

Listening to the Corporate Culture

Tailoring a Meeting to a Specific Group

by Jim Sturdivant, CMP



In his now-classic work, *In Search of Excellence*, Tom Peters tells us, "As we worked on research of our excellent companies, we were struck by the dominant use of story, slogan and legend as people tried to explain the characteristics of their own great institutions ... in an organizational sense, these stories, myths and legends appear to be very important because they convey the organi-

After graduate school, I took a job as a photographer for a film producing company that was also doing some multi-image work. I felt sure it was going to be my big break into a brand new glamour industry. The show I was hired to work on was a three-screen meeting opener for a national grocery chain. The script

was intelligent. It was sophisticated. I was impressed. I photographed my heart out, with visions of starting my professional portfolio with something really impressive.

When it was finished, the show was a thing of beauty. At the meeting, it was projected onto screens built into a set which looked like a grocery storefront with a podium that looked like a mailbox outside the store. It was very clever, very well done. When the show ran, I felt as proud as a new father. But when the show was over, it was met with the most thunderous silence I have ever heard. I thought the sound of it was going to drive me mad. I can still hear it. You see, no one had taken into account the corporate culture of the audience.

Looking back, it seems an inconceivable mistake. The grocery chain was a co-op of fiercely independent, mostly rural grocery store owners. Their membership in the chain was an economic necessity for most of them, so their relationship to the chain was usually defensive, often adversarial and always voluntary. You might say they were reluctant stockholders. New investment programs, like the introduction of bar codes and scanning equipment, were instinctively met with caution. An advisory council kept the company in line. To openly applaud the company's glorious history might imply undue support and cost bargaining leverage. Their musical tastes were overwhelmingly country and western. They had never heard of Heraclitus. Neither had I. But the experience proved to be a valuable one. The recurring sound of that thunderous silence keeps me constantly reminded that a meeting is only as good as the audience thinks it is, and that their judgement will be determined as much by the values, tastes, beliefs and expectations they bring to the meeting as by the meeting's content itself. If we would have people hear what we have to tell them, we must speak to them in their own language — and that involves a lot more than words.

Some of the choices are obvious. In the selection of venue, for example, you would probably not take the Junior League to a dude ranch, but should you take your annual

Would the sales force see a meeting in Hawaii as a just reward and a measure of the company's esteem for them, or would they see it as an extravagant expenditure of funds that could be going into higher commissions? If you hold your annual stockholder's meeting at an airport hotel in a major hub, will your stockholders applaud your fiscal prudence and buy more stock or curse your lack of imagination and give management a hard time about that new capital improvements program? I guess it just ... all depends.

The perception of any action is inevitably colored by the psychological context within which it is experienced. To a large extent, we see what we expect to see. And when it comes to what people see at meetings, it's the "stories, myths and legends" of their corporate culture that shape their expectations.

The dilemma extends into every phase of meeting design. Meetings are, after all, where "stories, myths and legends" are propagated. The timing of the meeting, the promotion, the theme, the agenda, the communications media, the speakers and entertainment, all must be in sync with the expectations of the audience if we are to optimize the investment made in bringing all these people together in the first place.

Everywhere we turn, our odds of making the right choice will be determined by how well we know our audience's culture. You don't hire Zamfir to entertain for the Rodeo Cowboys Association. They don't speak the same language. You don't hire Timothy Leary as the keynote speaker for the Republican National Convention. They don't speak the same language either.

But it's seldom that easy to read a company's culture. Sometimes appearances can be deceiving. I once picked up a project begun by another writer. The project was a national sales meeting for the manufacturer of some very sophisticated computer workstations. The format of the meeting was to be a day of broadcast television programming, done through multi-image and live performances. You know ... open with a preview of coming attractions, do the

programs, throw in a couple of comic quiz shows to change the pace and close with a news roundup.

That seemed reasonable. Although I had never met any of the sales staff, the company meeting planner told me that they were a very sophisticated group who sold multi-million dollar contracts and earned six figure salaries. A sophisticated approach seemed reasonable. So I wrote hard-hitting quick-copy. I wrote clever parodies of current network programming. I scripted live quiz shows full of subtle humor and sophisticated wit. The company's meeting planner who was, as it turned out, new at his job, got into the spirit by adding a couple of shows of his own. "By the way," he told me, "each of our regional zones will present a short skit on stage."

At the meeting, all my clever and sophisticated ideas were met once again with a terrifying sound — silence. But I knew why. The skits, completely unrehearsed and held in jealous secrecy until that day, revealed the audience's real sense of humor. There were sexist jokes. There were racist jokes. There were tasteless jokes about the zone managers, the VP of sales, the president of the company, even the Pope. There was a guy in blackface-drag doing computer-salesman jokes about "floppy ones" and "hard ones." There was a home video of one group getting drunk at their zone sales meeting. Clearly, regardless of the sophistication of their product or the size of their contracts, what this audience liked was slapstick — rowdy, silly slapstick. By meeting time the next year, the meeting planner was "no longer in that position." It would seem that they got all the sophistication they wanted out in the field. When they gathered for the meeting they wanted to relax. Had we known that going in, we could have tailored the meeting to fit using baggy pants, shaggy dogs and pie-in-the-face to get our message across. Appearances can be deceiving.

Since this traumatic experience, I have learned that no matter how well you think you know your company's culture, there are ways to learn more. Corporate culture is

with the top. Interview top management and find out what their perception of the corporate culture is and what the values are that shape it. Ask what they expect from the meeting in terms of its impact on the corporate culture. Talk about the changes in the culture and find out what role the meeting should play in implementing them. Take your meeting writer with you to these interviews if at all possible. Encourage your management to be candid and discuss the company's weaknesses as well as its strengths.

Then talk to the meeting attendees. Find out their concerns and their ambitions, their feelings about previous meetings, their feelings about management and about each other. Ask them about current inside jokes and anecdotes. Ask them about the rumors and the stories about the Big Guys. Find out about their heroes, their favorite movies, their taste in music and their favorite sports. Ask them why they are with the company and what their expectations are. Find out who the trendsetters are and interview them at length.

Conduct post-meeting surveys through anonymous questionnaires. Collect newsletters, marketing material, news releases, journal articles, news clippings, mission and policy statements. Listen to your corporate culture. Take your writer to some lower level meetings, a social event or the company picnic. If you can, get clients' or employees' impressions of the corporate culture through market surveys or focus groups. Do this on an on-going basis. Nothing is as constant as change.

I made reference earlier to meetings as the places where corporate culture is propagated. And so they are — just trace some of those "stories, myths and legends" back to where your contact first heard them. But, at their best, meetings can also be the place where culture is generated. Once you know your company's culture well enough to speak the language, you can be instrumental in guiding its evolution. And that is one of the most valuable benefits meetings can deliver.

I once had the privilege to design an annual sales meeting for a com-

something ex-hairdressers with blueish collar tastes, and although the audience was 90 percent female, their affection for their male company president was legendary. This was because he knew how to speak their language.

The president was a slight, unimposing figure of a man whose relationship with his audience had come to be symbolized by his entrance into the opening general session of the meeting each year being made more outrageous than the year before. One year it was on a motorcycle. Another year it was wearing a kilt with a bagpipe band. Then it was on horseback. After an entrance like that, he was one of them, sharing their sense of humor and their sense of propriety. This was a rich cultural tradition in this company.

After interviewing several of their managers, and guided by a very savvy company meeting planner, I hit upon an idea which ultimately generated the strongest audience reaction I have ever experienced. To celebrate the company's acquisition of several new outlets in Florida and California, a beach theme was requested. To set the theme, we designed the meeting opener as a live production number done to a Beach Boys parody.

The number opened in darkness. Then, as a guitar started a surrealistic wail, rim lights hit two champion body builders on either side of the stage. When that happened it was like Elvis had walked into the room. I had spoken their language.

The peak of the production number was when the company president was brought out on a surfboard carried by these two hunks like some California Big Kahuna, and proceeded to clown around, pose with them and ad lib, for two full minutes of pure audience pandemonium. When this same man later set the company's sales goals for the next year, when he established a disaster relief fund for company employees and when he hugged each and every one on the company's 100 or so award winners, corporate culture was forged and values were communicated.

May we never become so "experienced" or "sophisticated" that we fail

Meetings are where legends are born. They're where impressions are made, stories are told and values communicated. Meetings are an essential link in the formation, perpetuation and evolution of corporate culture. No pressure. Just remember:

"Without exception, the dominance and coherence of culture proved to be an essential quality of the excellent companies ... in these companies, people way down the line know what they are supposed to do in most situations because the handful of guiding values is crystal clear." Tom Peters, *In Search of Excellence*. MM



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forms of corporate communications. Jim holds a masters degree in film production and is a veteran producer and director as well. For the last six years, he has specialized in the design and scripting of major national and international meetings. Jim Sturdivant Creative Services can be reached at 3134 Walnut Hill, Dallas, Texas 75229, (214) 956-9511.

