

How to Make Your Next Conference 50% Better.. with **no** effort or cost at all!



By Billy Riggs

MRE, MDiv, CSP

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The Fusion of Enchantment, Entertainment & Empowerment

I'll never forget it. The years-ago summer meeting that day was a *disaster*. Being generally accustomed to attentive audiences, gales of laughter, and standing ovations, I was thoroughly demoralized as I reflected on what had gone so terribly wrong. *It was not my fault*, I knew, for I had performed my usual blend of comedy, magic, and content as an after-lunch program, and had customized the presentation carefully. My mind had been clear, and I was energetic and on-target with the message. *The problem was clearly the venue*. The room (only slightly more inviting than a warehouse), had been **five times too large for the audience**, the terrible acoustics of the building were exceeded only by the pathetic excuse for a sound system, and to make matters worse the air conditioning was not working that blazing day in "Hot-lanta." Worst of all, the catering company had set up a makeshift kitchen adjacent to the stage, separated from me and the audience only by pipe-and-drape. Throughout my session, they loudly clanged plates, chatted, and flung silverware into plastic bins with earsplitting crashes. I'm confident the company that had hired me to entertain and motivate their staff that day saved a *lot* of money by cutting corners. But I'm *certain* that as a result their meeting was hopelessly doomed from the start.

Few factors will so degrade a conference as a poorly prepared meeting room. Fortunately, the converse is also true: by making simple plans in advance with your hotel or convention center for a few minor adjustments in the meeting environment, you can measurably increase the quality of any given session *enormously* with almost no work at all on your part, and often at no expense!

It has been my observation that most meeting planners are excellent organizers, but tend to shy away from appearing on the platform, themselves. Consequently, they are generally unaware (as are most hotel banquet managers and destination managers) of **simple changes in room set-up that can make a speaker's or entertainer's presentation far more effective**. Maximizing the atmosphere of a room can make the difference between a mediocre convention and one which is *alive* with energy. A speech that might leave an audience cheering in a properly set venue can easily fall flat in a poorly-prepared one. **Below is my ten-point checklist** you can use to make your next event a truly superior one. **As a mnemonic device, I've used the word "ATMOSPHERE" as an acrostic for the ten most salient features of a conference.** Together, they will create an atmosphere conducive to laughter, learning, and life-change. Oh... *and it'll make you a hero all year long!*

Acoustics

The worst mistake a meeting planner can make for a large conference is to skimp on the sound system. *Nothing* will so wreck an otherwise meticulously-planned meeting as audio problems. I've experienced them all, I'm sad to say: incompetent or distracted audio-visual crews, missing equipment, intermittent microphone failures, feedback, outside radio interference, rattling speakers, incompatible electronic components and a host of others. On a few occasions I've had sound crews attempt to duct-tape a lapel microphone to my tie, having lost the clip some months before! (Of course, each time I moved so did the microphone, creating an irritating and distracting scraping sound.) At times I've had to improvise on stage by simply turning off the microphone altogether and *shouting* my way through the program.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the meeting planner's most important duty (once the conference has begun) is to ensure that the audience can hear and understand the presenters. *If this goal is not met, all other planning comes to naught.* For this reason, I encourage meeting planners to scrutinize and test sound equipment thoroughly, and inquire rigorously about the experience of the technician (if you've hired one) scheduled to run it. This must be done hours before the meeting, when possible. Frequently I have arrived at a venue only to discover a critical piece of equipment to be missing or malfunctioning. However, when I call the audio-visual company responsible for the set-up, I get a recording, or discover that the company is located in another town 40 miles away. Checking the system early, then, is critical to guaranteeing a properly functioning public address system.

One of the most common audio mistakes made occurs when the hotel staff forgets to combine the speaker systems in various sections of a ballroom. When an air-wall is retracted to combine smaller rooms into a big one, *the audio system does not automatically do the same.* They **MUST** be combined *manually*. For this reason, the presenter (and perhaps the meeting planner, depending on where he or she is seated) will be *completely unaware* that the right half of the room can hear clearly, but the left half almost not at all. This can be remedied with the simple flip of a switch, **but it is the meeting planner's duty to be sure this issue is addressed during sound checks. Most presenters do not know that they should check this factor, either.**

Temperature

When I'm on a platform presenting, I am moment-by-moment evaluating the dynamics affecting my audience. One of the most important, yet often overlooked is *temperature*. A room that is too warm will overpower even the strongest desire to concentrate on a speaker's words. A room that is too cold is annoying, but *much* to be preferred to excess warmth. *As a general rule, the first several people who enter your meeting room should feel chilly.* I like to set the room temperature to about 69 or 70 degrees well before a meeting commences. The body heat radiated by

audience members will quickly warm the room to a comfortable temperature. The exception to this rule is when you have a very small group of people meeting in a comparatively large space, when the temperature should be set at about 72 or 73 degrees. **Two principles will guide you in this all-important area:**

Principle One: It is *much* easier to warm a cool room than to cool a warm one. Consequently, *the wise meeting planner errs on the side of making the room too cool*, knowing that simply turning off the air conditioner will cause a noticeable rise in temperature almost immediately. Even on a cold or snowy day, keeping the room a little on the cool side will pay large dividends in the attentiveness of your conferees.

Principle Two: During a presentation, **air conditioners must be turned on immediately when the meeting planner has the first notion that the room might be getting a little too warm.**

Many times I have interrupted a speech to ask a meeting planner to adjust the temperature of the room downward. This is because I have learned from experience that waiting even five or ten minutes after the first hint that the room is overly warm (people fanning themselves, peeling off jackets, etc.) often makes the difference between successfully cooling it down again or fighting a losing battle. *Even the most hilarious or dynamic communicator cannot compete with a warm room*, as drowsiness will overcome even the most interested attendees. **A very alert meeting planner constantly monitors room temperature, and takes action instantly when a need to do so is indicated.**

Music

An often-overlooked tool in the meeting planner's arsenal for preparing an audience for a successful meeting is background music. *Long before an event takes place, the thoughtful planner determines the energy level desired for a particular session and chooses appropriate "walk-in" and "walk-out" music to create that effect.* If you want to open your conference with a bang, fast-paced rock 'n' roll music will energize the audience as they enter the room, paving the way for your chosen speaker to hit the ball out of the park. I even carry with me to each event a playlist of a half-hour of upbeat music on a "magic" theme, readying the audience for a lively production of illusions and content. Overlooking this component will put a damper on your event. The first several attendees will sometimes even whisper to one another to avoid being overheard in a quiet room, setting the tone for minimum buzz and excitement. This forces your presenters to expend valuable time and effort attempting to energize the audience. By simply playing an appropriate selection of music as people enter a room, you allow your highly-paid speakers to start at an energy level of 5 and take your conferees to a 10, rather than beginning at zero and laboriously dragging them to 5. The motivational atmosphere created by your speaker can then be enhanced and reinforced by playing similar music as attendees leave the session.

Orientation

When meeting with your hotel contact or destination manager, be sure to discuss where the platform will be placed in the room. Whenever practical, **the stage should be on the opposite wall from the main entrance** to keep distractions by latecomers, bathroom-goers, and early departures to a minimum. Usually the session is most effective when the platform is placed on one of the two long walls, allowing you to place more chairs near the stage, and shortening the distance from the speaker to the back row of chairs. However, when the anticipated presentation is highly visual (like my illusion show or a video or power-point production) the shorter walls may work better because it limits the number of people who are forced by a wide room to watch from a sharp angle.

Another factor to take into account is the wall immediately behind the stage. Mirrors and windows make especially troublesome backdrops, as attendees are self-conscious when staring at themselves (or being stared at by others) in a mirror, or as they watch birds at play and people walking by outside the windows. These distractions may be alleviated by covering the glass with tablecloths or potted trees, or erecting a backdrop of pipe and drape. Or, the stage can simply be moved to a different wall.

Sequence

When planning a conference, **care must be taken to juxtapose speakers and functions in such a way as to build upon one another rather than detract from each other.** For example, if you hire a humorist as your keynoter, placing him or her after a moving rendition of the Pledge of Allegiance, or a touching tribute to the victims of 9/11 places that speaker in a huge hole. It has been my privilege to present to many state chapters of the National Funeral Directors Association, and they have always been wonderful, fun audiences. However, on two occasions my upbeat, comical, rock 'n' roll-laden illusion show has been scheduled immediately following the association's annual "Service of Remembrance," a regular conference event memorializing members who have died during the previous year. One minute, they were looking at photos of dear departed colleagues, and a minute later they introduced me and I was on stage making cards come out of my mouth, tearing up and restoring a newspaper and cracking jokes. The combination of the two sessions was like fingernails on a blackboard, and placed me in a very difficult position.

Similarly, **introductions of speakers should be carefully matched to that presenter's planned opening remarks.** Several years ago I was to speak before a gathering of a few hundred people. A dear friend of mine was invited to introduce me, and she proceeded to tell the audience some personal stories of how I had influenced her life. As she did so, tears welled up in her eyes, and she was unable to speak for a few seconds. Finally, she came over and hugged me,

now openly weeping, and left the platform to join the deeply-moved crowd. It was a wonderfully touching introduction, but for one small problem: **I had planned to open with about 5 minutes of comedy!** Now I was forced impromptu to rewrite my entire opening as I was giving it and desperately trying to concoct an appropriate segue into my planned upbeat material. Now you know why I provide a prewritten introduction to meeting planners to be read verbatim before I speak.

Punctuality

Companies and associations run their conferences in markedly differing ways. Some run a “tight ship” scripted to the minute, with each platform presenter given specific instructions regarding where to enter, where to sit, where to exit, etc. Others conferences are remarkably unstructured, with decisions about order, announcements and agenda literally being made on the fly. In both cases, however, I find that **most people underestimate the amount of time any given portion of a program might take.** For example, I often speak to educational conferences which traditionally begin with a color guard and a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by a medley of songs by a school chorale. It is not uncommon for the meeting planner to allot ten minutes for these activities to take place, notwithstanding the fact that the songs alone are thirteen minutes long! Including transitions, introductions, and so forth, the program is already running 10 minutes behind schedule before the actual agenda begins. The cumulative effect of several small miscalculations like these is to leave your keynote speaker with much less time than planned. *On a couple of occasions I have actually been introduced to speak after I was supposed to have ended!* I find it very helpful to follow a few simple rules in preparing for a meeting:

- 1) **Schedule a half-hour break after a general session.** If the general session runs long, the time is made up for by shortening the break, rather than bumping back the rest of the day’s activities.
- 2) **Have someone sit in the front row with a warning card** to notify participants who take longer than their allotted time.
- 3) **Give your keynote speaker what I call a “drop dead time,”** the time you want him or her off stage no matter what time he or she was introduced. I always ask the meeting planner the following question: “If for some reason we are running behind, and I start later than expected, should I still take my full time or is there a cut-off time when you want me off stage regardless of when I started?”
- 4) **Get in the habit of starting your meetings precisely on time, or even a minute early.** If your conferees are perennially late for sessions, then build this later-than-scheduled start time into your agenda so that you don’t run behind. You don’t want to pay a speaker “big bucks” and

then leave him or her with twenty minutes to present.

Hype

By hyping your keynote speaker in conference brochures, in conversation, and in public meetings you will create an air of anticipation that greatly enhances your presenter’s ability to connect with the audience immediately. A side benefit will often be better attendance, as well. One way to help accomplish this goal is to give away a few of the speaker’s books, videos, and products in earlier sessions as door prizes. This gives you an excuse to repeatedly mention and “talk-up” upcoming general sessions.

A clever technique to add to the energy of the room I must credit to speaker Tom Antion: have the meeting planner ask the most boisterous, energetic, and enthusiastic people attending your conference to come early and take a seat in the very front row. Their effervescent personalities and eager reactions to the speaker will hopefully encourage your speaker and permeate your entire crowd.

Elevation

The larger your conference attendance, the higher the platform should be. I find it very frustrating to present to 500 people from a riser that is only twelve-inches tall, because I know that the people in the back rows are far more frustrated than I am. They spend the session craning their necks or contorting their bodies so as to see between the heads and shoulders of those in front of them. **A general rule of thumb is to request a riser tall enough that the people in the back row can still see the speaker’s waist.**

Room Arrangement

One of the first issues addressed by a planner once a venue has been chosen is the actual meeting room and its arrangement. Should it be theater style or classroom? Should the rows be straight or in a chevron configuration? For some functions, such as a banquet, the function dictates the form. But for most events, this option is left open to the meeting planner. After delivering thousands of presentations, I have developed some very firm beliefs about proper seating arrangements, which I have distilled into a few basic guidelines:

- 1) **General sessions should be conducted without tables, when possible.** In all-day events which are content-heavy and involve lots of note taking, a classroom set-up may be needed. This arrangement allows for water pitchers, pens, notepads, and candy dishes to be made read-

ily available to each attendee. However, tables have a negative effect on conferences that is not always outweighed by their advantages. The presence of tables in the room forces the audience to be spread across an area at least three times larger (even more with round tables) than they would occupy in a theater-style arrangement. **It is my theory that communication effectiveness generally decreases exponentially as the distance between the platform and the listener increases.** Tables force the back row of conferees *much* farther from the speaker, and therefore should be avoided whenever feasible.

2) **Audience energy is maximized when attendees can see each others' faces.** All of us engage in bizarre rituals each day without ever being consciously aware of them, one of which takes place each time we laugh in the presence of other people. Somewhere in the reptilian core of our cerebellum is encoded a protocol which dictates that our laughter must be followed by eye contact with another person. When placed in straight rows, people instinctively laugh less enthusiastically because of the awkwardness of making eye contact with someone who is at a ninety-degree angle and only inches away. However, when placed in a chevron, or even a semicircle, each audience member can see the faces of many other people without effort. The transfiguration of an otherwise stodgy crowd that takes place when they are facing one another (in a chevron or horseshoe configuration) is nothing short of *amazing*.

3) **Audience reaction is best when people are packed tightly together.** I have often said that I would much rather speak to fifty people in a room set-up to accommodate forty, than to speak to a thousand people in a room set for five thousand. This is because a mysterious dynamic overwhelms a sparsely populated room, placing a damper on the entire event. Jokes that would normally bring the house down elicit only muffled chuckles. Powerful points seem to bounce off scattered audience members like rocks skipping across the surface of a lake. There is a palpable lack of energy in such a room. *For this reason, it is of the utmost importance that you never put up more chairs than you expect to be filled!* It is precisely at this point that hotel and convention personnel be monitored closely. When asked to set a room for 80 people, they will frequently set it for 100, just to be on the "safe side." What they don't know is that the planner is expecting 60 people, and asked for 80 chairs "just to be on the safe side." **Both the hotel and the meeting planner are prone to think backwards about this issue.** If you are expecting 60 people, set up 50 chairs just to be on the safe side. The "unsafe side" is not having too few chairs (that can easily be remedied by adding a few more in the back), it is having so many chairs that the front rows are empty and the audience is scattered. **I do not recommend merely putting up more chairs than you need and roping off the back few rows.** This almost never works, as people will simply move the ropes, or become angry at your attempt to manipulate them.

Banquet staff and speakers are often at cross-purposes. The hotel wants lots of empty space through which wait staff can easily walk. Good speakers want audiences packed tightly together to take advantage of the energy a crowded room generates. The hotel staff wants all of their work done well in advance, so they set out many more chairs than needed. Speakers prefer to have the front rows filled, which demands that some chairs be brought in at the last minute only if they are needed.

Typically, if people purchase a ticket for a particular event, they will fight over the front rows. However, if they pay only a single fee for an entire conference, they fight over the *back* rows, presumably to allow an inconspicuous exit should the event become too boring. **This tendency to fill a room from the back to the front must be relentlessly fought by the meeting planner, for to allow the front rows to remain empty is to doom your conference to mediocrity.** *The only effective way to force the room to fill completely is to limit the number of chairs available.*

Edu-tainment

Successful conferences are marked by their ability to both entertain and educate attendees simultaneously. In a world dominated by television, You Tube, and fast internet, **the talking head is dead.** Activities must be both instructive *and* fun. Content must be mixed with humor. Instruction-laden sessions must be balanced by lighter fare, especially at the end of a long day of seminars. Similarly, highly effective speakers entertain while they teach and train. Choosing the right speaker, then, is critical to the effectiveness of your conference. **A boring speaker will override all of the principles in this article, and will ultimately be the criterion by which all of your efforts are judged.** The educational value of a conference that costs tens of thousands of dollars to put on can be greatly diminished by hiring a speaker that is unable to make your people laugh while they learn.

The ten principles above will enable you to create an ATMOSPHERE of learning that will greatly enhance the effectiveness of your next convention. Best of all, most of them require almost no effort at all. Many can be achieved by simply giving different instructions to your hotel or convention contact. Those that do require an investment of your time and energy, however, will be repaid many times over.

Billy Riggs is a motivational speaker, author, consultant, illusionist, and comedian with entertaining and educational presentations on sales, leadership, attitude, customer service, team-building, lead generation, and performance enhancement.

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