

Business Meetings: Take It Outside

By Chris Petersen

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Your office is – or at least should be – the perfect space for you to conduct your day-to-day business. In it, you should have all you need, from the desks your employees work at to the coffeemaker that keeps them sitting there. Every now and then, however, a change in scenery is not only nice, it's necessary.

Business meetings held outside the regular office environment can be an incentive for your employees, as well as a way to reinvigorate their thinking and refocus them. After all, when Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin got together to brainstorm winning World War II, they didn't do it all sitting in their regular old offices.

However, just like planning a family vacation, planning a business meeting can be more than a little stressful. Instead of dealing with whiny kids, long, boring drives and bad fast-food, though, you may be dealing with boorish employees, uninspiring meeting spaces and ... bad fast-food.

An outside business meeting can be more than just a chance to get out of the office and stretch your legs a little, experts say. They can be a chance to re-engage your staff, generate innovative ideas and do it all in a relaxing, fun environment. As long as you plan in advance and keep some pointers in mind, taking your business out on the road can be more like the Allies and less like the Griswolds.

Business and Pleasure

Before figuring out how you're going to hold your meeting out of the office, you should first determine whether the meeting is even worth taking outside. Peter Handal, chairman, president and CEO of business training firm Dale Carnegie, says the best meetings to have outside of the office setting are those that require a lot of collaboration and deep thought.

"If it's a face-to-face meeting, it's much better to have the meeting outside of the office because you always have interruptions in the office," Handal says.

If you're going to have diversions at your meeting, make sure that they're the kind that your employees will enjoy, Handal adds, and that means making time for R&R activities. "Set an agenda that combines the work with the fun, and make them compartmentalized," he says.

Keeping the atmosphere light and enjoyable can also go a long way toward promoting networking among your employees, especially if they come from different offices. Handal says he suggests setting up every meal as buffet style, to prevent people from just staying in their seats the entire evening.

Join The Club

Executive coach, speaker and author Mark Amtower says belonging to a private business club can make it easy to find outside meeting space that serves both your business and recreational needs. He says that aside from not having to pay additional fees for meeting spaces, unlike some hotels, business clubs also provide an environment that's first-class, not simply business-class.

"It's important that the ambiance be absolutely on target," he says. "You want everything to be as upper-crust as possible."

Once your company pays a membership fee and pays monthly dues, Amtower says, a private club will take care of everything else. The club Amtower belongs to, the Tower Club in Washington, D.C., charges a membership fee of between \$2,000 and \$4,000, with monthly dues of approximately \$150, he says.

Such fees are relatively minor, "considering what you get in return," Amtower says.

Location Is Everything

Whether you decide to join a private business club or stick with a hotel, Handal says the location of your

meeting should be easily accessible for everyone. "You really want to make sure that all the people from all of the locations come, and that's why the location is important," he says.

For example, he notes, Dale Carnegie holds a lot of its meetings on the West Coast because of the company's Asian offices. "It's hard to get from China to Miami," he says.

Of course, advances in telecommunications have made it possible for anyone and everyone to be "present" at a meeting, even if they can't physically be there. "In the old days, we'd say, 'Sorry, we'll miss you,' but now you can just patch them in," Handal says.

In terms of meeting space, Handal says employees won't be inspired to perform to the best of their abilities when staring at beige partitions. "I really believe you need windows in the meeting rooms," he says.

Keeping people fed is another important factor in keeping them focused, Amtower says. "You can never have a successful meeting unless you feed people and feed them well," he says. Any meeting that takes more than two hours should include a break for beverages, he says, and more than three hours should come with a break for a meal.

Too Much Fun?

There's always the possibility that one of your employees might end up having a little too much fun during the fun portions of your trip. When faced with an employee who doesn't understand that what happens in Vegas stays out of the meeting room, Handal suggests not letting it slide.

"The way we handle that kind of thing is the way we handle most kinds of conflict," he says. "We handle it face-to-face." Being firm but gentle in reminding people that it's still a business trip is usually effective.

"Another thing we do is depending on the size of our group ... we would have name cards around the table, so it's very obvious when someone is missing," Handal says.

The advice may be simple, but taking these things to heart will help your business hold out-of-town meetings that are more than just free vacations.