



How to Generate Greater ROI from Corporate Meetings



MOSSWARNER

Maximize Your Return. Minimize Your Investment. Measure Your ROI.

As communications professionals, there is one basic truth we can never forget: There is not, and never will be, a substitute for in-person engagement. That's the purpose of a corporate Leadership Summit, Management Team conference or National Sales Meeting. You bring people together to engage them as your brand and company ambassadors to a degree that no virtual meeting can match, no matter how great the technology may be. Engagement is the "secret sauce" that makes new strategies, campaigns, processes and other initiatives successful. Engaged employees and leaders feel positive about their companies – what they're trying to do, and how they go about doing it. They understand what is expected of them and are energized by contributing to the business' success.

Technology and geography have changed the ROI equation.

There are so many digital technologies connecting people in real time all the time, with far less cost and disruption, that quantifying the benefits of a live meeting is more important than ever.

But some of those benefits, real though they may be, are not immediately or directly measurable. Their value is ultimately measured in terms of the extent to which the meeting advances behavior changes that increase sales, reduce costs or otherwise help the company achieve its objectives.

And both sides of the Return vs. Investment equation are variable. Maximizing the Return depends on great planning, preparation, production and presentation. Minimizing the Investment depends on great management of travel, accommodations and logistics.

We'll look at both, and then at how to measure the results.

Business or work units that score in the top quartile of their organization in employee engagement have nearly double the odds of success (based on a composite of financial, customer, retention, safety, quality, shrinkage and absenteeism metrics) when compared with those in the bottom quartile. Those at the 99th percentile have four times the success rate of those at the first percentile.

Gallup State of the American Workplace 2017



Maximizing Your Return: 5 Ways to Make it Great

Planning and producing an effective meeting involves countless actions and decisions, large and small. These range from when and where to conduct the meeting, and who should attend, down to what's on the napkins.

Broadly, however, the following guidelines can help you maximize the effectiveness of your meeting and, as a result, the return on your investment in it.

1. Establish what success looks like

Start at the end and ask yourself and your team:

- After this meeting is over what do we want our people to know that they didn't know before they came to the meeting?
- What do we want them to feel about the company, its business initiatives, objectives, its leadership and their fellow associates?
- What do we want them to do, or do differently, when they are back on the job on Monday?

Presenters and session leaders should also ask the same questions, to help them structure the goals of their individual sessions and measure the value. You are trying to engage your internal market and the meeting is your brand experience. How well that brand experience (message, content, emotion, feedback, etc.) connects with the audience will impact your ROI. Bottom line: in order to get a positive ROI, your employees need to leave the meeting engaged and equipped to take action and do their jobs differently.

Define Success.

After the meeting is over, what do you want the attendees to know, feel and do or do differently?

2. Plan holistically

A destination meeting doesn't occur in a vacuum; it occurs within the context of an annual communication calendar. Working from the perspective of an entire year, you can plan for what you need to happen before, during and after the event.

For example, sending a backgrounder as a pre-read allows more time for clarifying, gaining feedback, collaboration, etc. at the meeting itself. And planning for what happens after the meeting – how the messaging cascades throughout the organization and what milestones are used to measure your progress – helps ensure that the meeting's objectives aren't forgotten.

When group off-sites are planned and structured properly, they can be a most productive means for efficiently:

- Creating awareness and gaining alignment
- Conducting targeted and consistent learning and development
- Reinforcing cultural norms and interpersonal communication skills
- Building relationships and trust through face-to-face networking
- Promoting focus and interactive engagement
- Creating an environment that fosters creativity and innovation
Don't alert the audience that a story is coming – "that reminds me of ..."



As for the meeting itself, it should be structured to provide the precious opportunities that only face-to-face meetings offer:

- Providing personal face time between senior management and employees
- Making sure everyone hears the same message, the same way, at the same time
- Promoting and practicing cross-functional teamwork
- Promoting networking among employees in different functions and regions
- Rapidly transferring knowledge and raising skill levels
- Providing motivational and team-building experiences
- Eliciting employee feedback
- Creating opportunities to disseminate specialized knowledge
- Creating momentum and alignment that lasts long after the meeting is over

The meeting experience should be constantly immersive and connective. One way to achieve that is to develop a mobile app or private social media group that keeps everyone up to date and on schedule, and can support interactions such as polling. You can also embed messaging into wake-up calls, turn-down services, in-house television broadcasts, placards in the dining area, daily newspapers, unique giveaways and attendee packets.

Attendees should understand the plan, like it, see their part in it, and leave the meeting equipped to act.

3. Set and control the agenda

The agenda should support your meeting objectives (what you want the attendees to do, or to do differently, after the meeting) and deliver your key takeaways based on an understanding of the audience. It should be structured in such a way that the attendees get the plan, like it, see their part in it, and leave equipped to act. This should suggest the sequence for delivering content and key messages.

It should also emphasize breakout sessions and, if appropriate, different tracks for different groups (e.g., by function). If your audience is not homogeneous, consider the differences among groups: What knowledge and skills do they already have? What tools or training do they need? How long have they been with the company? Have they covered this material before?

Some segmentation information is already known by managers or trainers, but more precise data should be gathered well in advance through pre-event communications or online registration, where attendees create their own profiles and define their professional interests. This information will help you determine who needs to know what, plan the appropriate numbers, sizes, and types of sessions, and avoid “agenda creep”. It can also help you to establish benchmarks for measuring ROI after the meeting.

Figuring out the schedule can be a logistics challenge but if done properly, the payoff is significant because with smaller groups and specific topics to work with, breakouts are great opportunities for personalized learning, collaboration and alignment.



4. Develop content that is meaningful, accessible and empathic.

There's an old axiom about meetings that says, "The brain can only absorb as much as the butt can tolerate." In fact, research studies have suggested that the average adult can "listen with understanding" for about 90 minutes, and "listen with retention" for about 20 minutes. So, use the "90/20/8 rule" which suggests restricting any session to less than 90 minutes without a break, changing the pace at least every 20 minutes, and including some type of audience involvement in the material at least every eight minutes.

A good rule of thumb is to focus on three big messages that you want attendees to retain.

These are derived from three insights:

- Knowledge transfer often begins before the event, with advance pre-reads. Getting the nuts-and-bolts knowledge across in advance enables you to use the actual face time to address the impact and implications of that knowledge.
- Understanding creates motivation. Engaged employees need to understand what part they are being asked to play in specific jobs or roles, and what's in it for them – how it will help them succeed in their respective functions.
- Ability requires tools and the skills to use them effectively. For some types of processes, in-person, hands-on training is the fastest, most effective way to advance both user and trainer skills throughout the organization.

When developing content, it's important to identify gaps and roadblocks. Is there a disconnect between the mindset of management and that of employees? Generally, there is. But even if there is not, it's helpful to know what's on people's minds and what key messages need emphasizing. Online surveys and focus groups, conducted well in advance, are effective and widely-used methods for gathering such insights.

Understanding the attendees' mind-set is critical to the creative process, from theme development to look-and-feel. Everything an attendee sees, hears or experiences says something about the content and goals.

For example, if a sales meeting is focused on beating one or more competitors, the theme may be evocative of team sports or military missions, and the accommodations, activities and even the travel arrangements may be deluxe enough to exude confidence.

On the other hand, if times are challenging, the meeting may actually be more effective if the mood is "lean and mean", with accommodations that are high in quality but modest in tone. Indeed, some audiences, including many engineers and scientists, are naturally skeptical of flash or flamboyance which many see as either wasteful or an indication that someone's trying to slip something by them.

Finally, remember that it's important to embrace controversy. If there's an "elephant in the room", don't ignore it. When people see that their concerns are included in management's view, tough issues are being addressed, and the conference itself is helping to stimulate ideas, it raises everyone's energy and their commitment to a united vision.

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5. Mix it up.

Look at your agenda and consider what experiences individual attendees are likely to have as they go through the week. Their experiences should be as interactive and varied as possible. Look not only at what they will take away from each session, but the best way to involve them in the process.

You want to keep people moving, learning, and doing. You don't want them sitting in a general session for a day and a half. But you'll have to balance that goal against the reality that Interactive sessions take time. A good work simulation session can take hours to go through the explanation, role play, critique, repeat (twice if using triads), and then summarize. So it helps to have experienced facilitators and well-planned sessions to ensure the time is well utilized.

10 Ways to Mix it Up:

- Roundtable Discussions
- Speed-Dating with Senior Management
- Moderated Panel Q&A
- Facilitated Brainstorming
- Role-Playing
- Demonstrations
- Hands-on Learning
- Audience Response Systems
- Game Show Formats
- Team-Building Activities

For more on this topic, see [“How to Engage Your Employees in Embracing Change”](#)

6. Make it theirs.

For associates attending meetings, ownership is everything, so you want to ensure that attendees have a high stake in the content. That can start with involvement before the event. For example, you can assign a few small “advisor/pilot groups” to solicit limited content review for clarity, or effectiveness, or ask for early feedback about questions attendees may have that need to be answered. These tactics can also generate peer buzz about content; you may even purposefully “leak” selected content to achieve that.

At the meeting itself, it is important to keep the content fresh and growing over the days of the event by involving the audience in its creation. Don't miss this opportunity by “canning” the entire content of a conference, or by finalizing it so far in advance that it's stale by the time the meeting happens.

One way to involve attendees is to solicit comments from them throughout the event (especially during breakout sessions) and to use those comments to reinforce key messages later on in the meeting.

A way to involve the attendees' perspective in the meeting content is to have video producers on site throughout the event, developing an ad-hoc movie of the conference that can be used in the final session.

The so-called “happy face” video serves important purposes:

- Rekindling the excitement of the event and elevating it to a grand finale
- Offering an opportunity to hear observations and insights from peers and leaders
- Reinforcing the critical takeaways from the meeting



Minimizing the Investment: 5 Areas to Save

Even if you've decided to commit resources to conducting a meeting, you'll certainly want to control the cost. But how do you do it without diminishing the Return part of the ROI equation?

The most obvious place to look is the choice of location. There are many criteria to use, from the cost of travel to the quality and cost of accommodations. Regardless of venue, here are some "tricks of the trade" that can help control your costs. They fall into five areas:

1. Hotel

Manage your schedule to cut one overnight stay. Most meetings are typically 3-4 nights. With smart planning, you can usually cut one of those nights, which can cut 25% off your room budget with little impact on the meeting.

Negotiate registration/welcome pack distribution at check-in, which can save rental fees and time at a separate registration desk.

Negotiate guarantees on room blocks by working closely with your purchasing department. Many hotels will work up to 20% attrition.

Be flexible with room dates and work with the venue to get the best rates based on its schedule. A little flexibility can cut rates more than 25%.

Bring your own ancillary equipment, including printers, projectors, power strips, etc.

Request a free microphone and basic A/V setup for each breakout room.

Take advantage of hotel environmentals, which are often available at no additional charge.

Utilize the venue supplies (linens, votives, centerpieces), as most venues can dress tables nicely without added outside décor.

2. Food & Beverage

Switch plated dinners to pass-arounds and stations. Most people prefer hors d'oeuvres anyway, and it actually encourages more social interaction between attendees.

Cut the amount of food you serve, since people really don't eat as much as they used to. You can also serve lunch portions for dinner, and/or order off the lunch menu for better rates for dinner.

Offer dine-arounds as an opportunity for free time. This will save the cost of an entire dinner service, and give attendees a chance to explore the local surroundings on their own.

On the drink side, offer wine and beer only or consider limiting the number of premium liquor choices.

Negotiate "as consumed" bars with the hotel, especially since people generally don't (and obviously shouldn't) drink much at company sponsored events.

For breaks, negotiate "as consumed" for coffee, water, beverages and snacks rather than by person, and consider cutting out additional coffee service during morning break if you've just served coffee with breakfast.

Purchase generic bottled water in bulk and label with custom company branding to save dollars and incorporate meeting themes. For greater savings, order in greater quantity for use at additional meetings or at the corporate office.



3. Activities & Entertainment

Use inexpensive team-building activities to achieve other meeting objectives. For example, we've had team building events that produce staging elements for the general sessions. It's a great way to save money on both staging and team building, while employees feel both pride in their work and ownership of the meeting.

Creating videos is a great way to get attendees involved in a fun and creative exercise. People get to showcase their hidden talents and to role-play in a free-spirited way, and internal humor can be the Big Bang of team-building and live events. The activities support engagement, provide fun memories, and can even save on pre-produced videos and marketing presentations.

If corporate pride is a goal, try utilizing charitable activities for team building events. From working with kids at local charities to participating in social improvement activities, events that integrate charitable activities will leave everyone feeling good and add to your profile in corporate citizenship.

Use internal creatives to stage a talent show or musical talents to create a club atmosphere. You can save tens of thousands on name talent, and deliver great fun in the process. Most companies are pleasantly surprised at the hidden talents that exist within their own walls, and the experience creates powerful bonds among associates, without regard to rank or position. This kind of activity can transform a staff into a family.

4. Communications

Negotiate free in-room Internet, as well as free or flat-rate meeting room Internet.

Bring your own routers for use in the command center and meeting rooms, allowing you to split one Internet connection between several users.

5. Premiums

Negotiate with the hotel for:

- Comp rooms for site tours, executive suites and/or future travel
- Drink vouchers for the hotel bar
- Discount coupons for local entertainment
- Free rounds of golf
- Clothing or other branded items
- Vouchers for golf /tennis



Measuring Your ROI: 4 Ways

As an accounting formula, determining ROI needs hard numbers. Meeting Planners International, in partnership with the ROI Institute, has developed a comprehensive methodology for quantifying the return on investment for a meeting. However, many contend that it is extremely difficult to isolate the meeting's contribution to a sales increase or productivity gain, as there are many other factors involved in success or failure. For example, a product launch meeting could be incredibly successful, but the product itself is fatally flawed. Does that mean that the meeting failed?

In addition to the complexities of isolating the meeting contribution to revenue gains or cost savings it should also be noted that not all meetings require the time, effort and detail required to develop a meaningful ROI analysis. Depending upon the scope and importance of the meeting, different levels of measurement can be employed.

Each level has a corresponding set of tactics that can be used to uncover the results.

Level One: Reaction

This measures attendees' (and management's) perceptions and satisfaction with the meeting presenters, format, and logistics. Planners typically do this sort of measurement using evaluation forms during or shortly after the event.

Attendee satisfaction does not always translate into achieving meeting objectives, but satisfaction has great impact on learning (Level 2). A positive reaction does not always guarantee learning; but a negative reaction always reduces the possibility.

It's important to develop a historical perspective so planners can track improvements from meeting to meeting. This allows them to repeat what works while discarding what doesn't.

Level Two: Learning

This measures changes in attendees' knowledge, skills and/or attitudes. Depending on the meeting's purpose, the focus could be on any one, or all, of these dimensions. Importantly, this level (and each level that follows) requires pre- and post-testing to track whether the meeting content was received and internalized.

Level Three: Transfer

This level measures behavior changes evidenced when attendees return to work. This looks beyond whether the message was internalized and ascertains whether or not the employees act on what they learned. This may involve any combination of pre- and post-surveys, on-the-job observations, management interviews, and performance evaluations. For example, you might measure new product speed to market -- how quickly do your sales associates make a new product presentation to all of their accounts, and how many accounts authorize new or increased business.

Level Four: Results

This measures the effectiveness of the meeting in terms of whether or not the business objectives were, in fact, met. Getting to these hard numbers generally requires more analysis than the other levels, and the results often occur over time, so it's often difficult to isolate the meeting's direct contribution to the achievement of the business objective.

A simple way to determine the meeting's contribution to results over time is to look at the investment in the meeting as a percentage of the total investment in an initiative. Then use that percentage to roughly calculate the meeting's contribution to the revenue gain realized. This should not be construed as a true ROI calculation, but can help provide a broad view for planning and initial accounting purposes.



The Bottom Line: Balancing the Experience and the Expense

We began this discussion by acknowledging that as technology has transformed the way people interact, the indisputable value of person-to-person engagement has to be balanced against both the hard costs of producing and conducting a meeting and the human capital cost in time and effort. With this article, we have offered suggestions that can help make the ROI equation work by maximizing the return and minimizing the investment. They are based on 20+ years of experience of producing successful corporate meetings – live and virtual – for some of the world’s best-known companies.

About MossWarner:

MossWarner is a marketing & communications agency with offices in Orange County, California and the New York Metro area, helping companies inform, engage, inspire and motivate their customers, business partners and employees since 1990. We produce meetings around the world and around the corner. We handle the agenda planning, creative development, content production, and all technical logistics, working closely with clients, meeting planners and venues to produce engaging events that deliver high ROI.

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