

THE MEETINGS POCKETBOOK

By Patrick Forsyth

Drawings by Phil Hailstone

“A wealth of succinct and sensible advice. Don’t arrange or attend another meeting without reading it!”

Gill Smillie, Chief Executive, Conference Venues Countrywide (and a founder member of the Meetings Industry Association).

“A complete guide showing how to make meetings more effective, as a chairperson or participant. It may be common sense but we can all benefit from this straightforward reminder of the rules.”

Pippa Bourne, Head of Non-accredited Programmes, Institute of Management.

THE AGENDA



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The costs, opportunities and dangers

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PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING

GET YOUR FACTS RIGHT



It is amazing how much time is spent in meetings querying, checking or challenging facts. If information proves incorrect, then a whole case can collapse or, at the very least, some credibility is lost.

Take time to check, and check again. Make sure what you say is factual. Information given out should be:

- **Explicit:** stated plainly, without being obscured by irrelevancies
- **Accurate:** exactly right
- **Precise:** just the right piece of information to make the point well

This may sound pedantic, but it matters. If you say something like: 'Change is essential. The current method is wasting 10% of the cost', and someone immediately says: 'I looked at the figures this morning and it is only 9.2%', then at once what you said is devalued. It is too late to say you only meant *about* 10%. It looks as if you did not know or were trying to overstate the case.

Be careful to state facts – factually.

PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING

MAKING AN INPUT



There are three clear objectives for what you say. It should be...

- **Understandable**
- **Attractive**
- **Credible**

...so that people listen, believe it is relevant and, ultimately, are prompted to agreement or action as appropriate. We will consider these in turn.



PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING

MAKE WHAT YOU SAY *UNDERSTANDABLE*



You can use a number of devices to make sure what you say is understood:

- **Use clear ‘signposting’:** announce what you are going to cover – ‘There are three issues here; I would like to say something about costs, timing and then the problems of implementation’. If people nod to that, you can go through what becomes an agreed mini agenda and people have your comments in context
- **Use a clear structure:** even a short input needs a clear structure. Often a beginning, a middle and an end works well. Never let your comments deteriorate into a string of points prefixed only by, ‘And another thing
- **Follow a logical sequence:** again, signposting will make it clear. You may, for instance, opt to discuss a planned conference in terms of the chronology of the event, or a project through its major stages. Whatever the method, it must strike others as sensible and act to make the message clearer than a more random statement

PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING



MAKE WHAT YOU SAY *UNDERSTANDABLE*

- **Use visual aids:** people really do understand (and remember) more easily what they both see and hear. Consider using slides, diagrams etc – and if you have no facility for visuals, make up for it by being sufficiently descriptive; paint a picture
- **Avoid jargon:** or use it carefully. Jargon is professional slang and forms a useful shorthand for those in the know. But, never assume everyone understands the technicalities that slip off your tongue so easily
- **Avoid gobbledegook:** and ‘officespeak’. Do not say: ‘*Considerable progress has been made in the preliminary work directed towards the establishment of the starting point and initial activities*’, if you mean: ‘Nothing has been done yet, but we must start soon’. Such language is trying as well as confusing

Finally, if only to remove a distraction, watch out for any irritating verbal habits such as beginning every sentence with ‘Basically’

Understanding is the foundation – everything else you do will suffer if what you say is unclear.

PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING

MAKE WHAT YOU SAY *ATTRACTIVE*



Much that goes on at meetings is more than simply communicating information. You may have to motivate, to enthuse, to *persuade*. If you need action by others, or a particular decision made, or something implemented with commitment, it is not sufficient to *tell* people, you must *persuade* them.

This process is effectively selling. You need to:

- Identify the needs or position of other people
- Put over a case that shows them how your proposal will be acceptable or beneficial to them

If you are regularly at meetings where you need to be persuasive, then it will be worth some study. Selling and negotiation can be learned like so many other skills. (See *The Negotiator's Pocketbook*).

PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING

MAKE WHAT YOU SAY *CREDIBLE*



If you say something apparently factual which supports your case, others may at once cast doubt on it: 'You would say that, wouldn't you'.

You may well need back-up proof or evidence, such as:

- Figures and statistics
- Examples
- The collaboration of others (particularly others with clout)
- Something in writing (or, better still, published)
- Something visual or descriptive
- Something based on research
- The result of a test or trial
- Objective comment from outside the organisation
- Expert comment from an acknowledged expert

Assess whether your case needs proof from something or someone other than you, find and add such evidence to support what you propose.

PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING

DIFFERENT FORMS OF COMMUNICATION



Three key kinds of communicating take place during meetings:

- **Initiating:** proposing, suggesting and building
- **Reacting:** responding, commenting, judging, evaluating
- **Clarifying:** testing, explaining, demonstrating

Each does different things, speaks in a different 'tone' of voice and may need signposting: 'I am not asking you, I am telling you' (or vice versa).

Use them all, use them appropriately and know which is which.



About the Author

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Patrick runs Touchstone Training & Consultancy, an independent firm specialising in marketing, management and communications skills training. He began his career in publishing and worked for a professional management institute before going into consultancy. He started his own firm in 1990. He has worked widely in many different industries and internationally. Writing is a key part of his work. He has more than fifty successful business books published including *Powerful Reports and Budgets*, *Marketing on a Tight Budget*, *The Management Speakers Handbook*, *Successful Time Management* and *Detox your Career* and his writing has been well received: *hugely readable and practical* (in 'Professional Marketing' magazine). He also writes corporate publications. He has written several other pocketbooks: *Sales Excellence*, *Negotiation*, *Managing Upwards*, and *Starting in Management*.

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