# The Modern Guide to Meeting Design

Free eBook

socialtables

Consider the last meeting you went to: this could be your weekly department meeting, a school board meeting, or a conference. Where did you sit? What kind of chair were you in? What type of table were you at? How did your seating affect your engagement?

The environment you create for meetings attendees should not be limited to the location of the venue or the credibility of your programming. Those items matter less than the very simple, but oft-overlooked foundational elements of a meeting: the chairs and/or tables at which attendees spend the majority of their time.

Facilitating an exceptional learning environment is your responsibility as a meeting professional. Start helping your attendees learn and engage today by providing the most effective seating design to aid in their success. By literally positioning attendees in a seat and/or at a table that enhances their cognitive engagement, you are framing their ability to make better decisions, engage with your programming, and remember the content that they are learning.

Now that we've established the reasoning behind conscious seating and room diagramming, let's talk about the most effective seating options for your specific program...
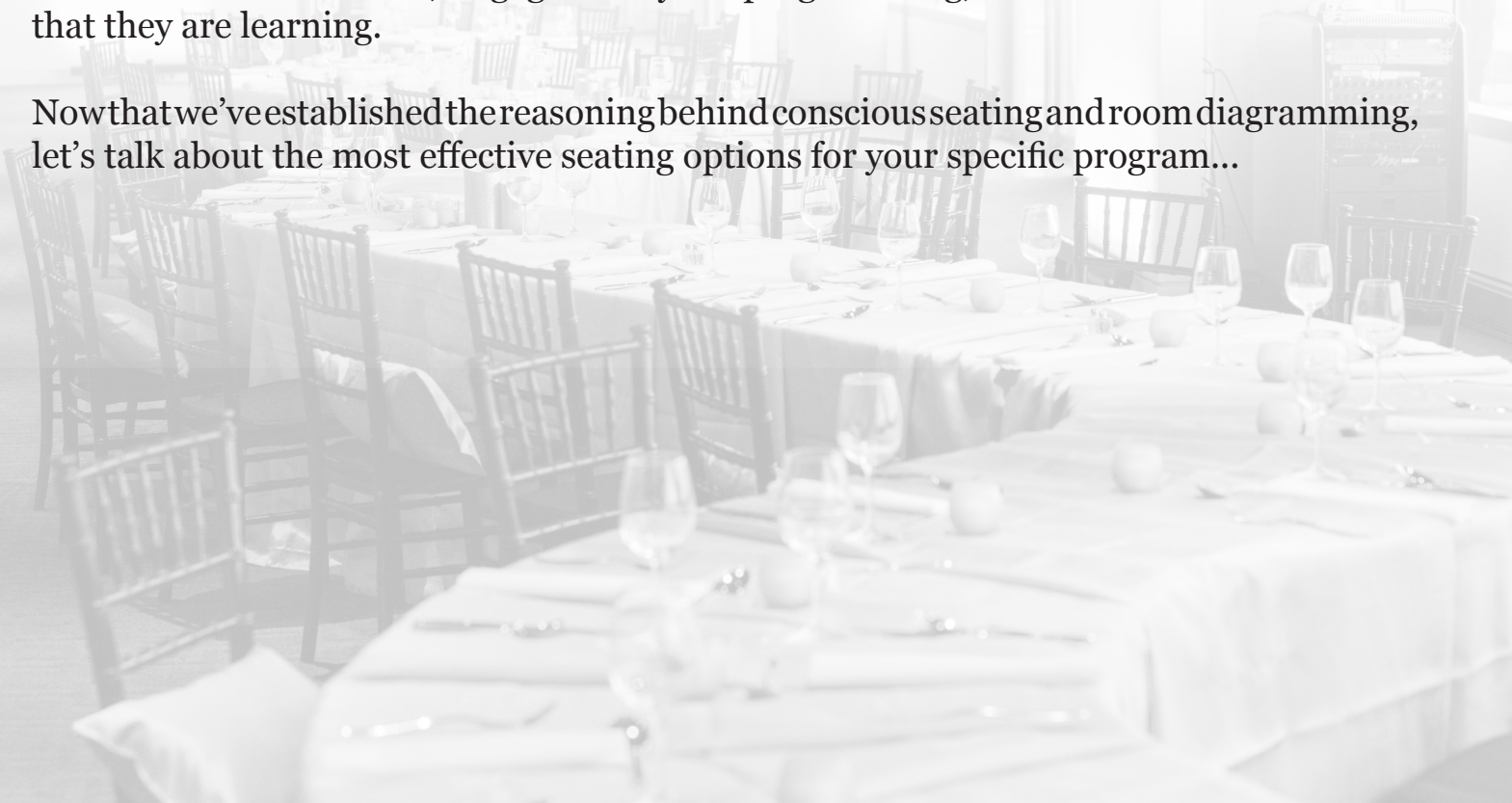
Best Practices for Attendee Management

Attendee count influences dynamics, so aligning your meeting goals with your headcount is crucial to the success of our program. As Dr. Eliza Hixson, lead researcher for MPI's Strategic Meetings Management notes, "You have to make sure you take into account all stakeholders in the process and be mindful of their perspectives and what they are aiming to achieve."

According to research in Meetings That Work, here are the recommended attendance capacities for hitting your meeting objectives:

2-7 participants = Decision making

Be cautious of allowing a single person to run this entire meeting. This intimate number of people should be decision makers, and as such, voices need to be distributed fairly throughout the meeting to achieve the highest level of success.

7-15 participants = Problem Solving

This group allows for many perspectives but is still small enough to manage and delineate key priorities. Consider hosting a facilitator to keep the agenda on track with this size of group, and assigning seating to breakup traditional "clicks."

15 - 30 = Hybrid

This group has the advantage of beginning as a large group, digesting information together, then separating into sub-groups to create action plans based off of the initial presentation. Be sure that the sub-groups are evenly divided to include different personalities for the most effective results. Concerned your groups will have a difficult time getting started? Include an icebreaker attached to each person's seat to get the conversation flowing.

30+ = Education

Crossing the the line to 30 attendees begs for meeting that consists of a panel, lecture, educational or debate setting. This is the most effective for singular thought disbursement and messaging, but least effective for group input and action.

"Your meeting is only as good as the people in it. Mind the stage you set."

- Meetings That Work

Pod Seating

Pod Seating requires two long classroom-style tables facing one other with three seats on each side and one at the end. The table pairs are arranged semi-circularly around the presentation equipment. This set up works best for small-group discussions as well as allowing the presenter to interact with the groups and join in their discussion at the open ends of the table pairs.

Ideal Use: Small-Groups, Interactive Sessions, & Breakout Groups
*Best For: Participation, Brainstorming, & Education*
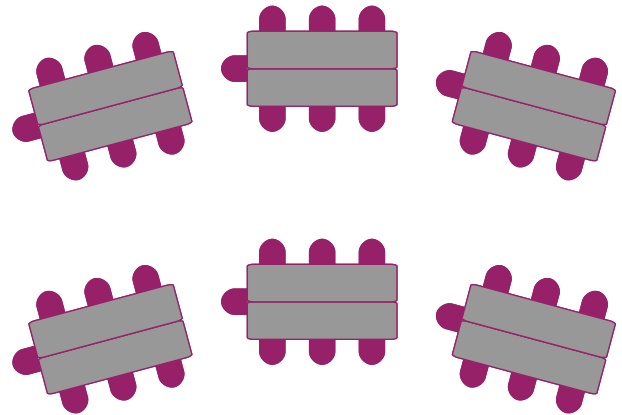
Café

Placing 3 seats around small cocktail rounds, each set around a speaker, stage, and/or presentation area is the arrangement that creates Café set. This seating plan facilitates a relaxed, intimate environment that is primarily used to encourage learning and reflection.

Ideal Use: Small-Groups, Interactive Sessions, & Breakout Groups
*Best For: Participation, Brainstorming, Education, & Creativity*
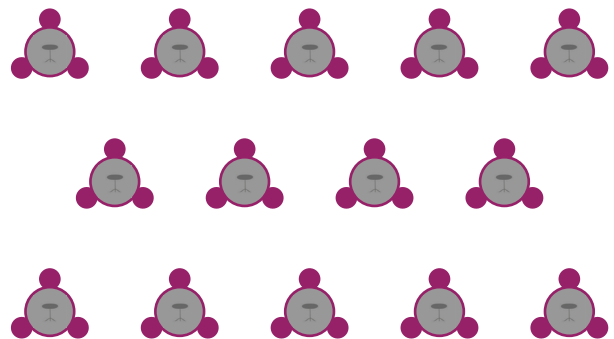
"Great things happen when people come together. Face-to-face interaction is the platform where deals are struck, relationships are forged and ideas are generated."

- Meetings Mean Business

Hollow Square

Hollow Square is nearly identical to conference seating, with the exception of one major factor: the tables are positioned to create a border around an empty square or rectangle, rather than being pushed together. Chairs remain positioned on all four sides of the perimeter facing the opposite side of the table. This setup disallows a single chair at the head of a table, thus projecting an environment of equality for all attendees.

Ideal Use: Committee Meetings, Meetings Without Presenters, & Interactive Discussions
Best For: Creativity & Determining Objectives
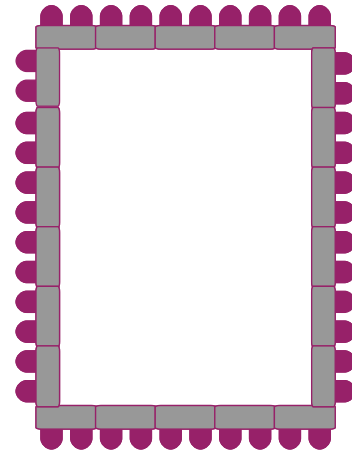
Boardroom/Conference

One of tthe most traditional meeting setups, conference or boardroom seating is created by positioning multiple rectangular tables together to create a closed platform, with chairs positioned on all four sides of the perimeter facing the opposite side of the table. Generally, there is a single seat situated at the head of this table, allowing for the decision maker or key presenter to be seen as "leading" the meeting.

Ideal Use: Committee Meetings, Board Meetings, Conferences, & Small Group Discussions
*Best For:* Creativity & Determining Objectives
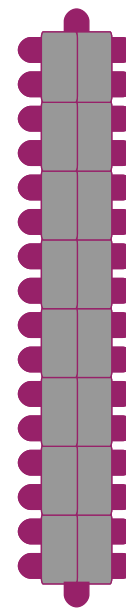
"Knowledge is the currency of meetings. Knowledge is best shared in groups."

- Into the Heart of Meetings: Basic Principles of Meeting Design

U-Shape

Appropriately named, the U-Shape seating set is a Hollow Square missing one side. This opening facilitates presentations of all types (podium, stand-alone speaker, screen presentations) while maintaining an environment for intimate discussion and engagement between attendees.

Ideal Use: *PowerPoint Presentations, Hybrid Meetings, & Small Groups*
*Enhances:* *Participation, Education, Creativity, & Determining Objectives*
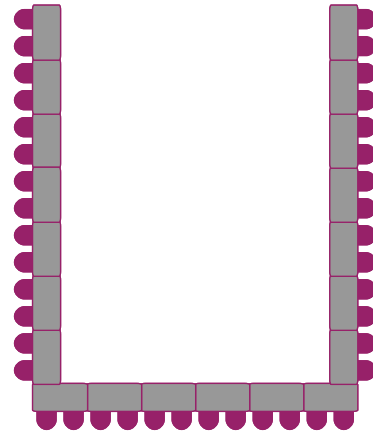
Semi-Circle

The semi-circle is, in essence, a modified U-Shape, sans tables. Commonly used for intimate groups of 10-40, this set up focuses all participant attention on the presentation. This is a favorite for speakers who want undistracted audiences and thrive off attendee participation.

Ideal Use: *Informal Discussions & Audience Participation*
*Best For:* *Participation, Interaction, & Engagement*
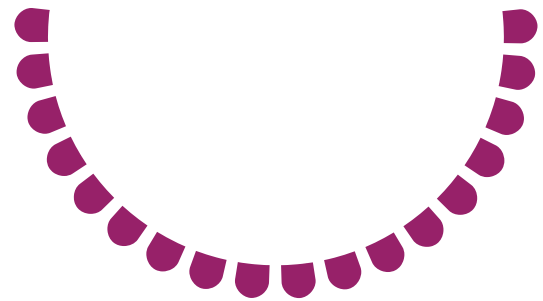
"Business, like many other human activities, is built around goals. [Business grows at the meeting table]."

- Gamestorming

Theater

The most-used set up for large groups, Theater set accommodates the largest amount of people in a space. Chairs are set side-by-side to maximize the size of the room, with aisles included as space and fire code allows. Most aisles will aim to be 5' wide to allow effective traffic-flow. Chairs can be set straight, in a semi-circle, or in a chevron formation.

Ideal Use: Large Groups & Presentations
Best For: Maximizing Space
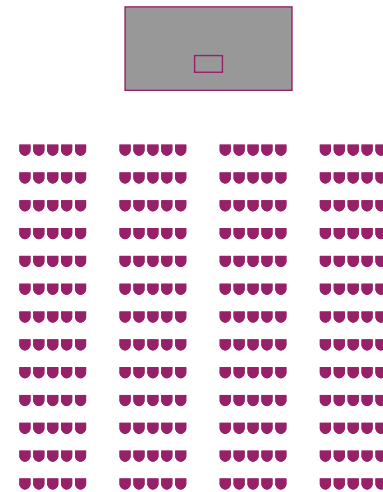
Banquet

One of the most common seating arrangements, Banquet sets seat 5-10 attendees around a round table. This seating plan is best for meetings that have multiple flips and that include food and beverage in their programming.

Ideal Use: Large Groups, Meals, Interactive Sessions, & Breakout Groups
Best For: Creativity, Engagement, & Networking
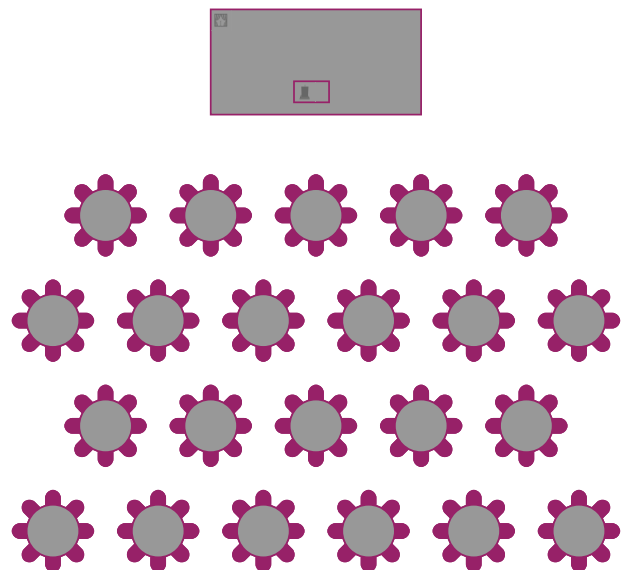
"Getting large groups seated is challenging. Consider utilizing ushers in theater-set to assist attendees to their seats."

- Dan Berger, CEO of Social Tables

Classroom

One of the most comfortable of all room sets, Classroom sees rows of tables positioned either end-to-end or as independent tables. Chairs are placed facing the speaker or presentation. Generally, 6' tables accommodate 2 attendees, while 8' tables accommodate 3 attendees. Typically, an aisle separates each table or set of tables to allow for effective crowd-flow. This set is commonly used when attendees are using laptops or taking notes.

Ideal Use: Large Groups & Presentations
**Best For:** Education & Collaboration
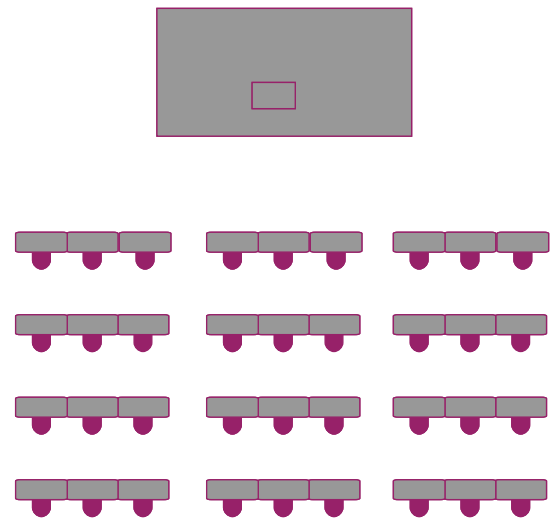
Tiered Classroom

A variation on Classroom set, Tiered Classroom promotes interactive experiences for attendees and enhances focus on the presenter. The traditional classroom is modified by moving the straight-line set to a semi-circle, with tables and chairs facing directly toward the presenter. Rows are tiered to allow for maximum sight lines to the presenter.

Ideal Use: Large Groups, Panels, & Technology-Enhanced Presentations
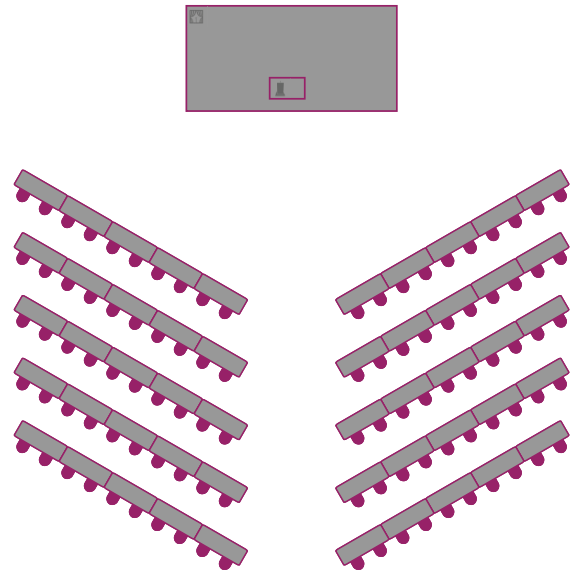**Best For:** Participation & Education
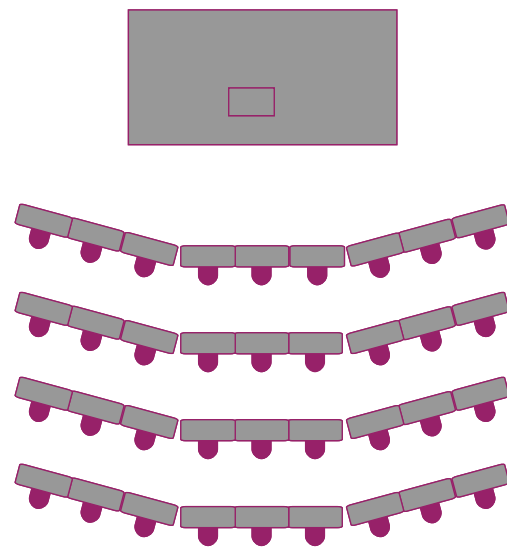
"Meetings provide a launchpad for conversation and collaboration, which are crucial tools to finding successful solutions to issues."

- David Adler, CEO, BizBash

Triangle Classroom Set

Triangle Classroom give you a choice of furniture to create the design with. One option are multiple sofas set side-by-side in a v-shaped format with an aisle down the middle, with the provision of individual coffee tables for attendees to place their notes or laptops. Another version would be your standard classroom setup, inclusive of 6' tables that accommodate 2 attendees each, placed side-by-side in the same v-shape. All seats should be focued on the "base of the triangle", which is the stage.
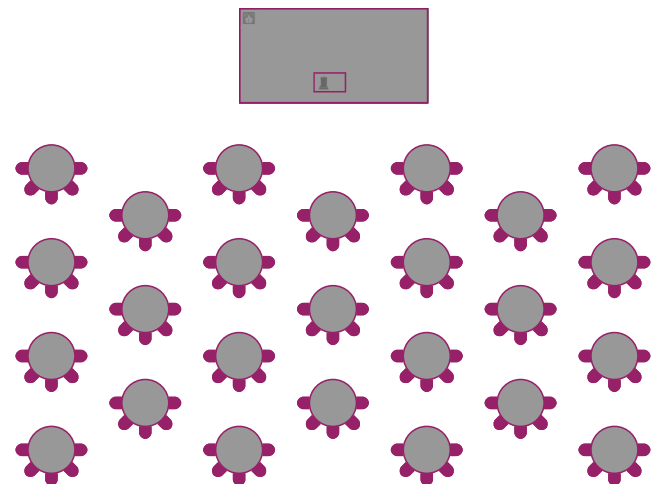
Ideal Use: *Medium-Sized Groups and Interactive Presentations*
Best For: *Participation and Education*

Crescent/Half-Moon

Crescent/Half-Moon seating requires round or square tables with chairs surrounding two-thirds of the table (generally 3-4 attendees). The open side should be facing the stage, screen, or presentation area. This type of set up works best for sessions where the audience needs to face the speaker and then engage in discussions after the presentation.

Ideal Use: *Breakout Groups, Medium-Large Sized Groups, Team Exercises, & Interactive Sessions*
Best For: *Participation, Brainstorming, Education, & Collaboration*

"Room set is extremely important to the success of a meeting, and a serious responsibility for the meeting professional to manage."

- Convention Industry Council Manual

Meetings provide a gathering place that act as a catalyst for development, innovation, iteration, and action. They are the foundation of every great achievement, the cornerstone for every decision, and the lifeline of every single action that has occurred throughout history. Welcome attendees of your next meeting by offering seating options that provide for enhanced interpersonal communication and effective engagement.

Need help deciding which seating option is best for your attendees? We've got you covered with our Meeting Design Generator. This powerful and free tool serves to help you in reaching your meeting objectives by recommending both traditional and innovative room sets based upon the quantity of attendees and your outcome goals for your event.