Revenue for Modern Associations

Participants joined **Lexie Mallory** from Wisconsin Hotel & Lodging, **Caley Mutrie, CAE, IOM**, from Association Acumen, and **Lynda Patterson**, **FASAE, CAE**, for a discussion on **"Sculpting Success: Non-Dues Revenue for Modern Associations**." The session got underway with a definition of non-dues revenue, an overview of the average revenue mix for associations, and trends in revenue diversification.

The didactic component of the session was kept brief to provide opportunity for two small groups to form and discuss practical strategies for creating revenue streams that go beyond membership dues, and steps and resources that are needed to develop and execute a non-dues revenue plan.

The groups came back with some intriguing ideas:

- Look beyond members and the internal environment. Consider the unique position the association has to connect members and the public, and what unique skills or resources the association has that can benefit other businesses

- Get rid of all we thought that couldn't work and relook at these as opportunities with application of available new technologies. For example, how can we leverage and monetize AI and digital platforms? One option discussed was using AI to turn content into a podcast format, and translating this into a revenue-generating activity.
- Reinvision and repurpose what our associations and their partners and supporters already possess–data, research, thought leadership, etc.–and create revenue generating opportunities.
- Utilize an LMS, even with AI, as an additional non-dues revenue option.
- Create year-around opportunities and bundle options for sponsors, and hit those wells once. Focus on ROI and communicate this back to supporters.

More information about non-dues revenue and strategies and tactics to use to increase the mix and types an organization can leverage is included post-session and available as noted below:

1. Sculpting Success: Non-Dues Revenue for Modern Association Slide Deck (link)
2. More Non-Dues Revenue Information (handout) (link)

Breakout 3: Sketching Success: The Role of Mentorship in Professional Development

In a later breakout – **"Sketching Success: The Role of Mentorship in Professional Development"** – panelists discussed the role of mentorship in associations. The panel, moderated by **Amanda Niebauer**, EDI, featured a mix of emerging and distinguished leaders including **Tracy Kerns**, Comptroller - *League of Wisconsin Municipalities,* **Denise Husenica, CAE,** *Membership Manager - National Fluid Power Association,* **Morgan Parks, MA,** *Senior Program Manager - Executive Director, Inc., and* **Michelle Vetterkind, CAE**, *President & CEO - Wisconsin Broadcasters Association and Wisconsin Broadcasters Association Foundation.*

Audience members left with key insights on building trustworthy relationships across generational divides:

1. Getting to know the individual
2. Being intentional with your relationships: listening, following up, and being persistent
3. Announcing your intentions and following through (project due dates, conducting training, meeting for lunch, etc.)

They also shared a few best practices from their early and mid-career vantage points, such as making a point to ask for volunteer feedback from each event your organization conducts.

Breakout 4: Want More Members? The 5 Point Proven Blue Print to Increase Your Membership & Revenues

In the final breakout of the day, **Susan Thomson**, a licensed coach and CEO of ActionCOACH Business & Executive Coaching, presented **"Want More Members? The 5 Point Proven Blueprint to Increase Your Membership & Revenues"**.

Susan began with two things that successful organizations do: **Get members and keep members.** She gave us insights into the three myths we've been led to believe that keep our organizations stuck:

- Y**ou just need to do more marketing.** We need to market right by testing and measuring what we're doing and sticking with what works.

- **We have all-volunteer boards and committees and we need to stick to the plan.** When the plan is not engaging people anymore, it is time to change it, and inspire new commitment and action from volunteers.
- **People are holding back because of economic and marketplace uncertainty.** People desire two things: hope and certainty. As association and business professionals, we can strive to give our constituents hope in periods of uncertainty and provide certainty by letting them know how we're going to make things happen.

We learned that people who make more money while working less think differently.

- They **get things done fast**, taking a step back, assessing and planning, and then moving quickly (e.g., new partnerships, revamping the membership process).
- They u**nderstand where power comes from** (ownership, accountable, responsible) **and what takes it away** (blame, excuses, denial).
- They know that **the two words that are the biggest obstacle to learning are "I know,"** and replace it with phrases like "isn't that interesting," to keep the conversation going and be open to further learning.
- And that **working with your organization should be fun**.

The **five-point blueprint** for getting more members and increasing revenue requires us to stop wasting time and money on focusing on the wrong things:

- Get your calendar under control.
- Know the value of your time in dollars/hour.
- Identify the time wasters and the most frustrating items on your to-do lists and delegate or outsource them.
- Focus your time on the things you love and can build connections and revenue.

The plan involves a little "mathing," but at its essence, is this:

of **leads**[1] x **conversion rate**[2] = members

Members x **# of transactions**[3] x **average cost of sale**[4] = revenue

Revenue x **profit margins**[5] = profit

**The superscripts indicate the five key factors we need to focus on as a business strategy.*

The five-point blueprint when applied consistently will increase members, revenue, and profit outcomes.

Closing Keynote: *Stepping into Your Personal Brand: The Process*

Closing out the day with powerful energy and insight, **Megan Kuiper**'s keynote **"Stepping into Your Personal Brand: The Process"** encouraged attendees to lead with authenticity—their greatest superpower. With energy, authenticity, and a touch of sparkle, Megan guided attendees through the transformational journey of embracing their most *authentic* selves as leaders—a move she called their true *superpower*.

Throughout the keynote, Megan challenged participants to rethink how they show up in their professional lives. She helped attendees gain clarity on what their personal brand truly is—what

they want to be known for and how they want others to feel in their presence. Through reflection and storytelling, she addressed the common trap of conforming to others' expectations, reminding us that doing so can water down the very qualities that make us influential and effective.

Attendees walked away with more than just insight—they left with a renewed sense of courage, strategies to overcome limiting beliefs, and the confidence to lead boldly. Megan's message was clear: when you lead from a place of authenticity, you don't just *fit in*—you *stand out*, inspire others, and drive meaningful impact. It was a motivating and energizing session that set the tone for a day filled with growth and connection.

We appreciate the support and contributions of everyone who made this fantastic day possible!

Our 2025 WSAE Star Sponsors: Executive Director, Inc., First Business Bank, Destination Lake Winnebago Region, Kalahari Resorts & Conventions, MemberClicks by Personify, Milford Hills, Discover Green Bay, Fox Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau, Let's Minocqua, The Osthoff Resort, Wisconsin Dells Visitor & Convention Bureau, Stevens Point Area CVB, Visit Brookfield, and VISIT Milwaukee.

Our host, Monona Terrace, for the beautiful meeting space.

And our 2025 Women's Forum Sub-committee: Chair, Monica Goeke; and committee members, Caley Mutrie, Amanda Niebauer; Marissa Lopez, Board Liaison; Laura Lindsay, WSAE Staff; and Jennifer Rzepka, WSAE Staff.

We look forward to carrying forward the momentum, the insights, and the connections made at this year's forum. These conversations are ongoing–with each other and year over year as WSAE celebrates women and allies at the annual Women's Forum. We hope you've enjoyed and found some nuggets of wisdom in what we've shared from this year's forum. Stay tuned for news about the 2026 Women's Forum later this year!