



Meeting Planning Tips

Secrets to a Successful Meeting

You are probably an experienced meeting planner, but if you delegate the planning process, here are a few tips from Laurie's thirty years of experience to pass along to your staff.

Keep your costs down.

If your meeting is at a hotel and involves coffee service or a meal, negotiate with the hotel to waive the meeting room fee. Also ask for a free sleeping room for your speaker. The hotel won't always do both, but it never hurts to ask. Ask for both and they're more likely to give you one or the other. If they won't provide a free room, be sure to ask for the best available room rate for your speaker – for instance a corporate rate rather than the full price "rack" rate. Since you are reimbursing speaker expenses, this will save you money. If you are making the hotel reservation for the speaker, ask her for a room away from the noisy elevators and ice machine. This will help ensure that your speaker gets a good night's sleep and is alert and ready to speak!

Be sure everyone can see.

If your audience will be 100 or more people, ask the meeting facility of hotel for a larger riser at the front of the room, center set-up. This riser should be at least 18 to 24 inches high and should be large enough to accommodate a screen, a table for AV equipment, and the speaker. AV equipment must be far enough away from the screen for a large projected image. Placing the projector on the floor on a cart works well, but the connection cord for the computer must be long for this to work. Don't let the facility staff talk you into a corner set-up unless you are using two screens. Another tip for good visibility – avoid meeting rooms with low ceilings and interior columns.

Build-in an extra 15 minutes.

Plan your program and then add at least 15 minutes. If you end early, you're a hero. Otherwise you have 15 minutes to allow for a late start, slow meal service, AV problems, or other unexpected snafus.

Check the AV equipment in advance.

Arrange to meet the Audio/Visual technician at least an hour ahead of the meeting's scheduled start time. Better yet, schedule the meeting and ask the speaker to do it for you. Be sure everything is working, microphone volume levels are properly set, overhead projectors have an extra bulb already installed, computers are compatible with LCD projectors, etc. Allowing at least an hour give the AV staff time to change equipment if required. Laurie does this for all her programs.

Remember, room size makes a big difference.

The success of the meeting is influenced by the room size and set-up. Ask the meeting facility to set chairs for the number of people you actually expect to attend. However....schedule a room which will accommodate the maximum number you might have. But, avoid a room that is too big. The maximum number expected should fill the room. When you book the meeting, alert the facility staff that you may wish to add chairs at the last minute, but that you don't want them in the original set-up. When the original chairs fill, attendees feel "everybody came" and the excitement and enthusiasm are high. If you have to add chairs, it makes the meeting seem even more successful from the very start. The psychology of this can't be over emphasized. Empty chairs drain the energy from a room... they are the kiss of death for a program! You can probably gauge whether you'll need extra chairs while the attendees are registering, getting coffee, or simply chatting before the start of the meeting. You should have allowed an extra 15 minutes in the meeting agenda anyway and so a brief delay while chairs are added shouldn't make your meeting run overtime. Although attendees love getting out on time, if you run a bit over, you'll still be "on time" based on your announced schedule. In either case, you're a hero!

Avoid latecomer disruptions.

To encourage people to sit in front and to leave several back rows for late arrivals, tape or rope off the back rows and hang reserved signs on the tape. (Use masking tape.) Attendees will generally remove the tape if reserved signs are not posted. Your speaker will be grateful for this assistance and your meeting will be more successful since latecomers will not be a distraction.

Ask attendees to turn cell phones off.

Everyone's attention waivers when phones keep ringing. Ask attendees to turn them off or reset to vibrate mode.

Meal meeting? Avoid distractions.

If your meeting involves a meal before your speaker, be sure to ask the wait-staff to clear and leave the room before your speaker starts. Otherwise, your speaker must compete with clinking dishes and wandering waiters. Be sure you know how much time the facility requires to serve and clear so you can schedule your meeting time accordingly. Remember to put your speaker on a riser so she can be seen. Don't ever plan a serious presentation after cocktails and dinner. Hire a humorist instead.

Classroom or theatre set-up?

If your meeting will be long or you expect attendees to take copious notes, consider a classroom set up with long tables. (Theatre style is chairs only.) Ask the facility to allow ample room between chairs at the tables. Otherwise they tend to crowd chairs together leaving many people straddling table legs and bumping elbows with their neighbors. Classroom set-up requires a larger room. 2 chairs per 6 foot table is ideal.

Before you book the facility, ask what's happening next door.

If your meeting is in one side of a ballroom and a high school band competition is happening on the other side of the room divider, your meeting may be drowned out by what's happening next door. Ask what other groups have booked rooms adjacent to the room you are considering. We once had to compete with a gospel choir "sing-off" competition!

An important note: avoid movie theaters!

Theaters are great for movies, but are a terrible environment for live meetings. (Some experienced speakers decline invitations to speak in movie theaters!) These cavernous spaces with their high ceilings and no center aisle will D-R-A-I-N all the energy from your meeting. It's

even worse if all the seats are not full. Your meeting will have no sense of excitement, the speaker won't connect with the audience, and you'll wonder why the meeting fell FLAT! Theaters may seem like good meeting locations, but generally are not – unless your meeting revolves around a movie rather than a live presentation.

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