THE **IGNITE** SERIES

# First Things First: A Powerful Strategy for Developing Meeting Content.

BY MICHAEL HAMILTON, PRINCIPAL - GETSYNCHRONICITY

Q: I am responsible for our next major meeting, and I need to maximize my development efforts. What should my first priority be?

A: First things first; it all starts with defining what you want to say, and how you want to say it.

Large meetings—whether user-group conferences, sales kickoffs, or general meetings—have two things in common: a very large roomful of people, and the need for concise, relevant content.

The size, visibility, and strategic importance of these meetings present high stakes not only for the organization but for the individual meeting owners. When meetings succeed or fail, they do so publicly. Careers may be launched, fortified, or lost as the result of a meeting.

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The other commonality is the need for well-defined, quality content delivered throughout the meeting, especially during the General Session. The General Session, more so than any other component, is the time when you can establish the meeting theme, tone, and objectives. Attendees are better able to relax when they know (early on) what to expect of the meeting and what is expected of them. The General Session becomes their foundation and reference for any subsequent breakouts or post events.

It is within the General Session that any number of core purposes are met: introducing a corporate vision, positioning new leadership, celebrating a brand, recognizing high achievers, motivating and educating attendees, launching products, strengthening a team, or encouraging a spirit of community. This article will explore some ways to maximize the impact of the General Session through the strategic development of content. For a deeper dive in the challenging subject of General Session Development, access our entire White Paper, **General Session Excellence: Driving Home Content – Improving Buy-In from Walk-in to Wrap-up.**

Discovering the Content: In meetings of any size, from boardroom to ballroom, content is everything. "Content," in the broadest sense, is every idea and message communicated at the event. Two needs drive content design: the needs of the meeting owners and the needs of the attendees. And a process of discovery is required for each.

An attendee survey sent out months before the meeting to the entire audience (or a representative sampling) can yield useful information while sending the message that the organization values their input. Open-ended questions such as "What specific topics or issues would you like the meeting to address?" can be mixed with narrower questions that ask attendees to numerically rate the importance of various options, such as "On a scale of 1 to 5, how important is a corporate partnerships update segment?"

An analysis of the data from these surveys brings the audience needs into sharp focus for the content design team. The team can then share the findings with key stakeholders and senior management and begin a discovery process to determine their expectations, key messages, and goals for the meeting.

Clear meeting and content objectives pave the way for the next step …

Once the needs of the audience and the leaders are understood, both inform the creation of the meeting objectives. The answers to questions such as those below determine how relevant the objectives actually are:

- What is the purpose of the meeting?
- What are the key messages?
- What do attendees need to understand and do as a result of the meeting?
- How do we want the attendees to feel? What tone best serves the meeting objectives? *(A bad sales year, for example, could warrant a more serious tone.)*
- How will we know the meeting objectives have been met?

Clear meeting and content objectives pave the way for the next step, theme development.

Developing the Theme. Every meeting needs a theme. And a theme is more than a catchy title. Themes have three chief purposes:

The theme provides a kind of "idea umbrella" under which every targeted topic and **message for the meeting can comfortably fit.** A module on customer service skills, for example, would not belong in "Driving Innovations in Technology." The theme sets boundaries on content to keep the attention focused on what is most important.

**The theme establishes the meeting intent and sets attendee expectations.** Therefore, it should create a value proposition for the attendees, answering the fundamental question "Why should I invest my time and money in attending this?" This is especially important for user group meetings, though even for internal audiences the theme should rally the troops. Themes such as "Conquering New Frontiers" promises an aspirational focus; "Today, Tomorrow, Together" telegraphs a teamwork emphasis;

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"We Are One Voice" hints at synthesis; and "Be the Brand!" asks for no small commitment. Many sales meetings themes simply use the name of the current or planned sales campaign.

Just as the content determines the theme, the theme drives the look and feel of the meeting invitations, slide templates, AV, set design, guest speaker selections, audience activities, and sometimes even the choice of venue (a planetarium might be a better choice for "Destination: Outer Limits" than the local airport hotel). For the meeting to look cohesive, these components must be designed with the theme in mind, not shoehorned into it.

Conclusion. When these two considerations are addressed … content subject matter and the overall theme through the which the content will be communicated … everything else will fall into place more easily, including the design for the General Session, Speaker Selection (internal & external), as well as the myriad other considerations Sales Meetings.

Only be establishing this firm foundation of content definition & theme can you hope to create a cohesive, effective, and powerful meeting.