

SEVEN SECRET STEPS TO A BETTER MEETING (OR, YOUR MEETING FROM MY PERSPECTIVE)

BY JOEL ZEFF

I HAVE A HARD TIME REMEMBERING LAST WEEK'S CONFERENCE. It reminds me of the conference I attended yesterday. The theme was "Climbing the Mountain" or was it "Reach for the Summit"? The lunch was ham sandwiches and a watery tortilla soup or was it turkey sandwiches and corn chowder? Did I listen to 16 presentations that had a PowerPoint slide of an upside-down triangle or 14 presentations with interlocking circles? Was the door prize a DVD player from an unknown manufacturer or was it a television from an unknown manufacturer?

From my perspective as both an attendee and a speaker, we seem to be in a meeting rut. There really is no difference between last year's conference and this year's conference. Attendees want to learn. They want to laugh and have fun. They want to be energized. We don't listen.

We give them ham sandwiches, a never-ending panel discussion, and another huge tote bag with more logos on it than a NASCAR race.

Our attendees deserve more creative meetings. They deserve excitement. They deserve to see the host city and not just the inside of a hotel ballroom. They deserve to be surprised.

I have some tips that I want to share. These are easy suggestions that will make a significant difference in your meetings. Most of these changes cost nothing and involve very little time. These are recommendations that most attendees won't think to include on evaluations; yet these tips will help you create a more memorable and successful meeting.

So, pull up a chair as we "Climb the Mountain to Reach the Summit of Our Seven Secret Meetings Ideas." ➔

1

Banish the cold deli lunch.

There is an evil lurking in our meeting rooms. This demon surfaces around noon. Attendees are hungry after a long morning of listening to speakers trying to explain how their upside-down triangle is more important than the last guy's interlocking circles.

This wickedness of which I speak in hushed tones is the deli lunch buffet. This plague of ham sandwiches must be stopped. We must end the limp pickles, the processed turkey, and the strange soup at the end of the line. Prisoners eat better meals than deli lunch buffets.

Please, nobody walks into lunch, thinking, "Man, I could really use a cold ham sandwich right now." The meeting started at 8 a.m. We listened. We participated. Now, feed us the hot meal we deserve.

2

Start on time.

A recent client's meeting was scheduled to start at 9 a.m. The meeting was held in a conference room in the client's building. At 9 a.m., three people were in the room. The client looked at me and said, "We always start late."

At 9:15 a.m., there were a few more employees. Finally, at 9:30 a.m. the meeting started. The client again explained that all of their meetings started late and she didn't know what to do.

How about starting the meeting on time? People who attend meetings fly on airplanes. They get married. They graduate from high school and college. They go to work. They go to the movies and to football games. I am going to wager they participated in these activities by noticing they start at certain times.

Once you start the bad habit of starting late, it becomes routine. Those that did attend meetings on time before will know the meeting will start 30 minutes late. Why arrive on time, if you know the meeting will start late?

3

Sit down and enjoy the show.

Correct seating can change the meeting mood faster than saying, "Instead of a cash bar this year we are having an open bar."

A common mistake is starting the first row of chairs or tables too far from the stage. If you can drive a truck through the gap between the stage and first row, you have too much space. Why do you think comedy clubs have seating so close to the stage? Ten feet of space is plenty. The speakers and audience need to connect and feed off each other's energy. (Okay, that last sentence makes it sound like I am a magician from the 1970s.)

Here are a few more thoughts on seating:

1. Ban classroom seating. It does not foster interaction. It is hard for people to get in and out of the room. It creates barriers between the audience and the presenters.

2. Force people to sit up front. Nothing kills energy in a room more than five rows of empty seats in the front.

4

Please don't speak. I am eating.

I wish I had attended the first Rotary Club meeting when someone said, "Hey, why don't we start the program while people are still eating lunch." Everyone probably agreed because Jeremiah Johnson was talking about the importance of insuring the town's crops against bole weevils and nobody really cared. Well, nobody listened to Jeremiah. Nobody bought bole weevil insurance. The town's crops were lost. Damn bole weevils.

What is the moral of the story? Do not have a presentation, do business, hand out awards, give out prizes, start a panel discussion, or introduce the new CEO while people are eating. Nobody is listening. We are too busy passing the salt, asking for more tea, and eating our chicken and vegetable medley. The dishes are clanging. The servers are asking me if I want coffee. Let your attendees focus and enjoy their meals.

There is one more moral to this story. Always buy bole weevil insurance.



Enter stage left.

I ONCE PERFORMED ON A STAGE THAT WASN'T even facing the audience. If I stood center stage and looked straight out, I would be looking at half of an empty conference room and a wall. I ended up performing on the far corner of the stage. Actually, that wasn't even the worst part. After I started, more than a 100 people came in late and went through the buffet line. The buffet was in the room. A little voice kept saying, "Get out of the conference room. The buffet line is in the room."

Want to hear some more stage horror stories? How about the 4' X 4' stage placed in the corner of the room? How about a stage with a 50' runway protruding from the front?

The stage should be centered in front of the audience seating. I know the request sounds simple, but I have seen stages angled toward one corner of the room while the audience was angled toward another corner. I am no geometry wizard, but this may cause a few stiff necks.

A few more stage tips:

1. Walk around the room and look at the stage from different seats. How is the line of sight? This will help determine if the seats or stage need to be moved. And yes, all stages and chairs can be moved; you just have to ask nicely. Actually, sometimes you have to ask twice.

2. Pay attention to the stage requirements of your presenters. If one of your entertainers or speakers requests a certain size stage, make sure the correct stage is set up.

3. It is fairly easy and inexpensive to decorate a stage with lights, balloons, plants, artwork, and other details. Be creative. Take risks. Remember, the audience is going to be staring at this stage for several days. But remember to keep the front of the stage clear. There should not be a wall of plants that separates the audience from the presenter on stage.

4. Make sure the stage is properly lighted. You may not give room lighting much attention, but can make a huge difference. Play with the lights in the room. Better yet, think about the lighting before you decide on your location.

Shorten the boring presentations.

SOME SPEAKERS DESERVE 90 MINUTES. SOME SPEAKERS deserve 30 minutes. And some speakers deserve a quick introduction and five minutes. Work with your internal speakers to shorten their presentations, avoid repetition, and create a buzz.

Take 10 minutes away from each speaker. If you have six speakers, you just found an hour to have some fun and create energy for your meeting.

A few other thoughts:

1. Eliminate the 30-minute recap of where we have been.

We all know where we have been. Focus on where we are going.

2. Eliminate the obvious. Do we really need to go over our organizational structure, mission statement, and our values? Isn't this on the Web site?

3. Eliminate the podium. It is a barrier between you and the audience. Remember, you are trying to connect to the audience.

4. Focus on three key points. Everything else will most likely be forgotten.

Don't do things because that is they way they did them last year.

I KNOW YOU CHANGED THE THEME THIS YEAR. Instead of "Reaching the Summit" we are "Starting our

Engines." Other than that, we are in the same hotel, in the same city, eating the same chicken, looking at the same PowerPoint slide with interlocking circles.

I know what you are thinking. We don't have the budget for anything new. Why don't you find some new money?

1. Spend wisely. Would you rather spend your money or sponsorship dollars on water bottles, sun visors, and cold drink cozies or transportation to another venue for part of the meeting?

2. Do we need a full color, spiral-bound agenda, with 47 flaps, 67 dividers, and 16 pockets or can we save some money and instead treat the group to a jazz quartet during lunch?

3. Stand up to your board, vice president, committee, or whoever else wants to do the same meeting every year. Be creative. Try different ideas.

We are at the top of the mountain. We have reached the summit. I hope these ideas are helpful.

There are so many small details that will make the difference between a good meeting and a great meeting. These are details that don't show up in evaluations or attendee comments. Yet these details can change the mood, create energy, support presentations, and build a foundation for a wonderful meeting.

Okay, now how do I get back down the mountain? ■

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