

Planning a Business Meeting

By Peter Penny

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The First Steps of Planning a Business Meeting.

Meeting planning is extremely complex, and requires very careful attention to detail. Those responsible for producing the meeting must take the time to carefully work out a comprehensive plan, and manage that plan very carefully.

Never forget, you are responsible for the care, feeding, teaching, entertaining, and in many cases, transporting of those who will attend. If the sessions are not designed to maximize the attendees experience, people will turn off, and resent their time and your money being wasted.

Simple things, such as if the production company and keynote speakers are not properly briefed on the audience demographics, their presentation will fall flat, or even worse, insult the audience. Any keynote speaker you consider should, without any prompting from you, should ask for as much information as possible about your company, and the nature of this particular meeting. I learned that lesson the hard way when a speaker I hired for a national restaurant chain stood before the audience of 450 Franchisees, and reminisced on how as a college student, he had fond memories of studying all night, and visiting this particular chain for breakfast a couple of times a week. The problem was, this restaurant doesn't serve breakfast! The audience questioned his credibility, and everything he said from that point on.

The AV Company, or "Stager" you hire can also be a tremendous help in your planning. They are up to date on all the newest technology, and can suggest different equipment setups, depending on the mood and theme you want to set.

The number one fact you must always keep in mind is that meetings must support your company's goals and mission. You cannot let the logistics of the event overpower the meeting's objectives.

The primary reasons that meetings are held are to inform, teach, exchange ideas, discuss problems, make decisions, and communicate issues. In some cases, the meetings can also be a reward for sales objectives met. These are usually held in southern locations during cold weather months. Many times these gatherings are half informational, half social activities.

Why do people attend meetings?

To gather information. To leave the meeting with more knowledge than when they arrived. Another very important reason is that they want to network; they want to discuss matters of importance to them with their peers, or with experts who can offer assistance.

With the work schedule many executives place on themselves these days, in many instances, an offshore meeting may be the primary "vacation" they take in a year. Allowing for some fun and entertainment must be carefully considered in your mix.

The Process

Where do you begin?

Location? Theme? Content? Timing? Agenda? Budget?

Actually, all of these must be considered, just about all at the same time. Budget will determine location. Location will influence timing. Theme will influence content. Content will drive Agenda.

My suggestion is you start with the Agenda.

A well thought out Agenda is crucial. The Agenda is your road map to a successful event. Allowing time to not only gather information, but also to interact with fellow attendees, vendors, or Home Office personnel is very important. The Agenda must also include a "fun" quotient. "All work and no play..."

A good Agenda not only takes care of business, but also will leave a positive, lasting impression.

Goals and Objectives.

For the purpose of this document we will define a goal as the general purpose of the meeting, and an objective as a measurable outcome supporting the goal. Putting these goals and objectives in writing should be the first step in the meeting planning process.

Lets start with Goals.

So, why are you having this meeting?

Here are some questions to help get started.

What is the purpose of the meeting? What is the meeting's primary emphasis?

- * To impart new information?
- * To train?
- * To network?
- * To reward?
- * To team build?
- * Some or all of the above?

How much new information should be communicated, or is the meeting to reemphasize current information and procedures?

Is the meeting to reinforce your company's mission statement and values, or to train attendees?

If the attendees left with only one impression of the entire experience, what should that impression be?

These questions put in perspective why, or if a meeting should be held in the first place. The most difficult part is writing out these goals and objectives. It is usually much easier to work on logistics, booking the hotel, hiring speakers, creating a theme, producing videos etc. Well thought out goals and objectives, in writing, force some serious evaluation.

Objectives

Setting objectives can actually be a scary process. Objectives can become measurable, leaving the committee accountable.

The goal may be to motivate and educate the team to meet and exceed sales budgets. The objectives, however should be more specific...

- * To increase sales by X% over last year.
- * To train attendees on a new technical procedure.
- * To introduce and educate on a new product line.
- * Learn five ways to increase your sales quotas.
- * Create a more effective marketing plan.
- * Determine how to cut production costs.

Setting these types of objectives for your meeting is not only specific, but they must be relevant, measurable and attainable.

Meeting Costs

The cost of meetings continues to rise year after year. Rising fuel costs, and having those increases passed on to us through airlines and travel agencies are adding significant increases to meeting budgets alone.

Senior management or budget committees are under constant pressure to evaluate the amount of money being spent, and why it is being spent. They need to know the return on investment they will get from this meeting is justified.

In summary, goals and objectives are the first step of meeting planning. Objectives must be relevant, attainable and measurable. People as high up as possible in the decision-making should be part of the process. Step one is to determine if the meeting is actually necessary. Step two is to ensure that you get maximum return on investment for the time and money spent.

Peter Penny is a Multi Media producer and corporate meeting planner with over 25 years experience developing strategies and producing corporate events. He has produced and directed meetings ranging in size from as small as 25 attendees to over 3,000 delegates. He has recently written a book on planning and running successful meetings. You can visit his Web Site at: <http://www.perfect-meeting-guide.com>

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