

Meeting with Success

Tips for managing effective, enjoyable events | by Iyna Bort Caruso

In today's economic climate, meeting planners are under more pressure than ever to deliver results.

"You only have one opportunity to create a great event or one that ends up as a costly fumble," says Carrie Mahoney, president of Event

Production Concepts in Southbury, Connecticut.

The measure of success may be enhanced productivity, increased product knowledge, improved skill sets or a solid return on investment—and, often, all of the above. It's a tall order, especially at a time when many planners are forced to do more with fewer resources.

The blueprint for a well-executed business meeting begins with one question: What's the objective?

"Establish the goal," says Ricky Kirshner, executive producer at RK Productions in New York. "Then discuss the path to it."

Kirshner has produced some high-profile—and high-pressure—events and meetings, including the 2008 Democratic National Convention, presidential inaugural galas, Teamsters conventions, and Super Bowl pregame and halftime shows.

"Employees should be clear on the reason for being there," Kirshner says. "When they leave, they should be well-versed on the issues they're dealing with and pumped up to go back to work."

Reaching that objective involves managing a thousand details, and timelines are crucial, says Judie Durant, a meetings and incentive planner with Colpitts World Travel in Dedham, Massachusetts. Printed materials, room lists, vendor contracts—there are a myriad of deadlines to nail down. "Meeting planners not only have to juggle many meetings at once, but they also have to juggle many aspects per meeting," Durant says.

However, it is also crucial to maintain a broad strategic perspective and not get mired down in trivial issues, cautions Patrick Grady, senior vice president and managing partner at CMS Communications, a Los Angeles-based firm that specializes in producing business events and conferences.

"By 'strategic perspective,' I mean you should always be able to step away and look at a project from 10,000 feet, so to speak," Grady says. "That way you can find efficiencies, eliminate redundancies and make sure the big picture is as it should be." He says many people have their nose too close to the project. "They might be arguing with the headwaiter about the placement of the place cards, but fail to notice that the logo on-screen is wrong—clearly a bigger miss."

The best perspective positions you to consider both the overall effect and every element of a meeting, each touchpoint between the audience and the message you're communicating. "From the pre-event communications to the post-event evaluation, everything should look, feel and sound just right," Grady says. "The audience should know what they're attending, why they're attending and, by the end, what they're supposed to do as a result of attending."

Free yourself up by delegating to team members at every opportunity. They can take on the roles of meet-and-greeters, timekeepers, note takers and vendor liaisons. For Kirshner, business-conference success is about assembling the right team, whether

for a Super Bowl halftime show or a quarterly business meeting. "Your team is as important as you are. None of us does it alone," he says. Kirshner concedes it's never a straight line to the end zone; however, when the team is in sync and every conceivable detail is planned and accounted for, nothing should throw you off track, he says.

The where is as important as the who, what and why of your conference. Survey meeting rooms for creature comforts: good lighting, climate control, suitable acoustics, and a proper line of sight to the speaker, screen, stage or podium. Don't leave seating as an afterthought. The arrangement you choose can have a big impact on energy and flow.

"Classroom-style is the best seating arrangement for a training session where an instructor requires full attention," says Keith Allen, meetings director at Crowne Plaza Hotel in Irvine, California. For brainstorming, Allen advises U-shaped seating. "It allows the presenter to walk inside the U-shaped table arrangement, get a foot or two away from attendees and say, 'What do you think of that idea?' Then he can step back and let the conversation start."

Crescent rounds—a large round table with seats around two-thirds of the perimeter—are best for team building. "Participants are facing forward, which creates an environment for conversation. That's what you want," says Allen. "You want them to discuss the topics."

Another important aspect of site selection is ensuring you have enough space beyond the actual meeting rooms. Can the venue accommodate all your support services? While few people need to plan events as large as, say, a political convention, Kirshner says it's critical to determine "not only what happens in the meeting room, but behind that room." Consider space for vendors, equipment, loading, speaker preparation and, if needed, on-site printing.

Keeping your audience interested and engaged is, of course, key to an effective meeting. "You only have the first seven minutes of a meeting to capture their attention and interest," says business coach Maria Elena Duron of Midland, Texas. "If you waste it on the mundane, you may never get them back."

Can your meeting benefit from a motivational speaker? Speakers bureaus have experience working with all types of personalities and budgets. They also handle all contract negotiations and bookings. "They know what speakers can be no-shows, which ones run over in time or have used off-color jokes," says Gail Davis of Gail Davis & Associates, a Colleyville, Texas, bureau that represents more than 2,000 speakers.

There are also ways to find speakers on your own. Duron suggests searching LinkedIn.com, the professional online

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business network, or YouTube.com to find speakers and subject-matter experts. Once you select your speakers, check their references and get a brief synopsis or outline of each presentation to make sure there are no surprises and that key messages dovetail with your company's objectives.

Presenters from within your organization may need some coaching to avoid what some call the "death by PowerPoint" syndrome. It's easy to lose an audience with a collection of mind-numbing slides. Duron advises limiting PowerPoint slides to 10 or fewer and stresses the importance of using large, easy-to-read fonts that can be seen by everyone, no matter where they are in the room. Clear and concise bullet points, graphs and pictures are a great way to summarize ideas. But don't allow the visual presentation to mirror the speech. The facts and figures on the screen should enhance the presenter's story, not convey the entire message or compete with it.

Limit presentations to around 90 minutes. Highly complicated and detailed sessions should be avoided at the end of a long day. To keep the speaker on schedule, discuss time signals in advance. Then have the designated timekeeper sit up front in the direct line of sight so the presenter will know when to start wrapping up the talk.

Patrick Grady of CMS Communications says the days of getting the desired results from hours-long executive speeches are over. In order to maximize the connection with today's audiences, he says, it's necessary to present information in a way that relates to people who are used to "simultaneous mental stimulation 24/7/365."

However, using high-tech toys for their own sake won't do much to enhance your message unless they help to engage the audience and make them sit up in their chairs.

In Grady's case, his company uses techniques such as real-time polling—a technique in which attendees typically use a cellular phone to respond to questions posed by presenters or event staff. Audience opinions can be instantly tabulated and integrated directly into presentations.

"Today's most effective meetings really are about keeping the mind engaged like never before," Grady says.

No matter what size your meeting—or budget—promote audience participation so that attendees are not tapping away at their smartphones throughout the day. By encouraging people to ask questions, join interactive sessions and volunteer during presentations, they'll have a sense of being invested in the meeting.

Despite teleconferencing, texting and instant messaging, there's no substitute for the real thing, says Grady. "[Virtual communication] is just not the same as being taken out of your element, immersed in an environment that has been designed to completely align with and advance organizational objectives, and being forced to slow down, listen, learn and, most importantly, do," he says. "I think face-to-face time is much more important when it comes to meetings, simply because there is so much less of it overall."

Face time in the corridors between sessions can also go a long way toward building and cementing professional relationships. That's often where the real business gets done, and smart planners incorporate plenty of informal interaction just for that purpose.

Executed properly, a well-planned meeting will resonate with your company for years. Carrie Mahoney says the most successful events have a certain synergy. "In the midst of hard decisions, logistical requirements and countless details, the best events have that indefinable quality, a certain magic, if you will, that makes them special, unforgettable. This comes from skill, passion and creativity." **m**

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