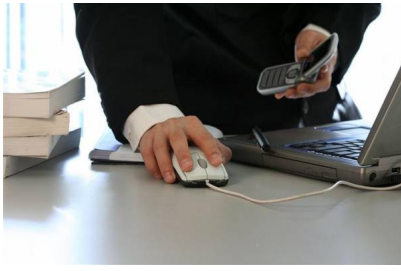


LIVE MEETINGS OR ONLINE MEETINGS?



During the last couple of years many in the meetings industry have tested the waters as to how much they should shift resources away from live meetings and into online meetings. Some organizations - particularly technology companies - have even canceled their annual employee conferences and held them online.

Should business travelers decrease the time they spend on the road and replace it by managing their business in front of a computer screen? I think it's more important to understand the different purpose that each type of communication tool plays before making that decision.

I recently attended a paella class and dinner conducted by chef Rafael Vidal from Restaurante Levante (Valencia, Spain). As guests gathered, I had an opportunity to speak with a gentleman from Connecticut, and the topic of live meetings came up.

He had a strong conviction that online meetings were the way of the future, but when I probed further, he didn't have much more than a personal impression that younger professionals have been raised as a computer generation. And I thought it was a bit ironic that we had this conversation in the grand ballroom of a Chicago hotel at an industry conference.

Back to Basics for Live Meetings

The purpose behind live meetings is usually to grow brand awareness, educate constituents, enhance business development, or bring products to market, among other business objectives. Whether it's at an industry conference or an important client meeting, business travel exists to achieve goals that require face time - live, real world face time and all of the experiences that go with it. It's written into job descriptions for a reason... That's the element that technology cannot replicate.

And when required to travel to live meetings, most business travelers are focused on their work from the time they leave home to the time they return. They're working on their laptops at the airport, drafting notes for a project on the plane, keeping other tasks on track from their hotel rooms, responding to emails at the convention Internet café, and managing the very important tasks that require face time on the road.

In the late 1990s, everyone was envious of others who had their own video conference room capabilities. Due to costs, organizations installed only a limited number of screens for use in their corporate or regional offices. I recall hosting regional meetings with my colleagues using the technology, and inviting individuals from my field offices who may not have otherwise had the opportunity to attend a national, corporate meeting. These were the early days of video conferencing.

That's an important distinction to make: we relied on video conferencing as a tool to enhance - not replace - our live meetings.

Back to Basics for Online Meetings

The Internet has evolved in the last decade, and so have webcam and video conferencing technologies. Everyone has a computer at work who needs one. And at the high end, video

conferencing is evolving into teleconferencing - an expensive tool that allows executives to meet virtually using cameras and large high definition TV screens.

It's understandable to be excited by the technology, but I'm curious as to why so many people have been quick to cancel their business travel priorities and embrace the online meetings sales pitches. Before allowing the finance department or others to shift dollars away from meetings and events and into IT, it's important to focus on the purpose for online meetings.

To be sure, online meetings enhance the communication used for conference calls, telephone meetings. People can now jump online to review documents with a team of others in different locations. Companies can make an important internal announcement, and use online meeting technology to stream live video on desktops throughout the organization. Conference organizers are taking a similar approach by streaming portions of general sessions to their websites for those who may not be able to attend the live meeting.

But the sales pitch to invest in online meetings or telepresence is often justified by taking dollars from the existing budgets for live meetings.

I met with a sales director of a tourism office at a recent HSMAI meeting, and we talked about that famous commercial where the business guy is complaining about how he feels inconvenienced to go to the airport and stay at a hotel so that he can attend the important meeting. She was concerned about what potential long term impact this may have on business travel to her destination.

My response was a bit more old-fashioned, and I think something that everyone should keep in mind. If someone who works for me had that bad attitude about their responsibilities, I wouldn't give him or her the flexibility of online meetings. I would encourage him or her to find a new opportunity - elsewhere - that didn't require business travel.

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