



That's the Plan

BY JULIANNE VAUGHN, CMP, CMM

Face-to-Face Has Its Place

What if you called a meeting and only 23 percent of the invited participants showed up? You would know about it, right? Maybe not. What if some of them did other work, checked their e-mail, surfed the Internet, engaged in side conversations or even left early. Surely you would notice that. Again, maybe not. OK, it would be impossible, wouldn't it, to overlook two people attending the meeting in their pajamas? That's clearly impossible—or maybe not. These questions may not be as moronic as you think—not if this is a Web-based conference or a teleconference.

When To Use It

We now have access to all of the technological gadgets that make attending meetings virtual. Meetings can be conducted via the Internet or over the telephone. Guests need only to log on, plug in or dial up. And travel to these meetings is done at cyber-warp speed. Or there is the "old fashioned" way of meeting face-to-face. Which method is better? It depends on the situation.

The first thing any good meeting planner does is ask questions to determine what type of meeting is required for the desired results. What are the client's goals? What message needs to be communicated? Is a new product being launched? Is the sales force brought together for training, motivation or recognition? Is the meeting an opportunity for employees, clients and vendors to network? Do various departments need opportunities for collaborating, team building or brainstorming sessions? What message needs to be communicated? Does information need to be disseminated quickly to the attendees? Answering these questions is a good first step in deciding which form a meeting should take. Of

course, there is much more to consider. But the most important consideration is how to best engage participants in order to achieve these goals.

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There are plenty of ways to bring people together—e-mails, conference calls, video conferences, newsletters—and all are very efficient. But, in many cases, nothing replaces the face-to-face meeting. Studies show that 85 percent of human communication is nonverbal. Even with the most highly sophisticated communication technology at our fingertips, facial expressions and body language lose something in the transmission.

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No matter what the purpose of the meeting, face-to-face gatherings promote good will, education, morale, interpersonal relationships and networking. It's difficult to establish rapport or build cohesiveness going eye-to-eye with a computer screen. And forget about the camaraderie that comes from post-meeting unwinding over cocktails.

What Do Participants Want?

So, given a choice, what type of meeting is preferred? TANDBERG—a leading global provider of videoconferencing systems and services—and RoperASW—a market research and consulting firm—conducted a study in November 2003 of 625 business professionals in five countries that shows face-to-face meetings are the preferred form of communication for 12 out of 18 common business objectives. Since TANDBERG is committed to advancing the uses of visual communication tools, face-to-face clearly has an alternative meaning. Nevertheless, the results also make a compelling argument for the traditional definition of face-to-face meetings.

According to the study, 90 percent of the participants say face-to-face meetings build trust, 87 percent say they are more personal, 81 percent say they reduce misunderstandings among participants, 76 percent say they make discussions easier to understand and 75 percent say they make negotiating easier.

These are impressive statistics. But let's assess the economic impact. A face-to-face meeting often involves air travel, hotel accommodations, food and entertainment and lots of miscellaneous extras. The price of a national virtual meeting should be considerably less. So this seems like a much better deal, doesn't it?

Cost Effectiveness

"We often were asked to participate in teleconferences," said a sales representative from a multinational Fortune 500 company. "I would dial in, announce my presence and then immediately punch the mute button. Then I would settle in with a cup of coffee and the crossword puzzle for the duration of the conference."

This isn't unusual behavior, either. According to the TANDBERG/RoperASW study, only 23 percent of participants gave their full attention. What were the rest doing? Writing or checking e-mail accounted for 25 percent, Internet surfing claimed another 13 percent—and who knows what the remaining 39 percent were doing. But they weren't paying attention fully. So, was this a cost-effective meeting for the company? Were the meeting's various goals achieved? Given that more than half of the participants didn't give their full attention, the answer to both these questions is probably not. So, when evaluating the communication tools available for your next meeting, the above statistics must be factored into the decision-making process. Remember that value can't always be measured in dollars and cents.

Expect the Unexpected

One more thing to remember—no matter what type of meeting you plan, things can and do go wrong. Virtual meetings rely on state-of-the-art equipment and highly skilled technicians operating flawlessly together. Even the tiniest glitch can have disastrous results.

With all the choices available, what makes sense for your next meeting? First determine your goals and objectives. Then define your message, select the meeting format (virtual or face-to-face) and get planning!

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