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Making meetings matter

BY RANDY LANKFORD

E-mail, voice mail, cell phones, videoconferencing, text messaging. There are so many ways to trade and disseminate information today that the face-to-face meeting has almost become a thing of the past. Gathering employees together to talk business strategy or tactics or even for training is a costly proposition, in both dollars and productivity. Businesses therefore expect expensive and time-consuming meetings to be more effective than ever and they're turning to meeting and event planners to make sure they are.

Wendy Welsh, president and CEO of Outside The Box Events, says the key to a successful meeting is keeping participants engaged and energized.

"We're just so technologically advanced now, everybody's seen every kind of meeting there is out there. It's getting harder and harder to hold people's attention. And, quite frankly, it's possible to conduct business without ever having to get together. You really have to make it worthwhile for a company to get people together for a meeting, especially if they're going to travel and stay overnight."

Lauren Grossman, president of the Hill Country Chapter of Meeting Professionals International, agrees. "Employers want a return on their investment. They're not sending employees to conferences anymore just to have fun. Education has gotten more important than it used to be.

"Look at how adults learn. It's not always just getting a lecture anymore. Meetings have to be more interactive now in the way ideas are tossed around and information is exchanged," she adds. "You have to engage people."

Create a theme

One way of engaging meeting participants is through a theme.

"There's nothing new about trying to create a theme for an event," Welsh explains. "But we have to go beyond the static things like signs and decorations. We really concentrate on what I call 'live props.' If we're going to theme an event around something like, 'You're All Champions,' then we're going to have to try to get (boxing champion) Jesse James Leija out there or have the Spurs Coyote make an appearance.

"People have to say, 'Wow! That was great and I want to come back.' We want people to go home and talk about how exciting their meeting was," Welsh continues. "If we say the theme is going to be around sports we're not just going to put up some decorations. We're going to go way beyond that. We'll (put) jerseys (on) chair backs — give people something to take home with them. Not just a key chain or a tape measure, (but) something they want, something unique."

Welsh, who opened her business in 2002, has seen it double in revenues in the first year and grow by a third in the second. "Our goal is to grow another 30 percent in the next year. We're seeing a lot of people more than once a year now. At first a company might hire us to do one event a year and now we're seeing those same companies hire us to do two or three events a year."

Nicole Jones, regional marketing director of Spectrum Athletic Clubs, says event planners are well worth the price. "It's important to us to create not only a great atmosphere but also great events that keep people engaged and keep them coming back. It's not so much that we want to put on a show, but we don't want people dreading coming to our meetings and our employee outings. We want them to look forward to it."

Jones faces the challenge every month when directing business meetings and three or four times a year when



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Wendy Welsh is president and CEO of Outside The Box Events.

organizing employee events.

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ing about whether the caterer is going to be on time or if we have enough electricity.

"It's a better use of my time," Jones continues. "Wendy has the network to do things in five minutes that would take me five hours. I don't have to stress out about those things. And then I'm able to enjoy the event too rather than worry about all the things that have to happen."

The right site

The meeting site has an impact on enthusiasm as well. Business meetings are frequently held in hotels where conference rooms and other amenities are readily available. After hours of sitting, meeting participants are often looking for something more than coffee to wake them up during their breaks.

"We try to make the most of our venue," says Mike Setser, corporate sales manager for Spurs Sports and Entertainment, the booking agency for the SBC Center, home of the San Antonio Spurs.

What I usually do is tell Wendy, 'These are the things I want to achieve and these are the things I've experienced lately that I think would be fun.' I count on her to come back and tell me how we're going to do those things from the moment we arrive until the moment we leave."

By turning logistics over to the meeting planner, Jones is able to focus on business issues. "I can make sure my CEO's prepped and ready for whatever he's going to be doing during that meeting. I can spend my time on business instead of worry-

"When you get that 15 or 20 minutes to re-energize we try to provide something unique instead of standing around the foyer of a hotel and drinking coffee. Maybe you go down on the floor and shoot some free throws. Or if the ice is down (for San Antonio Rampage hockey games) you shoot some pucks into the net. Or maybe you take a tour of the Spurs' locker room.

It's important to make sure meeting participants are comfortable as well. "Ergonomics are an issue," says Setser. "You need good lighting, comfortable chairs, good acoustics, good circulation. You want to do everything you can to make it easy for people to focus on what's being discussed or presented. You don't want them distracted by being uncomfortable.

"I know there have been meetings where there's a masseuse on hand during the breaks to give people quick 5-minute massages," he adds. "That gets them ready to go back to work."

No rubber chickens

Welsh's company coordinates four or five meetings a month. She believes a unique after-hours experience is more memorable than just another dinner.

"Unless it's something really exotic, you're not going to blow people away with the food at a meeting. We really focus on the things that are going on once you get to the event. Take a little something away from the food to book a player or a concert or something like that," she says. "I would much rather spend money on something like that. We try to stay away from the rubber chicken dinners."

Meeting planners are always looking for ways to engage attendees.

"People talk about team building exercises all the time and that's great but even team building is becoming a little passé," Welsh notes. "Oh, we're going to play that game again.' Or, 'Oh, we're going to see that video again.' We're always looking for unique experiences.

"And don't do any more Power Point presentations," she adds. "We've all seen them, we're all tired of them. Get someone who's exciting to listen to, someone who's knowledgeable about your business. Get them engaged. Get them excited."

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