



A New Approach to Meeting Design Engaging Event Participants to Generate Bottom-line Results

Recent media reports have taken corporations to task for holding 'lavish' meetings after receiving government bailout money. Fearing negative publicity and facing declining profits, some of these firms, as well as, other companies **not** receiving government funds, are considering canceling or scaling back their events.

The scrutiny focused on business meetings may, however, seriously impair these companies from being able to jumpstart their sales and profits. As a recent article in Meeting Professional International's (MPI) magazine, *One+* made clear "Meetings are not the problem. They are part of the solution."

Compelling Statistics on the Value of Meetings

The U.S. Travel Association estimates that meetings and events are responsible for 15 percent of all travel-related spend, create nearly \$40 billion in tax revenue and generate more than one million jobs in the U.S. alone!

A recent report on the meetings industry in Canada, issued by the Meetings Professional International (MPI) Foundation, found that the industry contributed \$71 billion in revenue to the Canadian economy, and fueled 235,500 full-time jobs.

The tangible and intangible benefits of corporate meetings and events for companies, and other types of organizations, are equally compelling. Forrester Research estimates that approximately two-thirds of senior executives go to industry conferences to learn about new products and services. They also attend to meet other leaders, share ideas and develop productive relationships.

Other research shows that 53 percent of marketing and sales managers consider event marketing the best way to accelerate and deepen relationships with target audiences (EventView 2009, MPI).

Meetings – Events – Communications

The value of a meeting to facilitate greater employee engagement should also be considered. The level of employee engagement can have a significant impact on an organization's bottom line.

A study of more than 360,000 employees from 41 companies, found that organizations described as having low overall employee engagement lost 2.01 percent operating margin and were down 1.38 percent in net profit margin over a three-year period. During that same period, high-engagement companies gained 3.1 percent operating margin and 2.1 percent net profit margin. According to the study, highly engaged employees clearly contributed to the bottom line of their companies (ISR, 2003).

The meetings industry provides invaluable economic and business contributions - both to individual companies, and the economy as a whole. So the question for today's meeting planners should not be whether or not to hold a meeting, but rather, what strategies should be developed and implemented for your meetings to generate maximum ROI?

Meetings are Being Redefined to Gain Greater Value

Unfortunately, many companies have fallen into "Death by PowerPoint" mode. They assume that a well-polished PowerPoint presentation delivered from a beautifully-lit stage is all that's required to get their message across. This once exciting medium, which is now 20 years old, has sucked the life and excitement out of many meetings according to Edward Tufte, Professor Emeritus at Yale University. "PowerPoint actually *reduces* the analytical quality of serious presentations, and often weakens verbal and spatial thinking."

Companies today are typically speaking to a new generation of tech-savvy participants who demand a different approach. Attendee's today want to be **engaged** participants, not passive recipients of information. Adept at using social networking sites such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook, meeting attendees are accustomed to receiving information real-time, and to engaging in continuing dialogue.

Smart meeting designers understand the value of technology and are using new tools and media effectively in virtual meetings, webinars and as part of other cost-effective methods of communications. However, they also understand the added-value of face-to-face meetings and events and the important role in-person events play in running a profitable, successful business.

The Value of Face-to-Face Communications is Unparalleled

Social scientists tell us that face-to-face communication is essential to building relationships, maintaining morale and keeping a business on track. Live meetings and events provide a great opportunity for businesses to effectively communicate because:

1. Face-to-face **feedback** fosters honesty, openness, in-depth communications and builds a stronger team
2. **Persuading and encouraging** an audience, especially during uncertain and rapidly changing times, builds trust, credibility and helps maintain a positive corporate image and workplace environment
3. In-person **recognition and reinforcement** of positive behavior is critical to building and maintaining morale and loyalty
4. Live meetings are ideal for engaging participants in **idea generation and problem-solving**
5. Large numbers of participants can be **educated and trained** on new ideas, tools or technologies, quickly and efficiently

An excellent example of the importance of face-to-face interaction is ***The D: All Things Digital*** annual conference. Sponsored by the Wall Street Journal. This highly successful conference **bans** PowerPoint presentations in favor of live interviews with WSJ editors matched with speakers in lively, animated conversations.



Steve Jobs & Bill Gates being interviewed by Wall Street Journal Editors at the Wall Street Journal Digital Conference

According to Gordon Crovitz, former publisher of the *Wall Street Journal*, "[This conference] is a dramatic example of how even the most digitally-minded people still thrive on human contact."

In his coverage of the conference, Crovitz details several significant interactions that occurred during the program that he claims would have been hard to capture remotely, in a news report, blog post or even Webcast. (Social Networking in the Digital Age by Gordon Crovitz, WSJ, June 2, 2008).

How to Make the Most of Your Meetings

There are four important steps leading, innovative meeting designers can use to maximize their return-on-investment and increase participant engagement:

Step One - Create an effective meeting design team

The most effective meetings include an experienced meeting design team whose members are responsible for key areas including;

- **Content.** The meeting owner is responsible for developing the meeting's learning, networking and motivation goals based on the host organization's business priorities
- **Design.** The meeting architect is responsible for structuring the agenda, selecting the most effective presentation methods, and managing the budget
- **Execution.** Typically, this is a small team that works with the meeting owner and architect to develop ideas to creatively accomplish meeting goals and objectives, and execute the plans in a timely and efficient manner

Step Two - Align meeting design with business priorities

Successful meetings effectively align the learning, networking and motivation goals with support tools to help drive measurable results. To accomplish alignment;

- **Be specific.** Detail each topic and sub-topic and quantify exactly what the audience is supposed to learn about each
- **Educate.** Good meetings teach the audience or remind them of something they had learned before. The core ideas behind teaching—*explanation, reasoning, finding things out, questioning, content evidence and credible authority* should be woven into every presentation
- **Create networking opportunities.** Never underestimate the power of meeting even one new person. It can change your business...and your life
- **Inspire and motivate.** Determine exactly what *you* want to communicate to your audience—and then, the best way to convey those messages

Step Three - Leverage the best technologies

There are several new technologies that can make meetings more engaging including;

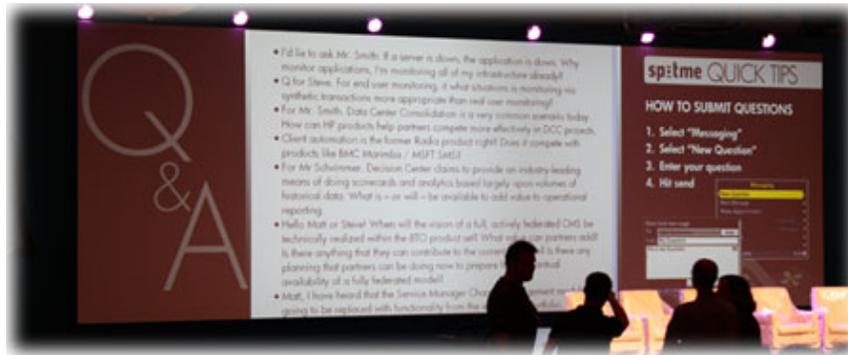


Spotme. This ingenious new tool enables social networking via a searchable photo database. It provides messaging, a unique people "Spotting" function and electronic business card exchange. Spotme also includes a personalized agenda, audience response capability, Q&A sessions facilitation, lead retrieval, attendance tracking, electronic feedback forms and more. Spotme is the only 'all-in-one' communication system for events of all sorts with 200 to 5000 participants.

- **Social Networking Devices.** These electronic systems allow conference participants to network, communicate and build relationships during an event. They can segment a 1,000 person delegate list, via multiple sorts, in no time, helping delegates identify the 15-20 most important people that they should network with at your conference.

- **Audience Response Polling.** These systems allow you to collect and summarize thousands of live-voting responses, instantly. Data may even be automatically displayed graphically. Results are then summarized in easy-to-read reports delivered online at the event. Raw voting data is linked to respondent demographic information and available in an Excel-ready format for detailed data analysis and cross-tabulation.

- **Q&A Session Systems.** Participants use keyboards to submit questions and comments, in real-time, even as panelists are responding.



The functionality of these systems includes:

- Every participant has an equal opportunity to submit questions
- The opinions of participants who may not normally voice their views can be captured
- Comments and questions may be screened based on relevance and importance, ensuring the session remains focused and constructive
- The Q&A process is accelerated allowing more questions, discussion and debate
- They allow questions that aren't discussed during the session to be retained for later reference and follow-up

Brainstorming FacilitatePro Groupware. This collaboration software for high performance meetings is designed to replace the traditional flip-chart. It is an online tool that facilitates participant engagement in the brainstorming process at a whole new level. Participant ideas are captured, by topic, as they are entered into a laptop computer. Once the brainstorming is complete, the group can review and discuss all of the ideas, by topic, and prioritize action plans for each.



The Human Touch. Every meeting planner's arsenal should also include some good old fashioned, low-*tech*, high-*touch* activities as well. Ideas Esprit recommends include:

- Have senior leadership personally greet all attendees during the welcome reception instead of arriving later
- Use crescent seating at rounds during the general session and have a company leader "host" each table
- Sprinkle members of the leadership team among attendees during the general sessions instead of seating them together
- Have the company president spend time at each table during the sit-down dinner or awards banquet to thank everyone personally for their contributions or for attending
- Have senior managers who present at the meeting join the "Meet the Speakers" session so participants can interact with them personally

The impact of an organization's leadership team, taking the time to meet every participant, is truly amazing.

Step Four - Integrate Meeting Messages with all Organization Communications

Well-designed meetings maximize attendee participation and feedback, and are the perfect opportunity to persuade, encourage and recognize top performers via the most powerful medium of all—human interaction. As you develop your annual communications plans, consider how a well-designed meeting can leverage the power of face-to-face communications to deliver your messages, engage your attendees and improve your business results. **But don't forget to also plan**, how your meeting messages can be continually reinforced via other communications media. Consider intranet articles, newsletters, email, message board posts, small team meeting presentations, etc. to drive home your messages on an ongoing basis—and make sure they stick.

Tips from our Effective Meetings Toolbox

Consider the following suggestions when planning your next event:

• General Sessions

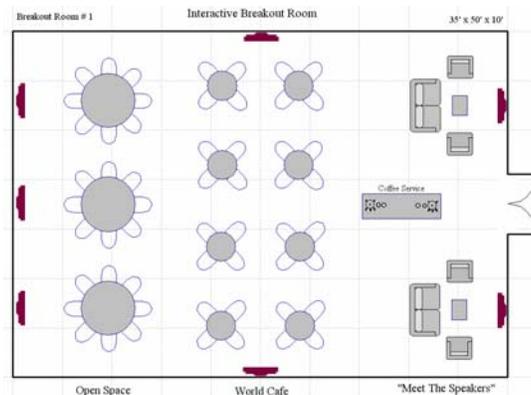
The structure of most general session presentations includes one-way communication supported by PowerPoint. We recommend less

PowerPoint and **more interview-style presentations**, moderated by a company executive, an editor from an industry magazine or a professional speaker/moderator. Brief comments to set the stage can be followed by **“A Conversation With...”**.

Questions are solicited by the moderator, through the live audience or can be garnered from your registration site, or the technology systems previously mentioned. This conversational, interview-style approach is guaranteed to elicit “golden nuggets” of information and the story that your audience **really** wants to hear. This type of presentation content is not just what’s important to the speaker, it’s also **what is important to your participants**.

- **Breakouts, Concurrent Sessions and Workshops**

Today’s breakout sessions and workshops are all about interaction. Forget the traditional broadcast approach supported by PowerPoint. We recommend the following group seating configurations to make these sessions more engaging and productive.



Open Space. This approach brings people together to discuss issues related to a specific topic. Participants volunteer to identify specific issues and then convene into small groups to discuss them. The group self-organizes to determine the agenda, examine the issues and capture the output. A company staff member or other topical expert is often available to provide advice and discussion guidance.

World Café. Creates a café-like atmosphere for participants to discuss their issues at small tables. At regular intervals, people move to different tables to learn something new about the topic—or, other, unrelated subjects. We call this approach *“speed learning!”*

“Meet the Speakers.” One of the comments we hear most often is, “It would really be nice to meet the general session speakers.” Here’s your opportunity. Create a casual environment where participants can interact face-to-face with your executives or other industry experts after the general sessions.

Leverage Printed Handouts. Don't miss an opportunity to develop a well-designed printed piece to support your group sessions. A printed piece will help drive the content of the session, as well as subsequent discussions and interactions. *From now on your presentation software should include Microsoft Word and Photoshop, **not just** PowerPoint.*

We recommend creating a print piece by folding an 11" x 17" sheet of paper in half to form a four page document. Information in the handout should include:

- A written synopsis of the session, including the title, a statement of purpose/objectives, key points and expected outcomes.
- High-resolution graphics and diagrams to support the copy. Eye-catching visuals will help foster thinking and exploration by the reader.

Keep in mind, written documents require more work than simply compiling a list of bullet points on slides. But, writing out key points forces presenters to be clear, and on task, and handouts provide a permanent record for later review.

Ask the audience to read the document before the session, or just as they walk-in. In the five minutes it takes to review the document, attendees will absorb much of the information, and, they can write down their questions in the margins. This reading exercise helps convey messages clearly, reduces 'preaching' and selective dissonance and leaves more time for in-depth interaction and discussion.

After the audience has read the document, the presenter should offer a brief synopsis (about 5 minutes) of the key points while using graphics from the piece to reinforce the key messages. The presentation should then be framed with stories that support those key points. Whenever possible "success stories" should also be included to support the content.

Once the key points are reviewed and the stories are told, open the session to Q&A to ensure audience engagement, understanding and buy-in.

Ready, Get Set... Meet!

There's no time like the present to start planning your next meeting. Use these ideas to make some exciting changes in the way you design your meetings. In doing this you will be able to harness the creativity, energy and passion of your attendees and achieve the results that will make a positive difference in your business.

Don't forget that, first and foremost, today's audiences want to be engaged. They want to participate and be part of the content flow and ideas. They want to be part of the decision-making process and about the future of their organization. They want more time to meet more people face-to-face.

The 3M meeting management book, *How to Run Better Business Meetings* explains it very well, "Good meetings bring forth the best in people—the best ideas, the best decisions, and the best follow-up reactions. Not all meetings are good meetings, but good meetings can happen, and when they do, the company and the individual participants reap the benefits...

"There is a certain amount of magic when people come together for a meeting. The magic is in the interplay of ideas and personalities that takes place in the meeting room. When the interaction is completed, information has been exchanged, old ideas have been tested and blended, and new ones have emerged...

"One of the magical aspects of a meeting is that it can, and should be, so many things at once—a communication device, a cauldron of creativity in which new ideas are born, and an anvil on which solid plans are forged."

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