



Innovative Meetings

By Michelle Russell

Innovative Meetings Take Away

No-Box Thinking

Sure, you get the creative juices flowing when it's time to come up with a theme for your annual meeting. But for the meeting's formats, do you fall back on tried-and-true terminology such as "panel discussions," "roundtables," "sessions," "seminars," and "conferences"?

Might it be time for us to rework the very word "meeting"? "I think one of the challenges with meetings may be the word itself," said Jonathan Littman. "It's not terribly exciting."

Littman knows a thing or two about words that capture the imagination. Not only did he co-author two best-selling books on the famous design strategy firm IDEO, *The Art of Innovation* and *The Ten Faces of Innovation*, he also heads up a branding studio with Marc Hershon — the guy responsible for coming up with such household names as BlackBerry, Swiffer (the sweeper), and Garmin Nuvi (GPS system).

Who better to lead a group of meeting professionals through a freewheeling session to rename meetings than these two? They took center stage at PCMA's Leadership Conference in Los Angeles this past June, and began by laying down some ground rules about brainstorming — which, they told the group, "is like a discipline ... part art, part science." Rule No. 1, Hershon said: "There are no bad ideas. No matter how silly, crazy, or ridiculous they may seem — write them all down. That's the real secret to brainstorming."

But, they informed the audience, this brainstorming exercise wasn't going to be about thinking up better names for meetings. The group was going to split into teams, and their job was to come up with the best possible name for three other things: a new type of conference phone system, the world's largest ocean cruise

liner, and the "tribal council" portion of a "Survivor" rip-off show. A noisy work session culminated in each team revealing its names to the group, and then Littman and Hershon came clean: The three other things were a pretense.

In considering realms outside of the meetings industry, the group had unknowingly engaged in "divergent thinking" — a circumspect method of arriving at fresh ideas that can be applied to the true task at hand (in this case, renaming meetings) without actually focusing on the task at hand.

The duo had done their own divergent thinking before their presentation. In search of inspiration for replacement words for the "shopworn" terms "meetings," "conferences," and "seminars," they had explored other worlds — from astronomy and alchemy to the Roman Senate, social networks, chat rooms, race cars, and organic farming. It's a process the two employ at their branding studio, Simmer (see example in sidebar to left). A lengthy list of suggested alternate names was shared, designed to

spark interest and better convey the dynamics of meetings today (see top sidebar for a sampling).

In the end, nobody seemed to mind being duped. It was a thoroughly engaging session. Make that a thoroughly engaging "brainspin." ■

A MEETING BY ANY OTHER NAME

Try these on for size:

360, Attentive, Brainspin, Carry Thru, Connective, FatChat, GreetUp, InDepth, Inforum, Superposium, TalkAbout, Upshot, Work Salon, Zoomin

DIVERGENT THINKING

At the Simmer

Branding Studio, teams were tasked with coming up with the name for a rare Michelangelo statue (the female counterpart to David), a new red wine, and a cool Italian bistro. The real assignment? Christopher Ranch had engaged Simmer to create a name for an heirloom garlic. One team hit upon "Monviso," a peak in the Italian Alps — the very region where the garlic originated.

According to Littman and Hershon, "meeting" should be replaced with a term that:

► supports the concept of what a new level of professional interaction can be — beyond a conference where attendees sit and listen to a speaker, to a new breed of highly inclusive participation

► is easy to pronounce and spell, working well primarily in the North American market but with the possibility of being used internationally

► connects well with the idea of people getting together in ways that are creative, insightful, and inspirational, as well as implementable

► repositions the use of "meeting," "conference," "seminar," et al, making such terminology consistent with an outmoded style of professions getting together.

► **Michelle Russell** is editor in chief of *Convene*. Look for a follow-up article on the role a "storyologist" plays in branding in an upcoming issue. The Innovative Meetings column is sponsored by the Irving, Texas, Convention and Visitors Bureau, www.irvingtexas.com.

WEB SEARCH: Have some fun with words. Learn how Jonathan Littman and Marc Hershon create their own terms (Words of the Week) at <http://simmerthinktank.com>.