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THE most important question you can ask *before* you plan a meeting

By Andrea Driessen, Chief Boredom Buster, No More Boring Meetings

In managing hundreds of large company meetings and events, particularly since the dawn the Digital Age, I've found the following question is **THE most critical to ask** before starting *any* aspect of your planning process.

It can save you enormous amounts of time, boatloads of money, and high levels of frustration—both yours and the audience's. And it will **ensure your meeting is best-in-class**:

"What will we do, experience and learn in this meeting...that could never be communicated in a PowerPoint file, MP3 attachment, Podcast, email or webinar?"

This *one* question will serve as an extremely powerful filter for you and your team, from the beginning to the end of conceptualizing your meeting.

You *may* find, in fact, that your meeting—at least in its current iteration—would just as well be "held" digitally. After all, if attendees are (most often) going to sit *passively* through spoken presentations backed up by PowerPoint, our current technology makes that possible from the comfort of employees' *offices*. And of course, you save on hotel, airfare, AV, speakers, and food costs.

So, let's assume you **will** hold the meeting.

Use this question as a benchmark with which to measure the viability of *every* meeting element....starting with your opening program. What will make it worth listening to, traveling for, and missing work?

In other words: how will you **maximize the presence of everyone** in the room so they *all* contribute to the education and experience of the program? How can you ensure that the **sum (participants+speakers+leadership+venue) is greater than the parts?**

The days of talking heads delivering to observing audiences are *gone*. Everyone wants to be heard, counted, and recognized. Boost what people learn and what they *remember* by consistently eliciting **more participation**.

Here are **ten easy ways** to make this question come alive in your meeting:

1. Current meeting technology allows you to seamlessly and affordably use real time **text-ing and Twittering from attendees**, who text their comments, feedback and questions directly to presenters via their own handheld device or one you provide. The younger generations are going to text and Twitter anyway. Why not clearly allow participants to do just that—*participate!*—and become a key part of the meeting conversation? (Contact us for more information about proven vendors for this service.)
2. Boldly stage the UNConference, which wikipedia defines as “a facilitated, face-to-face, and participant-driven conference centered around a theme or purpose.” *Participants*, not planners, determine the agenda and content. What if even a *portion* of your next meeting was “UN-planned”??
3. Have all internal and external speakers ask *themselves* this question as they design content. It’ll hold their feet to the fire to create and deliver more dynamic, memorable and effective programs. And ensure they **rely less on their slides and more on fresh ways to communicate information**.
4. Schedule a more informal set of **café conversations**: these participant-chosen and -led sessions allow you to focus simultaneously on a wide range of topics of **greatest interest** to your participants. Be sure each sub group appoints a leader who gives findings and ideas back to a central gatekeeper for mass reporting back to the entire group.
5. Build in ROI by polling **specific knowledge** and / or **brand awareness levels before and after** an educational program, using an audience response system.
6. Immediately follow an executive or “outside” keynote speaker with a 30-minute Q&A, led by the speaker and/or executives who take *live* questions from the audience. You’ll get a more authentic, relevant and participatory experience. **If you encounter resistance to allowing live, unscreened questions**, because leaders are concerned about a

- loss of control, you may wish to note that it can be best for such points to be made in *public* rather than when employees return to work and complain among selves, without a useful outlet.
7. Supplement spoken content with a memorable, strategic illustration of keynote and breakout content, drawn in real time by experts who specialize in graphic recording. A superb choice is Patti Dobrowolski: http://www.nomoreboringmeetings.com/index.php?page=speaker_page&speaker_id=73
 8. Be sure keynote speakers offer audiences resources or take aways that can be sent to participants after the event, to **reinforce spoken content and extend meeting education**.
 9. Instead of using a stale digital pie chart, how can you create a visual and more *visceral* rendition of the same information, **live, on stage**? Showing conservation efforts amounting to 10 buckets vs. one glass of water year over year is more memorable than a bar graph of same, for example.
 10. In lieu of sharing customer service survey results as numbers, *humanize* the point by reading a **real letter** from a customer. Or bring someone on stage for a role play the successful use of a new customer service method.



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