Techniques for Submitting Successful Proposals for SHAPE America National Conventions

DEBORAH STEVENS-SMITH

The SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators national convention has just completed another successful year in Minneapolis, MN. Thousands of conference attendees in the health and physical education profession were able to attend over 300 presentations from various fields. Some of the presenters were professional speakers such as best-selling author Tom Rath, U.S. Paralympian Chris Waddell, and internationally renowned chef Jon Ashton. However, the majority of the presenters were individuals like you and me who get up and go to work every day hoping to make a difference in the lives of those we teach. We are health, dance, sport and physical educators who do a lot of good things in our programs that need to be shared and can benefit others in the profession.

SHAPE America, district SHAPE and state conferences all provide a venue for professionals to share their work each year. Many individuals submit proposals for the conference each year without success and may wonder why they are not accepted. It is doubtful that anyone has ever had every submitted proposal accepted every time. The process is very competitive — this past SHAPE convention had over 1,000 proposals submitted and only 300 were accepted for the program. If you have never submitted a program before, a good place to start is with your state convention. Work your way up to the district level to understand the process and what is expected, and then submit to national. All levels have a similar process that requires submitting a proposal well in advance.

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of the conference. Whether you are submitting a program for the first time or the 50th time, everyone would like to increase their chances of being accepted.

The purpose of this article is to explain the basic components of the submission process for the SHAPE America national convention. Although the guidelines are specific to SHAPE America, similar guidelines are employed at the district and state levels as well. The article will also discuss the review process and how the proposals are evaluated and selected for inclusion. Additional tips and techniques specific to the submission process including the unique discipline areas, will be included.

The Process

In order to make your proposal competitive you have to know where to start. It all starts with understanding the review process.
In the spring, the SHAPE America staff sends out a call for proposals for the next annual convention. SHAPE America uses an established set of criteria during the review process that includes: (a) quality and relevance of the proposal to the mission of the organization, (b) stature of the speakers within the industry, (c) appeal of the content, (d) overlap with previous sessions and conventions, and (e) completeness of the submission. The call sets forth all the specifics for submitting the proposal online and the deadline for accepting proposals for the next convention. All proposals must be submitted online through the SHAPE America submission site under the “Conferences & Events” tab by the deadline of June 16. After the deadline for submission has passed, the SHAPE America staff sorts the proposals into appropriate categories and subcategories and distributes them to the Education Sessions Review Committee around the first week in July.

Proposal review is a two-tier process that involves the Education Sessions Review Committee and the Annual Convention Program Committee. The Education Sessions Review Committee includes individuals who have been selected to review proposals for SHAPE America in the various program categories. Reviewers apply for the position and are selected based on a variety of factors that include experience, expertise in a selected area, and previous committee experience. Each category of reviewers has between 5–10 reviewers looking at proposals. Reviewers are selected because they have a wide range of expertise across multiple specialty areas and represent all levels of the SHAPE America community, including K–12, higher education, health, government, adapted and dance. The individuals who serve on this committee serve a three-year term. This committee provides the initial review, rates the proposals, and makes recommendations to accept or reject each proposal submission. It is important to know that the review of each proposal is a blind review, as the names of those submitting the proposal are not included. This is to eliminate any bias on the part of the reviewers. The committee also provides comments, rationale and rubric scores that are sent to the Annual Convention Program Committee. This information allows them to make informed decisions relative to the acceptance of sessions for the national convention.

The Annual Convention Program Committee is the second tier in the process, and they use the information sent from the Education Sessions Review Committee to make recommendations for informative and appropriate programs for the individual session slots that are available. The committee combines the scores from all the reviewers in each area to generate a composite score for each proposal. This committee looks for proposals that represent diversity among the speakers and topics and also makes recommendations regarding special sessions and/or symposia that can further the goals and objectives of the organization. SHAPE America states, “our goal is to design the best program that provides cutting edge topics that are timely and relevant to our professional disciplines and that will have broad appeal” (SHAPE America web page). The total review process takes about two to three months, with acceptance letters sent out in late September. People will often get frustrated if their proposal is rejected, especially if it occurs several years in a row. Keep in mind that just because the proposal is rejected does not mean that it did not have value. Often, if a large number of proposals has been submitted on an individual hot topic such as technology, then there just is no room for all the programs. Take a look at the programs that have been selected in that area previously and compare them with your submission. Examine the differences and see what you can add to your proposal to make it unique and more likely to get it accepted.

**Submitting a Competitive Proposal**

How do you make your proposal competitive? How do you make your proposal stand out among all the programs that are reviewed each year? Before you start the initial process of submitting any proposal it is very important that you review the SHAPE America guidelines. They will answer basic questions about the submission process and what is needed once you access the online form for submission at the SHAPE America website. Click on the “submit your proposal” link to review the components needed for submission. Here you will find information about the types of proposals and the submission categories. It is a good idea to plan out the proposal prior to the online submission by typing out all the elements needed in a Word document. You will see that there are some specifics (e.g., the number of words in the abstract) that need to be followed in advance before cutting and pasting the elements into the submission form. You can submit as many proposals as desired for review and consideration, but you may not be a presenting author on more than two accepted sessions across the SHAPE America convention, including research. All accepted sessions and abstracts will be programmed in the ideal time slot independent of what is requested in the submission. The current time slots available are full day, which are reserved for invited sessions, half day, 12 minutes, 75 minutes, 30-minute idea exchange sessions and the newly introduced 15-minute rapid relay session.

Prior to submitting your proposal you will need to decide which type of session and program area category is the best fit for your presentation content. SHAPE America offers participants two types of sessions during the national convention: (1) sessions and workshops, and (2) research sessions. Sessions and workshops highlight quality and innovative practices in respected fields of national significance relative to health, physical education or physical activity with a well-defined focus. Sessions of this type will be informal, interactive presentations that emphasize discussion. A new session just proposed this year by SHAPE America is the idea exchange, which is high energy and 30 minutes in length. These sessions are on interactive on cutting-edge topics and offer attendees a blended learning approach, with both a live learning component combined with further subject matter exploration and continued discussion on the SHAPE America online community, Exchange. The presenter for the session shares their previous knowledge and resources on the topic, and then opens up the topic for discussion by the attendees. The topic will then be posted online to continue the sharing session throughout the year. SHAPE America offered a new session format during the 2016 convention called rapid relay. These sessions highlight general planned activities as well as provide some tools and resources to participants that enhance their professional development, including addressing the professional interests of those in attendance.

Research sessions can include symposium, lecture, oral or poster presentations, and they are peer reviewed by the research council. Symposium sessions involve a verbal presentation of a series of related research abstracts by several researchers. There may be three to five researchers who present their work, ranging in length from one to two hours depending on the number of presenters. Symposium submissions must include multiple abstracts within one submission. Oral sessions (90 or 120 minutes) involve presenters who discuss their research during a 12-minute session just proposed this year by SHAPE America is the idea exchange, which is high energy and 30 minutes in length. These sessions are on interactive on cutting-edge topics and offer attendees a blended learning approach, with both a live learning component combined with further subject matter exploration and continued discussion on the SHAPE America online community, Exchange. The presenter for the session shares their previous knowledge and resources on the topic, and then opens up the topic for discussion by the attendees. The topic will then be posted online to continue the sharing session throughout the year. SHAPE America offered a new session format during the 2016 convention called rapid relay. These sessions highlight general planned activities as well as provide some tools and resources to participants that enhance their professional development, including addressing the professional interests of those in attendance.

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verbal presentation followed by three minutes of questions from the participants. Poster sessions are formatted to allow presenters to display research findings on a 4’ × 8’ poster in the exhibit hall. Presenters facilitate discussions with interested attendees during a 90-minute session. All abstract submissions must describe original, data-based research (quantitative, qualitative, historical, philosophical) that has been completed by the time of the submission, with specific results included and reported. The research cannot be presented elsewhere, accepted for publication, or already published anywhere at the time the abstract is submitted. All accepted sessions are programmed at the discretion of the Annual Convention Program Committee, including presentation time and combining sessions with similar content. Presenters of all accepted proposals are expected to be available to present the session during any of the scheduled dates and times for the convention.

SHAPE America Submission Categories and Subcategories

After a participant determines the session track they wish to submit for, they have to decide on the category that best fits the content of the presentation. SHAPE America has developed the seven categories to encompass all aspects of health, physical education and physical activity (Table 1). Determine the category and subcategory you wish the proposal to be reviewed for. This is important in order to receive the best analysis of the session's content for the convention. When choosing the category/subcategory keep in mind the scope of the proposal and the audience you wish to attract. If you feel the proposal has multiple applications to a variety of individuals, then choose the area with the best fit for the content. Keep in mind that some categories receive more proposals than others because there are more professionals in that category; e.g., in those cases, it may be more difficult to get a program accepted (i.e., physical education K–12 instruction). Other categories such as family and community engagement may not have as large a following, so it may be easier to get a program accepted. Each category has an allotment of programs based on the number of the practitioners, so that there is equity in assigning programs where the interest is greatest.

Proposal Basics

When preparing your proposals for submission there are some basic concepts to keep in mind. The online submission page has several fields that ask for details about the proposal. You will be asked to provide a concise title, descriptive overview, learning objectives, focus of the session, and what the audience will learn in the session. Each of these components needs to be filled out completely to provide as much information as possible to the review committee.

Selecting a topic might be the hardest part of the process. Think of those things you do in your program that you know would be of value to share with others in the field. As you select the topic, be sure that it is relevant to the selected category and to the audience that will be attending. Ask yourself the following questions about your topic:

- Is it a new topic?
- Is it based on current trends in the field?
- Is it relevant to a wide range of conference attendees?
- How easy will it be to implement the strategies presented?
- What are the hot-button topics?

Your topic should stand out among the plethora of session proposals that are received. Make the title catchy, and make sure it does not exceed the 10-word limit required.

The descriptive overview is a very important part of the proposal and is limited to 75 words. This will be the marketing piece included in the convention program for participants to determine whether they want to attend your session. Be sure the overview covers all you expect to do and the vast content information that participants can expect to learn in the session.

The learning objectives should naturally evolve from the program description, as they detail the specifics of what will be learned and what participants can expect. You need to have at least three objectives that should involve a variety of cognitive, affective and psychomotor goals. The objectives in some way should include how the National Standards are addressed in the session. Everything we do as educators has to have purpose, and the National Standards set the goals we need to meet in our field each day. If the content of the program cannot be related to the standards, you may need to rethink whether it is viable for a national conference.

The focus of the session is where you will spend most of your time and describes how you will implement the information in the presentation. In this section, provide the details of what you plan to do. Will there be an activity that backs up the theoretical implications? Is the session strictly a lecture to provide a current topic and its application? Determine here how the session will progress, so participants know what to expect.

You will be asked to include an abstract for your session. Abstracts go into the program proposal and should be written so people will want to attend your session. The session description includes more detail and is read by the review committee, but the abstract should provide specific details about what will be included in your presentation.

In the final section of the submission form you will need to determine what the audience will learn by attending. Participants love to have information they can take back with them and use immediately in their programs. The information in this section should stem from the objectives that were stated previously. Here you are providing more concrete details about what will be learned during the session.

There will be a section that asks about equipment needs for your presentation, if accepted. Keep in mind that the association may provide some equipment for your convenience (e.g., PowerPoint projectors, screens, writing pads, or PE equipment), but you need to be very specific and conservative in expressing what you need. Keep in mind that the association has to pay to rent most of the equipment, which can drive up the registration costs. Ask for what you need well in advance to make your presentation successful.

After completing the proposal’s submission be sure to make a copy of your work and save the Word document. Too many times individuals will submit proposals and actually forget six months later what they were planning to do because they failed to make a copy of their files.

Techniques for Success

Although some of the suggestions in this section may seem to be obvious or even contradictory, think through them — they do work!

- Begin with the end in mind: Look at what the review committee is expecting and write your proposal with that in mind. Clarity
and understanding of what you have to offer in the presentation will go a long way in helping you to be successful.

- **Think of your audience:** What professional group are you seeking to attract to the presentation? Which of your colleagues would attend the session and why?
- **Topic relevance:** Be sure the topic is current and relevant to the field. Reviewers would probably not accept a presentation on “keeping kids busy, happy, and good,” but they would accept a topic on “using technology in the field.” Consider what is the hot-button topic in the field that others are most interested in at this time. Be sure the topic matches what you plan to do.
- **Be focused, but not too focused:** It sounds like an oxymoron, but two extremes that exist when proposals are submitted include topics that are so broad they say nothing (e.g., “teaching physical education”) and topics that are so specific very few individuals would be interested (e.g., “quail fishing techniques”). The topic must have broad appeal that is applicable to a variety of groups.
- **National Standards:** The proposals need to address how the topic aligns with the expectations of the National Standards. How do these standards affect the work we do each day? Standards should assist in making our programs stronger. Proposals that fail to include this element are often given lower scores, and few are accepted.
- **Demonstrate your scholarship and expertise:** Whether your proposal includes a session on theory, practice or research, make your ideas connect with others in the field.
- **Get a second opinion:** Ask colleagues to review the proposal before submitting it to SHAPE America. If your colleagues are unable to understand what will occur during your presentation the review committee may not understand it either.
- **Handouts and PowerPoints:** SHAPE America makes available to all participants the opportunity to upload all handouts and PowerPoint presentations for participants prior to the convention. Make these valuable to your session, so that participants are eager

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<th>Table 1. SHAPE America Categories and Subcategories for Proposal Submission</th>
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| **Advocacy** | Physical Education  
School Health  
Physical Activity  
Sport |
| **Jump Rope and Hoops for Heart** | Organization  
Preparation  
Event Specifics |
| **Physical Activity** | Comprehensive School Physical Activity Programs  
Early Childhood Physical Activity  
Dance (outside of physical education)  
Adapted Physical Activity |
| **Physical Education** | Technology  
Professional Preparation  
Administration/Supervision/Leadership  
Curriculum/Instruction/Assessment  
Adapted Physical Education |
| **School Health Education** | Technology  
Professional Preparation  
Administration/Supervision/Leadership  
Curriculum/Instruction/Assessment |
| **Sport** | Coaching  
Coaching Education  
Organization and Administration  
Diversity and Inclusiveness |
| **Research** | Exercise Science  
Motivation and Psychology  
Motor Behavior and Measurement  
Physical Activity and Health Promotion  
Sociocultural and Social Justice  
Sport and Coaching  
Teaching and Learning  
Adapted Physical Education/Activity |
to take them home and share the information with administrators and others who need to be involved.

- **Common proposal errors**: It is very easy to reject or to give low scores to proposals that show the individual has taken little time to prepare the submission. This is obvious when categories are left blank, presenters are not listed or even contacted in advance, spelling and grammatical errors are numerous or when there is a lack of content information. Many proposal forms ask for a pre-sider to be listed, so if you do not have someone in mind, you can list yourself. Also, be sure to include all presenters in the initial proposal submission, as this is important, especially for higher education individuals who depend on these presentations for tenure and promotion. Presenters can sometimes be added later, but at some point the deadline passes and someone may be left off the presentation schedule, so be thorough from the beginning.

If you are considering submitting a proposal for future conferences, consider collaborating with a colleague at another level. Public school teachers and university professors, health educators and public service professionals, or recreation specialists and coaches can all work together to present proposals that reflect a broader spectrum of information. Also, consider submitting topics that you were hoping to see at a conference but that were not on the program. If you have an interest in a particular area, it is likely that others do as well!

**Conclusion**

These are the basics that are involved when the review committee looks at proposals and decides which ones will make the final program. It is important for all participants to understand that no one group has the autonomy over any proposals that are submitted. SHAPE America tries very hard to make this a fair and equitable process for everyone who wants to be involved. Good luck with your future submissions. We hope to see you presenting at a future SHAPE America conference!

**Acknowledgments**

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