



Why Community Service Projects Are The Next Big Thing at Meetings

Excerpt from an article written by Alison Hall for *Financial & Insurance Meetings* – September, 2008

“**Sometimes people look** at corporate social responsibility as touchy-feely,” says Stephanie Olivero. “In reality, it's smart business.” Olivero, meeting planner at MetLife in Long Island City, N.Y., has seen first hand the incredible motivating effect of community service projects at meetings. She's watched attendees bring smiles to the faces of kids, turn a nondescript yard into a beautiful garden, and build playhouses. She's also heard one consistent complaint: “We wanted to do more.”

“We have really enjoyed planning these givebacks and hearing that our attendees feel the same way participating in them,” she says. “More are planned for the future with hopefully no end in sight.”

Do the Good Thing

Companies have incorporated charitable giving or community service into meetings for years. What's new is that these projects are now reflecting a company's overall social responsibility mission, something that consumers, employees, and even investors increasingly see as critical.

At PMI, the Walnut Creek, Calif.-based mortgage insurance provider, giving back is part of the culture. “Strengthening communities” is part of the company's mission, and service projects have been under way locally and globally for more than a decade. The company's insurance products help potential home buyers get mortgages without the usual 20 percent down payment. (In response to the current mortgage crisis, PMI joined the HOPE NOW Alliance, a nonprofit organization made up of loan originators and servicers and related companies and counselors. The alliance was created late last year to help at-risk homeowners avoid foreclosure.)

“We're very much into corporate social responsibility and the service that goes with it,” says Barbara Moreland, director, internal communications, events, and recognition. In fact, PMI's community service is what attracted Moreland to join the company six years ago. For example, PMI is a Cornerstone Partner with Habitat for Humanity. “It's not just money. We're putting in time as well,” she explains. PMI employees apply to go on “blitz builds” with Jimmy Carter, where a home is put up in one week. “We just did one in Biloxi, Miss., in an area hit by Hurricane Katrina,” Moreland says. “Employees and volunteers were working right alongside Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter. They start with a foundation, and, by the end of the week, there's a dedication ceremony. People are so moved. It really goes along with what we do as a company — we put people into homes.”

Can Service Motivate?

But recently Moreland had her biggest, and riskiest, insight. Why not live the company's mission at the 2008 Sales Kickoff? The meeting was booked into San Diego, for 200 salespeople. In addition to the business sessions and networking, there would be spa and golf and an opportunity for seeing the sights — probably the San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park, Moreland thought. But after meeting with Jennifer Miller of Access San Diego, [ACCESS Destination Services] one of three destination management companies she interviewed for the conference, Moreland thought again. “When I have these meetings with vendors I take the opportunity to share what our corporate culture is all about,” she explains. “When I told Jenny, she mentioned a teambuilding service project and it resonated with me right away.”



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Senior executives, however, did not embrace the idea immediately. They saw a meeting element that salespeople had come to expect being taken away. "It took a little bit to sell it," says Moreland.

Here was the scene in January: Attendees walked into a ballroom where they were divided into 17 teams and told that each team would build two bikes to be given to kids in need. These were children whose families couldn't afford bikes or whose homes and possessions were destroyed in wildfires that swept through some areas north of San Diego.

Led by facilitator and Access teambuilding director Paul Blanchard, the teams elected leaders and recorders, chose names, created team songs, and proceeded to answer trivia questions in order to earn the bike parts they would need. They also wrote cards for the recipients, since they were told that they wouldn't be able to present the kids with the bikes (and helmets) directly.

Meanwhile, however, the 34 kids were in fact arriving at a breakout room. At the appropriate time, the ballroom door opened and in they came to receive their bikes. "There was not a dry eye," Moreland says. But there was a little more work to be done. "People would have said it was the best thing ever when the kids left the room," says Moreland. But the critical extra element, she believes, was the processing of the experience. The teams stayed for another 20 minutes, with Blanchard having the participants report out on what the experience meant to them personally, as teams and as PMI employees.

"If you're truly doing teambuilding, the key is to process it," Moreland says. "That gives everyone the ability to internalize the experience. This was not just about community service. It reinforced our company's core competencies of collaboration, communication, adaptability, leadership, customer focus, and results."

In follow-up surveys, 98 percent of participants said their expectations were exceeded (the other 2 percent said the event met their expectations). Most gratifying for Moreland, many tied the experience back to their jobs. Said one: "My job is not just to get people into homes. It's to get families into homes and help them stay there."

And the doubtful executives? The chairman and CEO called Moreland that night to thank her. "The key was having the right partners and facilitators," says Moreland, who has high praise for Paul Blanchard and Jennifer Miller.

Meanwhile, Miller of Access San Diego [ACCESS Destination Services] has seen "a huge increase" in requests for service activities, which she attributes to two factors. "The meeting industry tends to be wasteful, and people are taking a closer look at that," she says. "And companies want to leave a positive imprint on their meeting city."