

# BEYOND CLOSED DOORS

There's more to a  
meeting than sitting  
around a table

It used to be that people went to conventions or sales meetings and came home with little more than paper-work and dirty laundry. But attitudes about productivity have changed. Now people often come home from these gatherings refreshed, with an enthusiastic spirit and the knowledge that their circle of friends has just ballooned to include a few hundred new pals.

Today's meeting planners say that meetings just aren't worth-while unless the participants go back to work with a renewed sense of purpose and enthusiasm. The secret to making that happen is team-building.

Team-building can range from bringing a bunch

By Susan Hauser

of people together and making them perform silly athletic stunts to taking a group to an art gallery and hoping they chat about art.

What better way to break down people's barriers than to outfit them with flippers and throw them into the heat of competition? That's one method employed at California Leisure Consultants [ACCESS Destination Services] in San Diego to build esprit de corps. That particular event – ducky waddle relay – is part of something called Super Sports, which is a favorite method of bringing people together.

Chris Lee claims his firm put on the largest Super Sports extravaganza ever seen in California. He had 1,500 people at a corporate retreat for a high-tech firm doing duck waddle relays (done in flippers in scuba gear, while trying not to spill a glass of water on a tray), giant Earth ball races and more.

“We had 40 or 50 teams and each team had different-colored T-shirts,” Lee says. “So we had five to 10 shades of every primary color. We had colors I hadn't even heard of.”

If Chris Lee in San Diego had the largest SuperSports event, Ilene Reinhart of California Leisure Consultants [ACCESS Destination Services] in Los Angeles had the second largest. She rented the Rose Bowl for 1,200 people. They split into small teams and each had to come up with a team cheer. They went on to cheer for each other in events such as the Three-Legged Pantyhose Potato Race. In that competition, contestants are tied together, using one leg of the pantyhose, while the foot of the dangling leg holds a potato. Running to the finish line is only half the feat; once there, you and your partner must somehow make the potato swing enough to knock over a stack of bottles.

How about something more dignified? Dian Lindsay, of Ewe-Me and Company in Portland, likes to liven up meetings

with murder mysteries. Participants are assigned parts beforehand, so they can bring along an appropriate costume, or at least get a head start on their ad-libs. “Everyone gets into it,” Lindsay says. “They really are the entertainment.”

Lindsay recalls another meeting she did on a shoestring budget. Her client asked her to schedule a brief bonding activity that cut only into the board's lunchtime and didn't cost much. “Give me your lunch money,” Lindsay remembers saying.

She bought lunch for the group, and then hid the ingredients. An actor in chef's attire passed out clues, and then everyone had to scramble over hill and dale to locate a number of small coolers. One

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contained lettuce, another held a bottle of mayonnaise, one had salami, and so forth. “Finally, the last person came in with the 6-foot hero sandwich bread, so they immediately knew what they were building.” The group made the sandwich together, and then went on to tackle other problems at the meeting, this time as a team.

Barbara Cappa, at Cappa and Graham, Inc. in San Francisco, planned a similar, but somewhat more dramatic event. She sent a group off on what they thought was a tall-ship cruise on San Francisco Bay. Suddenly, their ship was overrun by pirates. The hijacked ship sailed to Angel Island, where the passengers were forced to disembark and then dig for buried treasure. The booty turned out to be the assortment of fine California wines that would accompany their gourmet lunch.

Such activities are what Dian Lindsay has dubbed “partic-events.” In ordinary language, they are events that foster interaction. And it is interaction that clients in the '90s are specifically requesting.

Pat Couch at California Leisure Consultants [ACCESS Destination Services] of Palm Springs has figured out a way to have people interact while they learn about the Palm Springs area. She divides everybody into teams of 20 to 25 people, assigns them to mini-coaches, and sends them off on a road rally. “It's somewhat of a scavenger hunt,” she says, but instead of the usual unusual items the participants collect facts about the area. The intent is to teach them enough about Palm Springs to entice them back.

For Couch, learning and fun seem to go hand in hand. She has staged game shows, at a client's request, in order to test people's knowledge. At the same time, she provides another opportunity for teamwork. “The people had to go to exhibits during the day, and then in the evening, the client wanted to make sure they had been paying attention,” Couch says. The group divided into teams to field questions that had been submitted by exhibitors. The prizes were substantial amounts of cash.

“It was a Vanna White sort of thing,” Couch recalls. “The client later told us it was the most interactive his people had ever gotten.”

Chris Lee says it's hard to gauge the results of the team-building events that destination management companies devise, but feedback from clients is “overwhelmingly positive.”

“They go away with a greater sense of teamwork,” says Lee. “Just bringing people together allows them to get to know others as human beings, instead of titles.”

Conference attendees aren't the only

ones who bring home happy memories of a sales meeting or convention. Husbands or wives, plus the kids, are often not only welcomed, but encouraged to come along. Planners strive to make the experience so positive for everyone that participants actually can view out-of-town meetings as “quality time” with the family. “Everybody’s looking for ways to maximize their leisure time,” says Chris Lee. “So why not bring the kids along?”

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Lee’s office dreamed up a *Teen-Age Mutant Ninja Turtle* road rally to entertain kids. They also offer a *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* road rally.

While Mom and Dad are busy with meetings and entertainment for spouses, the kids are left in the care of the planning staff, who pile them into cars and charge around town in search of answers to written clues. The clues, plus the costumed characters the kids encounter along the way, tie in with the theme but still offer some educational tidbits about San Diego and the city’s attractions.

There usually aren’t hordes of kids that come along to meetings – nothing like the children of 600 Microsoft employees that Linda Granat of Seattle VIP Services entertains each year. Her company is in charge of the annual holiday party for Microsoft Corporation. She says the grown-ups’ party, for employees and their guests, is considered The Event in Seattle each December, but surely the school-age set hasn’t stopped talking about their bash either.

Granat is becoming experienced at enter-

taining children. She did the planning for a meeting of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Naturally enough, everyone brought their kids.

Nobody gets left out at company meetings and conventions anymore. While attendees are off bonding, their spouses are busy with a plethora of programs offered for their entertainment. And these days, just as many husbands as wives will be coming along for the fun. “Spouse groups can be a good mix of male and female,” says Ilene Reinhart. “The days of the fashion shows are long over.”

Reinhart lines up speakers who cover subjects ranging from healthy lifestyles and celebrity lifestyles, to stress management, relationship building, and estate planning. “It’s not just the foo-foo topics anymore,” Reinhart says.

Other activities for spouses include aerobic workouts, shopping trips and tours of the city and surrounding area. The idea is that the spouses will want to return later with their wives or husbands.

But there’s a danger. When the outside activities are too enticing, the meeting-goers tend to play hooky. “You’d be surprised at how many couples show up at the bus,” one planner says. ▲

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