

Meeting Design for Customer Events

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Today's customer and user conferences have become seminal events for focused groups of business people. Each industry, each level of leadership, each region, and (in some cases) each city have meetings to discuss common challenges, issues and opportunities.

The person sitting next to you could be your competitor, your future preferred supplier or your next friend. When done right, the people around you are the best at what your group does, and this proximity sparks conversations taking the whole assemblage to a new level of mutually beneficial interaction.

Yes, at the end of the day it *is* about increasing sales, market share, and profits ... but what a glorious way of getting there: By taking the high road. By thinking of the group and sharing the knowledge for your niche. By creating these events where you treat your audience to new ideas, new ways to look at looking at things and developing new relationships.

Connection Before Content



By sponsoring a customer or user event you are providing a valuable service by designing it from the group's point of view and delivering ideas to help spark innovation. By seeing things from where each audience member sits, and striving to help them be more successful in their professions, you are building a relationship ... a connection.

Neuroscience experts Dick and Emily Axelrod advocate an approach of "Connection Before Content" and developed the "Canoe" model to get attendees to connect and develop trust at meetings and conferences.

What triggers connection comes in many forms and in many sizes, from the smallest details, to the larger and awe-like experiences that can happen when people meet face-to-face.

Building Trust



The Meeting Canoe model developed by the Axelrod's illustrates the steps that one takes in order to fully engage the meeting audience.

The width of the canoe represents the amount of time that should be spent on that portion. Helping you navigate the waters of audience engagement, this 6-step outline follows the flow of information and involvement over the course of the conference, starting with a simple welcoming, developing emotional connections, expanding to creating possibilities and finishing with a distinct, strong summary.

1. Welcome - More than just offering a drink and a buffet dinner, the welcome reception offers the audience time to transition from the travel to the hotel and become more comfortable and focused on the event that is about to unfold. You also want to add some new LinkedIn connections and Facebook friends. Here are some ideas:



- Speed Networking or First Timer Reception – This allows people who may not know anyone at the event to meet a small group of other attendees to establish an immediate kinship.
- “About Me About” Name Badges – This TED-like idea is where you list what you want to talk about (dark grey area) on your name badge which acts as a conversation starter.

2. Connect - The unique feature of live versus digital communications is the ability to meet face to face. Seeing the body language and the eyes of the organization's leaders, speakers and staff can connect an audience to an organization like nothing else.



- Schmoozing – The Art of Working the Room. Everyone from your organization who attends should be a gracious host, a good listener and attend to your attendee needs. Be known as “the company with those really nice people”. You have no idea of the power of face time between your leaders and your guests.
- Location Apps – There are many smartphone apps available to help attendees find other attendees at conferences.

3. Discover



Your general session's agenda structure needs to give context to where you are, the challenges that face your audience, and solutions to get to where they want to go. The key is the audience does not need not to be preached to. By leading them with facts, details and stories you can let them come to the conclusion themselves and therefore they are more engaged. That's why they call it leadership!

- Know your audience so you are imparting new insights
- Select a great MC to weave a message and story
- Make an impact with beautifully run general sessions
- Offer easy to use apps for polling, surveys and Q&A

4. Elicit



Breakout sessions allow us to cultivate a deeper relationship with the audience by eliciting their questions, concerns, ideas and dreams. Keep the presentations short and allow plenty of time for answering questions and open discussion. Effective leadership is based on giving them the basics and allowing your audience to brainstorm the next steps.

- Set the room in crescent rounds
- Structure time for discussion
- Use a digital flipchart to capture ideas

5. Decide

Towards the end of the meeting decide who does what and assign roles. This lets the audience know that their time and effort has purpose and was well spent.

Communicate with the audience several times post event and answer any questions or items that need follow-up.

This is critical to your credibility and the trust that you are trying to develop.

We have seen a software client at the end of their user conference commit to new designs and improvement. Then they open their next year's conference with a review of those commitments. That is called *walking the talk* and builds huge amounts of excitement and trust with their audience.

6. Attend



Attend to the end by clearly defining your future objectives.

Provide a summary of the progress that was made and discuss the next steps. Constructing action plans will give the audience members something tangible to look forward to receiving and they know their hard work at the conference will pay off.

- Highlight key takeaways
- Commit to when key items will be completed
- Post and market the content that was created at the event
- What will success look like when we meet again
- Thank everyone

Have Some Fun

As a good host you should incorporate the six parts of the canoe then round out your agenda with plenty of time for fun and networking.

In our celebrity driven society attendees like to go to events that have a name speaker or entertainer. As you look at these costs a good rule of thumb is using the phrase “is it appropriate”. Is the cost and perception appropriate for our company, your current financial situation and how the overall industry is doing etc.

Whenever possible use a speaker or entertainer that ties in your theme or key message. For instance we once produced a meeting that had a boxing theme called “The Main Event” and we had world champion Sugar Ray Leonard speak. One of our favorite themes revolves around music and we had the world famous New Orleans trumpet player Terrance Blanchard speak and showcase his band while he discussed the keys to what makes great band and a great leader.

People also like the swag. Give them cool and useful premiums that ties into your message.

Summary



Customer conferences are one of the most effective ways to build trust in today's world of multi-faceted marketing. Connection before Content and the Canoe approach are effective tools to help you create relationships, understand your customer's needs, and help them to innovate and be more successful.

By using these tools and ideas you will create a community of devoted customers, suppliers and employees.

Esprit Productions



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