

Meeting Support Institute

Meeting Content Conference

Frankfurt, 20 April 2007

Results from: [Crystal Interactive](#)

Mindshare with Mike van der Vijver & Ray Elmitt

The session “*Houston, We Have a Problem...*” asked participants to comment on the difficulties involved in organising the content at meetings in such a way that the objectives of both organiser and participant could be met. The session generated a lot of useful output. Thanks you! Unfortunately, due to technical issues, I was unable to comment on participants’ observations in the course of the session, as originally intended. Thanks to the co-operation of the Meeting Support Institute, I now have the opportunity to do so, even though briefly. Of course, I will make these comments from the perspective of the meeting designer - my profession.

Question: What are the difficulties involved in organising the content of meetings?

Target Audience

- Don't know the audience
- Finding suitable content for particular delegates
- Different levels of education among participants
- Participants' needs for new information are very variable
- Cultural differences
- Setting the right expectations
- Meeting different expectations of participants
- Cross cultural differences
- Finding the right thrilling questions that are interesting for the future
- Knowing your users, satisfying and evaluating them
- Delegate mix
- Wide range of interests of all the delegates; impossible to cater to all
- How to create space for participants' agendas

Solutions

- Pre meeting survey of participants
- Audience profiling (Myers Briggs)
- Define criteria for audience appropriate for program
- Demographic questions
- Define program objectives - clear and factual
- Define very specifically the topics of the congress and communicate it clearly
- Create the appropriate expectations
- Limit topics covered per session
- Mixed / diverse audience can be enriching too (e.g. Provide the group with various ideas)

Comment Mike van der Vijver:

It is surprising how little meeting organisers sometimes know about the reasons why people attend meetings and about their expectations of the programme. Lots of demographics but little qualitative data.

For the meeting designer it is essential to have access to end users and conduct in-depth interviews with some of them, in addition to talking to leading figures in the subject matter. Purposes include getting a “feel” for the (un)interesting, incoherent or problematic aspects of the topic, map out positions and power games, and finding the organiser’s possible blind spot.

Many difficulties raised in Frankfurt, such as delegate mix, cultural differences, etc. will be taken on board in a good meeting design, on the one hand with a view to creating an interesting debate thanks to diversity, and on the other as just something that needs to be managed properly by choosing the right formats and roles for people.

Lack of knowledge (organisers)

- Lack of knowledge of available services
- Lack of clarity of conference objectives
- Matching the right speakers with the content of the meeting
- Reducing too much content to manageable proportions

Solutions

For every repeat of your annual conference reduce number of speakers by one

Use money for facilitators that can involve participants]

Educate people

Tell speakers how much presentation time they have - only 20 min, 40 min discussion, 6 powerpoints, 6 bullets, 6 words per bullet

Stick to key messages and let audience direct expansion

Electric shocks when presentation is too long

Comment Mike van der Vijver:

Things are gradually moving the right direction: this year's MPI's PEC, with its stress on design, started bringing home the right message. Those who recognise the need for change in the MICE industry must continue to tell the story and especially look for good examples that show results (for instance expressed as ROI improvement) and that stick in people's minds.

I don't think we should expect organisers to develop the awareness of better content organisation during meetings on their own. By its nature, the organisation of meetings and events induces risk-aversion: let's just do the things we have always done and that everybody does, then not much can go wrong and no-one can get blamed. There is a clear task here for the Meeting Support Institute and the idea of creating a Master in Meeting Architecture deserves strong support. Further research similar to the Learning Lab project in Denmark is highly necessary, pointing out the relationship between adult learning principles and meeting design. However, change is always slower than those who advocate it would prefer.

Stuck in routine

- The issue has become religious
- Boring template - fixed formula
- How to make delegates active
- Fear of new meeting content experiences
- Can't use PowerPoint - its 21 years old!

Solutions

- Encourage meetings planners to be less risk-averse
- Different seatings, venues
- Reward risk-taking in certain areas of meetings planning
- Sharing best practice in creative meeting planning
- Involve experts in meetings
- Use the mimlist to find original, tried-and-tested ideas from meetings planners all over the world
- Renew quality to your conference
- Ask your opposition to work with you on the next project
- Approach each meeting as the "first and one" in your working life
- Study, research, learn from each meeting
- Try new innovations only in new concepts; very difficult to change an existing formula; can only be done gradually. The customer can only change in small steps

Comment Mike van der Vijver:

The more change agents in the MICE industry help organisers understand what their real objectives with meetings are, the more they will realise that ancient formats are not going to get them there. This means we must take the first steps and develop the right data and arguments to underscore our points.

Speaker abilities

- Speaker selection/ evaluation
- Entrenched practices
- Dealing with difficult speakers
- Quality of presentations (too many slides and bullets)
- How to communicate through different senses
- Humour may not be appropriate
- Speakers know the content but not the deliver
- Speaker preparation - not respecting agenda
- We need more speaker briefing/training/support to make them more motivational
- To find good speakers who have not been heard before
- Finding the right speaker is difficult

Solutions

- Briefing speakers well in advance
- Guidelines for good speaking
- Seniority of speakers sells tickets; but is no guarantee for quality...
- Previewing and testing presentations, speakers
- Invite recognized speakers
- Enough time for speakers to prepare
- Upset speakers are the best; they are flaming in their speeches and cause controversy
- Good chairmen are required to challenge the speakers
- A good mix between very senior speakers and speakers with real hands-on experience
- Speakers need very good English language skills
- Speaker screening and briefing before program
- Or use instant translators
- Organise speaker training to raise awareness on learning objectives

Comment Mike van der Vijver:

My first reaction tends to be: Who needs speakers anyway? One of the important functions of the meeting designer is to protect the organiser against bad speakers and to protect bad speakers against themselves. PowerPoint is a blessing in disguise, as people who did not have the courage in the past are now also asked to take the stage. We all know there are few really useful speakers – most organisers know this, too. The problem is that few people come up with a suitable alternative that leaves room for a meaningful dissemination of (new) information, opportunities to enhance people's status, etc.

I can hardly think of a better argument for a prominent role of meeting content management in general and of the meeting designer or architect in particular!

Investment of time & money

- Companies want more in less time
- Time pressure
- Quantifying the added value
- Defining the aim of the meeting
- Not preparing the audience / delegates beforehand
- Humour, could be dangerous
- Organisers don't want to pay speakers
- Finding meeting organisers who want to invest time and money in meeting content

Solutions

- Integration in existing marketing programs/budgets
- Approach the decision maker

- Knowing lead times
- Providing ROI feedback

Comment Mike van der Vijver:

Meetings are costly creatures. How do meeting organisers know they are not squandering huge amounts of money? Come to think of it, how come they don't know they generally are? Well, essentially because there is still a lot of work to do for people like ourselves! We need to push much more strongly for clarity on meeting objectives and for the development and deployment of ROI-instruments. Has anybody ever researched and calculated how many new people meeting participants encounter during traditional network events? And of course I'm not referring to network events for seasoned conference addicts in MPI or the MSI. I'm referring to the EU Conference on the prioritisation of medical expenses for the elderly in the 21st century. Or to the European Cutlery Association's Annual gathering...

It is crystal-clear that well-designed meetings earn a better return on investment and it is up to industry bodies such as the MSI to break this story incessantly to the MICE industry.

Quality assurance

- Briefing facilitators
- We need longer and better briefings, before the meeting get designed.
- Lack of control over presentations
- Hard to find enough added value for the participant
- All information is fragmented so no one really knows all there is to know to do a good job.
- Finding relevant and interesting speakers
- Too much content for programme

Solutions

- Work with speaker bureau
- Set parameters for speakers
- From the side of the organisers this requires attention to both speaker and delegate aspects.
- Key note speaker with public profile
- Different formats in day programme
- Pre conference speaker briefing
- Work with accredited speakers
- Surveys prior, during and post conference
- Clear conference materials
- Reference system
- Create meeting team with diverse skills; different character

Comment Mike van der Vijver:

Almost everybody knows a good meeting when they experience one. My comments on this one are similar to the ones under the previous two points. I would add that the professionalism of meeting designers is key in the change process towards more effective meetings. Clearly, it is not enough to just add a bit of fun or a motivational speaker to the programme to make it more effective, just as a marvellous painting in the hallway will not make an ugly building beautiful. To get better programmes a different alignment between content and format is required. Organisers must be able to develop the trust in a new type of professional – the meeting designer – thanks to the clear added value this professional has on meeting outcomes.

Vested interests

- Relation between sponsors and content
- The issue has become political
- Boring leadership expect to speak
- There is not always a balance between interests from politicians, consumers, experts and industry
- Identifying participants' expectations (content, good speakers)
- Need to meet sponsors' expectations and to create a friendly content for them

Solutions

- More honesty, and clarity of objectives; sponsors shouldn't necessarily expect to speak
- Develop boring speakers, AND/OR different approach, e.g. Chat show
- Give delegates power to remove "vested interests"
- Be realistic - you know politicians will be bland, safe and dull!
- Ability to review and assess part way through - why wait till the end (do it at lunch - event blog!)
- Solutions:
- Keep the content and sponsorship apart
- Watch out for saboteurs and mic huggers!

Comment Mike van der Vijver:

Organisers can always be reminded about the meeting objectives the originally agreed – these should be leading and any other interests should be included in the programme in such a way that they provide a fit with the objectives. This applies in particular to sponsor requirements.

As for politicians: often it is enough to give them a different role, other than speaker, to make them suddenly a lot more interesting.

However, for politically sensitive issues and high-profile politicians it may sometimes prove impossible to let the organiser stick to his plan and the design – which would be in the interest of participants.

Organiser v Delegates

- Feedback not sought
- Meeting owner not listening to delegates
- How to involve participants in meetings?
- Determining clear goals by the content owner.

Solutions

- Make sure the delegates know what to expect
- Consult the meeting initiator. Run the "anamnesis" process as extra professional benefit to the client.
- Analyse the "needs" of each group of stakeholders (participants, initiator, suppliers, speakers, etc.)
- Opportunity to ask questions before the conference
- Set right expectations to all stakeholders - organizers, delegates, sponsors etc
- Find out who pays and the price sensitivity

Comment Mike van der Vijver:

As mentioned under point 1, the organiser does not necessarily have a clear view of what delegates want, nor of what he himself wants, for that matter. The first task of the meeting designer is to face up to the organiser on these issues and help him to develop clear and consistent ideas. In addition, on the basis of delegate interviews, organisers will need to recognise that a meeting that does not satisfy delegate expectations and their need for participation will be money wasted. Organisers can obtain results only when they consider the delegates the most important guests at his meeting. What that means in practice, varies from one meeting to another and needs to be worked out in a good meeting design.

Other

- Too much motivation in the social part, not enough in meetings.
- Never listen to the request from your customer; they are interested in everything but will not want to pay for anything
- Synthesising of content
- Conference expresses the balance of power