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Hints for Exceptional Meetings

Whether you are the presenter, the meeting planner or the boss's assistant, you will want to make sure the meeting runs as smoothly as possible. Here are a few suggestions to make your day a success and remove those worry wrinkles from your brow!

LIGHTING

1. The room should be well lit, people fall asleep in dark rooms and can't see to take notes. Most LCD Projectors are strong enough now to show presentations in normal light.
2. Make sure outside light doesn't glare into anyone's eyes and there are no moving shadows.
3. The speaker's platform area should be highlighted if at all possible.
4. Know how to lower lights for screen presentations if it becomes necessary. Check with your presenters as to their preferences. They may be able to make their presentations lighter rather than having the room too dim.

AIR CONDITIONING/VENTILATION

1. Keep the room on the cool side, but not uncomfortable or "freezing." Enlist a few trusted attendees in various parts of the room to keep you posted about how the room feels in their section. Texting each other may be the optimal way, or work out hand signals.
2. Find out how to regulate room temperature before people arrive. Work with the engineers at the venue and either get their permission to change it, or find a way to contact them quickly should you need them to make adjustments.
3. Be sure the room is well ventilated: free from drafts & annoying odors.

DISTRACTIONS/NOISE

1. As far as possible, keep room free of excessive background noise (plan how you will handle distracting persons outside of the room – having some volunteers keep an eye on slamming doors and random passers-by will reduce your stress immeasurably).
2. Set room up so it is free of traffic. If you have no choice, traffic should move through the back of the room, never through the door next to the stage.

EQUIPMENT

1. Within reason, have in place only the equipment that is being used for that session. Have a plan for moving extraneous equipment out of the way.
2. Know how (or have a volunteer who knows how) to run all equipment, open screens, run LCD projectors, video cameras, etc. Test **everything** prior to all sessions. Test it again the next morning if your conference goes for several days.
3. If DVD's, CD's, livestreaming or anything requiring moving parts will be used, be sure you have tested it completely. Have all media cued up and ready to go. Expect that something will go wrong and have a Plan B.
4. Your presenters "should" bring all the connectors they need for their laptops and other AV. They won't. Assume they will have an old computer or a brand new one that came out yesterday. Have all the possible connectors you can find. Mark them with colored yarn, ID tags and return address tags. You will occasionally not have the right ones. You will improvise. It is not the end of the world.
5. If you are using projectors, make sure you have an extra bulb for each type. They will burn out at the worst possible time. Do NOT allow anyone to place a book or other cover over the bulb while it is turned on. This will shorten the life of the bulb considerably. (If using PowerPoint, have the Presenter push the "B" key to take the screen to black, or the "W" key to take it to white.)
6. Create an AV backup kit with spare bulbs, batteries, extension cords, etc. on hand for every piece of equipment to be used.
7. Check to be sure you have adequate outlets for all lights and equipment.

SEATING

1. Arrange seating so it supports attendees and speakers. If possible, Participants should be able to see each other. The optimum arrangement would be either table rounds with no one seated with their back to the stage, or a chevron where everyone is at a slight angle. Classroom seating with all tables facing forward is the least conducive to interaction and learning.
2. Insure that screens, flip charts and other visual aids are visible from every seat in the house. Walk through the room and sit in random sections to make sure.
3. Seats should be comfortable, but not so comfortable they put your participants to sleep.
4. Keep audience close to the speaking platform rather than spreading out too far. If you have far too many seats for the number attending, block off the back rows. Interaction happens in more intimate settings.



SUPPLIES, EXTRA MATERIALS, PARKING VALIDATIONS

1. Work from a supply checklist to insure that you have all the necessary pens, markers, erasers, tape, and other supplies for the presentation
2. Place all materials needed for the day, including parking validations, extra pens and pads of paper, as well as extra agendas and any materials you will be handing out on a table at the rear of the room.
3. If items will be stored for long conferences and workshops held offsite, check to see if you will have a secure place to store your supplies and equipment.

EXIT

1. If the room allows it, have the exit at the back of the room.
2. If the exit/entrance must be near the speaker, post a sign outside the door that a session is in progress, or post a "guard" to control movement during crucial parts of the presentation.
3. FIRE EXITS - be sure these are clearly marked and that you have announced them to everyone using the room.

REFRESHMENTS/REST BREAKS

1. Determine what your policy will be regarding food and drinks in the room. Announce this policy during the "housekeeping" portion of your introduction. Include any information for smokers. They will be your "agitation" reality check. When they are agitated, it's time to call a break.
2. Don't fall in love with your schedule. Adults can't handle more than 55 minutes sitting at once, especially if the material is dry and they aren't moving around.
3. Announce your general intentions and policies regarding rest breaks as well as location of refreshment and restroom facilities during the introduction section. If possible, give attendees permission to leave the session for a quick break if they feel the need. (Since adults have an attention span of about 55 minutes, break at least every hour if possible.)

SECURITY

1. Determine if the room can be made secure during breaks and overnight.
2. If security is an issue, make it known to the attendees as gracefully as possible during the introduction or as you make an announcement for a break. Allow them to make a decision about leaving their belongings in the room.
3. Be sure you know whom to call in the event of a problem.



ROOM APPEARANCE, SAFETY AND SECURITY

1. Check the room at the beginning of each segment of the workshop or program. Be sure it is neat and orderly. Boxes and crates for supplies should be hidden.
2. Cords should be taped down. Visual Aids not being used should be moved to the back of the room if possible.
3. At each break, the room should be cleaned and straightened. If conducting this at a hotel or club, let the staff know when breaks will be so they can clean up and replenish refreshments.
4. Be sure there is a wastebasket at the back of the room and at the registration table.

CARE OF PRESENTERS

1. Have water on or near the podium for your presenters
2. If they are speaking during a meal, find out if they would prefer to have their meal after the presentation. Work with the venue to save them food on the side whether it's a plated meal or buffet.
3. Ask for their introduction in advance so you can preview it and ask any questions. Introductions are vital to the success of the presenter and help to set the stage for success. If the introduction is too long, or is presented poorly, it starts your session off on a bad note, which defeats the purpose of having this person there.
4. If your presenter has educational materials they would like to make available at the back of the room, let them know you have a policy of no sales from stage. Offer instead to do a quick "outro" when they are done that encourages attendees to sign up for their ezine or blog and to visit the back of the room or the bookstore.
5. Make sure they have a good table, a place to set up early, and someone to help them. Volunteers are great for this. Many speakers will happily pay a volunteer to help, or they will give the volunteer some of their products for helping.



TIPS IF YOU ARE AN MC OR MODERATOR

1. This is a pro-active job. You are the "conciierge" for the event. Anticipate the needs of the speaker and attendees: i.e.: parking, phone calls, restroom breaks, fatigue, anxiety, boredom, emergencies, etc.
2. At the beginning of each day, let everyone know how the day will progress; when time will be made for phone calls; how they will receive their messages (do you have a bulletin board or a digital format); when they will have time for personal matters; set the rules for interaction, leaving the room, etc.
3. Find out your group's policies on texting, tweeting, internet, cell phones, etc. and include that in the housekeeping announcements. If your group is using a hashtag for texts and tweets, announce that as well and add it to the slides at the beginning and end.
4. During the sessions, be alert to audience reaction. If you see squirming, bored expressions, lack of participation, it may be time for a break. Have a system to communicate both with the Meeting Planner and the Presenter in the event of a change in the schedule or need for a break.
5. During long conferences or programs, find ways for participants to move around so they are not sitting in the same place for long stretches.
6. Check with participants from time to time to see if they are achieving their personal goals for the meeting.
7. Have fun with the group. Acknowledge them. Be honest about changes in schedules, lateness, and re-arranging any part of the meeting. Admit your mistakes. Keep things light and moving. Start meetings on time and finish early if you can. Be flexible.
8. Take care of your group and they will take care of you.

Thank you to Sam Horn and Eileen Millar for helping me put this together way back in 1989. It has been edited and modified many times as the times have changed. Please use this as a starting point and add your own checklists and notes to make it useful for you.

