



## General Session Part III: All About The Attendees.

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**Q:** In the past, my attendees tell me that my General Sessions are rich in content, but they're not very fun or engaging. What can I do?

**A:** There are all sorts of interactive activities you can implement during a General Session ... from the strategic to the just plain fun.

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One of the most creative challenges of General Session design is coming up with ways to boost audience energy and involvement—and to do so in ways that are relevant to the attendees, meeting theme, and subject matter. This article offers several ideas for making the audience experience more interactive, entertaining, or both. For a deeper exploration of how to maximize your entire General Session experience, check out our White Paper, [General Session Excellence: Driving Home Content & Improving Buy-In from Walk-In to Wrap-Up](#)

**Walk-in Activities.** Before a General Session begins, attendees are typically socializing, finding seats, checking emails, and preparing to settle in. Some meeting planners opt to keep this walk-in period free of any content, for attendees to use as they wish. Others see value in providing engagement activities, even minimally, at this point. The rule of thumb for the walk-in: if you entertain them, don't ask too much of them.

The most successful activities at this early stage are those in which people can choose to participate, whether silently by themselves or with others seated nearby. For meetings in which attendees do not know each other, walk-in activities can also serve as icebreakers helping people to relax and connect.

Here are a few suggestions:

- **Personality Tests.** Attendees answer a series of fun questions about their preferences, such as “Which of the following animals do you most identify with?” or “Which of the following colors are you most attracted to?” The audience members then

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note their preferences privately (in their heads) or via an Audience Response System (ARS). An ARS enables attendees to provide feedback instantaneously through a smart phone, a tablet or a laptop.

- **Visual Challenges.** Heavily pixilated images appear onscreen. The audience tries to figure out what the image is before it appears moments later with full clarity. The images may be industry related or more broadly selected, such as the faces of celebrities or U.S. presidents.
- **Wild Captions Cam.** Strategically placed cameras scan the audience and randomly land on close-ups of individuals, projected onto IMAG screens. Superimposed below each face is an equally random funny caption, such as “Thought this was an Amway meeting” ... “Has already had 8 cups of coffee” ... “Secretly texting the competition.”
- **Thoughts to Ponder.** While the audience members find their seats, a series of facts (the more surprising, the better) occasionally appear onscreen. The facts can relate to the company or industry or provide a preview of the meeting content. This activity also works well as a platform for “myth busters,” in which the audience members are shown statements they must decide are true or false. ARS can be used to broadcast the results to the entire room.

**Audience Center Stage.** In the best scenarios the attendees are the most enthusiastic spokespersons for the company and its meeting objectives. With the availability of quality videotaping options, it has never been easier to put attendees centerstage. NextGen Healthcare Information Systems, for example, hosts its annual User Group Meeting to introduce new products and inspire a sense of community among thousands of attendees. On the evening before one such meeting, attendees were videotaped commenting on how NextGen was helping them meet their goals. Samplings of their thoughtful, upbeat sound-bites were edited overnight and used the following day throughout the General Session. The audience was delighted to see themselves onscreen, and the video reinforced NextGen’s relationship as a partner with its clientele.

**Staff Vignettes.** A surefire way to engage the audience is to give them the theatrical spotlight. Comedic vignettes featuring members of the audience, such as employees or members of user groups, are often big crowd pleasers whether performed live or on video. And there is no limit to subject matter. Vignettes can poke fun at the competition, portray hilariously over-the-top sales scenarios, roast a retiring executive, or take a wild guess at what the company will look like in the distant future.

Despite the light touch, vignettes are not as easy to pull off as they might look. A vignette needs:

- A creative concept that complements the theme
- Smart writing
- A producer to schedule the participants, select locations, and gather any required props, costumes, or makeup
- A director to coach the performers, assist with lines requiring comic timing, and make the scenes translate effectively to stage or camera

- An editor to create the best footage from the collaboration, adding titles, music, and special effects as needed.

**Audience Polls.** Conducting a poll is a simple low-tech way to create instant interactivity. The speaker poses a question and asks for a show of hands, asks the audience members to sit or stand in response to the question, or directs them to text their responses via ARS. Besides involving the audience, polls provide immediate data, yielding surprises or reassurances for the meeting host.

However, too many polling questions can become tiresome and gimmicky.

**Quizzes.** An effective way to motivate audience attention is to quiz the members at the end of one or more content modules. Attendees can jot their responses on paper or ARS. To encourage friendly competition, quizzes can be coded and timed so that teams, departments, or regions vie for the highest score.

**Q & A.** As an alternative to a question-and-answer session at the end of the meeting, meeting hosts can invite attendees to use the Chat feature to submit their questions at key points during the meeting. To eliminate distractions for the speaker, it is recommended that others be assigned to select only the most relevant and representative questions for the speaker's attention.

**Executive Reveals.** An “executive reveal” introduces the top executive by staging his or her appearance in an unexpected and theatrical way. It enables the executive to take himself or herself less seriously and winds up being as much fun for him or her as it is for the audience. Here are a few examples:

Software AG, an enterprise software company, opened its big meeting with a high-spirited video that featured its CEO and software programming team. The story line followed the CEO as he attempted to beat the clock on relaunching two flagship products. In every shot was a grunge band that accompanied the frenetic action. At the conclusion of the video, the lights came up on the grunge band, playing live onstage. A few moments later, one of the band members yanked off his stocking cap, revealing himself to be the CEO.

Davol, a seller of medical products, once opened its meeting with a spectacularly choreographed story featuring live fighting ninja warriors. A black-hooded ninja troop descended upon a lone white-hooded ninja. After an awesome gymnastic display of leaps, rolls, and thrilling stage combat, the white-hooded ninja emerged the victor. When he removed his hood, he turned out to be the CEO. (In reality, the CEO did only the end moves in the act; everything else was performed by a professional.)

In keeping with its conference theme “Ignite,” Chicago-based Business Marketing Association opened its meeting with a video featuring actual firefighters in a parody of the TV show Chicago Fire. The story line led to the characters speeding away in a fire truck to an emergency at the Sheraton Hotel—the same venue as the meeting itself.

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The audience watched as the on-screen firefighters, now wearing gas masks, ran inside the building and then showed up live onstage. With a flourish, one of the firefighters removed his mask, walked to the podium, and began his duties as host of the meeting. The other masked firefighter remained onstage until he was revealed to be a surprise guest.

**Live Demos.** A live demo can add immediacy to a meeting, as well as credibility for the product or process being demonstrated. At the annual education conference of Florida-based Workers' Compensation Institute (WCI), demos of routine surgeries are streamed live to the event. Attendees can ask the on-screen physicians questions during surgery and hear their responses. WCI also features live simulations of oral arguments from actual court hearings from Florida's First District Court of Appeals.

Yet even with today's advanced technology, live demos—whether streamed or onsite—are risky. Internet connections are not always reliable. Things that worked perfectly in rehearsal can malfunction while hundreds of attendees watch. Live demos need a Plan B. Most anything that can be demo'd onstage or streamed can be prerecorded on video—a less-showy but much-safer route.

**Conclusion.** When the message matters, every detail affecting its presentation matters too. In this article, we touched on one core component ... the attendee. However, in the big picture, successful meetings reward audiences with a clarity of purpose, ideas, direction, and a sense of community in which they may collectively support the fulfillment of those objectives.

There are rewards as well for the meeting-content designers, who deserve full recognition for creating an event in which every word, image, and activity is strategic, relevant, and energizing for stakeholders on both sides of the stage.

And lastly, when you have your audience engaged and having a little fun, you know they're listening, so as this article illustrates, what happens **BETWEEN** the content is just as important as the content itself.