

Identity. Crisis

In the second of a series of exclusive articles for AMI magazine, meeting designers Eric de Groot & Mike van der Vijver explain how meetings communicate identity

Invite me to your meeting and I will tell you who you are

Meetings transmit many overt and covert messages about the organisation behind it and its owner and, of course, it is possible to influence the conclusions drawn to a considerable extent. Although the objective is rarely expressed explicitly, the meeting owner wants the meeting's design and programme to reflect what the organisation is.

Event marketing is a technique used to strengthen a brand. Brands can come to life during events. Powerful events – with fashionable artists, glamorous presenters and a strong 'we' feeling capitalise on people's physical presence, offering their senses a roller-coaster ride. Connecting with the brand becomes a positive experience.

While sitting in a meeting room and listening to a speaker, participants cannot ignore how the room has been laid out, how the chair feels, or what sounds their neighbour is making as they slowly nod off. You cannot switch your perceptions off. Messages about the brand are given by the entire package of the event. All these impulses create an emotional state, lingering in the back of your mind to surface later.

Identity and culture of organisations

Organisational identity is what people see when they look at the organisation. Organisational culture is 'the way we do things here'. It strongly depends on the culture of the nation where the organisation originates, but other factors include the size and complexity of the organisation, the type of industry it works in, the kind of tasks people in the organisation perform, the expectations of stakeholders and shareholders etc. There

are a few other less predictable factors, like the legacy of a visionary founder or any particular corporate myths or 'trauma' the organisation has suffered at any time.

The meeting designer has to configure the meeting in accordance with the meeting owner's identity, matching physical aspects ('hardware' such as choice of venue, graphics, meals and drinks) and non-physical aspects ('software' such as modes of communication, conference formats, atmosphere etc).

Design with identity in mind

How hardware can relay a message:

Waiting in line for an hour to receive a lunch of left-overs goes deeper than just poor logistics – the implicit message in having to queue is 'your time does not count'; the lack of choice suggests 'your voice does not count'. Both, of course, are completely at odds with the organiser's objectives and have an impact on the subsequent commitment of participants.

How software can relay a message:

To show participants they were being listened to, all 2,500 members were seated at round tables and, after discussion of an issue presented for three minutes, were invited to cast a vote using an electronic voting system.

At the end, a government minister commented on the results of the votes and the membership felt happier that their views had been heard.

The five types of identity interaction

One: Meetings that affirm identity

Simply an expression of an organisation's identity. The meeting designer transforms the mode of communication and translates the identity into specific features of the

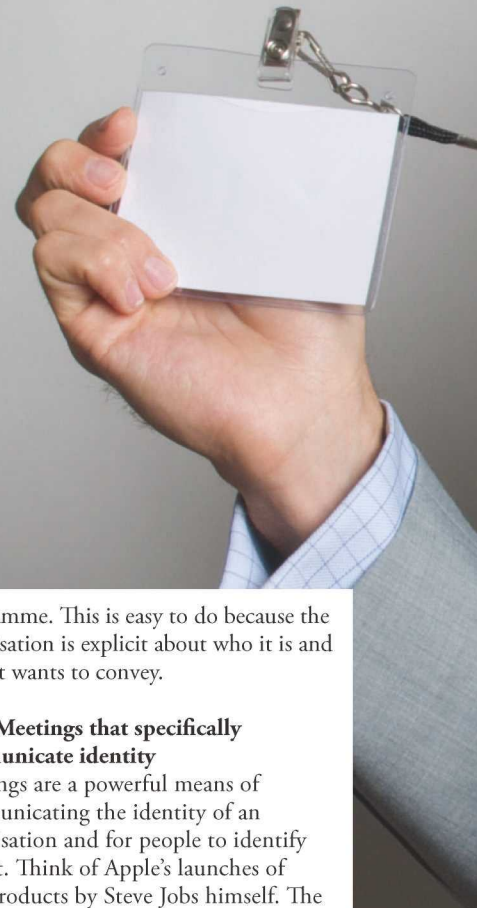
programme. This is easy to do because the organisation is explicit about who it is and what it wants to convey.

Two: Meetings that specifically communicate identity

Meetings are a powerful means of communicating the identity of an organisation and for people to identify with it. Think of Apple's launches of new products by Steve Jobs himself. The informal dress conveyed 'be yourself, no frills'; the jokes about Microsoft, 'we are family'. They exemplified what Apple is about, not just to the consumer but to the corporation's workforce.

Three: Meetings that stretch identity

Sometimes a meeting owner wants to convey a message about a change in the organisation's way of doing things. For example, a small accountancy firm wanted its staff to speak out and interact more with each other and management. The programme offered a day of workshops





not related to their business but focusing on interaction – dance, photography and a philosopher talking about the meaning of life. Participants agreed they had never seen their colleagues this way before – exactly the feedback you want in this type of meeting.

But be careful: a programme like this can pose a severe risk to credibility.

Four: Meetings that generate identity

Sometimes, during mergers or transition processes within an organisation, meetings aim to create corporate history. They do so by offering participants experiences that become part of the organisation's identity. In the case of a merger, the first meeting with a large number of members of the two organisations can be crucial in how the shared values will develop. In these meetings, emotional engagement has to be strong and compelling, leaving participants with a lasting memory.

In a merger between two banks the manager wanted a 'marriage' of the two organisations and a new collaborative

culture and identity. The night before, the two groups of bankers held separate farewell parties, then couples – a husband from one bank and a wife from the other – were married in a role-play with the right mix of fun and solemnity.

Five: Meetings despite a lack of meeting owner identity

In spite of vigorous efforts, many associations do not have a strongly distinctive identity; they are a lot like other, similar associations, apart from the field that they work in. Meetings held by such organisations tend to be boring.

To breathe life into them a meeting designer needs to probe the direct interests of the association members, but not the staff, steering advisors or board, who may have vested interests. This can be done by interviewing about 10 potential participants and using their expectations to help influence the programme.

Striking the balance

This field lies on the intersection between

identity, organisational culture, marketing, practical meeting circumstances and strategic leadership. A meeting designer needs a keen awareness of what the meeting owner and meeting participants consider possible and what they do not. It is necessary to challenge the margins, to a point: what is acceptable and normal often risks being poor in communicative power; while what is extraordinary and powerful in terms of communication may be too unconventional. A consistent programme, in line with the organisational culture, the objectives of the meeting owner and the particularities of the participants, requires a proper understanding of the organisation's identity and its stories. ■



*This is an abridged version of a chapter of the authors' acclaimed new book *Into The Heart of Meetings – Basic Principles of Meeting Design*, available at www.mindmeeting.org and at amazon.com.