



Why In-Person Meetings for Groups of 20-200 or More Bring Impressive Results

By Joanne Ireland, President of Ireland Presentations

Who needs a face-to-face group meeting anymore? With the Internet, web conferencing, webinars and social media, there's really no need for people to deal with traffic, travel costs and other hassles related to face-to-face, in-person meetings, right?

Not so fast! Recent studies have shown that there are some very real, and compelling, reasons to push for group meetings in a number of situations. And our own experience bears this out. Let us explain:

- First, in-person meetings are an ideal way to gain the undivided attention of the attendees. (Contrast this with the typical webinar attendee's multitasking and disruptions, where perhaps only 10% of their attention is on the webinar.)
- Second, it is only through face-to-face group meetings that you can establish relationships and drive deep professional bonds. Such meetings enable an organization to really illustrate the concepts, ideas and messages they want to convey to their audience.
- Third, in-person group meetings provide a unique ability for attendees to build human networks and relationships. There is no substitute for talking with others during a coffee break or lunch, working with him in a small group exercise, or speaking to a presenter or industry expert in person.

In this article we will explore three key types of events for which there is no replacement for the in-person group meeting – sales and kickoff meetings, customer or user group forums, and customer/partner advisory councils – and will discuss the critical success factors for these meetings.

SALES AND KICKOFF MEETING

Companies hold sales kickoffs and meetings to achieve some important corporate goals. The primary purpose is to mobilize and energize the sales force for the upcoming year. But, when you combine the Sales team with other key groups within the company such as Marketing and Professional Services, so much more can be accomplished. This is the one time in a year that you can bring together all of the interlocking pieces of your organization. Here is where you provide the forum for sharing new ideas, solving problems and developing deeper professional relationships. Other important goals include introducing new products or services, fostering an environment of crafting bigger deals, stressing specific products and bundles, and delivering resources to increase sales effectiveness. Finally, companies want to create a rich, vivid experience that will strengthen teams, solidify learning, and create an enlivened buzz around the company and team.

Why choose an in-person group meeting?

Group meetings are ideal for harnessing the intensity and productivity of the team. And, when people are taken out of their normal work environment and sent off-site, there is the possibility not just to eliminate distractions, but also to allow for renewal and reinvigoration.

These meetings provide the opportunity for the sales and support teams to do a “deep dive” with subject matter experts, whether in plenary sessions or in team and small group environments. In addition, they are ideal venues for bringing in outside experts from partners and specialty firms, to provide color and context to the team. One important component of these group meetings is the chance to let sales people actually develop and give a presentation in conjunction with their peers and sales engineers; this hands-on component renders the meeting immediately relevant.

THE CUSTOMER OR USER GROUP FORUM

The goals and objectives of a customer or user meeting are many, and by providing a venue for this group to meet under one roof, the company stands a good chance of meeting all of them. First, a customer/user meeting provides the audience the opportunity to express their business and technology needs in an open forum – something that is less than satisfactory when done via conference call. Second, it is a chance for your audience to influence the company strategy and technology plans in an immediate, compelling way. Third, such meetings strengthen executive relationships and begin a continuing dialogue with market-leading customers. Fourth, in-person group meetings have the unique ability to spur action and drive business results by creating powerful emotional ties to your business mission and message. Finally, these meetings position your company as the partner of choice, and create long-term loyalty by developing ambassadors within customer accounts.

Why choose an in-person group meeting?

Customers and users today are demanding closer relationships due to the fast pace of change in the enterprise, the world’s increased reliance on high-technology products and services, and the uncertain economic conditions in which we live. Strong professional relationships and a high level of mutual trust have become requirements for success. Experience shows that establishing a customer/user meeting on a regular basis is an essential strategy that contributes to the ultimate goal of growing your business. By inviting your customer to be a part of a communal group, you signify that you are truly interested in his or her business and the partnership. In fact, customer/user meetings are proving to be a major competitive differentiator, as they afford direct access to and dialog with your product specialists and, in many cases, your executives.

PARTNER OR CUSTOMER ADVISORY BOARD MEETINGS

Whether a company is very small, or large and vibrant, the advisory board is a key component to early and ongoing success. Companies want to meet with these individuals for a number of reasons, chief among which is to effectively communicate through education, product demos and networking. This forum can jump-start relationships and strengthen bonds among key partners or customers. When the meeting includes your key partners or customers as advisors, it underscores the company’s interest in, and commitment to, their success with your company.

Why choose an in-person group meeting?

Most partners and customers have an arm's length relationship with the companies with which they do business. Meeting in person and together can strengthen ties and create a much deeper, more solid relationship. When key advisors meet one another in person, they build on the commonality of purpose. Newfound relationships can bring huge benefits to your company as the advisors find common ground, collaborate to help move your company forward, explore mutual connections, and more. The result can be greater mindshare, and increased investment in the company that may be manifest through introductions to prospects, a willingness to participate in panel discussions at conferences, provide partner/customer testimonials and the like.

Critical Success Factors

Whether your group meeting is for 20 or 200, you can maximize your chances for success by ensuring that the following conditions are met:

- **Format:** the meeting format should be focused around dialog and interaction between your company and the attendees, not on broadcast sessions. Depending on the meeting and its purpose, make sure your company presents only 25-50% of the time, with the remainder of the time being spent actively listening to, and participating in, attendee input and providing outside resources that support the objectives you set for the meeting
- **Commitment:** make sure your company executives who participate in the meeting are committed to staying for the full meeting. Nothing says "we don't care" more than an executive leaving the meeting for something that is (presumably) more important.
- **Duration:** most people state that they prefer a 2 to 2.5 day meeting, rather than shorter or longer ones. You have to make it worth their time to attend, but not overstay your welcome. If you can hold the session on a Monday/Tues/Wednesday or Wednesday/Thursday /Friday, you can offer attendees the option to stay over at the offsite location at their own expense, which often leads to greater participation.
- **Makeup:** meetings that involve your company executives and key partners/customers executives should be kept small, intimate and more personal. Consider a maximum of 10-15 key company executives and 20-30 partner/customer advisors. This ratio of executives to your attendees leads to optimal outcomes and shows true respect and involvement. And, since you are already there with your key partners/customers, you should consider private one-on-one time between your executives and advisors.
- **Cost:** Depending on the type of meeting, don't be afraid to consider charging a registration fee for attending. Studies show that a charge of \$250 or \$500 to attend is considered reasonable, and should not discourage people from attending. In fact, it demonstrates some commitment and actually decreases the number of potential attendees who fail to attend once they have registered.

Conclusion

There is just no substitute for bringing your key personnel, customers or partners together away from a normal work environment for a personalized group meeting. Kicking off the sales year with updates, direction and camaraderie, providing product updates and in-depth discussions with your customers and users, brainstorming and strategizing with your advisors – all are opportunities to gain undivided attention, develop lasting professional bonds, and create human networks. These are all ways to give your company the competitive advantage that comes from working, relaxing and spending quality time with the people who can help make your company great – your internal team, your customers and your advisors.

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 www.irelandpresentations.com.

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