

01

ARE EVENTS BIG MISUNDERSTANDINGS?



Events are about more than logistics.

This chapter considers the ubiquitous routine that almost all events follow. It's about too few surprises, and too little muscle or meat.

Find out how to break out of the standard program of welcome cocktails, management speeches and product presentations with dance.

Ever since corporate events, designed for liaising with clients, interest groups, stakeholders, partners, the media or employees, became a firm fixture in the business world – about 20 years ago – they have followed a certain pattern. This pattern almost seems God-given, unchangeable and without alternative. It strings together the event's program points and determines the time-frame within which guests are to play active or passive roles. It lays down feeding times and when it is ok for guests to take a break. Let's call this pattern the pearl necklace.

The pearl necklace dominates the entire process of planning events. It robs the responsible event managers of any creative freedom and even determines the size of budgets. It limits concepts to a tried-and-tested combination of standard building blocks. And it is the reason why events do not deliver the impact they potentially could have.

Yet the pearl necklace is rarely questioned.

Every experienced guest knows what to expect from a corporate event. Whether it is the launch of a new product, the annual sales kick-off or a company's centenary. Same procedure as last year? Same procedure as every year.

Curtain up and clear the stage. To visualize the procedures and pitfalls of the pearl necklace, let's accompany an imaginary guest to an evening's event. Let's call him Mister K. Why not Missus? Still today, most people invited to corporate events are male, reflecting the decision-maker demographics of most companies – except perhaps in the fashion, beauty and media industries. Since there is nothing we can do about that, we'll stick to Mister K. And meanwhile, he has arrived at the event's location.

THE OVERTURE

Thanks to his host's good directions and provision of parking space, his journey was stress-free. Now he finds himself at the entrance to the venue. Due to the ubiquity of the host company's logo, he has no doubt that he is at the right place – even though people from the host company are nowhere to be seen. But a friendly hostess takes him to the reception, where they soon find Mister K.'s name tag and give it to him to wear. Thus prepared, he

heads over to some friendly catering staff, and grabs a drink and some of the delicious but apparently rationed nibbles.

Now he casts his gaze across the room, looking for somebody who might be interested in him – without luck. Those who should be there to greet him and attend to him, the key account managers, are huddled at a table, intensely preoccupied with themselves. Their reunion is so exciting that their role as hosts unfortunately becomes secondary.

Mister K. continues to scan the location from his table in a safe corner, now looking for familiar faces. Because he knows that this part of the function is for mingling and he is supposed to be networking. But with whom? Mister K. concentrates on his personal needs, satisfying his hunger and quenching his thirst. Who knows when he will next get the chance? He discerns some familiar background music, probably – as usual – something from one of those best-selling lounge music samplers.

After about 45 minutes, Mister K.'s wait is over at last. The door to an adjacent room is opened and friendly hostesses ask the guests to follow them. Mister K. is a bit disappointed as he has seen this bit a whole lot more spectacular before: projection screens turning out to be movable walls, fabric flying magically to the ceiling or dropping from it. And all underlined with dramatically choreographed sound and light effects.

But Mister K. is happy that the show is finally about to start and looks for a seat in the auditorium. At least the chairs seem comfortable – but that could also be a sign that it's going to be a long evening. Mister K. then spots a woman on stage, and is relieved. In his experience, a woman on stage means a professional presenter and that increases the likelihood of an entertaining show ahead.

Indeed, the presenter greets all the guests charmingly and expresses her delight that so many people showed up – considering the strike / trade fair / wonderful (or terrible) weather / football game on TV. "And considering how boring last year's event was", adds Mister K. to himself and wonders whether it wasn't a mistake to come here after all.

A fanfare interrupts his thoughts and he sees that the Managing Director of the host company, Mister C., has stepped onto the stage. "Where was he earlier when I was killing time all by myself?" Mister K. thinks. Shouldn't a good host welcome his guests at the door?