Rethinking Meetings and Conferences: Don't Automate, Innovate

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B ack in 1990, Dr. Michael Hammer, the father of business process reengineering, wrote a seminal Harvard Business Review article titled "Reengineering Work: Don't Automate, Obliterate."

His idea was that you don't want to automate existing processes, you want to rethink and reengineer them. Back then, companies would use software to automate bad processes, speeding up bad results.

Although this article is from thirty years ago, the concept is still relevant today, maybe even more so, during these challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently, we are unable to conduct in-person, face-to-face meetings. As a result, there has been a knee-jerk reaction: Take what we did for in-person events and simply automate them. In other words, create a virtual version of the live meeting. This is the modern-day version of automating bad processes.

Doing this misses a huge opportunity for innovation. We don't want to deliver online meetings or presentations the way we conduct them in-person. In fact, I would argue that many of our face-to-face meetings were poorly designed to begin with. So now is the time to rethink the way we collaborate. Innovate the experience rather than simply automate it.

Although this article focuses on conferences and conventions, the concepts can be adapted and applied to any kind of meeting. It is based on my real-world personal experience over the past decade.

MOVE FROM EVENT TO PROCESS

The conference industry is based around events. People gather together for a few hours or days. Ideas are shared with attendees filling notebooks. Once the last speaker leaves the stage, the event is over and everyone leaves. There is a clear start and finish. And when all is said and done, quite often, a lot more was said than done.

But what if we moved from an event mindset to a process one. Instead of everything concluding when the event is over, the end is actually the start of something larger: real learning, application, and value creation. Let's face it, getting people together and holding a meeting is not the goal. The real objective is to improve some aspect of the business/organization. Using a process mindset, we can measure the real impact of a meeting.

Fortunately, virtual tools make this possible in ways that are difficult with only the face-to-face model.

LEVERAGE REAL-TIME AND ASYNCHRONOUS DELIVERY

Meetings and conferences typically focus heavily on real-time content delivery. This could be a live in-person presentation, a live virtual webinar, a group call, or a one-on-one phone conversation. Everyone is participating at the same time.

With the virtual world, we have the added advantage of being able to deliver content asynchronously. This content can be delivered

and consumed at different times. Examples are videos watched at your own leisure, emails, and voicemail. People are not participating in the conversation at the same time.

What does this mean for presentations?

The opportunity is to only deliver in real-time what must be consumed at the same time. For example, if a speech is a canned presentation and the audience is just going to sit back and watch passively, a video would be just as effective. A live event is not a good use of their time.

WHAT INNOVATING VIRTUAL LOOKS LIKE

To illustrate these points, here's one common face-to-face meeting scenario that is near and dear to my heart: keynote speeches and presentations.

Typically, we get on a stage in a ballroom and deliver a presentation to hundreds or thousands of people. The speech can vary in length but often lasts for forty-five to sixty minutes. Some speeches have interactivity to keep people engaged, others are more like a show. Regardless, it is an event with a start and finish.

Automation
The typical approach for a virtual keynote is to deliver online what was done in person. Speakers give the same presentation as they would have given live, except they do it via webinar software. In other words, they are simply automating the old process. The creative ones will add some interactivity, such as polls, to make sure people haven't fallen asleep. Others invest in fancy studios and equipment to make the video quality higher, but the process remains the same just with higher production quality.

Innovation
Instead of simply automating the keynote, we have an opportunity to rethink the entire experience for the audience and participants. Take advantage of asynchronous options to maximize the value from the real-time sessions. And leverage the process mindset by focusing on outcomes rather than events.

Here is a four-step process I've used with my clients for many years with great success. Get creative and develop an approach that works for your specific situation:

1. Send a video before the meeting: Record the canned part of the presentation in advance of the meeting in a custom video. Allow attendees to watch it at their own leisure. Where appropriate, include a simple quiz to make sure everyone viewed the video. This is an example of asynchronous content delivery.

2. Live experiential presentation: Conduct a live (real-time) virtual meeting focused on experiences and conversations that can only be done in real-time. Use the live event to create a participatory experience. Find ways to engage people. Go beyond polls, Q&A, or chat. These are the lowest level of engagement. Create shared experiences that will be memorable and will help them learn. Use breakout rooms with exercises, so that people can apply what they heard. Finally, set up the "process" that will begin after the meeting. Sometimes these are real-world problems that teams need to solve using the tools. One creative example was a mobile phone company that had a competition to create a new iPhone app. Or it could simply be the application of the concepts to attendee's daily work.

3. Post-meeting deep dive: Give them the tools they need to complete the work. Post the pre-event video, live meeting recording, and other materials online on a private page. Either create a dedicated email address where people can submit questions or use a platform with chat capabilities such as Slack. Once a week, the presenter creates a video where the most common and important questions are answered and is posted to the private page.

4. Follow-up live meeting: Conduct a follow-up session thirty to sixty days later where everyone debriefs and presents their solutions. The goal here is to share, learn and celebrate. It is also an opportunity to discuss how to continue making progress after the meeting. For larger events, you may want to select in advance the individuals who will share their stories.

Bonus idea: To keep the conversation going, create a friendly competition where participants

get points and there is a leaderboard that shows progress. Our experience shows a high participation rate when this is done correctly. *(To see what we do, go to www.30daychallenge.org.)*

You can, of course, repeat the process multiple times. And this approach is scalable to audiences of any size.

My clients find that they get incredible value from this process as it not only maximizes the impact of the live sessions but also helps ensure deeper engagement and longer-term impact. Plus, you often get solutions to real-world issues.

BEYOND PRESENTATIONS

Of course, the list goes far beyond speeches and can be used for training, brainstorming, consulting, status meetings, performance reviews, and more.

And when people are able to start meeting in person again, use the approaches above in conjunction with your live meetings. This will give you even greater results as you are taking advantage of the value of each delivery method.

Now is the perfect time to rethink the way we meet, whether in person or virtually. Online meetings aren't new, but there is a huge opportunity for innovation. And although we have more technologies at our disposal than ever, it doesn't mean that technology is the only solution. Don't limit yourself to the way it has been done in the past. Don't just automate the live meeting. Instead, focus on outcomes and goals, and then reverse engineer a process that works for you and your team.

When done correctly, you may find that virtual meetings create greater value than their in-person counterparts while requiring less time and a lower investment.

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