

Virtual Meetings

White paper

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It would be difficult to overestimate the cost cutting measures businesses of all descriptions have embraced as a result of the current worldwide economic downturn. In this atmosphere of declining revenues, the search for opportunities to reduce expenses in order to preserve profits knows no bounds, and the phrase “contain costs” could almost be considered the mantra of this decade. However, industry leaders tread a thin line, and risk leaning so heavily toward the commitment to reduce the costs of doing business, that they sacrifice the ability to conduct business effectively while generating new opportunities for growth.

Nowhere is the need for balance more readily apparent than in areas that traditionally required face-to-face meetings. According to Hervé Sedky, Vice President and General Manager of American Express Business Travel, taking into consideration airfare, hotel, and ground transportation, the average domestic business trip is expected to increase in 2010 to a total of approximately \$1,080.00. While the increase expected for an international business trip during the same time period raises the average cost to \$2,818.00. Mr. Sedky also points out that, “as unbundled and ancillary fees continue to add to the cost of trips, businesses should expect to add up to an estimated 15% to the total trip cost for air, hotel, and ground transport elements alone” (2010-Increases Expected in Airfares, 09.30.09).

Still, businesses must continue to market new products and/or technologies. The need for conferences around specific industries remains. Corporate marketing needs must still be met by providing forums in which senior leaders communicate with end-user audiences. The quest for middle ground, a less expensive means of bringing people together to fulfill these needs, has long been underway and the future looks promising.



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At the World's Fair, held in New York in 1964/65, the Bell System (AT&T) Exhibit included a picture phone that had, up to that point, been a concept popularized by fictional explorations of life in the future. The general public did not embrace picture phones, which went on sale at the time of the fair. However, less than 50 years later the world benefits from fully disseminated technology that allows us to claim that middle ground and use it to balance the need for cost control with the equally important need for face-to-face interaction. It is not necessary to debate whether virtual meetings will replace traditional meetings; it is enough to understand the possibilities virtual meetings provide, and to recognize their potential uses in any given setting.

In an article appearing in Computing.co.uk, in April of 2008, Neon Kelly references a study done by Deloitte that suggests "simulated environments will become increasingly significant over the next five years in terms of brand management" and encourages businesses become fully acquainted with the various virtual meeting technologies sooner rather than later. Deloitte concludes that, "the inevitable changes brought about by virtual environments will redefine the way businesses interact with consumers and enable more sophisticated collaboration with organizations" (Kelly, 04.02.08).

Virtual meeting capabilities will also play a significant role in the future of tech transfer. Failing to integrate the commercializing of intellectual property into the development phase of any technology can be an expensive yet avoidable error. Conducting virtual meetings along with research and development can provide a smooth vehicle for collaboration, cultivating clients, and establishing relationships with potential buyers. In an article published in The Daily Record, David W. Edgerley, Secretary of the State Department of Business and Economic Development, is quoted as saying, "Commercialization - bringing to market the technologies developed at research institutions - is the magic word in



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technology transfer, the art of creating relationships with industry, licensing technologies to corporations and eventually reaping royalty fees on their sales” (Buckelew, 05.28.07).

Virtual meetings, when well planned and cleanly executed, provide the ideal venue for creating these long term relationships, and developing partnerships with companies that will result in the exchange of ideas, resources and people.

In addition, virtual meetings offer institutions the opportunity to enhance their marketing venues. Virtual world trade shows provide a secure environment for potential customers to obtain information about an institution’s intellectual property prior to contacting the institution in the real world. The result is a moderately priced means for the owners of new technology to easily grow their customer base.

Another significant contribution to the rapidly growing interest in virtual meetings is ever expanding off-site work force. “Today, more than 34 million US adults telecommute at least occasionally. Fueled by broadband adoption, better collaboration tools, and growing management experience, the US telecommuting ranks will swell to 63 million by 2016” (Schadler, 03.11.09).

As with real world meetings, the best virtual meetings depend upon a well defined purpose, a thoughtfully designed plan and expert facilitation. The successful outcome of a virtual meeting, however, also depends upon excellent technical support, and presents some additional special challenges. Planning and managing virtual meetings require taking a disciplined approach, developing a set of meeting protocols and selecting the right tools (Harper, 2009).

Defining the purpose of the meeting means setting a very clear boundary around what the meeting is intended to accomplish. Whenever a group of people with common interests and objectives comes together, a wide variety of possible topics become available.



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Successful virtual meetings demand the creation of a predetermined list of issues best addressed both by the group and in the virtual setting (Bell, 09.13.2002). This step may be the most difficult, but provides the keystone for the entire meeting. Many experts agree that group decision-making, brainstorming, aligning goals and sharing the knowledge and skills of participants are activities well suited to the virtual meeting.

Anyone who has ever attended any kind of meeting knows that the best results occur when participants come prepared. “Enable participants to come prepared”, says Kate Harper in her article “Virtual Meetings That Work”. “Before the meeting, communicate the purpose, expected outcomes, required and invited attendees, and the agenda. Have any presentations or background information available in advance.”

Identifying the attendees and the roles they will be expected to play is another critical step. In an article prepared for Gartner, Inc., one of the world’s leading information technology research and advisory companies, Michael A. Bell recommends selecting someone to serve as the meeting’s facilitator and another to serve as recorder. The recorder captures notes and, using a variety of technological means, makes it possible for attendees to read what is being said as the meeting is taking place. “When discussions, decisions and action items are visibly shared, all participants have both an aural and visual sense of what is happening. It allows non-native speakers to read as well as listen, it supports group alignment by making things explicit and allowing misunderstandings to be seen, caught and fixed quickly (Harper, 2009).

What most notably separates the virtual meeting from the real world meeting is the need to include web conferencing technology. “Select the virtual meeting technology best-suited for the purpose of the meeting”, says, Michael Bell. Bell further suggests that erring on the side of simplicity is a cardinal rule for virtual meetings. The marketplace is



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brimming over with web conferencing software, and even the most advanced technology available is priced far more reasonably than real world travel and meeting venues. Aligning the decisions made when initially planning the meeting, its purpose, goals and limitations, with the technological options currently available, aides in the selection of the best-suited product at the most appropriate cost.

Even the best-planned virtual meeting can fail without benefit of expert facilitation. The facilitator is responsible for keeping participants on topic, adhering to time allocations, and taking care to see that all participants are invited to contribute. In addition, the facilitator makes process checks during the course of the meeting, polls attendees for consensus, summarizes decisions agreed upon, and verbally sets forth action items as assigned during the meeting. The selection of the facilitator depends largely on the complexity of the meeting's purpose. If significant interaction is essential to achieve the goals, then an experienced facilitator will add immeasurably to meeting's outcome. If the meeting's purpose is less complex then the meeting's "owner", the person who called the parties together for the meeting, is usually quite capable of playing the role of facilitator on his/her own (Bell, 09.13.2002).

Inventive techniques to help facilitators bring a more in-person feel to virtual meetings are often learned by trial and error. The most valuable ideas seem to be those that focus on replicating aspects of in person meetings for which most people are willing to travel. Seeing and being seen adds much to the productivity of a meeting. People tend to get lost if they do not know who is talking, or the names of the people to whom they are speaking. "Always start a meeting by introducing everyone in the meeting and having each person speak. Then ask people to identify themselves every time they speak" (Harper, 2009). Lisa Kimball, author of [Leading Virtual Teams That Learn](#), suggests creating a virtual



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conference table at the start of a meeting. Attendees draw a circle on a piece of paper and put names around the clock face. For example, Jane is at one o'clock and Raymond is at two o'clock.

Perhaps the most frequently aired concern with virtual meetings is the inability to pick up on non-verbal clues. This makes it impossible to determine who agrees or disagrees with a point, but chooses not to speak. The well-prepared and experienced facilitator will mitigate the downside of this aspect of meeting virtually. Kate Harper recommends keeping track of those who have remained silent for extended periods and soliciting responses from them at key points during a meeting.

The final step in a productive virtual meeting is no less important than any of those described earlier but should be the easiest one to take, especially if proper attention was given to recording the meeting as it progressed. Send the results of the meeting to all those who attended, those who were unable to attend, and a group of select individuals, who will either benefit from the information, or play key roles in accomplishing one or more of the meeting's action items. Reporting serves two distinct purposes. First, it fills the void created because "attendees do not have the benefit of chatting with each other during breaks for clarification or perspective on a particular point (Bell, 09.13.2002). Second, when done well, the record will include copies of, or links to, all of the materials referenced in the meeting, capture the context for decisions, and make certain that all parties involved are informed whether or not they actually attended the meeting (Harper, 2009).

In the end, the question should not be whether or not an organization can afford the time and money necessary to conduct a traditional meeting. Rather, given the myriad opportunities currently available to those who choose to hold virtual meetings, the



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question becomes which method will deliver the most purposeful, results oriented, productive, and satisfying meeting?



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