



7 IDEAS TO GET A GREAT “RETURN ON CONFERENCES”

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by David Lim, CSP

You've been there before – a large national meeting organised by your company comprising a day or more of keynotes, presentations, regional or country updates.



Now ask yourself this, within just one hour of a session or presentation, describe three key things you learned that made a difference in your workplace, and how you will apply them. Chances, you'll be feeling a bit sheepish because you can't recall a single distinct call for action, new idea or action plan that you want to implement.

For over a decade, I've averaged about 60 over motivational keynotes a year for client conferences, and have been invited to add value to such events in 75 cities and 33 countries. I've seen the good, the bad and the ugly of meetings.

The reality of meetings and finances is that most stakeholders haven't worked out specifically, what they want as a Return on Conferences (or ROC) for the meeting, and how they will measure it, let alone decide on which metric to use.

As a key person responsible for a meeting, you are also, directly responsible for the metrics of ROC, expressed in man-hours gained, lost or leveraged. 100 of your key staff sitting in a poorly positioned presentation, delivered in a mind-numbing fashion is 100-man hours wasted or, almost TWO weeks of a single executive's time wasted from a session whose messages failed to stick, inspire, or mandate a call for action.

So here are seven ideas for you to make you be more interested in having a say how an organization spends for a meeting and well as get a ROC that matter to them

1. GET A CLEAR IDEA OF WHAT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE OUT OF THE MEETING



Far too many meeting sessions are better served by distributing a handout. Why?

Think massively dense presentation slides of Excel sheets; speakers reading off the screen with their backs turned to the audience.

Disengaged audiences struggling with more data.

Meetings are to share ideas that provoke action and make shifts in beliefs and mindsets.

The rest are called handouts.

Select a metric that supports your thrust.

2. PEOPLE THINK WITH LOGIC BUT ACT ON EMOTION

We think and rationalise information, but what often makes us act is our own self-serving interests and emotional triggers. Why are my services as a leadership and motivational speaker in demand? Meeting organizers realise that in the programming mix in a meeting, it's better to have a session with a fresh external perspective that makes the audience assess their own unique condition in a different way.

A speaker or session that makes them want to believe they can achieve their goals through a number of simple, effective skills, stories told that enthrall, validate their own experiences, are powerful 'wake-em-up' components. In Dan and Chip Heath's bestseller, "Made to Stick" which was #2 in Amazon.com's Top Ten Business Books of 2007, Stanford professor Chip Heath's outline held a dozen key points that would make any presentation 'sticky'. One of them was powerful story telling that helps cement the points conveyed.



Tip:

Get your presenters to think about the emotional content of a business topic, and leave dense charts and information as a handout.

Zero in on key items (only) that make a difference to the audience

3. REVOLUTIONARY IDEA? ASK THE AUDIENCE WHAT THEY WANT.



Conduct pre-event meetings with focus groups , or conduct a pre-event online survey to ascertain what the participants want to take away. Move away from the top-down approach. Move away from what the CEO wants to deliver and create a meeting that is audience-driven. A couple of years ago, I attended a large conference organized by a major IT multinational. It had up to seven presentations in a single day with almost no opportunities for participant interaction,

and with no professional speakers in the lineup. Towards the end of a stultifying day, the planner realised that each speaker had overrun by 5 minutes. So on top of a numb 300-strong audience, they were already an hour behind schedule by 4pm. Do you seriously think this audience learnt much? In reality, the 'real' meeting – where ideas were exchanged, action plans developed – was already happening outside the auditorium. People were outside talking, sharing and connecting, as more and more left the main hall.

Tip:
avoid legacy events which happen every year, and start each meeting with a fresh slate, and really really discover what outcomes both the C-officers want as well as what the audience needs.

4. FORGET FEEDBACK FORMS



Yup, you heard it here. Most are poorly designed, and given at the end of a meeting when everyone needs to rush off somewhere else.

Here are some pertinent question that should be asked 2/3rds through a meeting:

- Has the meeting met your expectations in terms of learning or receiving the communications/information you desired?
- What are you going to do with the information or ideas received?
- When are you going to implement the above?

A month later send an online survey to see the efficacy of the meeting's lessons.

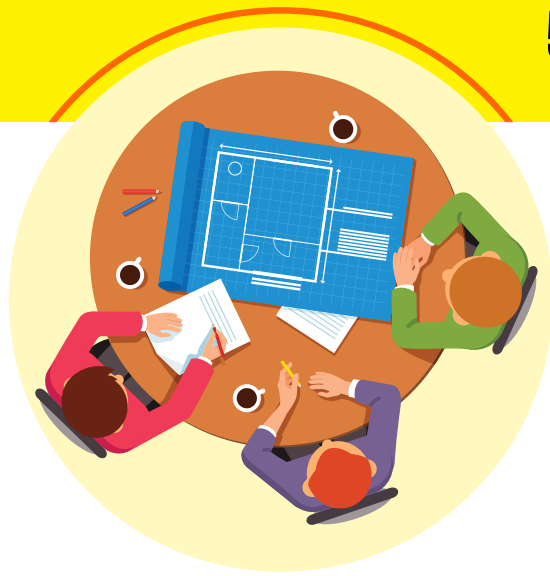
This, if you think of it, is a basic ROC. More sophisticated tools exist where , you and the expert provider can map out the actual dollar ROC.

For example, if after a supplier conference, you acquire 30% more customers who signed up with a specific product, you could attribute quite a bit of the revenue gain to the meeting. Great ROC.

Tip:

If you are getting feedback forms which mainly talk about the quality of the food or the airconditioning of the venue, you have lost the plot.

5. MEETING ARCHITECTURE IS EVERYTHING.



Here's a typical meeting that gets some results, but also sometimes get very mediocre outcomes: CEO address and 'state of our organization' speech; five regional updates (that only seem to interest reps from the regions when their boss is speaking). A finance report, followed by a speaker, possibly external, on global trends, perhaps some fun team games at the end, and then a dinner where far too many drink far too much. Here's an 'alternative' meeting: The CEO reveals the greatest triumphs and relates a story using the power of myths where the company is the hero and its officers

all 'warriors' – a highly interactive “meet-the-management” session follows with active use of audience response pads, Twitter and similar technologies. Questions unanswered are later addressed in an Open Space meeting in the afternoon, where people are allowed to roam freely from one sub-meeting to another, where each attracts only the most committed to see change and implementation of plans to achieve the year's goals.

Lunch is an extended 2-hour session where senior staff and their key suppliers join forces in the kitchen to provide some the luncheon's top dishes. Post lunch, an external speaker puts a whole new spin on the organization's challenges, reinforcing productive beliefs already in place, and ending with a call for action. Breakouts follow where the audience recall top learning points, implementation plans, and a post-conference follow up 2 weeks later.

You get the point. ROC is greatly enhanced by audience engagement, connectivity and having a meaningful dialogue that leads to action and implementation.

Tip:
Don't play it safe all the time if you truly want change and outcomes from your meetings. Doing “same old same old” only gets the same old results

6. SAVE LIKE A SCROOGE, SPEND LIKE A PRINCE



McKinsey's 2010 report on Singapore Airlines is a wonderful, deep dive into what has made this airline consistently one of, if not the best airline in the world over the past two decades.

One key point that stuck out was that Singapore Airlines always spends where it matters – at the customer experience level.

That means the latest business class seats, state-of-the-art inflight tech and experience.

They cut back in areas that don't matter so much

to the customer experience. I've seen it myself – many backend staff are housed in 1970s buildings located far from costlier city centre locations.

Like meetings; where are you spending your budget?

Looking to sting on what might be a great, memorable speaker with a bang-on message for your team to take away? Think if you can afford the speaker by cutting out the dessert. Feed their tummies or feed their minds? And yet, there are countless meetings that spend a lot on the wrong things – swanky sea-side resorts but where the agenda locks up the group for most of the day inside conference rooms. You might prefer to pick a less glamorous offsite location and spend the monies saved instead on, for example, a team of professional facilitators. They could help you to get to the heart of issues and help you produce an actionable post-meeting set of projects

7. OPTIMISE THE ENERGY FLOW



Losing the engagement of a 100 senior professionals for even an hour is a terrible waste and impacts your ROC. Much of the time, it isn't even the content that is to blame but where the content is positioned.

Front-load the hardest part of the meeting in the morning, where rest from the night before and caffeine helps hold attention and engagement. Save more interactive break-outs and small-group encounters for the difficult after-lunch slots. Identify draggy bits way in advance and work at chunking them down;

maybe splitting them across a tea-break, or an energizer. I've lost count of marathon sessions between natural breaks at conferences where the philosophy was **"it's-so-hard-to-get-them-together, -let's-pack-the-agenda"**.

Tip:
Sometimes, less is more

David Lim is a veteran Mt Everest expedition leader, motivational speaker and meeting architect for clients wanting steak and sizzle in the face of increasingly demanding, and distracted audiences.

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for a free consultation about how to deliver more ROC for your next events

