

## *Meetings and Cellphones*

It was the exclamation point that gave it away. "I turn mine off and expect that everyone else will too!" The intensity of emotion jumped off the survey form. I had asked a group of meeting planners a simple question, "What are you doing about cellphones ringing during meetings?" – never expecting the answers I got.

As a speaker, there's nothing more disconcerting than a phone ringing just as you're making a critical point in your presentation. For years, you could prevent this situation by carefully checking the meeting room and disconnecting any phones you discovered. Then came cellphones.

In the early days of wireless communication, the embarrassment factor of realizing your pocket was ringing caused most people to mumble a quick apology while frantically searching for the off switch. If they didn't move fast enough, they risked the pointed glares of the people around them. How times have changed. Today's most common response to a cellphone's musical tones is a scramble to locate and then to answer with a hearty hello. What's a meeting planner to do?

I conducted a survey of over 100 meeting planners at a recent MPI forum in Michigan expecting to gather some *cellphone off* ideas. Surprisingly, it appears that we're all still trying to find ways to handle this increasingly troublesome problem. Perfect solutions didn't appear, but the respondents did agree on some general concepts.

- **Communicate Specifically**  
As often as you can – from program brochures to meeting announcements - let people know that you expect that they will turn their cellphones off or place them on vibrate.
- **Take Breaks Effectively**  
Tell people that you've scheduled sufficient time for breaks so they can retrieve and return calls.
- **Set the Example Obviously**  
Ask the person who starts your meeting to mention and then check their own cellphone from the front of the room.

Think creatively about how you can make your next meeting free from cellphone interruptions. Your participants will be glad you did!

### Sidebar

#### *Make It Fun!*

Still not certain how to get your group to turn off those annoying cellphones? How about doing something so memorable that no one will be able to resist your plea to silence their technology during your meeting. If you're the adventurous type, you can lead the show. If you tend to take a more behind-the-scenes approach, enlist the aid of one of your out-going musically inclined participants. It's as easy as following this script.

*Thank you all for joining us this morning/afternoon. To start us off on the right foot, I need your help. I just recently learned that music can enhance a meeting. I entertained the idea of singing to you, but quickly decided it would be better to sing with you. I'll sing the first line and you repeat it back. Don't worry, it's a song you all know.*

Are you sleeping? Are you sleeping? Brother John. Brother John. Morning bells are ringing. Morning bells are ringing.

Ding Ding Dong. Ding Ding Dong.

*Great Job! Let's try it again with some new words*

Where's your cellphone? Where's your cellphone? Is yours on? Is yours on? This would be a good time. This would be a good time. To turn it off! To turn it off! *Thanks for your participation!*

Try it, you might be surprised how much fun you can have while changing behavior.

*Copyright © 2001 Chris Clarke-Epstein*

*Chris Clarke-Epstein, CSP is a speaker, consultant, and author who works with leaders who want to lead more than they manage and teams who want to have fun while they're learning to be more effective. Learn more about Chris at [www.ChrisClarke-Epstein.com](http://www.ChrisClarke-Epstein.com) or contact her at [Chris@chrisclarke-epstein.com](mailto:Chris@chrisclarke-epstein.com).*