

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

# MEETING OF THE MINDS

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With information retention a primary objective, effective meeting planners are becoming increasingly sensitive to and perceptive of the unique environmental needs of the adult learner. I use the word *unique* because adults require educational formats that are quite different from their younger years in the traditional school system. While it may not seem possible, adult learners actually have shorter attention spans (plus considerably more distractions in their life) than younger learners; their demands have grown to include more involvement with the learning process, increased focus on *real world* problems, more interactions from peers, and immediate applicability to their daily lives and work. In short, it is a difficult, but critical task to make sure adults are comfortable and in environments that minimize distractions and maximize learning.

A U.S. Department of Education study, in fact, indicates that the environment alone can impact the potential for learning as much as 25 percent. The learning environment doesn't end with the walls of the conference or meeting room: it includes how your speaker prepares and presents their material, how the room is laid out, what's on the menu, and a host of other issues that impact learning.

When conducting your site visit and planning your next event, consider what I've dubbed the 3 C's of learning-oriented meetings: comfort, conference services, and clarity.

## Comfort

*Providing an environment in which the learner is comfortable helps to keep them attentive to the material being presented.*

- **Seating/Tables:** The old adage that the mind can only absorb what the rear-end can withstand is not so far off. If the chairs are uncomfortable, your guests will start to fidget, lose interest in the speaker or even leave the room. Personally test the chairs and look for options that allow for ergonomics, such as seat adjustability, padding, and the designated amount of sitting hours of the chair. If you do not have a choice, you should consider having sessions that are no more than one-and-a-half hours long to give your guests the time to get up and stretch. If you
- are conducting a session in which your guests will be seated at a table, consult with the facility on the dimensions of the tables and number of people seated per table. Generally, you do not want to seat more than two people per six-foot table. If your guests will have a lot of books and materials for the session, you may want to opt for the 30" wide tables, or doubling up two 18" wide tables. In order to reduce eye fatigue for your guests, it is best to have non-glare tabletop surfaces. If the tables are draped, try to use off-white linens.
- **Lighting:** Find out how much control you will have over the lighting. Are there dimmer switches? Can the light switches control a bank of lights? You want to strike a proper balance offering lighting that is strong enough to allow for note taking, but not so bright that it overwhelms the screen during the video presentation. If windows provide natural light to the room, check to see if there are shades that can be used to control the amount of light let in.
- **Temperature:** The optimal temperature for a meeting room is 70 degrees Fahrenheit; however, you will need to realize that guests will have varying temperature preferences. Men tend to like rooms that are cooler, whereas women and the elderly prefer warmer rooms. Since *you* know your audience best, be sure that you can change the temperature individually in all rooms. You may also want to recommend, through your promotional brochure or pre-conference letter, that your guests may want to dress in layers, for comfort. Also realize that if the room has windows, the radiant heat that enters can affect the temperature of the room, as well as provide additional heat on the guests that are in the direct sunlight.
- **Sound Proofing:** If the room you'll be using is divided by an air wall or partition, check for thickness. Solid partitions of about one-inch thickness provide the best sound proofing. Make sure to investigate other potential sources of distracting noises from adjacent areas, such as kitchens or swimming pools, which tend to divert audience attention.

- **Menu:** Your menu choices also play an important consideration in your guests' learning processes. It is preferable to offer choices lower in fat and calories; good selections are fruits, vegetables, pretzels, whole grain breads and broiled foods. Keep in mind that menus high in carbohydrates tend to make your guests sleepy, while menus high in protein keep them more alert. Consider reducing portion sizes and offering items such as mini-bagels or muffins. Although you do not want to starve your participants, you may want to limit their food intake by only offering beverages for their mid-morning or mid-afternoon breaks. Variety is the key and with a good number of people on various diets, being able to accommodate individual food preferences is beneficial. Dehydration can also be a concern, so make sure that there is plenty of water available in nearby hallways, whether in bottles, fountains or stations.

## Conference Services

*One of your greatest resources is the venue's staff. Many of the conference service planners and audiovisual technicians have had extensive training and can help you to provide the ultimate learning environment.*

- **Room Assistance:** Simply put, the facility's resources available and your collaboration with them can make or break a learning-oriented meeting. Whether it is the conference service manager or the audiovisual technicians, they have the experience with the facility to make suggestions and point out limitations of the facility. Make them aware of whether you will be using your equipment or renting from them. If you will be using your equipment, make sure that you have the proper connections to match the plug-ins to their house system. You may also want to ask if there is an opportunity for your speaker to do a 15-minute trial run in the room they'll be using to iron out the kinks and ensure a better session for your guests.
- **Occupancy:** Be sure to reference the occupancy rates commonly found in the site's information packet, so that you do not overcrowd your guests. If there are breakout sessions, consider having your attendees pre-select their options.

Although it may be a little more work for you in the beginning, it will remove the guess work out of which topics are going to be highly attended. Then you can assign the correct room sizes to the sessions in order to minimize distracting mid-conference set-ups.

## Clarity

*Your need to know how the information is going to be presented in order to determine the best room set-up, as well as enhance the presentation methods.*

- **Presentation Style:** Although you do not always have a choice in who will be your program's presenter, you may be in a good position to make suggestions about their presentation. Despite all the bells and whistles that come with today's top software programs such as PowerPoint, many presentations can be quite distracting. The slide show should complement the speaker's presentation and should not *be* the presentation. If the audience is constantly anticipating what sound effect is coming next, or watching the speaker read their slides verbatim, they will become disinterested. It is best that slides not contain more than six lines or six words per line, per slide. The fonts used should be simple with san-serif fonts for the headers and serif for text. Light colored backgrounds with dark colored lettering will guarantee that whichever medium you use to project the image, will allow enough light through, so that the learner can read the slide. It is usually best to incorporate a joint visual and verbal learning environment. Adults learn 30 percent of what they see and 20 percent of what they hear, but they retain 50 percent of what they see and hear simultaneously.
- **Room Layout:** There are five common types of room setups with varying purposes. When trying to determine which setup is best, you need to consider the audience size, the speaker's position in and/or movement around the room, and how much interaction the speaker will have with the audience.

**Theater** style and **Classroom** style (similar to theater, but with tables added) are generally best for one-way communication or for sessions that require a larger attendance. To encourage

more two-way conversation, try eliminating the speaker's podium or encourage the speaker to walk around in the audience.

**U-shape**—or its closed off version, the **Conference/Square** setup—are ideal for two-way communication. Guests can see each other, and the speaker is able to walk inside the u-shape or around the outside of the square to be closer to the guests.

**Banquet** setup is most commonly used for larger numbers and for meal settings at round tables, but can effectively accommodate small group discussions that occur within a larger meeting. Keep in mind, however, that this style limits itself to one-way communication and can hinder a couple of the guests at each table who typically need to turn around in order to see the speaker.

- **Sight lines:** Take account of any room elements, such as pillars, light fixtures or projectors, that might obstruct meeting participants' views. Although it's inconceivable to have pillars removed from a room, you should check with the facility to see if other obstructions can be raised or removed. The screen or image projected in the room should start above the guests' heads, providing clear sight lines. It is a good rule to have one diagonal inch of screen per person in your group; for example if you have a 25" monitor, your maximum number of people for viewing would be 25. When determining whether guests are too far back in the room to view presentation material, multiply the height (not width) of the screen by six. If you have a five-foot high screen, for instance, your last row of participants should not be any farther back than 30' from the screen.
- **Sound System:** Also make sure to scan the room and consult with the facility about its sound system. Are there speakers positioned throughout the room adequately? Realizing that the volume is cut in half every time the distance from an audio speaker is doubled, you want to consider the distance between an audio speaker and the students to determine if additional speakers will be necessary to make sure all audience members can hear the speaker at an appropriate volume.

- **Equipment Needs:** Carefully select the equipment you use and always take stock of it before selecting a room. Not only will this insure that you will have proper connections, but it can affect your audience's attention. Modern projectors, for instance, have become much brighter than their predecessors, allowing presenters to walk through their presentations without having to dim the lights and potentially create eye fatigue and sleepy participants. Projectors with a *luminescence factor* of 2,200 or greater will generally allow you to project with the lights on and allow your guests to have enough light to write.

As with the pre-planning of any event, the more particulars that you attend to, the more worthwhile the learning experience will be for everyone involved. So it is with teaching adult learners. The learning environment is crucial because there is a principle of readiness and need in the adult learner. With so much information flying past them, you need to provide an atmosphere that captures their attention. When you apply the basic elements in the three C's – comfort, conference services, and clarity – you provide that environment containing a good base of knowledge, space, and food.

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