




Ten Common Mistakes in Planning a "Participatory" Event



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 To conduct a successful participatory event, a number of factors should be considered in the planning stage, related with the sponsor, the venue and the agenda.

- **Site-related**

Mistake #1: Choose a venue with auditorium-style seating and no space for break out sessions. Choose a venue that is too large, small, noisy, warm, cold, or difficult to access.
Learning: Physical space directly affects participation.

- **Agenda-related**

Mistake #2: Create an agenda in which 50% or more of the available time is taken up by:

- Welcoming speeches and other protocol
- Reports on past events or activities
- Keynote speakers
- Panel discussions
- Reports from breakout groups

Learning: True participation calls for two-way communication and multi-dimensional interaction.

Mistake #3: Plan the agenda down to the last second, leaving no space for emergent issues.

Learning: Participatory events produce surprises. Welcome them!

Mistake #4: Fail to set or enforce time limits for speakers.

Message: If speakers dominate the agenda, the public's role is reduced to passive listening (See 2 above).

- **Sponsor-related**

Mistake #5: Stifle controversy or dissent.

Mistake #6: Insist on a pre-determined outcome.

Mistake #7: Engage participants in brainstorming or other exercises whose results will never be used for anything.

Mistake #8: Expect participants to "validate" or "reach consensus" on material they had no hand in creating.

Mistake #9: Never inform the public how their participation affected the final decision.

Learning: If you bring people together in a "participatory" event, be prepared to listen, learn their opinion and consider it in the decision making process. The promise to inform the public what happened with their comments is also important.

Mistake #10: Hire a facilitator only after the venue is chosen and the agenda is set, and then ask him/her to "add a few dynamics" to make the event "participatory."

Learning: No facilitator can fix -in the sense of making it more participatory- a process that is

controlled from the top, packed with one-way communications, or in which dissenting points of view are unwelcome.

FINAL WORDS: Effective participatory processes depend first on careful process design, and secondly on skillful facilitation. To get the most value from facilitators, the sponsor must hire us first as architects for the process. Once we have helped you design an event that brings you and your publics together in a new way, then we can open our facilitator's toolbox and work our invisible magic, supporting the whole group in its process of mutual discovery 🔥

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