

Managers See Uptick in Institutional Decision-Makers at Conferences

Both asset owners and managers have become more selective about which events they attend and who they send.

By Sam Heller | June 7, 2024

Asset managers are getting more face time with institutional asset allocators at conferences and other in-person events, as asset owners become more selective about who they send to these forums.

To take advantage of conferences, managers are drafting game plans to work the room and show off their staff and company expertise. Some managers are also hosting their own events or prioritizing smaller affairs to get on asset-owner radars more easily.

Institutional investors are sending CIOs and more influential members of their investment teams to conferences than they did before the pandemic, said Malik Murray, head of business development and institutional marketing for Ariel Investments.

"You are beginning to see people who were not enthusiastic about conferences before attending conferences now," he said.

Prior to the pandemic, many allocators took conferences for granted, and it was difficult to gain traction with institutional investors, said Dominica Ribeiro, chief marketing and distribution officer for Breckinridge Capital Advisors in a recent FundFire Exchange webcast. However, two years of largely virtual meetings reiterated the importance of these conferences, she said.

"[T]here is something more spectacular when it comes to in-person interaction and our distribution teams engaging with them," she said.

Given the caliber of the investment professionals in attendance, conferences have become an important marketing technique – speaking on panels or sponsoring events where CIOs are present can help boost a manager's brand awareness among investment chiefs, he added.

Asset managers are not necessarily gaining more new clients than they previously did from these conferences, but these may now be the only opportunity to get in front of top institutional decision-makers, said Seiji Nishimura, head of intermediaries at Pictet Asset Management, USA.

"We don't believe the percentage has necessarily changed, rather, conferences have become even more crucial in the overall equation to secure new clients," he said in a written statement to FundFire.

Indeed, conference attendance is not back up to its heights, and online conferences are still an option for industry professionals who don't want to attend in-person, said Hazem Gamal, Chief Operating Officer for The SME Forum, an organization that organizes institutional asset management events.

"[Asset owners] are becoming much more thoughtful about whether they do attend a conference or not, and if so, which ones are they going to go to," he said.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic's travel restrictions, many institutions decreased their travel budgets, and large national conferences have not regained their importance, said Gabriel Altbach, the chief marketing officer at Voya Investment Management.

"Clients are a little bit more willing to travel regionally and perhaps less willing to go to... national events that require a cross-country trip," he said.

While Voya still attends national conferences, it has reallocated some of its event budget toward its own forums. The firm has found that events catering to institutional investors in a particular region – with around 30 participants – have been the most successful when trying to get face time with clients, Altbach said. Intimate events are key to winning over institutional investors, and the firm has had asset owners refer their peers to Voya after a successful event, he added.

In order to entice institutional investors to show up, these events need to stand out and be more unique than just "gathering for cocktails," he said. But, Altbach declined to give more specifics about the events Voya hosts because of the intense competition for institutions' attendance.

"It is important to come up with something that differentiates the event from an experience," he said.

Asset managers have also become more selective about which conferences they attend as they're unable to guarantee the success of any given event. At the beginning of each year, Ariel Investments has a team meeting where it goes through the conferences available for the year to decide which it will attend, who will go, and what the goals are for attending each event, Murray said.

"There is a game plan for us, not only as it relates to deciding which one we decide to attend, but also what we do while we're there and what's the follow up from engagement," he said.

Some asset managers have found success in collaborating with their competitors to plan events in order to get more institutional investors to show up, said Kelly O'Brien Vives, chief marketing and communications officer at Allspring Global Investments, during the FundFire webcast. For example, Allspring will be hosting a women event with two other asset managers in the spring aimed at female investors.

"We are all going after the same investors, [if] we can get them in a room with three of us... we will have more of the ability to get the right investors in the room and share content that is not proprietary specific," Vives said during the webinar.