

How to Handle Traffic Flow

By Bruce Harris, CMP

Orchestrating the smooth and orderly movement of attendees between venues is one of the most overlooked and underrated tools in the meeting manager's toolbox — one that certainly separates the professional from the amateur meeting planner. There are a number of situations in which traffic or flow planning is absolutely essential, including directing people into meeting rooms, coffee breaks, cocktail receptions, and banquet functions. On the following pages you will find time-tested techniques and helpful hints on handling all of these scenarios and more.

Meeting Rooms

If any attendee is standing in the back of the room without a seat nearby, then you have not done your job, which is to have everyone seated in a prompt, efficient, and courteous manner. To accomplish this goal, use the following strategies:

- Load the front of the room first, setting aside seats for VIPs and speakers.
- If there are side doors, open the front-most door first and direct delegates to the front seats.
- To prevent people from going down the aisle, stand in the middle of the aisle and point to where you would like them to go. Don't argue with insistent guests, however, if they choose to move down the aisle.
- As the front fills, close the front-most door and open the next door. Continue this procedure until all but the back of the room is filled.
- Tape or ribbon off the seats farthest from the speaker and nearest to the back entrance door or use reserved signs to maintain the integrity of this area — approximately one-tenth of the chairs in the room.

- Finally, once the other seats are taken or the meeting has begun, remove all tape, ribbons, and signs and save the rear-most seats for late arrivals. Be sure to place meeting room signage by the back door once the session has started.

For large groups, station one person in front of the doors that are to remain closed and one person at the entrance that is to be used first, which will automatically direct traffic flow to the desired door. Staff members stationed inside the room decide when to open the next door and communicate that decision via walkie-talkie to staff members stationed outside the room. When the next door is opened, the coordinator steps into the flow and directs the delegates into the new door opening. Inside, staff members make their way to the new door and continue seating people. Walkie-talkies and many coordinators or assistants are vital for large group movements.

Coffee Breaks

- Never have open stations near the doors of a meeting

room. If it is unavoidable due to space limitations, keep those stations closed and direct delegates to the farthest stations first.

- When setting up the stations, always consider the direction people are coming from and position the stations so that movement is *away* from the meeting rooms.
- Organize the stations so that attendees do not stop moving until *after* they get their coffee or hot water. Place tea bags, sugar, and cream just downstream from coffee or hot water so that those needing coffee only can move through the line unimpeded. Place regular coffee first, decaffeinated second, and hot water last.
- Place sodas and snacks (if applicable) on *separate tables*. Arrange items in the correct order — glasses, then ice, then soda.
- If it is necessary to have a fast break and labor costs are not a problem, coffee can be poured by servers. Once again, keep tea bags, sugar, and cream downstream.
- Make sure that the end of the stream has an outlet — do not run the end of the station into a wall, escalator, or dead end. Keep stations away from restrooms.
- When going from a general session to breakout sessions or vice versa, always try to locate the break in front of the next chronological destination. If you go into breakouts that are remote from the general session foyer, for example, set up the coffee break in the breakout area.
- In a situation where remote breakouts and the general session are both being used, you could have a problem when attendees going to the remote breakouts attack the coffee station reserved for the general session breakout. To solve this problem, have the speaker excuse the breakout session attendees first and keep the general session foyer stations closed until these people pass through. Then, as soon as the first group has exited the room, send the second group (those returning to the general session) to the break just outside the room.

Cocktail Parties

Meeting planners must be proactive to ensure that their events have the proper space and design. Obviously, the type of cocktail party as well as the number of hors d'oeuvre stations, entertainment options, and props greatly affect the layout design and flow pattern of the room. The following guidelines apply to *all* types of cocktail receptions.

- Do *not* position bars near doors.
- Food stations should not overlap or flow into bars.
- Avoid high-density bar areas — four or more bars back to back is not a good idea.
- Consider beer and wine bars at large events and outdoor events.

- Place seating away from high-traffic areas and group the seating together. Don't spread it out so that traffic is forced around those seated.
- Always create large spaces for traffic to move between areas of the function.
- For large groups, move guests to the back of the room first by not opening bars and food stations closest to the entrance until after the majority of the attendees have entered.

Moving People to Dinner

To buffet dinners — Goal: No long lines

- Only move as many people as necessary from the cocktail party to keep the buffet lines full. “Bleed” attendees away from the reception by telling *only* those closest to the exit or dinner area that the buffet is open. (They will likely thank you and move quickly.) When the lines get shorter, repeat this procedure with the next group closest to the exit.
- Do not close all the bars until the buffet line is finished. Close bars nearest the buffet first.
- Always discuss your plan with the hotel staff to ensure that *you* control the flow.
- Never flash lights or do anything to encourage all the guests to leave the reception at the same time.

To sit-down dinners —

Goal: Seat quickly so food service can start.

There are several techniques that work.

- Close all bars at the same time. (Always do a “last call” before using this technique.) When a bar is closed, a tablecloth goes over the bar and the bartender steps to the side.
- Do a last call, then signal delegates that dinner is served by flashing lights or by playing exit music.
- In each scenario, encourage people farthest from the exit doors to leave the event first in order to have their choice of seats. As they pass through the party, others will notice the movement and will also make their way toward the dining room.
- When using these techniques, always be polite, not dictatorial. Keep in mind that courtesy and warmth work wonders.

Seating People at Food Functions

Seating people at food functions is critical, especially for larger groups. Keep these three rules in mind when seating groups of several hundred or more in unassigned seating:

1. Establish larger aisles to more easily move the masses through the room. The “filter through” method (no cross

aisles) is a guaranteed disaster for 500 or more guests.

2. Line up banquet staff in the aisles to direct early arrivals to the far reaches of the room. If early arrivals sit at tables closest to the entrance, they block the passageways needed to move attendees to the back. (Note: Reserved signs on tables nearest the door force people to the rear. Remove them as the room fills.)

3. Use as many entrances as possible, combined with multiple corridors if possible.

Reserved Seating Events

Reserved seating events require a major use of manpower and signage for groups of 800 or more. The first challenge is to have people enter the correct door, which minimizes wandering around the room in search of the correct table numbers.

To achieve this objective, follow these guidelines:

- Place large reproductions of the room layout, complete with table numbers, at eye level in the reception area.
- Hang a sign above each door to the ballroom displaying the table numbers that can be located by entering through that particular door.
- Position staff members outside each door with a list of seating assignments.
- You also can color code each area of the room (with balloons, tablecloths, or banners) and affix a corresponding color sticker to each attendee's name badge. This tactic will direct them to the right area. Numbers are then necessary to help them find the right table.

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Effective Crowd Control

The key to crowd control is to persuade people to give you their authority in an area where you need control, and there are various ways to achieve this goal.

One of the most effective strategies is to become a symbol of authority. If you are in a restaurant, for example, and a person dressed as a maitre d', holding menus in his hand, instructs you to follow him, would you do so? Most likely you would. To a great extent, this example applies to a banquet or reception where waiters dressed in tuxedos are assumed to be in the know. Other symbols of authority are megaphones, uniforms and/or costumes of distinction, people using hand signals, and people giving directions while holding a flashlight in one hand.

In the meetings business, a walkie-talkie is a symbol of authority. When directing traffic, there are three simple tips to keep in mind:

1. Put the walkie-talkie in an outstretched hand.
 2. Speak with great authority.
 3. Make decisive hand movements.
- If you use these techniques, you will become a symbol of authority.

But this does not mean you will be successful at crowd control 100 percent of the time. You also need to *perfect* your technique.

- Survey the area in advance and use as many physical barriers as possible in areas where you do not want people to go, such as entrance doors that you don't want used or aisles that you want people to avoid.
- Use symbols of authority, including something as simple as signs and orange cones (for outdoor events).
- Dress in a fashion that separates you from those you are directing. Many groups provide staff members with matching shirts. If outdoors, use the colors that most safety forces use (i.e., yellow or orange).
- Use uniformed people to block exits or to direct people to alternate routes.
- Hold a walkie-talkie and keep it up high; wave it when you use hand motions.
- Get the first delegates going in the desired direction. The rest will always follow as long as the group is moving steadily.
- Speak loudly. Sound official. Be decisive. Leaders lead ... they do not

ask or plead. Yet they should always be friendly and courteous.

- If you need to change the direction of the flow (an extremely difficult task), you must physically become a barrier — outstretched arms, megaphone, walkie-talkie, loud and clear voice, simple directions. *But never touch anyone.* If some guests manage to get by you, ignore them and focus on the masses.
- Enlist the help of the crowd itself, reading their names off their badges: "Bill, could you help by moving in that direction? Please head those people over there." People generally like to cooperate when they hear their name.
- Directions such as "This area is closed" or "Open buses this way" also work.
- For outdoor crowd control, elevate yourself above the crowd if at all possible.

Remember, the key to crowd control is to get the attendees to voluntarily transfer their authority to you. By using these tools and strategies you will be successful in overcoming the independent mind that crowds often have.

— Bruce Harris