

## **SPICE UP YOUR MEETINGS WITH A VARIETY OF SESSION FORMATS**

Before you is the blank slate of your meeting's agenda. You know what you want to accomplish but you are not sure how to structure the time to achieve your objectives. To maintain your participants' interest and appropriately address the various objectives of your meeting you will want to vary your program.

Here is a review of some of the session formats we consider at Ann Becker and Associates, Inc. when we design meeting agendas for our clients, along with a few comments about when each one is most appropriate. While this list of possible session formats is far from exhaustive, we hope it will be helpful to you as you consider the agenda building blocks available when you design your next meeting.

### ***Formal speeches or lectures***

Keynote speeches often establish the mission and set the tone for the conference. The presentation format is also suitable for showcasing well-known personalities, professional speakers, or for conveying cutting-edge information unavailable elsewhere. In large halls, visibility is typically enhanced by having the speaker's image projected onto screens placed around the room.

### ***Panels***

Skillfully moderated panels of three to four experts can convey a large amount of information presented from differing viewpoints in a short period of time. If the moderator knows how to stimulate and sustain panel interaction and appropriately invite audience participation, a panel can be an exciting format that deepens everyone's understanding of the topic and not just a series of "talking heads."

### ***Professionally Facilitated Sessions***

When you need to address complex issues and devise creative solutions, a professional facilitator will employ a variety of group process techniques ranging from brainwriting, brainstorming, and nominal group technique, to highly structured large group participation methods to induce participants to work together productively.

The facilitator might also suggest Open Space Technology. This "self-organizing system" was devised by Harrison Owen about 20 years ago and can be a very effective way for large groups of people to identify issues of greatest interest to them and then to work and learn together.

### ***Roundtable discussion***

A small group discussion of 8 to 10 people is a good way to give time and attention to sharing ideas, exchanging experiences, and to important concerns that may only impact a small portion of your participants. Roundtables are equally valuable for equitable, focused conversation to develop "action agendas" and problem solve.

Small group report backs always present the challenge of keeping the larger group's attention. Over the years, Ann Becker and Associates, Inc. has devised several ways for solving this puzzle. For example, at one conference the critical listeners met with each of the small groups, a process that was more productive than anyone had anticipated.

### ***Entertainment***

Entertainment, whether live theatre, song or dance, or canned, such as a film or video, can be a very effective way to introduce a serious message with great impact, build a sense of community among the attendees, or simply to entertain.

***Game show***

A game show format is a novel way to review basic knowledge or current trends, while doing a little teambuilding and entertaining at the same time. An effective "game show host" is a must.

***Off-site programming***

Community based training sessions, "conventions without walls," and site visits are well accepted and often expected program design formats providing highly-valued experiential learning for attendees in the neighborhoods of the host city. The key to success is to structure the visits to provide a meaningful opportunity for interaction with constituents rather than a one-way "show and tell."

***Technology-based tools***

Groupware, the Internet, and local and national computer networks provide an ever-improving range of opportunities to be increasingly innovative in the way people obtain information and work together to develop new ideas. Some of the systems depend on the participants being in the same room; others are designed for groups whose members are far-flung, be it in the same building or in locations around the world.