

Meeting Design
Leverage the Art of Learning
Improve the Audience Experience



The objective for all meetings is to communicate information and elicit some form of behavioral change. Meeting planners, speakers and event staff members communicate and send thousands of messages, some overt and others subliminal. The event's look, feel and brand; its layout; agenda topics; and even the PowerPoint style all send important messages to attendees about what they should learn, feel and do. The aggregation of all these bits of information shapes the overall event experience.

The problem, according to Dr. Richard Ackley, professor of business psychology at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, is that meeting planners don't typically consider how the brain processes all the information that comes at them during an event, and as a result many corporate meetings fall short of achieving their full potential.

"The way material is presented at conferences caters primarily to the left brain (which processes facts), sometimes to the exclusion of the right brain (responsible for intuition and emotion). When this happens, the overall learning process is stunted," says Ackley.

In Ackley's article, "Learning How the Brain Learns," which appeared in Meeting Professional International's One+ Magazine in May, 2011, he offers several ideas for meeting planners to maximize the participant experience.

Setting the Stage

When meeting organizers are planning an event, Ackley says the first thing they need to ask themselves is, "What do we want the attendees to take away from this event? What behavioral changes do we want to make? Will our attendees already have [what they need] to understand the subjects or do we have to provide context for them?"

With the answers in hand, meeting organizers can then organize, sort and present their information so that attendees can see the big picture, organize the facts, evaluate their options, focus on the details and finally embark on a process to complete the task.

Creating Context. According to Ackley, before an attendee can understand the information being presented or change their behavior, the data they are receiving must be organized and contextualized. "The more information that conference organizers can share with attendees ahead of time, the better the overall experience is likely to be," says Ackley.

- For example: Don't overlook the importance of sending out pre-event information in well-designed invites and/or dimensional mailings. This will frame the event for attendees making it easier and more efficient for them to receive information on-site.
- In the same way, General session presentations and meetings should be planned around an intuitive and logistical flow so participants don't have to think about moving from room-to-room. In the same way, content should be organized and structured to make it easy for attendees to follow and make sense of the information being presented.

In developing content, Ackley says meeting planners should have at least a rudimentary understanding of how the brain works to make sure that the information appeals to both the left and right sides of the brain. For example, fact driven information is geared more to the left brain, which processes information based on predetermined models, while the right brain is more intuitive and emotional.

In addition, it's important to consider different learning styles when planning a meeting. Visual learners learn through seeing, auditory learners learn through hearing, and tactile/kinesthetic learners learn through doing, moving and touching. The most successful events incorporate information in a way that appeals to *both* sides of the brain and accommodates a variety of learning styles to reach as many people as possible.

Tips for Engaging the Left Brain

- 1) Educate.** Good meetings teach the audience something new or remind them of something they have learned before. The core ideas behind teaching – *explanation, reasoning, finding things out, questioning, content evidence and credible authority* and should be supported by **storytelling**.



- 2) Engage.** Take advantage of **Spatial Parallelism**. This concept has been developed by leading designers to present as much relevant information as possible on as large a scale as possible. Spatial parallelism takes advantage of our capacity to reason with multiple images that appear simultaneously within our eye span. Audiences are able to select, sort, edit, reconnoiter and review information which keeps them engaged.



- 3) Different Points of View.** Well-designed panel discussions led by a great moderator engages one's thought process. Audiences love the spontaneity and real answers over rehearsed and sanitized PowerPoint deck. Questions from the audience are now easily obtained via smartphone apps, twitter or the old tried and true method...the mic runner. Also, hearing from customers can be some of the most enlightening moments at meetings.

Tips for Engaging the Right Brain

When emotion is attached to a message, people are more likely to remember the information. Emotion is also a powerful motivator and plays an important role in behavioral change. There are many different and creative techniques that can be used to elicit an emotional response among attendees throughout your event:

Awe: Announce a big initiative or rollout a new product or service. Include a big name speaker or entertainer. Use big, beautiful, staging, lighting and production. Holding awards ceremony highlighting the results of a top performer.

Impress: Include case studies demonstrating how a person or team accomplished a task to achieve superior results. Showcase the benefits of a product or service. Offer hands-on opportunities for attendees to interact with products and experience the benefits for themselves.

Compassion/Empathy/Relaxed: Use video to tell the story of individuals who have benefited from your product or service. Create a completely smooth and hassle-free event that offers attendees a chance to network and enjoy their experience.

Confidence/Determined/Powerful/Pride/Positive: Key factors in how the leadership and speakers come across during the meeting.

Energetic/Enthusiastic/Excited/Fun: Events should be choreographed to have a distinct rhythm to keep people engaged and energized. Develop a well- designed agenda, include exciting speakers, or a well-led panel discussion, offer great walk-in music, and make exciting announcements. People love live!

Hopeful: There's nothing like a well-presented speech by a sincere speaker outlining a specific challenge, followed by an inspiring call to action with a plan to overcome the challenge.

Humorous: When done well, humor brings a sense of community to a meeting. When executed by a senior executive it makes him or her more human and approachable, which is very appealing to an audience.

Inspired: Politicians, sports figures and many business leaders have not lived up to the qualities that people expect from a leader. Today, more than ever, people want to be inspired. They want something they can believe in and strive to become. Take risks in planning an event and look for that unique speaker that truly can inspire.

Love: Yes it's a soft word to use for business, but one worth considering. It's very powerful when the people who work for your company or belong to your organization can say, "I love working here. I love belonging to this association".

Surprised: Attendees love surprises. An unexpected room gift, an upgrade, an unannounced speaker or entertainer are all ways to bring an element of surprise and joy to an event.

Handling the Breakout Session

Better Presentations. More Participation. Today, most people equate breakout sessions with PowerPoint and as a result, many companies operate in "Death by PowerPoint" mode. The assumption is that a well-polished deck delivered from a well-lit stage is all that's needed to get a message across. PowerPoint debuted as an exciting medium, but after 20 years it has lost much of its ability to captivate.

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.

Presentation Zen

Many speakers and meeting planners are using a new presentation philosophy known as Presentation Zen, which encourages speakers to eliminate data points, tell a story, and become more fluid with delivery. It follows three simple rules: restraint, simplicity and naturalness. <http://www.presentationzen.com/>

Restraint: Resist the urge to cram too much information and deliver a speech with too many facts.

Simplicity: Only talk about what's important to make the listening experience easier.

Naturalness: Have an interactive conversation with the audience instead of just reading slides.

Handouts

Don't miss an opportunity to develop a well-designed printed piece to support your sessions. A handout will help drive the content, as well as subsequent discussions and interactions. We recommend 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. Writing out key points forces presenters to be clear, stay on task and provide attendees a take-away for later review.

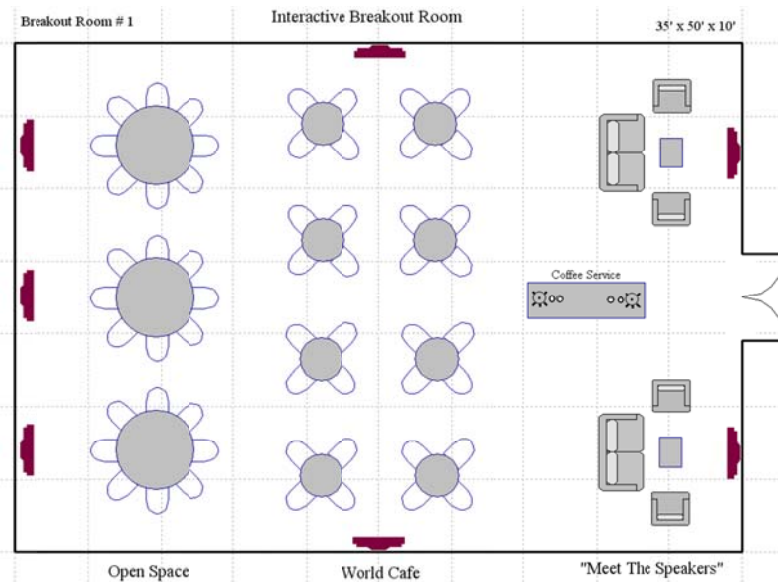
Ask the audience to read the document before the session, or just as they walk-in. In the five minutes it takes to review the document, attendees will absorb much of the information. They can also write questions in the margins. This reading exercise helps convey messages clearly, reduces 'preaching' 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 handout to reinforce key messages. The presentation should then be framed with stories to support those key points. When possible, use case studies 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.

But it's not just about better one-way communications and presentations. Most companies today are presenting to a new generation of tech-savvy individuals who demand a fresh approach; audiences want to be **engaged and heard** rather than addressed. Accustomed to communicating in real-time via Instant Messenger, chat rooms and Twitter, meeting attendees seek to participate rather than merely listen.

Room Layout

Today's breakout sessions and workshops should be all about participation. 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 matters 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.** This arrangement creates a café-like atmosphere for participants to discuss issues while sitting 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.” This is a great opportunity for speakers to make a huge impression on attendees and also learn valuable insights from their constituents. Create a casual environment where participants can interact face-to-face with executives or other industry experts after the general sessions.

Collaboration through FacilitatePro.com Groupware



This collaboration software for high-performance meetings is designed to replace the traditional flip-chart. It is an online tool that elevates participant engagement in the brainstorming process to 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 and prioritize action plans for each.

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 results that will make a positive difference in your business.

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Esprit Productions is a full service meeting, events & communications company focused exclusively on engaging your audience, inspiring enthusiasm, providing clarity, building esprit de corp and creating memorable moments for your audience.

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