



To meet or not to meet

Meetings still play a valuable role for business if they can be justified

When Associated Bank cancelled plans to reward about 100 employees with a trip to Puerto Rico, almost everyone was in agreement that the Green Bay-based bank made the right call.

The bank had accepted money from the federal government as part of the TARP program. The planned conference ensnared management in the fury over corporate bonuses and what many considered excessive compensation. Everyone from U.S. senators to rank-and-file employees excoriated the banks' executives until they dropped the plan.

That decision was part of a flood of meeting and conference cancellations nationwide, as corporate officers sought to protect their companies from the public outcry.

Almost everyone seems convinced that is the right move. Todd Hanson is one of the exceptions.

"In these times, with the scrutiny, many companies may be cancelling, but they may not have all the facts," says Hanson, president and founder of Catalyst Performance Group, a company that specializes in helping companies maximize the value of meetings and conferences. "There could be a heavy price to pay for that."

What if that is the only time to update large numbers of staff on changes in policy? What if a conference is the best way to provide a group of new employees with skills that improve their performance?

The key question for business leaders is to determine whether a meeting or conference is worth the investment of time and resources. If it's not, don't have the meetings. But if it is, then defend it, Hanson says.

Hanson will get no arguments from Michael B. Knight, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay who specializes in leadership as well as business group dynamics and performance.

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The consensus among many experts is that the media is currently driving the negative reaction to business gatherings. Still, business leaders are wise to be aware of the criticisms and be ready to defend themselves.

"There is a psychological contract of what the consumer expects from business, and it is certainly changing," Knight says. "I think we still need to have meetings; that face-to-face time is valuable."

Perhaps a meeting at a resort with champagne and caviar is not appropriate from a perception standpoint, and a meeting at the Howard Johnson's may not impress clients, Knight says. Finding a balance

is key, as is defending it when there is value.

Finding that value is what Hanson's firm helps companies do. The work starts long before the meeting takes place, with a pre-meeting to assess corporate direction and what performance improvement the company is looking for.

Following the meeting, measure to see if the objectives were met, whether that's increased sales or

some other measure of performance. For most meetings, what gets measured are what Hanson calls "the smiley face" measures, which includes things like the hotel rooms, meals and airline tickets.

What really needs to be measured is what was learned, can it be applied and can the impact be measured—even monetized, he says. With that information in hand, most executives should have little problem defending the need for a meeting or conference.

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