

# Anticipating the most successful business conferences

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BUSINESS EXAMINER

Gayle Voyer, president of Total Events in Kelowna has worked in event planning for 18 years, every since she graduated from B.C.I.T. Her first professional stint was with the Vancouver firm, Venue West, where she worked for three years. From there she moved to the Downtown Business Association in Kelowna before starting her own company, Total Events, in 1999. She has organized events for as many as 1,500 although she says most business meetings have 50 to 250 persons. As such, she is a keen observer of what makes for effective meetings.

The most important contributor is clearly knowing the purpose of the meeting. Voyersays, "There is always an underlying purpose." Her job, and the meeting planner within the company should be able to articulate it precisely.

It can be to reward key people, to generate enthusiasm for a new launch or business change, to review past events, as information dissemination or a meeting between people within a company that don't normally interact. Whether it is one of these or another reason, what events are planned, how meetings are conducted and what message is reinforced for employees depends on the types of events and how they are delivered.

Voyer points out that conferences can be powerful tools in retaining people. "Companies have to be aware of how to keep their employees," she says.

Business conferences can reinforce quality time outside of the meetings themselves with fun events, the timing of the meetings (try to schedule during the week so people aren't giving up family time) or by including families and loved ones in the

conferences.

A theme can make a business conference something to look forward to (see 'How to make your conference stand out' - pg. 5).

So even in more mundane meetings off time events can be rewards in themselves. The rewards build team morale.

Conferences are also good ways to get ideas flowing and increase communication between different departments. Voyer says she has several ways to help that inter-communication process along. Dinners can have assigned seats to increase interaction. Changing table sizes between meals or conference sessions helps to break up cliques and the status quo.

And what she practices when planning a meeting is a good habit for bosses and organizers within the company to think about. "The biggest thing I try to do is get the 'wow' factor by personalizing it."

Plan activities that are fun, hands on but respectful of the fitness level of your group. Give people choices so that they don't feel exhausted by the trip. Make at least one trip or event optional so that some people can have down time to explore the area or read a book or have lunch with a friend from the company. Keep dietary preferences in mind and pay attention to personal events where possible - if an employee is going to be there on his/her birthday, find an appropriate moment to let them know you know. For one employee that might be an announcement at a banquet, but others could be embarrassed and prefer a note or bottle of wine in their hotel room. It costs little, but makes a big impression on those attending.

Choices can be good

too. If a certain group is out of shape, perhaps a spa visit can be a reward while more athletic employees might appreciate a more active outing.

Voyer says one of the best events she did was a grape stomp. The grape stomp was active but short in time so that most everyone could participate and it tied the delegates into the region where they were visiting.

Meetings should reinforce your company's message and employee concerns.

Voyer says "green" meetings are one example. "You're seeing it coming." She adds that being green does not preclude having fun. "There's still going to be the "glam" but companies are wanting to see the green aspects." That might be as little as making sure cans and paper are recycled, or booking a venue that supports green initiatives.

Every business planner has to be concerned with cost. As Voyer notes, "Cost is always a factor. Everybody has a budget." That is why many of these ideas can make a huge difference to the team, for very little cost.

One of those details is sending a thank-you note after an event, or checking in with staff to see what worked, what didn't and why. Or, during smaller, less expensive meetings, shorter sessions or sessions broken up by an event can be very useful. Not only in making staff feel better, but in keeping them high-energy and focused. Inspirational speakers, aerobics specialists or comics can add something that makes meetings productive and more memorable.

Finally Voyer has a message about time lines. The more popular the time is (spring and fall), or for events with lots of people (150 plus) or if you have a specific venue that you must have, planning ahead becomes imperative. Not only are venues booked well in advance, but arranging restaurants or caterers, transportation and all the other necessary services can be very difficult on short notice.

Voyer describes herself as a "control freak", necessary to look after all the details in a successful event, says elaborate events need to be planned at least a year in advance.

## The Effective Meeting List

- Know the purpose of the meeting
- Keep your budget in front of you when planning
- Create a strong theme (message) for the meeting
- Learn who is at the meeting and why
- Off session activities need to be hands on with active participation
- People want "greener" meetings
- Give people choices for activities and, occasionally, for participation
- Don't wait too long - plan ahead
- Take a moment to thank people



DEVON BROOKS/TOBE PHOTO

Gayle Voyer of Kelowna's Total Events knows many things contribute to successful business meetings, but underscores knowing the purpose as being essential.