

Interactive Meetings = Exponential Results

By Janet Gregory

Recently I facilitated a highly interactive meeting in Japan. Language barriers and cultural traditions would make you expect a much less interactive meeting. Many group meetings are not naturally interactive for any number of reasons. In addition to language barriers and cultural traditions, large groups, peer pressure, management participation and the use of technology may all present barriers to an interactive meeting.

The most effective meetings are highly interactive. Commitment and buy-in are products of participation. Real learning and change come from collaboration. Here are five strategies that you can begin using today to make your meetings more interactive and more effective.

Begin at the beginning.

- Have meeting attendees participate in co-creating the agenda. Co-creating the agenda can be as simple as review and input prior to the meeting or more in-depth development of topics and desired outcomes.
- Communicate the agenda, goals and pre-work when setting up the meeting. These are very basic activities but often over looked. If people come prepared, the meeting can be more effective. Pre-work is a way to have participants share in the preparation and be more active in the meeting.
- Assign roles. Each attendee should know why their participation is important to the meeting and what their role is. Let each participant know what you expect from them. Don't assume.
- Keep introductions brief. Long introductions are yawners and you will lose the audience immediately. Jump right in. Skip the "cute" introductions. Introductions should always include expectations for the meeting.
 - 📺 Video, web and phone conferences benefit from introductions that give all participants time to identify and recognize the voice. Introductions should include name, function, geographic location and meeting expectations.
 - ** With very large groups ask everyone to introduce themselves to 4 people, the person on their left, on their right one in front and one in back.

The power of silence.

- Music is defined by the silence between the notes. Change the pace of your presentation. Change the pace of your meeting. Pace your presentation and your meeting to fit your audience. With language and cultural differences a slower pace is much more comfortable. With high experience levels on a topic set a dynamic and blistering pace.
- Silence allows the brain to catch up, new concepts get absorbed, complex topics are understood and ideas get processed. Suggest points where notes should be taken and pause allowing time for brain and note taking to connect. Provide a blank outline for participants to complete during a topic. Provide questions to be answered to promote absorption and understanding.
- Silence promotes understanding between multi-lingual speakers and listeners. Accents and unique use of language take additional processing time.

- Find opportunities for silence. Find silence comfortable. Pause between thoughts. Repeat key ideas, using the exact same phrasing. Set up a demo or vary media use with a few moments of silence while set up takes place. There are lots of opportunities to comfortably find silence.

Variety is the spice of life.

- Vary the pace, the speakers and the media. Your attendees are sophisticated. They watch HDTV, talk shows and action movies. They listen to talk radio, news programs and music of their choice. They play video games and online games. They surf the web and have multiple applications running simultaneously. Keep their attention or they will be doing this during your meeting!
- Keep topics short, crisp and precise. Break topics down into small digestible topics. Have multiple speakers and ask each speaker to involve the participants in some way.
- Include the business action heroes. Add real life business action heroes to the agenda for discussion time. It is reality TV for business with real action stories to engage your meeting participants. It is also a reward for your business action heroes by recognizing their accomplishments and asking them to tell their story. They are your business role model.
- Build participation into the agenda. Lecture style meetings are a thing of the past along with overhead projectors.
 - 📺 Video, web and phone conferences promote participant attention with television news or a talk show format. Allow for questions and input from the participants, this can be done live, via chat or using other online tools.
 - ** With very large groups have audience microphones or “runners” available to gather questions/comments.

Interactive techniques.

- Questions to the participants. Allow an appropriate amount of silence time for participants to formulate their response. Asking for volunteer responses works well in some cultures and peer groups, but not in others. As appropriate to the nature of the group, use round-robin, color-coded or random selection to promote participation. When facilitating a recent meeting in Japan it was effective to present all participants with a question, allow them time to formulate a response and vary the feedback request between round-robin and random selection.
 - 📺 Video, web and phone conferences work best by asking specific individuals to provide input. Let them know at the beginning of the exercise that you will be going around the “virtual table” asking for responses. This alerts attention and promotes participation. Open volunteer requests are too often met with unwanted silence in online meetings.
 - ** With very large groups break them into smaller units and have them discuss among themselves and report their group findings as appropriate to promote understanding of the topic.
- Questions from the participants. Great for panel discussions! Know in advance if you can handle the open-ended unknown question coming at you or if you prefer to pre-screen & sort questions. Always start with a few “planted questions” to break the ice and set the right tone.
 - 📺 Video, web and phone conferences offer great tools for Q&A sessions. Become acquainted with the features available and how to use them.
 - ** With very large groups have audience microphones or “runners” available to gather written questions.
- Every vote counts. Participant input matters before, during and after. Use email or survey tools (like [Zoomerang](#) or [SurveyMonkey](#)) prior to a meeting to gather agenda ideas or gather information prior to use in the session. During a meeting, getting audience participation and feedback keeps them involved, engaged and interested. Survey tools (online or paper questionnaires) used after a meeting help improve future sessions. Look for every opportunity to get input and involvement.

- 💻 Video, web and phone conferences offer great polling tools (like [Webex](#), [LiveMeeting](#) and other services). There are also many interesting e-learning tools available that can be used for remote meetings and remote learners... some are simple and effective (like [Adobe e-Learning suite](#)) while others are sophisticated and feature rich (like LMS – Learning Management Systems).
- * With very large groups audience response systems grab their attention. Google “audience response” and you will find a Wikipedia explanation and several vendor products for purchase or rental. Traditional techniques, like hands-raised and stand-up, also keep the audience moving and engaged.
- Self-discovery exercises promote the best learning. Allowing participants to discover information through guided questions that leverage their experience and expertise is the most effective adult learning method and provides lasting change. It takes considerably more preparation on the part of the meeting organizer, but the results are profound.

- Grow a tree if your goal is to generate fresh ideas, promote new thinking or gather suggestions. Start with a common base and ask for participant input to build branches.
 - Mind mapping is a great technique that can be used individually and in small groups to grow a tree of ideas. Google “mind map” and you will find a Wikipedia explanation, various software tools and more. A piece of paper, flip chart or white board is all that’s needed in a face-to-face meeting.
- Build a pyramid if your goal is to create a focal point, common language or shared vision. Start with a broad base of participation and leverage participant input toward the desired focal point.
 - Everyone can supply input. Input allows participants to think about the topic and to see/hear different approaches. Take care to not label input as good or bad, all input is of value. Leverage the input that provides a springboard, platform or foundation for the commonality you seek. Be open to new ideas; you may be surprised at the great thinking going on in your organization!
- You can grow trees and build pyramids in the same meeting. A sales team may be growing trees with fresh new ideas for networking and connecting with customers. Later in the same meeting the same sales team may be building a pyramid as they seek a common language to discuss customer interest levels.
 - 📺 Video, web and phone conferences can use polling or survey tools during, prior or after the meeting as great input tools.
 - ** With very large groups, break them into smaller units and have them report their group findings.

Janet Gregory is a veteran sales executive and co-founder of KickStart Alliance. For assistance with sales strategy, sales planning, training, compensation or any aspect of sales operations, contact [Janet](#). Janet leads the sales readiness practice at KickStart Alliance. For help in aligning sales & marketing for results contact any member of the [KickStart Alliance team](#).