How to eliminate unnecessary meetings and turbo-charge the necessary ones.

It's true. People hate meetings. But for most business people, meetings are a necessary evil. Why are they so detested, and what can be done about it?

According to Forbes® magazine, a recent survey reported that a whopping 85% of executives said they were unsatisfied with the efficiency and effectiveness of meetings at their companies. Yet many of these management-level men and women spend more than half of their time in meetings.

Consider some of these alarming statistics about meetings:

- There are estimated to be more than 11 million business meetings in the US every day.
- Most executives attend about 62 meetings every month.
- An average of 5.6 hours per week is spent in meetings.
- Research has found that over 50% of meeting time is wasted, equating to about one day per week of lost time per employee.

"At this point in the meeting we'll open a discussion of whether or not we needed to have this meeting."

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So how do we eliminate the "evil" - the unnecessary meetings - while turbo-charging the "necessary" meetings we must have?

Here are some ways your company can have fewer, better and more productive meetings.

Eliminate Unnecessary Meetings

Take an honest and objective look at your organization's meetings. You will likely find that a lot of meetings aren't necessary. Ask these questions about your meetings:

- Is it just a habit? Many regular meetings have no objective.
- Is there a specific purpose for this meeting?
- Is there a defined agenda with a stated goal?
- Will the result of the meeting have a measurable outcome?
- Are there one or more decisions that need to be made?
- Will the decision-makers be in attendance?

Consider placing this list, or something like it, in your conference room(s)! Eliminating unnecessary meetings will allow you more time to focus on making the important ones better.

Make Meetings Efficient and Effective

Certain meetings are necessary. Projects must be managed, decisions must be made, and people need to be apprised of important information. If only 15% of meetings are effective, how do you make sure yours are part of that group?

The best way is by using visuals. SmartDraw gives you the tools to do this with a variety of easy to use flowcharts, graphs and other templates that will improve the efficiency and productivity of your meetings. Visual communication using SmartDraw has been shown to reduce meeting times by as much as 25%. Effective meetings use a visual agenda that allows you to build action items in real time. This process is known as live information capture and will produce results that are up to six times more effective than communicating with words alone.

Here are some simple tips that will help make your meetings more effective and efficient.

1. To communicate effectively - *visually* - use a conference room projector or connect attendees via computer using an online meeting platform such as WebEx™ or GoToMeeting™.
2. Have an agenda prepared ahead of time. According to a survey conducted by Microsoft®, 63% of meetings in the US don't have a prepared agenda! Make sure that the agenda is structured around what you want to accomplish, rather than following a rote format. Make the agenda interactive through the use of visuals. Below is an example of an interactive, visual agenda for a product launch created in about a minute using SmartDraw.
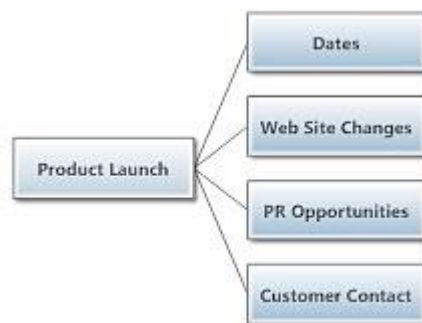
3. Share the agenda with other attendees in advance. Elicit feedback and make sure everyone is clear on the purpose and goal of the meeting. In the above

agenda, the discussion items are clearly defined. Those attending are made aware - *in advance* - that decisions will be made, responsibilities will be assigned, and completion dates will be set.
4. Document decisions, tasks and assignments during the meeting. Assign action items to each person right on the visual agenda in real time. Everyone in the meeting sees the action item assigned. There is no room for different interpretations of action taken and the person assigned the task is publicly accountable for completing it. Here is an Assignment View of the visual agenda being created in real time.
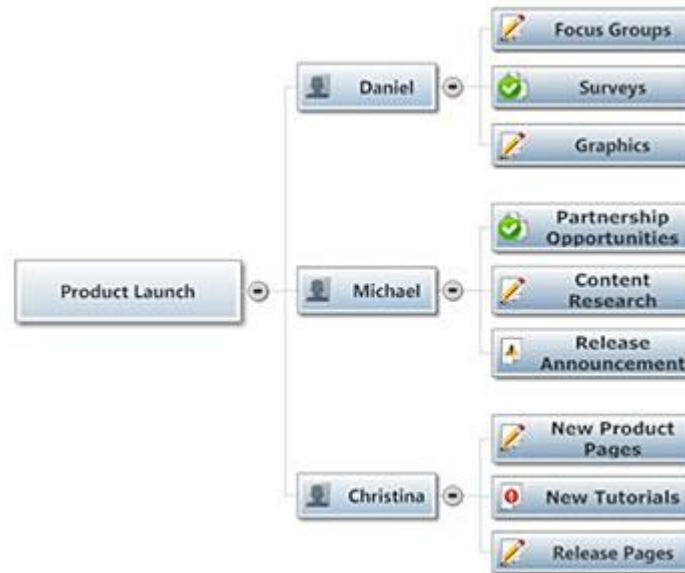
As you add dates for the start and completion of each task, SmartDraw automatically builds a timeline for the project, with accountability that everyone in the meeting can see. The meeting has produced a measurable outcome. You can easily switch between the Assignment View and Project Chart View, shown below.

	Task		Assigned To	Start	End	Dur.	%	Week of 9/25/2011				
								Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
	Product Launch	⊖		9/25/11	10/5/11	7.75	19					
1	Focus Groups		Daniel	9/25/11	9/29/11	3.125	50					
2	Partnership Opportunities		Michael	9/25/11	9/26/11	0.875	100					
3	New Product Pages		Christina	9/28/11	9/30/11	2.125	0					
4	Surveys		Daniel	9/27/11	10/5/11	6.375	100					
5	Graphics		Daniel	9/25/11	9/28/11	2.5	0					
6	Content Research		Michael	9/27/11	10/1/11	3.5	20					
7	Release Announcement		Michael	9/27/11	10/1/11	3.625	10					
8	New Tutorials		Christina	9/28/11	10/2/11	2.625	5					
9	Release Pages		Christina	9/30/11	10/2/11	0.875	0					

5. Try to keep meetings brief, but don't sacrifice quality. The goal is to

eliminate unnecessary meetings but make sure the ones you have are highly productive.

Make Sure that the Right People Attend

If decisions, particularly critical decisions, must be made, then be sure that the decision-makers will be there. If they can't, then the meeting will be a waste of everyone else's time and needs to be canceled or rescheduled.

Too many meetings involve people who have no stake in the outcome. Those in attendance should be crucial to the decisions that need to be made or the assignments that will be given.

Be Aware of the Morale Factor

For many people in the workplace, there is a certain status attached to being included in meetings. They build their schedules around them and may not be happy about fewer meetings and fewer invites.

Letting everyone know in advance that the company is going to reduce the number of overall meetings, with a focus on making meetings more productive, will let them know they aren't being left out.

The Key to Successful Meetings: a Great Visual Processor

To produce great results you need great tools. For effective meetings, use a tool like SmartDraw that is designed for live information capture. SmartDraw has a special template specifically designed for your meeting. It lets you create an easy-to-read agenda, edit in real time, and assign action items to attendees. Best of all, it gives everyone in the meeting a clear and concise plan of action *with accountability*.

SmartDraw actually doesn't require any "drawing." You can even use the keyboard to create your visuals. In about the same amount of time it takes to create a (boring) document, you can create an interactive set of visuals with SmartDraw.

The breakthroughs of automatic formatting and the built-in know-how of SmartDraw enable anyone to create presentation-quality visuals in real-time, or in other words, at the speed of thought.

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To read more about conducting visual meetings, **download this white paper**.

To watch a video showing how easy it is to conduct a visual meeting with SmartDraw, **click here**.

If you prefer to contact one of our product specialists, **click here**.