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Back to the Media Basics

By Cliff Atkinson (Published in the May 2003 edition of Convene, the magazine of the Professional Convention Management Association)

If a PowerPoint were projected in an empty room, would there still be a meeting?

Not that long ago technology was the star of corporate meetings. You wouldn't think of showing up without the latest monitors, projectors, gadgets and software.

But today, despite the variety and capacity of presentation tools, meetings are returning back to the basics. Technology is no longer the star -- people are. And something interesting has happened on the way back to the basics: The meaning of communication itself has shifted, due in large part to the use of media.

A Return to Communication Basics

A meeting itself can be called a "social technology" - it's a systematized way of gathering people together for a particular purpose - communication.

In the classic model of communications, a message travels from a transmitter to a receiver. If you have a message, you present it to your audience. Essentially it's a passive model, since the audience sits fixed in their chairs and receives what you have to say, and sometimes talk back.

But there's an earlier historical model. Another meaning of the word communication is still retained in the word commune, as in "to commune with nature." In this model, there's no active transmitter and passive audience. Communication happens when all parties are at one in understanding. Meaning comes from the inside of the group out, rather than from the outside in.

This older model has found new form in today's meeting spaces, where communication is a complex synergy between media, presenters and audiences. Instead of a one-way, giver-receiver relationship, today's communications model is a three-way relationship between you, your audience and your media.

The key is to find the proper balance that will result in a group "communing together in understanding." And the way to get the mix just right is to explore the different modes of media a little bit deeper.

Media modalities

When you listen to someone give a speech without media, you're able to stay engaged and still maintain your critical thinking skills. But when you watch film or television, you're processing image and sound in a different way. You're absorbed more fully in the experience, and don't tend to engage in the linear thinking that takes place during a speech or conversation.

Presentation media is a related but distinct way of communicating. Where film and television rely mostly on emotion to communicate, presentations introduce quantitative information to the mix. This dynamic tension between emotion and information is producing an evolution in communications media which will only grow in size and scope as our information society grows more complex.

Figuring out how and when to use different types of media for different purposes is the key to effective meetings. The core question comes down to this: How do you configure a social space for optimal communication, balancing media, presenter and audience? These principles are three steps in the right direction:

Media should deepen, not drown. Media shouldn't call attention to itself or overwhelm a meeting with its presence. The best media is almost transparent. It enhances understanding, taking viewers into places and experiences they wouldn't be able to see otherwise.

Media should result in engagement, not passivity. Media should help lead people into active participation, not passive reception. Its end result should be interaction, discussion, debate, exploration and resolution. When your media mix leaves people in silence too long, it's time to reconfigure the message in a way that will get people talking.

Media should be the right blend of emotion and information. At times, media should create an absorbing experience. For example, video works well to quickly set the emotional mood and tone of a meeting. Other times, media should create a contemplative experience. PowerPoint can deliver quantitative information effectively when it tells a strategic story through a compelling sequence of slides. And the full range of other presentation technologies can help evoke either emotion or information in their different ways. The art of meeting design is to choreograph these tools along with effective facilitation to create an effective communication experience.

So does a PowerPoint in an empty room mean it's a meeting after all? Only if it's joined by presenters and audience, who make the best use of media tools to engage, energize, enliven, and "commune together in understanding."

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