

THE BUZZ



What *Angry Birds* Can Teach Us about Event Design

BY ANDREA DRIESSEN

More than 250 million people have downloaded the game *Angry Birds*. In a world of time-starved business people, a vast chunk of us find time for an admittedly silly game, a pastime that has us fully engaged and focused for hours at a time.

What's going on? What makes this digital interface so compelling gamers can't stop interacting with it? Wouldn't you like just some of those folks to read your emails and offer some of that engagement and energy at your meetings?

Let's see what *Angry Birds* teaches us about designing more captivating meetings filled with more focused meeting attendees.

THE POWER OF STORY

Knowing why the birds are angry (the pigs stole the birds' eggs) gives the game

some context and an added layer of fun.

The same holds true for a well-designed meeting, which tells a unified, compelling story with a captivating arc and interesting characters, dialogue and plot.

What story does your meeting tell?

Does it have a clear and compelling beginning, plot twists that create positive surprise and a suspenseful, clear and high-energy conclusion? What specific roles do each of your participants-as-characters play in the telling of your organizational tale—before, during and after the meeting?

We humans are wired for storytelling and listening. That's why paying attention to your event's narrative will get and keep participants engaged. Can meeting delegates

retell your story effectively and passionately? Are they actively involved with how to be “on the same page” with your organizational objectives—or do they just check out to read email?

ANTICIPATION AND SURPRISE

Angry Birds, like any good game, becomes incrementally harder the more you play. We are met at our skill level—

plus a bit more. And the more we learn, the more challenges we get. A skill gap and the desire to improve keep us engaged.

Meetings are mediocre when participants are given little or no new insight or challenges to solve. Boring agendas

often consist of retelling the same information that everyone already knows. No wonder they disengage (and play *Angry Birds* quietly in the back of the room).

Yet interesting meetings feature fresh insights, new ways of working and important connections that could never be experienced virtually. Delegates are paying attention because they're learning and applying new insights to solve new problems.

According to *WorkHappyNow.com* blogger Karl Staib: “People quickly get addicted to [*Angry Birds*] because it challenges them on different levels. When

you can anchor into a wide range of emotions—anger, joy, frustration and love—you keep people wanting more.” (Read Staib's entire post at tinyurl.com/AngryBirdsWorkHappy).

Indeed, *Angry Birds*—like a great meeting—taps the power of anticipation. How will you surprise your audience with unexpected

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guests, new information they don't know but need and reasons to meet in person that can't be realized on Facebook, Twitter or elsewhere online?

A juicy example of integrating anticipation into an event: the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) staged a powerful surprise at

a 20,000-attendee convention. Their Random Acts of Conference Kindness (ROCK) segments fostered interaction and happy surprises—without a hefty price tag. Lisa Block, SHRM's director of meetings, explained: Out of nowhere, staff appeared bearing gifts. They came, they delivered, they disappeared. Mugs, t-shirts, Starbucks cards, free cab rides to the airport, front row seats for keynote sessions. And all the winners got a ROCK'd ribbon to commemorate the oc-

casation. The campaign cost less than US\$5,000, including ribbons for recipients—less than 25 cents a person.

MAXIMIZING MULTI-SENSORY IMPACT

Like any video game worth a few million downloads, *Angry Birds* has distinct sounds, vibrant visuals and

an easy-to-use interface. Players are involved with their eyes, ears and hands.

When you design meetings, how do you purposefully honor our many ways of absorbing information? Or are delegates simply attending—sitting passively in their seats listening,

seeing some (or way too many) slides? Next time, get everyone actively involved—with all of their senses—in creating content, interacting with and learning from one another. Include music, sound effects, kinesthetic experiences and even scent to boost learning and allow for new and surprising ways to absorb information.

You can even try darkened dining. This multi-sensory experience allows the audience to tap taste, smell and touch with a deep sense of focus. We all have so much information coming

at us—mostly at our heads, and much less to our kinesthetic sides. So with a sensory experience like this, you immediately broaden how people experience your organization—and build enormous buzz, too.

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WIN, REWARD—AND PING! YOU'RE AT THE NEXT LEVEL

Like most video games, *Angry Birds* delivers an oddly powerful, addicting adrenaline rush when we win. Finishing the right series of moves, we get the angry birds to sabotage those righteous pigs and—BAM!—move up a level. Now, to instill a similar sense of progression and triumph for meeting attendees... First, give audiences clear pictures of where you're headed (what is the end goal?), and share what your meetings are accomplishing. You could even post meeting checklists, showing clear milestones. Then visually and audibly confirm you've in fact reached these hurdles. Even small wins, accompanied by public acknowledgement (a tangible reward, an audible ping, a loud bell) can, in video game language, move us to the next level.

BROKEN BIRDS, BROKEN RULES

Angry Birds breaks several gaming rules. It replaces fast with clever, for example. (For a fascinating review of the cognitive aspects of *Angry Birds*, read tinyurl.com/AngryBirdsSuccess.)

What rules can you break in your meetings—not for the sake of rebellion, but to stage a more effective, memorable experience?

- Do you really need chairs? What if everyone sat on exercise balls instead?
- Who says you must begin with the spoken word? What if you opened an event by singing a customized company anthem?

Who would have thought that *A Minute to Win It* game could be a perfect team-building exercise in the corporate world?

Let's commit to designing meetings that foster *Angry Birds*-level engagement and focus for all. **one+**

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