



Action Sheet

Arranging Public Meetings and Conferences

*This is not a definitive list but may give you some ideas and pointers to help you get going.
If you have any ideas or comments of your own to add, please do contact us.*

(A short briefing paper for those who wish to be reminded of their common sense.)

We all have various experiences of meetings

- Bumping into a long-lost acquaintance on the train
- An encounter with a loved one in a favorite hideaway
- A drink with friends down at the local
- Celebrating together at the Easter High Mass
- A reunion of the extended family for the annual binge.

“Meetings” are not just those dull boardroom affairs which John Cleese caricatured in a famous training video “Meetings Bloody Meetings” - there, we saw the ultimate in wasted time and energy. Meetings are those occasions when people come together to inform each other, to share experiences, to plan new activity, to celebrate, to decide, to assess..... Meeting each other is part of the web of relationships that make up the human community; without meeting, we would all remain hermits (and even hermits needed to come together occasionally - the very word “conference” is derived from the culture of the original desert fathers who came together to encourage and to support and to share and to celebrate).

So, if you think back to all the meetings good and bad you have ever been involved in, you probably know all you need to know. This short notice merely spells out the essentials.

Here are a few basic questions to be asked to make sure a meeting or conference is on the right lines:

***Why do you need this meeting at all?
Could the same purpose be achieved in some other way?
What do really aim to get out of it?***

You don't necessarily need to have an end-result in terms of action points or clear learning goals; you may just want to create a greater sense of Community, or be in communion with others of like mind or faith. Most informal meetings are about spontaneous friendship and shared stories.

Who is the target audience?

Are you expecting middle-aged loyalists, or hoping for some radical new faces? If the latter, are you prepared for their style and demands? If you expect a group of people who are sympathetic to your group, they will need different treatment from a bunch of cynics who are there because they have to be there professionally, but have no truck for this “pastoral care” business. The audience makes the meeting.

Have you thought about the style and ethos of the occasion?

The place you choose to meet in says much about the values of the organizers - if you are a bunch of Franciscan brothers, then you might appropriately choose a poorly-decorated church hall or disused cave; this would convey your sense of ownership! On the other hand if it is going to be in the middle of winter, when everyone will generally feel a little jaded, it is the time to choose a very comfortable carpeted room with beautiful decorations. But make sure that the view through the window or exotic paintings do not distract from the speakers.

How many people do you expect?

You don't want a large bleak hall with a few punters tucked away in a corner; on the other hand it could be overbearing if you overbooked on a hot summer's evening when everyone is thirsting for a cool drink. This will sometimes mean taking a risk; unless you have a booking system with an exact number (and then people often let you down on the day unless they have paid a big deposit), you may not know how many are going to walk through the door. So it may be best not to put out all the chairs. Leave a few front row chairs available, and then fill up from the back as more people arrive. This creates a sense of energy.

What refreshments are you going to provide?

Everyone remembers a good free meal; on the other hand, if people come along prepared to share this can create a sense of "agape". At least if you are going for plain tea / coffee and biscuits, ensure that it is easily available without sound of boiling urn drowning out the speakers, or cold coffee at the end of a long queue.

And Registration?

If you do want to know who has been there, and so need some form of registration, leave plenty of time and have room for everyone to sign on. There is nothing more uninviting than being left at the back of a long queue when you have arrived after a long journey; you may even have conference rage at some poor old man who is signing in without their glasses.

And what about the Programme?

People like a variety of presentations. As well as the good speaker, who deserves a decent slot without being allowed to bore the audience, you might show a video or let people buzz in two's or three's. If there is enough space, then larger groups are good - they help the shy to come out and people get to know each other. If you are brave, you might try an icebreaker to get everyone involved -but do not patronize by treating people like children. It is good to finish the morning with groups, because then people are warmed to each other and go off for a meal ready to enjoy each other's company. The time after a good lunch is called the 'graveyard slot' - so make sure there is something really interesting then, or get them involved through action.

The Plenary

It is always difficult to know how to end on a high whilst most people are still with you. But they want to go home with a clear "take-away". We are all like children at the end of the party!

So take courage. Meetings are intended to be fun. Plan well, relax and all will be well!

This action sheet was produced by APCMH (The Association for Pastoral Care in Mental Health) August 2000

For more information or to be put in touch with an existing group contact

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