



get the most from your next . small meeting... set objectives

Know the purpose of the meeting and state the objectives up front. Set up an e-mail or Web system by which participants can receive information and give input about the event well before the meeting. Be prepared to act on that input. Give attendees an agenda. Meetings often lack agendas because they're "not important enough." If it's not important enough, don't meet. Give attendees advance reading or assignments so they come to the meeting with some sense of what is expected and are psyched about possible outcomes. Get them involved in the outcome.

Develop an advisory council of interested parties from different regions or offices, if your attendees are coming from varied geographical locations. The group can work with senior management to prioritize the issues and topics for discussion.

On Site

The mind can absorb only what the seat of the pants can tolerate. Keep attendees up and active during the day; use varied presentation styles; use participation techniques to make the attendees feel they are part of the meeting. Try different room setups each day if the same people are meeting in the same room. Anything to keep things interesting!

Make sure your hotel convention services manager knows the hours you have reserved your meeting room. Even if you have a 24-hour hold on a room, it is safest to take all of the materials you'll need for the following day to a safe place, like your hotel room.

Seat people in a circle or semicircle to encourage interaction. Put "reserved" on the back rows of seats in a room set larger than the audience you are expecting, forcing people to sit up front.

Suggest casual clothing if you're encouraging ice-breaking or interaction. Have people fill out index cards to pose questions anonymously at the beginning of the session so the presenter can address them at an appropriate time.

Give attendees mental and physical breaks. One company started a meeting for 30 people with a continental breakfast at 7:30 a.m., continued in the same room through a working lunch, then broke at 5:30 p.m. Attendees never got out of the same stuffy meeting room or the same chairs. Never get a small meeting rolling until you've given attendees a chance to introduce themselves and get their agendas on the table.

This could mean simply jotting down a list of issues on a flip chart, for example, that the meeting leaders or facilitators can promise will be handled throughout the meeting. Do make sure facilitators follow through on that promise.

Don't use a resort unless you plan to make the resort's facilities a part of your meeting. Imagine a company holding a national sales meeting at a resort when corporate policy does not permit free time to use the resort's amenities. So attendees get to see the glorious outdoors from inside a meeting room and watch and weep as others have a good time! Don't use sophisticated audiovisual or technical equipment unless it fits your audience's needs or unless the presenter knows how to use it; technology does not equal interactivity. Don't write and distribute a meeting description until you know exactly what is going to be presented.

There's nothing worse than having attendees go to a session and come out of it muttering "That's not what I expected."