

Patterns for Meetup.com Organizers

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***Abstract.** I propose a series of five patterns that can be used by Meetup.com organizers to help increase attendance and fosters connections among the attendees. Meetup.com is an online platform people use to find and organize group activities. People are attracted to the platform to meet new people and do activities as part of a group. The patterns I propose come from my experience as an organizer for a group called Seattle Movie and a Beer club over a year in Seattle Washington. What I observed is that how often, and when, a meeting is scheduled affects how many people attend, and that an organizer can add things to the meeting to make it more enjoyable.*

Categories and Subject Keywords

•Social and Professional Topics

General Terms

Organizing, Patterns

Keywords

Meetup.com, gatherings, scheduling, organizer, online, food and drink

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1. Introduction

Social gatherings, and the search for friendship, are at the heart of most people's social life. I have found, and most I think would agree, that when someone is out of school finding friends and organizing events becomes much, much harder. There are a variety of reasons for this, but the most common explanations would be that there is no longer an outside institution essentially forcing people to socialize, and that the complexities and pressures of adult life mean that people have less time to devote to activities outside their job or family. Meetup.com (<https://www.meetup.com>) is an online platform that people use to find different kinds of group activities. For examples of the kinds of group on the site there are groups to meet and socialize with new people; have an intellectual discussion; find emotional support; or do an activity. It can also be used by preexisting organizations to advertise events they are putting on. Usually a group has one particular theme or type of activity that they focus on. Based on the gatherings I have attended the typical users of the site are often in their mid-20s through mid-40s. It is free to create an account, and your account can be linked to other social media like Facebook. Users have often recently moved to the area, which the most common reason I have been given as to why they are open to meeting complete strangers without any guarantees of it being an enjoyable time. Users are not required to use their real names to sign up for the site, and the nature of its user interface means that people can sign up without giving much information about themselves, or having to provide a means of identifying themselves at the time of an actual meeting. Members are notified of new meetings by email after they sign up with a group, can sign up for an unlimited amount of groups, and can sign up for as many or as few meetings as they want. Depending on the nature of the group there may be penalties for the member if they RSVP to a meeting and don't attend, but that is at the discretion of the groups organizer and most groups have no penalty. Most meetup.com gatherings will be made up of complete strangers, although more well established groups will have regulars that might know each other as well as the organizer.

Meetup.com will let anyone organize a group, but there is a small fee involved to become an organizer that needs to be paid every six months. As a user of meetup.com I have attended more than one poorly organized or unsatisfying gathering, and usually I do not attend a second group event if the initial gathering is poorly organized. As an organizer I have a pretty big incentive to create a satisfying event to justify the time and money I have spent to organize the gathering, especially since this is not something done in a professional capacity and a busy adult's free time is limited. As an organizer I have to compete with other meetup.com groups as well as all the other possible activities available in a big city, so I have to rely on more than having a good taste in events to create fun gatherings.

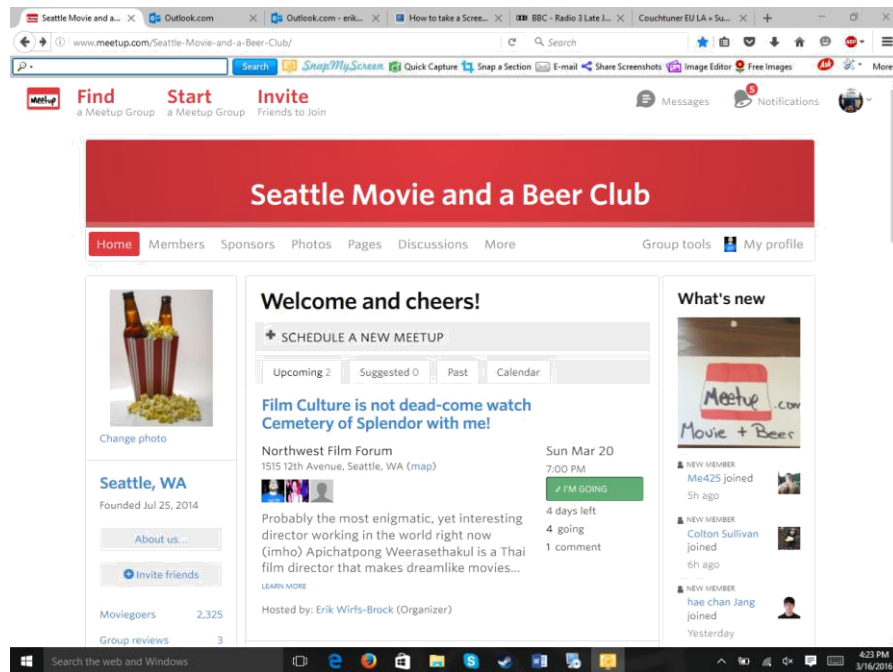


Fig 1: Home Screen of Seattle Movie and a Beer Club, which follows the typical template for a Meetup.com groups

What follows are some patterns I have observed as I have built up the meetup.com group that I currently organize in the Seattle area called Seattle Movie and a Beer Club, as well as from being an attendee of several unrelated meetup.com groups. My experience is with organizing gatherings where the main purpose of the gathering is to have fun doing a specific activity, with a secondary purpose of meeting new people. My purpose in creating these patterns was to ensure that more of my events are enjoyable for me and the attendees, and that group cohesion becomes strong enough that lasting friendships are formed outside group meetings. These patterns can be used by other organizers of meetup groups, and also more committed members of a group to suggest actions to a struggling organizer. The Patterns are, I think, also applicable to any organizer using an online platform to organize gatherings, since meetup.com is doing nothing especially revolutionary with its interface. They might even be applicable to any periodic gathering of people, although caution should be taken since the groups purpose and the level of familiarity the group's members have with each other could drastically effect how applicable these patterns are.

Pattern 1: Twice a Month

As the organizer of a meetup.com group, the number of gatherings the group has is completely up to you. Meetup.com places no ceiling on the number of times an organizer can schedule a gathering, and only deactivates a group if the fee isn't paid. For organizers of

groups in large urban area, even if the organizer has chosen base the group around a very niche activity, there will be a wide array of events to choose from.

How often should meetings be scheduled?

An organizer can quickly burn out in the role. Scheduling multiple meetups in a week is expensive, and takes up all your free time. Too many meetings mean the organizer has less time to plan each individual meeting, increasing the number of unsatisfactory events. If an organizer schedules too few gatherings, the organizer isn't really getting value for their registration fee and might decide to end the group. Gatherings can become repetitive to an organizer, as small talk among strangers often covers the same topics. If too many unsatisfying gatherings happen in quick succession, an organizer could lose confidence in their abilities as an organizer or the usefulness of meetup.com as an organizing platform.

Meetup.com in its default settings emails every member of the group multiple times about each scheduled gatherings, so the number of gatherings you schedule will affect how often members are reminded of the group. Scheduling too many gatherings and the group becomes just another spammer in your inbox, schedule too few and members will forget the group exists. The length of time between gatherings affects the likelihood of members of the group forming connections with each other. Having a long time between meetings can easily weaken the bonds among repeat attendees.

Therefore:

Meetings need to be scheduled often enough to remind the members that the group is still active, while maintaining the organizers energy level. Schedule a gathering twice a month.

As an organizer, I find that **scheduling two gatherings a month** leads to the greatest number of satisfying events. The meetings do not need to happen on the same time or day (See **Just of Peak Hours** for more another scheduling pattern), but an organizer should avoid scheduling two meetings in one week.

If the group has two meetings a month the organizer has time to put some thought into each gathering. Scheduling two meetings a month will lead to a manageable number of emails to group members, and even members who are not interested in most of the scheduled meetings won't be very likely to mute you. If a first time member really enjoys the group they will have a quick chance to come out again, and even if they skip the very next gathering of the group they will have a chance to come again within a month-a not unreasonable length of time to see someone again socially. Going out two times a month is within the budget of most of the people who sign up to meetup.com, so the idea of signing up for multiple events is not burdensome.

Scheduling two gatherings a month can lead to the group missing out on activities that they would find enjoyable. The activity that the group is organized around might be more popular during certain times of the year, like drinking outside during the summer or watching movies during the holiday season, and committed members of the group might be disappointed that there are not more meetings during those times. On the other hand, for members who want to attend every meeting twice a month is a lot, and they might drop out of participating more quickly because of the busy schedule (I have observed this happening during members who come in during a rush of new members that came in during the new year). Limiting the number of meetings per month also means the organizer is not operating the group at full capacity. While most members of a group never come to a meeting, a group can attract hundreds or thousands of people who get notified about the group's activities. So the rule should not be considered as applicable to the group, but to a committed organizer, and if demand starts exceeding an organizer's abilities they should definitely consider bringing in a co-organizer from the group or their wider circle of friends. Meetup.com allows the lead organizer to designate a co-organizer at no additional cost.

Make Your Own Happy Hour

Mary Lynn Mann and Linda Rising discussed in their book *Fearless Change* the pattern **Do Food**, the idea that adding in food and drink to a meeting causes an increase in social cohesion, good feelings, and help the group achieve the goals of the meeting. This pattern applies to meetup.com meetings as well. An organizer wants people to have a good time, and attract a good turnout. One way to do this is to add food to a meeting. Sometimes the activity the group does around means the group can't eat during that activity. The number of places to eat in a large urban area is limitless. Adding food to a meeting can make the meeting more logistically complex for the organizer and attendees.

How should food or drink be added to typical meetup.com meeting?

The way food or drink is added can make the meeting more enjoyable, but if done poorly it can make a meeting less successful. A bar right next to a university is typically crowded, dingy and full of loud music, so meaningful conversation is almost always impossible. The fact that patrons of this kind of bar are often in their early twenties might make the older members of the meetup group feel out of place. A bar or restaurant that caters to the highest income bracket often has a more formal atmosphere that discourages loud or boisterous conversation, doesn't typically have accommodations for a group larger than five, and the price point might make people hesitate to come to the meeting. The cost of the meal could be more expensive than the activity the group is meeting up to do, and could cost attendees the amount of disposable income they have budgeted for the week or even month. Meetup Groups, unless they are explicitly created to bring people together to enjoy extremely expensive things, do not typically demand that level of commitment. If an organizer picks a venue to add in food and drink that is unenjoyable, the organizer's competence could be called into question, and attendees to the meeting will be less inclined to go to another meetup with that group.

Depending on the activity, adding in food or drink might limit the venues that one can go, or make the meeting's logistics more complicated. Movie theaters might serve food or alcohol, but the number which do so are a minority of all movie theaters, and thus you self-limiting the number of movies you can see if you only attend theaters that serve food or drink. Concert halls or theaters do not allow people to eat, or drinking might be prohibitively expensive at the venue, so an organizer would have to organize a meeting that includes more than one location. Restaurants and bars have their own hours, and can close at the same time an activity is over. If the activity is in the outdoors, an organizer would have to ensure that food and drink is brought to the activity, and that enough is provided to ensure that everyone receives an adequate portion.

Therefore:

To add in food and drink in an effective way, schedule the gathering to start an hour before the activity at a quiet bar within quick walking distance of the activity venue.

For a meetup.com organizer, starting the meeting by **Making your own Happy Hour** is an excellent way to gain the benefits of adding food or drink to a meeting. If it is before the activity this can also be an opportunity to confirm the venue where the activity takes place is acceptable to the group. The organizer of the meetup should have knowledge of the area or rely on others knowledge of where the meetup takes place, and select a venue where the price of food is moderate and where it will be easy to secure a table that will be large enough to hold the entire expected group. The organizer should announce the location of the happy hour in their initial announcement of the gathering. An hour is an ideal time to for the group to mingle before doing something, and it's similar to the happy hour in a bar because it is supposed to imply a casual drink rather than a heavy night of eating or drinking.

Mixing in food and drink into the routine of the meetup group will cause people to have warmer feelings about the group. Making food and drink a part of the meetup can improve the attractiveness of the group to people, as the idea of "activity + food or drink" not only makes individual meetings of the group more attractive, but can make the idea of signing up for the group to get notifications of its activities more attractive to people who are searching for things to do and discover the group online. Adding food or drink to the activity can make the meeting feel less artificial or out of the ordinary for new attendees to the group, as going out for a night on the town for food and a fun activity on their own or as part of a group of acquaintances is something the typical person often does anyway. The organizer can solicit suggestions from other members about where to go for food or drink if their initial idea doesn't work out, and make the attendees feel like they positively contributed to the meeting. People getting to know each other briefly increases the chance of a **Meeting after the Meeting** once the activity is done, because people have more chances to feel some connection to the group before the activity ends. And by itself, walking and talking with members of the group in transit from the food venue to the activity venue can be a pleasant experience.

Adding food and drink to the meetings does increase the workload of the organizer. For activities where food and drink do not easily fit in the same venue, the organizer that puts together a meetup not only has to pick an activity that will attract a decent turnout, which is a complex decision in itself; they also have to be knowledgeable enough about the neighborhood where the activity is taking place, because they can't guarantee that attendees are knowledgeable about the neighborhood. Going to the same food venue repeatedly in different gatherings might in the long run make the group feel stagnant or poorly organized, but this might be unavoidable if the group is organized around an activity where there are very few venues in the city. It is also possible to lose people in transit from one venue to another, as happened when I organized a gathering to see the movie The Revenant, and someone who loses the group is unlikely to come again.

When I organized a meeting to watch the movie The Martian this fall, I arranged to have the group meet in a brewpub I had been to many times and knew had excellent food and drink. Everyone got to have at least a beer, as well as some food, and either because of that or because they really liked the movie most of the group went to have another drink and eat some more after the movie.

Just off Peak Hours

As an organizer, choosing the right time to hold a meeting is a mysterious art that can determine how many people attend, how easy it is to organize the group, and whether the meetup is enjoyable for everyone. Choosing the wrong time for a meeting can even mean that the meeting doesn't happen, because no one signs up for the announced meeting.

What's a good time to hold a meetup so that you can attract enough attendees?

Picking the ideal time for a meeting is tricky because of the demographic nature of meetup.com. Meetup.com groups that focus on socializing with other people typically attract people in their 20s and 30s who are out of school and have full time jobs. Free time is a precious commodity for people in this age group. The cultural expectation for people of that age is that they should go out at the end of the traditional work week, with Friday and Saturday evenings being the most popular time to go out. Scheduling outside that timeframe can lower the number of people attending the meeting. At the same time, if an organizer restricts meetings of the group to only the most popular times, the group can miss attending events that they would all enjoy.

If a meetup takes place at a popular venue, depending on the time they crowds can make it incredibly difficult for everyone to find the group and get the meeting organized. The nature of meetup.com means that the people who sign up are often completely anonymous, and it can be hard as an organizer to be visible. Even if the organizer should designate an easily identifiable gathering point in a crowded lobby or bar, every seat might be taken. If the group can't find each other, the meetup becomes a failure, and disorganized meetup can also reflect poorly on the organizer and the reputation of the group. Depending on the nature of the meetup

the size of the crowd might also hamper the functioning of the group. Crowded places can be difficult to hold a conversation in or find enough space for everyone in the group to sit near each other, while places that are mostly empty might not offer a warm and welcoming feeling to members of the group. An empty venue might also lead attendees to question whether the activity they are about to do is worthy of their time.

Therefore:

To maximize the number of people who are attracted to your meetup while minimizing the complications of gathering the group, pick a time for your meetup that is just off peak hours.

The starting time for a meeting that has led to the most enjoyable meetups in my experience has been to schedule the group to meet **just off peak hours**. For example, the most popular time to go to a movie is 7pm on a Saturday night, so I would schedule the group to go to a showing of the movie at 5pm. If the activity can only happen at 7pm, schedule it for Thursday instead of Friday or Saturday. Another example is, if a music festival is slated to last all day, schedule the group to meet right at the beginning of the festival, rather than the time when the festival has the greatest number of attendees.

Picking the earlier starting time gives you the opportunity to have a meeting where deeper connections happen. Starting the meeting earlier means it will be easier, if not guaranteed, to find time a place for the entire group to meet and for everyone to be able to interact with each other. Starting early also allows people to be able to run more errands or find other entertainment options once the meeting is over, thus making the decision to attend the meetup less weighty. Starting earlier also attracts people outside of the typical meetup demographic; couples with children could be home at a reasonable time, slightly older people would find the meeting more appealing because there is less expectation that the activity will be dominated by people outside of their demographic, and people with unconventional work schedules might think of a Thursday or a Sunday as their Friday. Diversity of attendees leads to a livelier conversation. Having a meeting that starts at a time away from peak socializing time also allows the potential meeting to go for as long as needed, or continue with a **Meeting After the Meeting**. Starting an activity at peak hours runs into the the reality that many entertainment or dining venues close down before the meeting has run its natural course.

When scheduling a meeting outside of the peaks hours for social gatherings an organizer should expect the turnout for any individual meetup to be less than the total number of people in the group who might be interested in the doing the activity the meeting is scheduled around. Meetup members want to go out to at the most popular time. If an organizer follows this rule absolutely the group will miss out on an activity that everyone in the group would enjoy, because many things are scheduled to only happen during peak hours. Another negative consequence of scheduling off peak hours can occur at longer events, like the music festival example listed above, because attendees might ignore or not read the listed start time and only come during peak hours, thus leading to a group that is hard to find and without much cohesion.

The last gathering, I organized before finalizing this paper, for the movie Carol, was scheduled at 4:30 on a Saturday. Most of the people (7/9) who signed up attended, and they all went out to drink for an hour after the movie ended. Multiple people who attended that meeting signed up for the next meeting of the group.

1/3 is good enough

As an organizer, the day of the meeting can be nerve wracking. You have the activity and the venue planned, and hopefully some experience with previous meetup.com gatherings, but you really don't know how this particular gathering will go. The biggest unknown, besides if the activity you are about to do is actually fun, is who will actually show up for the meeting.

What turnout can an organizer expect for a perfectly planned meeting?

Because meetup.com is an online platform, signing up for an event is easy to do but also very low commitment. The website reminds the people who signed up for an activity the day of, but doesn't offer any additional encouragement to attend. Because the typical attendee, if not the organizer, expects to go to a gathering of complete strangers when they attend the gathering, the social penalty for blowing off a gathering is nonexistent. Traffic or weather conditions, things outside the organizers control, can increase the difficulty in getting to the activity venue or make something else more attractive. Spambots do exist on the website, which inflate the number of potential attendees. And unexpected emergencies do happen to people.

Therefore:

An organizer should expect to have a third of the people who signed up for the meeting actually attend, and be happily surprised when more people come.

If an organizer has that mental target in mind they will be happy when it is exceeded rather than disappointed by a low turnout. This will definitely improve the organizers self-esteem. Expecting a lower turnout means that an organizer can also judge whether a meeting will be unsuccessful before it even happens, because it is likely that if 6 or fewer people signed up no one will attend. An organizer can then cancel an unsuccessful listing. If people give reasons for why they were unable to attend the gathering, a group organizer can adjust what activities the group is doing or where the meetings are held. Usually the actual number of attendees makes the group more manageable, and the organizer doesn't have to have extra time and expense reserving multiple tables or a special banquet hall when **Making their own Happy Hour**.

A typical attendee won't know about this pattern, and will probably be disappointed that they aren't attending a livelier or more well attended gathering. Since there are times when this

pattern doesn't apply an organizer might cancel a meeting people were going to attend, or have to scramble to make enough space to accommodate everyone. Despite their best efforts an organizer can become deeply discouraged when meetings consistently don't have a large attendance. In an effort to maximize attendance, an organizer might focus on scheduling the most popular activities (for example, only the biggest blockbusters when scheduling movies) rather than focusing on making meaningful gatherings for the people who do attend.

Meeting after the meeting

At the end of a meetup.com gathering some of the people who just met will want to deepen their connection to the group. They might want to get to know the people they just met more deeply, they want to party longer, or they didn't have time to eat before the activity. An organizer should be alert for individuals looking for a deeper connection with the group even if no one explicitly states that desire, since the role of an organizer is to facilitate the group's interactions as well as schedule the initial meeting that brought everyone together.

How can an organizer fulfill the desire for a deeper connection for those attendees who want it?

The factors working against people making a deeper connection with the group can include the type of activity that first attracted people to the meeting, temporal and geographic restrictions, and the inherent unreliability of first impressions. The activity that brought people together might be quite enjoyable in its own right but not conducive to much interpersonal communication, like attending a movie or a play. The venue where an activity takes place has its internal schedule that an organizer has to reckon with, and could kick out people before the next show or when the venue has to close whether the meeting has run its course or not. The activity might take place in an isolated area or neighborhood, where there are few inviting places that can accommodate a large group (**Make Your Own Happy Hour**). The meeting might not have been long enough for people to become attached to the group. There might also be the natural assumption among the attendees that the meeting is over as soon as the activity is, since the activity is what brought people together.

Therefore:

To build a deeper connection among members who want it, suggest to those who are interested to continue the meeting elsewhere after the official meeting is over.

As an organizer I have found a good way to strengthen connections is to suggest to group attendees who seemed to enjoy the initial activity to come out to a drink and keep talking, essentially **a meeting after the meeting**, with no explicit end time or topic of conversation. This second meeting should ideally take place at a venue reasonably close to the initial meeting so the group doesn't have to reorganize itself, and in a more casual venue than the initial meeting. The offered second meeting should be optional, so the group attendees who are not

interested do not feel like they are not getting the full experience that they initially signed up for.

Having a second meeting right after the first meeting could lead to more attendees forming a positive impression of the group, which usually increases attendance to future meetings. Without the structures of a formal meeting, people might reveal different facets of their personality than they would during the meeting. People might also build a close connection with the group of people who chose to stay afterwards, and thus use the group as a springboard towards actual

friendship. Loyalty to the group might also result, and the organizer can start to expect seeing attendees' multiple times. And because the second meeting is optional, attendees to the initial meeting who don't want to come will have still the experience that was initially advertised, and will hopefully leave satisfied.

Having a meeting after the meeting can raise expectations about how enjoyable the groups' future meetings are to an unrealistic level. Because the secondary meeting is optional, and the people attending a meeting are mostly new each time, an organizer can't guarantee to repeat attendees that a secondary meeting will happen at every meeting of the group. It might also lead to a different kind of disappointment for a second time attendee, if they expect the people they made a connection with at their first meeting to be at the next meeting of the group. If attendees of the meeting after the meeting are consistently the same group of people, an organizer also risks creating a clique within the group that is not welcoming to outsiders, which may lead to a situation where only the clique is having a positive experience. Finally, there is always the risk that once you get to know people more deeply than the initial impression they make, you will find out that your initial impression of them was wrong and that you don't especially want to form a deeper connection with them. This would erode the positive impression of the group that the attendee had when doing the activity that was the initial reason everyone gathered, and the attendee would be less likely to attend future meetups.

One meeting where this worked well was with a meeting I initially thought was going to go poorly, because I ended up disliking the movie I had chosen to go to. It was a small group which really enjoyed the movie so I suggested we go out for one drink afterward (beer was available in the theater so we had one during the movie) and we ended up staying out until the bar closed-quite a long evening!



Figure 2: An ideal site, with a movie theater and a bar right next to each other.

2. Conclusion

These are only initial impressions from a year of being an organizer. A future area of inquiry I may pursue would be to investigate whether these patterns apply for other online organizing platforms, and how many patterns are applicable to all organized gatherings. The biggest challenge to overcome as an organizer is finding a way to overcome the pattern of **1/3 is good enough**, and figuring out what activities will attract enough attendees to make a fun gathering while also be interesting for the organizer. Ultimately an organizer would want to use the group to make lasting friendships, and have the group become popular enough that the demand outstrips the ability of one organizer to attend all meetings of this group, and I think these patterns are useful in trying to build up a group to that point.

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