

# MEETING NIGHTMARES ... FROM THE SPEAKERS VIEWPOINT

By Suzanne Boswell

**W**ith well more than 25 years of speaking under my belt, I've experienced all kinds of logistical and technical problems at meetings. Sometimes the problems could have been avoided completely with good communications during the planning stages of the meeting. Other times, the problems may be totally unpredictable. New problems and challenges



constantly arise as technology changes and as meeting venues evolve. My viewpoint of meeting challenges is that of the speaker.

However, these same concerns have direct impact on the audience and can affect the way attendees feel about the meeting on the whole.

Some problems raise their ugly heads frequently. The most common problem areas that can affect the presentation relate to room setup and audiovisual components. I've found that these problems can also vary dependent on the type of facility. I categorize meeting facilities into 4 major groups:

**Clubs:** The upside: They are often in beautiful locales with spectacular views. The downside: They typically cater to social events, not business meetings. The rooms, the food and beverage and table settings may be lovely, the support (room setup and audiovisual) may be lacking and can be problematic. You'll probably need to use an outside A/V supplier.

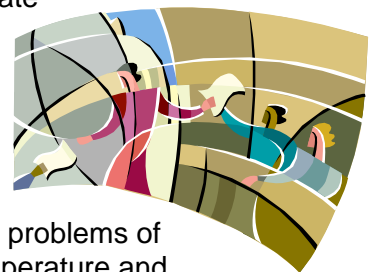
**Banquet halls/restaurants/churches:** Like clubs, these facilities often cater to social events, though banquet halls in business locales usually have a lot more extensive experience with meetings than clubs do. The upside: The food may be good. The downside: Sound systems are often poor in older facilities and they may have only round tables (not 6' tables). AV issues abound in these facilities and you might consider using a professional A/V supplier. Banquet halls are usually a step up from churches and restaurants when it comes to service and support. The more

reliant the facility is on receiving income from serving business clients, the more service and responsiveness you might expect when you voice needs and request help.

**Hotels:** At the upscale, high-service end, you may find great food, environment conducive to continuing education and good A/V support. At the low-quality end, you may find poor service all the way around. The traditional business hotels like Marriott, Hilton, Sheraton and Hyatt, particularly those in business locales or metro areas, may be the best choices for meetings and may also provide good, basic A/V support. They usually will have the most experience in meeting the needs of business clientele.

**Convention Centers:** These are usually large buildings that cater to multi-speaker meetings. The challenges vary greatly. In general however, the larger the facility, the more complex are the on-site challenges.

The facility may be managing setup for many rooms simultaneously, communications can be difficult and response time is typically longer than in smaller venues. The most frequent problems I've experienced relate to uneven sound quality in the very large rooms and less flexibility with lighting. Temperature control is often a challenge and the audience may experience extremes in temperature. The rooms are more often too cold than too hot. The speaker must arrive early to ensure that needs are addressed in plenty of time prior to the start of the presentation. In most cases, the A/V supplier is separate from the conference facility staff. It's important to understand the territory issue that can exist between these groups when it comes to solving problems of room setup, lighting, temperature and audiovisual matters. Make sure you know who is responsible for what, or your requests may be delayed due to miscommunication!



## Boswell's Top 7 Meeting Nightmares

THE CHALLENGE	THE ISSUE	THE SOLUTION
<p><b>#1: CHOICE OF LOCATION</b> You plan your meeting to take place in a country club, golf club, or church that hosts more social events than continuing education seminars. Often these facilities "make-do" with equipment and amenities that are easily accessible to them whereas out-of-the-ordinary requests are difficult for them.</p>	<p>The meeting rooms at clubs often have expansive windows with beautiful views. These rooms were designed for social events, not business meetings. They often cannot be adequately darkened for image projection and may have inadequate sound systems. The facility usually does not have an audio-visual department. There may be no one trained to manage equipment failures and they do not have A/V accessories that may be necessary during setup (like cables, extensions adapters etc.)</p>	<p>First you must decide if you are focused more on a social meeting or on an educational meeting. Upscale hotels can provide the best of both worlds. Find out from the facility how often they hold business meetings that require image projection in the specific room in question. Visit the room during the brightest time of the day and determine if the room can be darkened. Find out if they have an A/V person who is specifically trained to manage sound and image issues. You may need to hire an A/V company to supply quality sound equipment and electronic image equipment that is powerful enough to compensate for increased ambient light.</p>
<p><b>#2: LCD PROJECTOR IS INADEQUATE FOR ROOM</b> LCD projector may be provided by the client. This may be a projector used for small sessions held in dark rooms. It can be a problem in brightly lit rooms with 10 times as many people who must see the screen from the back of the room.</p>	<p>Sometimes a facility provides a projector that "we've always used in this meeting room". That is NOT assurance that it will provide the quality needed for this meeting! It may only mean that other groups have just settled for whatever was provided – it doesn't mean that they were happy with it. The facility may assume the room lights will be off, but the speaker wants the lights ON!</p>	<p>Hotels that have an A/V department and host many business meetings are more likely to have appropriate equipment and a variety of different equipment options. They know what projectors work in their own meeting rooms under different conditions and they strive to keep their business clients happy. If you are unsure about the equipment, it is best to use a professional A/V supplier who knows what power of projector is needed for the room, the lighting and group size. This person can then provide the related support services.</p>
<p><b>#3: ON-SITE BREAK-DOWNS</b> The room setup information and audiovisual requirements have not been provided to the people who actually set up the room.</p>	<p>This is a VERY common problem. The meeting planner may have spoken with the sales department; I may have spoken to the catering manager. Key people have the diagrams of the room and the necessary A/V equipment. HOWEVER, on the day of the meeting this information is not given to the people who actually arrange the room. This is a sure-fire formula for problems, resulting in excessive stress for speaker and meeting planner!</p>	<p>One cannot predict when these problems are likely to occur. On the meeting date be sure to arrive early, with copies of diagrams and meeting details. Find the banquet manager to review the details. Alternatively, visit the facility the night before, review the requirements with the people who will set up the room or get there VERY early in the morning. The key issue is accountability and having a key contact person who will TRULY be responsible for service – find out who the accountable person is and how to reach that person. If you have uneasy feelings before the meeting date, trust your instincts – an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!</p>
<p><b>#4: LATE SETUP</b> Either the room is not set up in a timely manner or the A/V set-up is delayed until shortly before the start of the meeting.</p>	<p>This is a nightmare that can significantly affect the energy of the speaker and increase tension for the meeting planner. The stress of this situation can drain the energy that should be devoted to the presentation.</p>	<p>The room setup (tables, chairs and registration area) should be completed at least <u>1 hour before the start of the registration time</u>. Ideally, when you arrive on site the room should be ready for you. The A/V setup should be in place about 1 hour before registration time. This is critical so that equipment can be tested before attendees start to arrive.</p>
<p><b>#5: POOR SOUND</b> Meeting takes place in a facility that has an outdated sound system resulting in uneven sound.</p>	<p>You won't see this problem in a site inspection. It's realized when the meeting begins and there are sound problems. Poor quality sound can be a killer for a meeting.</p>	<p>Find out when the sound system was installed or updated. This is especially important to determine in facilities that are more than 10-15 years old. If need be, hire an A/V company to provide a sound system.</p>
<p><b>#6: "DON'T WORRY ..."</b> This challenge typically occurs in advance of the meeting during the planning stages. In answer to your concerns and questions, the sales contact or catering manager responds with, "Don't worry" when you express a concern.</p>	<p>Instead of listening to you and providing specific responses and solutions, your contact person passes off your concerns with "Don't worry ..." Often the person is high on providing comforting (but vague) words and low on providing specific answers. A cavalier attitude is an omen of more problems to come.</p>	<p>Whenever I hear "don't worry" without any explanation WHY I shouldn't worry, red flags go up. It often means that this person doesn't know how to handle the problem and can not provide solutions. Be specific with your requests. If you feel uneasy with what you're hearing ask for responses to be provided in writing prior to the meeting. If you get vague responses and perceive a cavalier attitude, be sure to arrive on-site very early to check that details have been attended to.</p>
<p><b>#7: THE BUFFET SASHAY</b> A buffet is planned for lunch. However at the meeting the design of the buffet results in longer turn-around time and attendee unhappiness.</p>	<p>The setup is key for buffet success. A long line snaking through the room is a really unhappy sight for attendees. Setup may require 4 lines, depending on the size of your group. Those at the end of the line should not be met with slim pickings.</p>	<p>Work closely with the Food and Beverage department to ensure there is room for adequate movement, food display and enough lines to get your group seated promptly. If you have a sizable group, enable self-service on BOTH sides of the buffet table. Long lines are upsetting for attendees and can result in lunch running overtime!</p>