Four Content-Focused Ideas for Elevating Your General Sessions

General sessions have always played an important role at user conferences and industry events. If they're approached, planned, and executed well, there is no better way to tap into the communal energy of a large, supportive crowd; connect audiences to and build authentic excitement for your brand and company vision; and make powerful statements about who you are, what you stand for, and what you offer as an organization.

But if you're an event planner (or even a conference regular), you know that these types of positive outcomes are far from guaranteed—no matter how much A/V wizardry you pack into a convention center ballroom. We've all endured long, boring, entirely forgettable general sessions that took place on elaborate (and very expensive) stage sets.

So how do you create general session experiences that fully deliver the tone-setting, loyalty-building, must-share impact you and your audiences are looking for? Yes, innovative and on-brand staging, A/V design, and production are important ingredients. But those elements should support the experience, not define it. Here are four practical ideas for taking your general session experiences from conventional to unforgettable—without spending a fortune on giant stages and A/V spectacle.

1 Start with the Story

Like every classic movie or play, the best general session experiences are grounded in a central story that drives every part of the experience—where all the speakers, segments, and production elements work together to contribute pieces and add layers to one unified narrative. Yet all too often, this type of story-focused approach takes a backseat to individual agendas, logistical hurdles, self-inflicted time crunches, and a long list of other factors. Defining a compelling, focused story up front—and then making disciplined decisions that always serve the best interests of that story—will help elevate your general sessions from a familiar parade of speakers to a uniquely memorable and cohesive experience.

2 Align what you want to tell your audience with what they want to hear

It's never safe to assume that the content you plan to communicate in a general session automatically aligns with what your audience is most interested in hearing about. To avoid disconnects, make sure you actively listen and learn what's really top-of-mind for your audience, measure that audience perspective against your messaging and communication plans, and make sure you focus on the areas where your story and your audience's interests and expectations overlap.

3 Play to your speakers' strengths

Most experienced executives are capable public speakers, but they all have individual strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. Some feel completely comfortable reading a full script from a teleprompter, while others are better speaking off-the-cuff to familiar PowerPoint slides or engaging with guests in on-stage interviews and discussions. Rather than trying to shoehorn your general session speakers into rigid, pre-determined speaking roles ("You are the CEO and therefore MUST deliver a 20-minute tele-prompted solo company vision talk"), lean into formats, situations, and supporting materials that showcase each speaker's individual strengths—and help them become their best, most confident, and most authentic selves on stage.

4 Be ready and willing to leave your comfort zone

On one hand, general sessions tend to have high stakes, which can lead to a justifiably conservative, stick-to-what-works approach. On the other hand, your audiences are much more likely to appreciate, remember, and share surprising, unexpected moments. Pushing to weave more authentic novelty and surprise into general sessions is challenging—which is why you see so many of the same rinse-and-repeat formats and conventions used over and over. But if your primary goal is to make a lasting impact on your audience, the extra effort, planning, and creativity you invest to deliver authentically original experiences will be more than worth it.

EMP would love to talk event content strategy with you! Drop us an email and let's talk.

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Practically since the dawn of time (30+ years), Todd has been working with clients to weave compelling, unified brand messaging through every aspect of their event programs. With experience as a writer, creative director, executive speechwriter, and content planner in both the corporate (insane) and agency (more insane) worlds, he understands the essential role content plays in every successful event program; knows what it takes to imagine, develop, and produce consistent world-class event content; and has gotten VERY good at hiding unhealthy levels of stress.