



Thinking “New” – As in Ways to CONTINUE to do Your Important Company Meetings

By Joanne Ireland, President of Ireland Presentation

We’re hearing it over and over again...Tough times...Cut backs...Expense and travel reductions...

Many executives and customer representatives are no longer allowed to attend events that might be construed as frivolous, a conflict of interest, have limited sales or marketing value to the company, or that might influence buying decisions. Some companies are deciding to cut out all big ticket events, such as sponsorships or tickets for major sporting events, or client meetings at high-end resorts that might “include” activities such as golf or spa treatments. Those days are over. And that’s probably a good thing!

However, at times it seems like the pendulum may have swung a little too far in the other direction. Have you been told to cancel your user group meeting this year? No more customer meetings? Say good-bye to VIP gatherings? But can you really afford to cut all face-to-face interaction with customers and prospects, and squander the momentum and goodwill so carefully built up over the years? Your customers are still interested in the future of your company. They still want to have the ear of your executives, and get the inside scoop on new products and updates. Going too far in trying to cut costs could be cutting potential sales and relationships as well.

There are ways to get around the problem, work with a reasonable budget, keep your customers happy, and perhaps even become a hero in the bargain! The key lies in taking a fresh new look at the business meeting, breaking with past traditions and examining the reason for the meetings, the needs, goals and budget, and then finding new, creative ways of accomplishing those goals.

There are four important steps to making business meetings work when money and appearances are under scrutiny:

- 1 – Understand the budget – yours and your attendee’s
- 2 – Location, location, location - find innovative, new, less costly but interesting locations
- 3 – Collaborate with your business partners - what can you do together
- 4 – Bring real value to your attendees – that’s what they are coming for

1. Know the budget

You know how much was spent on your company meetings and events in the past. But what is the budget today? Even when senior management is making deep cuts, your budget probably hasn’t gone down to zero! Find out how much you have to work with for the year, and ensure that your senior management is in agreement with the final budget figure.

Then, make sure to document any restrictions, requirements or other limitations that can influence your planning decisions. For example, is there a type of venue you are not allowed to use? Is there a cap on the travel expenses? Dig deep to find out the real parameters of your event budget, so that you can make sure to do everything within those guidelines.

2. “B” is for Boutique - Being creative in city selection

Now take the really innovative step, and choose what I like to call a “B” city. But “B” is for Boutique NOT 2nd rate. We’ve all been to and are used to the “A” List/First Tier city for our meetings – New York, Chicago, Las Vegas, or San Francisco to name a few. But these cities, because of their extreme popularity, are more expensive to go to and to hold events in. These are cities that in today’s reality, you may be chastised for spending more money than is really necessary. So look for the “new” city choices for your meeting. For example, choose a city like Anchorage, Kansas City, Nashville, Sacramento, St. Louis, Tampa/St. Petersburg or the like. You will find that the pricing is much more competitive, there are lots of things to do, plentiful venues, great hotels, and fine places to eat. Happy for this type of corporate business and wanting their city to “impress”, I find that these “boutique” cities generally go “over and above” the call of duty to get and keep your business. They are more likely to cater to your needs, offer you better hotel rates and they tend to be really friendly and make you feel wanted, which ultimately will lead to a more impressive meeting. Research airfares into several cities within a region – you will find there are vast differences in the costs. Look at some of the smaller airlines, or partners of your preferred carrier – many of these fly into the smaller cities. And, many of the “Boutique” cities often have lower airfares especially during off-season, which allows your attendees’ dollar to go much further. Once, you have chosen your target city; do some more research on the local history, entertainment, arts and the like - if you’re creative, you’ll find some very interesting venues for off-site events and dinners or activities. And, your attendees will probably be pleasantly surprised to find out how many interesting things there are to do and see pre or post event and in the evenings in a city they haven’t yet visited (but maybe always wanted to).

But, while being innovative in your venue selection, don’t forget that there are two budgets to consider here – your company budget AND your attendees’ budget for travel expenses. While considering all options available, choose a hotel that is appropriate for the needs of your meeting *and* suits your attendees’ budgets – make sure that it doesn’t give the appearance of being “over the top”. This way you help your attendees justify coming to the meeting – they are under the same constraints as you are! Remember that appearance is reality: even if you were to negotiate a comparable sleeping rate for a high-end resort as for a nice hotel, management will assume that the resort is more costly and may not approve the expenditure.

3. More Bang for Your Buck

Let’s say that you are accustomed to doing an annual User Group in a major city – San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Las Vegas... If your customer base is spread throughout the US, why not look at doing smaller, regional customer meetings? These can be in locations that are easy for customers to attend, without the high travel costs normally associated with their attendance. If your customers are clustered on the East and West Coasts, consider having one meeting on each coast.

Or, piggy back with partners by offering sponsorships at various levels which basically allows you to co-host the meeting or event. You might consider trying to tie multiple events into one city, such as internal departmental or sales meetings with customer events – this way you can kill many birds with one stone. Take advantage of having your clients and key executives in one place at the same time. By combining meetings, partners will notice that you are being budget cautious, both for them and you, but still achieving success at both meetings. Other items to consider from a budget stand point are hotel rates. Often times hotels will give discounted rates if you have a larger room block, this can be achieved by combing two meetings. Don’t forget everyone is saving on airfare as well!

4. Content is king

Clients are only willing to come to a meeting today if the meeting is content-rich. Make it worth their time, and don't let them leave feeling that it was a waste of time. Spend the time internally to put together the type and depth, of information that your clients, customers or prospects are most interested in. If need be, bring in planning resources: perhaps a strategist who could interview a sample of your clients to find out what topics are top-of-mind.

When clients leave at the end of a meeting, it's not the beautiful location or the expensive meals that they will remember. It's the knowledge they will have gained through your carefully-constructed program, excellent materials, knowledgeable speakers and actual face-time with your executives and experts that will bring lasting value.

There are many ways to continue to do your most important company meetings and still get first-rate results. Think NEW – Think CREATIVE – Think INTERESTING – Think DIFFERENT – don't let the golden opportunities of today pass you and your company by.

About the Author:

Joanne Ireland, a 20 year veteran of the meeting and event planning industry, is Founder and President of Ireland Presentations, a meeting, conference and event planning company based in San Francisco. Joanne is one of San Francisco's leading consultants in planning, coordination & management of conferences, meetings & events. Her expertise is design, project standards/content, conceptualization & design of project strategy, and contract negotiations. Joanne and her team continue to produce successful events and meetings for a wide range of corporate and non-profit clients both large and small, domestically and abroad. More about Joanne and Ireland Presentations can be found at <http://www.irelandpresentations.com>.

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