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The Meeting Productivity Process – Unleashing the Power of Meetings

Article on MPP

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Powerful, Transformational Experiences

When designed right, large group meetings are powerful, transformational experiences. They can dramatically change people's feelings, opinions, intentions and behaviors. National sales meetings, dealer meetings, franchisee and employee meetings, even recognition events, are a one-time opportunity to make a powerful impact on the way people think, feel and behave when it really counts, after the meeting back on the job and in the marketplace. For example:

A national dealer meeting increased a GuideStar client's annual sales by ten percent when 98% of the dealers signed up for a new annual purchase agreement at the meeting conducted by this copier company.

A national dealer meeting for a GuideStar client in the automotive industry transformed a disaffected, frustrated dealer network into one that was rededicated and motivated to support the brand by increasing their inventory investment by 108%. In addition, 31% of the dealers did not reduce their purchase of cars at all, as they said they would on the pre-meeting survey. For the Audi factory, these two post-meeting shifts represented tens of millions of dollars in auto sales they would not have had if it weren't for the meeting's impact.

A national sales meeting for a division of a major health care company motivated the sales force to achieve 95% of their retail shelf space goals for a new product launch within 45 days of the meeting, half the targeted time.

An employee tele-conference for a telecommunications company increased employees' confidence and belief in the company's future by 48% and increased their confidence in their personal futures by 110%.

A national sales conference for a division of a major corporate credit card and corporate travel management company produced a 71% increase in those who were very confident of meeting or exceeding their sales objectives and a 340% increase in those who were confident the organization was moving in the right direction. The meeting achieved the highest attendee satisfaction levels on record with 89% of the attendees saying the meeting was effective in increasing their ability to compete and in providing a highly motivational experience.

A real estate company decided to reinvest in its "Chairman's Circle" instead of scrapping it when they found out how valuable it was as an educational experience for their top producing franchisees.

A 10-city series of independent broker conferences for another client resulted in 52% of the 3,500 broker principals placing new business with them worth almost \$60,000,000 in new premium income.

Re-Engineering the Meeting Process

Many companies have streamlined and "re-engineered" their business operations but have done comparatively little to redesign their organization's communications and their large group meeting process to achieve similar dramatic increases in customer value and return on investment. Companies invest hundreds of thousands, often millions of dollars, days of their most valuable peoples' time and energy in attending large meetings and months of key executives' preparation. Yet, even with stakes this high and so much invested, many meetings fall far short of the mark, never realizing their potential and rarely changing the way people feel, think and behave.

Many large group meetings become lost opportunities because they are not designed to address or satisfy the important relevant concerns, critical issues and needs of the participants, and very often as a result, do not deliver measurable, strategic results which move the organization ahead.

Avoid the "Speaker-Driven Meeting Syndrome"

Listen to the voice of the customer - The most common mistake meeting managers make is to produce a "speaker-driven" event instead of a "customer-responsive" event. It is certainly understandable why this happens. Most of the time, with corporate meetings, the small group of executive speakers is the same people who control the meeting budget. Meeting makers focus on satisfying their clients' needs first, and predictably, the most satisfied people at the meeting are often the executive presenters. They got exactly what they wanted; well polished, well rehearsed speeches with well-produced speech support visuals. They made their points well, and they looked good.

But, whether the hundreds, or thousands, of meeting attendees had their important needs met, whether they had a highly satisfying, highly valuable experience and whether the organization achieved a high return on its meeting investment are very different and much more significant questions than whether or not the speakers were personally satisfied with their presentations. Very often, meeting makers do not genuinely seek or respond to the fundamental, relevant and important needs of their meeting participants. As a result, many meetings are fatally flawed from the beginning and cannot fulfill their potential to powerfully connect with and move people to new feelings, thoughts and behaviors and do not deliver a high return on the meeting investment. On the other hand, when meeting designers conduct full and legitimate pre-event research with their prospective meeting attendees' using professional meeting attendee research methods and standards, they can acquire a very clear picture of what is necessary to build a highly relevant, satisfying meeting for attendees and one which will deliver a high Return On Event (ROE) for the organization.

Learn the Real Truth by Creating Trust

It is absolutely essential that people participating in this kind of research fully trust the researcher to protect their confidentiality. Companies often use outside research specialists like GuideStar Research who can guarantee absolute confidentiality and anonymity to the people being interviewed and surveyed. By developing what Kerns describes as a "cocoon of trust" during interviews and focus group sessions, outside research specialists often produce very open, candid, gut-level, real-world information and insights.

For example, at a division of a corporate credit card and corporate travel management company, meeting executives were prepared to duplicate a successful, celebratory national sales meeting format from the prior year with singers, dancers, sets and costumes, etc., however, confidential tele-focus group research and survey findings clearly showed that the field sales force was not in a mood to celebrate as they had been facing growing competitive threats, a downtrend economy and trying to find their footing through two internal reorganizations.

These weary warriors wanted a very different style of meeting, one which addressed their issues and concerns, gave them straight answers up close and personal from their leadership, which instilled confidence and trust that their new leadership had the strategies and competitive commitment to move the division in the right direction and was providing them with the tools to meet the competition head on and win.

A Vice President at the client company put it this way, "I think anyone who goes into a meeting like this and doesn't do a pre-conference survey is flying blind. You can sit here at headquarters and think you know what people really want or what they're like and what the issues are out there, but if you don't go out and confirm that you do know, you could run into problems. The productivity process gave us an idea of which issues were the major issues from the attendees' point of view, which were really hot and which were not."

Focus your Budget and Decrease Meeting Costs

First, design the "must have" elements of the meeting, those which satisfy the most important attendee needs and address the biggest opportunities for gain. Then, develop the "nice to have" elements which directly support the overall meeting objectives. Other meeting elements can be selectively eliminated as they are superfluous. These might be media and theatrical elements, displays and exhibits, celebrities, guest speakers, executive presentations, outside seminars, entertainment, etc.

By focusing with precision on the known essentials, a meeting's budget can be targeted to achieve the greatest impact on attendees' feelings, perceptions and behaviors while, at the same time, reducing costs by eliminating extraneous, gratuitous meeting elements.

The MPP is a proven, research-driven process for both designing meetings, which deliver powerful, measurable results, and for accurately, scientifically measuring post-meeting results. It was developed to meet the special needs of both meeting attendees and meeting managers, and has been utilized in a variety of businesses to dramatically change peoples' understandings, perceptions, attitudes, abilities, intentions and behaviors through the meeting medium.

The MPP is based on a set of beliefs:

- Organizations deserve a measurable return on their meeting investment.
- Meetings should be viewed as powerful, experiential instruments for communications and change.
- A large group meeting experience, when designed with precision using measurable objectives, can affect a specific set of attendees' personal dimensions; peoples' understanding, perceptions, attitudes, abilities, intentions and behaviors.
- Meetings are most effective when they are responsive to and satisfy the real needs of both groups of customers of the meeting experience, the attendee participants and the organization's leadership.
- Meetings, which address and satisfy attendees' most important needs, issues and preferences are able to connect with attendees at deep personal levels and affect their feelings, opinions, intentions and behaviors.
- A meeting's effects can be precisely measured using proven MPP research methods.

How the MPP Works

[Pre-meeting qualitative "pulse" research](#) - Confidential, in-depth telephone interviews with attendees and tele-focus group sessions with peer groups of attendee segments are conducted by meeting research professionals. Pulse research is accomplished quickly and inexpensively using pre-established sets of MPP questions and methods to identify and define prospective attendees' interests, business concerns and issues and their needs, desires, suggestions and preferences for the meeting.

Though the findings of this qualitative research are often enough to provide meeting managers

with the information they need to design a high-performance meeting, most of the time, a pre-event attendee survey is also conducted.

Pre-meeting quantitative research - Pre-meeting surveys are designed to confirm and refine what has been learned in the qualitative research and, most importantly, to provide a baseline of information about attendees' attitudes, perceptions, intentions, behaviors, etc. which will be used after the meeting to compare with the findings of a post-meeting survey to develop the Return On Event (ROE).

MPP, confidential, baseline surveys usually contain 45-65 multiple-choice plus 5-6 open-ended questions and often utilize tele-communications for rapid, cost-efficient data collection. One low cost method is the FxTele-Survey.

Questionnaires are faxed back directly into PC's with software programmed to read and extract the data thus eliminating weeks of questionnaire mailback and data entry time and costs.

Another method is the 800# Tele-Survey which offers respondents the convenience of using the buttons on their telephone keypads anytime 24-hours a day during the survey period, to "touch-tone" in their responses. People's responses to multiple-choice questions are instantly digitized. Their spoken responses to open-ended questions are recorded and transcribed. Snapshot reports can be ready for review within 24-48 hours of the survey period.

Meeting design - measurable objectives and essentials first - Using the research findings, measurable objectives are developed and organized by the core dimensions; understandings, attitudes, perceptions, abilities, needs and concerns, intentions and behaviors. These are prioritized, and then meeting strategies are developed to accomplish the most important objectives in each category. By approaching the meeting design this way, from the "inside out", and focusing first on what is known to be essential, the trap of imposing superfluous, cliché themes and irrelevant agenda items is avoided.

After the core meeting experiences have been designed, then the rest of the agenda can be filled in to address peoples' additional needs and preferences with an eye towards how these can support and enrich the core meeting experiences. The meeting theme and style will emerge naturally from this process and should be allowed to emerge rather than be imposed prematurely.

This design process also assures that the meeting budget will be allocated to the most important objectives first so that the meeting investment is leveraged to achieve a maximum Return On Event (ROE/ROI).

In-meeting feedback - During the meeting, especially multi-day events, feedback from attendees can help meeting makers respond to attendees' needs and concerns which have surfaced during the course of the meeting. This feedback can be gathered through a variety of means; suggestion and question cards, voice-mail, ARS, meal function table discussions, networking teams, PC-based kiosks, pre-planned debriefing meetings with small groups of selected attendees, etc.

Post-meeting qualitative "pulse" research - A series of confidential interviews and/or tele-focus group sessions are often used to identify and define attendees' satisfactions and dissatisfactions with their meeting experience, their perceptions, attitudes, intentions and behaviors in key areas of concern and interest to management and their suggestions for improving future meetings.

Post-meeting quantitative research - A tracking survey is conducted within several weeks of the meeting with benchmark questions to measure attendees' satisfaction levels with various aspects of the meeting, shifts in their understanding, attitudes, perceptions, abilities, intentions and behaviors and to learn about their suggestions for future meetings.

Tracking research conducted 3-6 months after a meeting can determine sustained results in peoples' understanding, attitudes, intentions and behaviors as well as the value of the meeting's contribution to peoples' success in achieving their business objectives. This extended research often involves customers, managers, service personnel and others within the meeting attendees' circle of influence and engagement.

Return On Event (ROE) - By comparing findings on pre-meeting and post-meeting benchmark questions, the Return On Event (ROE) is calculated, both on individual attitudes and perceptions and across the range of questions to determine the overall meeting ROE.

Return On Investment (ROI) - This is a specific financial measure which is applied in situations where valid quantitative information, such as sales or distribution figures, customer complaint ratios, etc. are available and can be linked directly to the meeting.

Post-event, meeting managers know exactly how well their meeting performed, precisely what results it produced and what specific actions to take in following through to reinforce strengths, address areas of weakness and plan future meetings.

As one client from a major corporate credit card and corporate travel management company said, "I think the real value of using the MPP in both 1992 and 1993 was that after looking at the 1992 post-meeting survey findings, we could see whether or not we moved the needle in certain areas, and the '92 data gave us a benchmark to use as a gauge for the 1993 meeting. Post-conference, the MPP tells us what we did right and what we did wrong in the meeting and what people will look for in the next meeting. That's very important information."

Some research is much better than no research - Although the MPP is a process, each of the individual pre- and post-event research services offers significant stand alone benefits and is often employed individually. Pre-event research can be extremely valuable in assisting meeting designers and organizational leaders to understand the critical needs, desires and expectations of attendees, while post-event research provides both an understanding of what was accomplished and guidance for follow through.

For example, a national sales meeting post-event survey for a leading diagnostics health care company examined the effectiveness of a series of technical product and sales training workshops. The company had invested a significant portion of their meeting budget in audience response systems to be used extensively in the workshops. Among other things they wanted to assess was the value of ARS as an educational tool at meetings. Questions on the survey provided answers from each segment of the sales force. In this case, the application of ARS received very high marks.

In another instance, a post-event survey showed that dealers had nominal interest, low confidence of success and little commitment to a new business strategy the manufacturer's leadership thought they had communicated well about and had gained dealers' commitment to at the meeting. Findings showed that the seminar on the new business strategy had been poorly conducted, and the dealers perceived that the company wasn't serious or committed to the strategy.

Re-Energize the Strategy

Discovering the truth of the situation within weeks of the meeting, the company's president quickly held a series of regional telephone conferences with the dealers to address the dealers' misperceptions and attitudes and was able to re-energize the strategy and move it forward with only a few weeks lost.

In another situation, pre-meeting focus groups and a survey prior to a national sales meeting for a very successful, market leader in the health care industry showed an extremely high degree of personal stress and frustration throughout the national sales organization due to abnormally high (average 60+ hours per week) work loads over many months. Management had already designed an intensive 2-day, 8-hours a day training meeting at a resort site in Arizona. Wrong!

The meeting was redesigned with training time and topics cut back and replaced with networking, R&R and informal discussion opportunities with management. The redesign provided attendees with a much-needed respite from their intense job stress. The balanced agenda and relaxed meeting style gave the entire organization a much needed "time out" and provided the opportunity to step back, look at the business and personal issues and to talk candidly about how things might be changed.

The result was that attendee satisfaction and ROEs on this event were very high with a 147% ROE on the sales force's satisfaction that their leadership understands what people are experiencing and feeling about their jobs, a 90% ROE on satisfaction that the company is a unified team working together, 69% ROE on satisfaction with recognition, 62% ROE on confidence in achieving sales goals, 56% ROE on satisfaction with morale in the work group and a 45% ROE on satisfaction with organizational support. (ROE represents the total percentage shift on a question from pre-meeting to post-meeting.)

[The MPP is low-cost meeting insurance](#) - MPP service costs average about 2%-3% of a company's total meeting investment. This comparatively modest cost assures that the remaining 98% of the meeting budget will be spent effectively and that a high ROE/ROI will be achieved and precisely measured.

Summary

In summary, large group meetings can deliver significantly higher attendee satisfaction and a greater Return On Event for the organization than many companies realize. By employing the Meeting Productivity Process, or some of its individual elements, to assure more efficient meeting designs, ones which are responsive to and satisfy their meeting stakeholders' most important needs, objectives, and preferences, organizations can dramatically improve the return on their Total Meeting Investment.

To learn more, visit www.guidestarco.com.