



Top 10 Mistakes Meeting Planners Make **By Mark Sanborn, CSP, CPAE**

If you're reading this, it is because you don't want to make the mistakes that potentially ruin an ordinary meeting. More likely, you want an *extraordinary* meeting. And that means not only avoiding common pitfalls but using better practices for your next event.

If you add together each day I've been in a meeting, either speaking or attending, the total is 6.5 years. That is 6.5 years of consecutive daily meeting attendance. I'm not a meeting planner, but I know from experience quite a lot about meetings.

The first thing I know is that you've got one of the hardest jobs there is. I recently hosted a three day meeting for 40 colleagues and was reminded of how challenging planning and executing a successful meeting can be. I like speaking at meetings much better than planning them!

I've paid close attention to meetings (the good, the bad and everything in-between) and here are the dozen biggest mistakes I've observed meeting planners making:

1. No clearly defined meeting goals

All great meetings share this in common: they are purposeful. If you don't have clearly defined objectives to achieve, you don't have a foundation for planning, and you'll likely waste money on an event with a vague outcome.

Find out what the person or people who "own" the meeting are trying to achieve. Get specific. Get clear on goals, objectives, results and benefits. Then reverse engineer your planning to achieve those results.

2. Programing inconsistent with goals desired results

Picking an entertaining but fluffy speaker when the V.P. of Sales wants a provocative

presentation about the important changes in selling is a recipe for disaster, yet I see it happen all the time. Likewise, choosing a serious, content-driven speaker for an after dinner slot can be just as disappointing.

Don't compare speakers or resources against each other only; compare them against the objectives you are trying to achieve (see #1).

3. Putting personal preference over attendee preference

I know what I like and you know what you like. Your success will be judged based on what the audience both wants and needs. Becoming attendee-centric gives you an advantage. And if you don't know, just ask. Most meeting attendees will gladly share their preferences. But do your research in advance. While after meeting questionnaires have their place, they are at best remedial. Ask attendees to tell you in advance what a great meeting would be like for them.

4. Lack of preparation and anticipation

A meeting's success or failure is often determined before it even starts. You can count on this: the better and more thorough the planning and preparation, the better the meeting. Loose ends amplify once a meeting is underway.

Things always go wrong. That's a given. Preparing carefully to avoid problems is important, but anticipating and being prepared for what can go wrong is essential. Make a checklist of all the things that might go wrong, in order of likelihood. Then develop a contingency plan for what they'll do if those things happen.

When you think you're completely prepared, go over your plan one more time with you team and ask, "Are we missing anything?"

5. Inattention to details

The devil is in the details. A too-hot ballroom can diminish a terrific general session. Meeting planning is a lot like marriage: you need to get the big stuff AND the little stuff right. While onsite, keep asking everyone you encounter, "*Is there anything we could do to make this experience better?*" They more likely to tell you you're out of sodas than wax philosophical about the roundtable session.

Another important detail involves the assistance you give to internal speakers: executives, association volunteer leaders, etc. Unless they are experienced presenters, providing them basic coaching on how to present effectively will pay off handsomely.

6. Sessions going too long

In this ADD world, shorter is better than longer. It is almost always a good idea to go shorter than longer. Between physical needs and mental distractions, long sessions (especially if they're not engaging) will lose the attention of attendees.

That isn't to say that every session needs to be a TED talk. I've seen the pendulum swing from too long to too short to be effective.

7. Unassertive behavior

On the best day, you are successful in your role as a meeting planner and everyone loves you. On some days, you are successful because you professionally and assertively did what was necessary to make the meeting a success. I've seen meeting planners throw away money and effectiveness because they weren't willing to press the hotel or a/v team or some other vendor to provide what was promised in the contract.

8. Little variety or engagement

The cliché is true for a reason: variety is the spice of life. When I design my presentations, I try to use as many techniques and tools as possible given my allotted time and intended purposes.

S&L (sit and listen) might be sufficient for your meeting, but what about mixing things up? Include panels, facilitated sessions, videos, a live Skype call, networking and/or any other powerful meeting elements you can think of.

9. Lack of team leadership skills

It takes a team to put on a meeting. The quality of your meeting is largely dependent on the commitment, abilities and talent of your team.

Pick carefully those best-suited for the roles that need to be filled. And avoid these three things that I've seen kill event teamwork:

- Wrong person: a good person isn't necessarily the right person for a particular job. Match desire and skills with the roles you assign. Wanting to do a good job is a recipe for failure when someone lacks the right skill-set.
- Micromanaging: you don't trust your people enough to give them the latitude to do their job. Not only do you tell them what to do, you also tell them how to do it

and bug the daylights out of them while they're carrying out your over-specific instructions.

- “Under-appreciating”: if it is possible to over-appreciate, I’ve yet to see it happen. As long as your appreciation is sincere, remember that not only is it deserved by those who do a good job, it is also a tremendous motivator that costs nothing more than your time and thoughtfulness.

10. Not having fun

Meeting planning is tough. But don't let that stop you from enjoying the process. When you're having fun, your team, presenters and attendees are having fun, too.

What are the other mistakes you've observed or learned not to make? Please share them with me at mark@marksanborn.com and if I use them in future updates, I'll give full credit to you as the source.

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