

Value of Face-to-Face Meetings Resonates Even More Today

By David M. Brudney, ISHC, October 2010

I've been writing a lot lately about group meeting demand returning - - very good news for hoteliers and conference centers everywhere.

Obviously, this much-anticipated demand increase could be stalled depending upon various economic factors and the upcoming mid-term elections.

In order to give some support to my opinion, I thought now would be a good time to revisit some of my pre-recession writings along with other documents and quotes acquired over the past two years.

One document that caught my attention was a report (Forbes Insights, "Business Meetings: The Case for Face-to-Face") published in 2009. Forbes Insights surveyed more than 750 business executives about their meeting and travel preferences. Significantly, the executives were asked about "meeting options" and what types of outcomes - - and chief benefits - - they might expect from different meeting methods.

According to the Forbes Insights survey:

- ❑ 84% preferred in person, face-to-face meetings - - only 16% preferred "technology-enabled" meetings
- ❑ 85% preferred the face-to-face meetings because they "build stronger, more meaningful business relationships"
- ❑ 75% of those execs surveyed said face-to-face meetings allowed for "more social interaction, ability to bond with co-workers/clients"
- ❑ 77% said face-to-face meetings provide "ability to read body language and facial expressions"

And let's not forget that 90% of human communication is non-verbal - - it's pretty hard to read the non-verbal via webconferencing, videoconferencing and various virtual meetings.

The survey findings - - no surprise to me - - complement some of the quotes and data I referenced in an article of mine in April 2009 ("Time for Hotel Sales Professionals to Lobby Meeting Planners"). Talking points lifted from USTA's "Meetings Mean Business" site:

- ❑ Meetings (events and responsible incentive trips) are "essential tools for companies to strengthen business relations"
- ❑ Meetings "reward business performance"
- ❑ Face-to-face and responsible incentive trips "build trust, afford attendees opportunities for bonding, growth and networking"
- ❑ Meetings "align and educate employees and customers"

- ❑ Meetings are “strategic tools that deepen employee relationships and contribute to the overall health of companies”

Forbes Insights survey respondents said face-to-face meetings are best for:

- ❑ Persuasion – 91%
- ❑ Leadership – 87%
- ❑ Engagement – 85%
- ❑ Inspiration – 85%
- ❑ Decision making – 82%
- ❑ Accountability – 79%
- ❑ Candor – 78%
- ❑ Focus – 75%
- ❑ Reaching a consensus – 71%

In remarkable contrast, only 30% or less said webconferencing, videoconferencing and teleconferencing are best for persuasion, leadership, engagement, inspiration, decision-making, accountability, and reaching a consensus.

And let us not overlook that ever-important bottom line:

- ❑ According to a recent survey of Fortune 1,000 chief marketing officers, meeting and events “provide the highest R.O.I. of any marketing channel”
- ❑ “A 5% increase in employee retention can generate a 25% to 85% increase in profitability”
- ❑ “Companies with satisfied employees generate better overall returns”
- ❑ “Firms on the list of ‘100 Best Companies to Work For’ generate up to five times as much return as their competitors”

Meeting planners - - in particular, those new to the game, less experienced - - need reminding of these strong arguments for face-to-face meetings and events. Some will need these talking points as they make their case to senior management.

Hotel sales professionals have a real opportunity here to reinforce the importance of face-to-face meetings with their meeting planning clients and prospects - - remember, this anticipated uptick in meeting demand will not occur automatically. There’s little doubt some serious nudging would help a great deal.

And those hotels expecting to benefit from this anticipated meeting demand would be wise to check out the results of another recent survey conducted by the International Association of Conference Centers. Here are the Top 10 most important items for Complete Meeting Packages (CMPs) - - ranked 0-10, “10” best:

- 9.8 Food & Beverage - - customize menus for special dietary requirements
- 9.7 Meeting Room - - unobstructed views in meeting rooms; no pillars

- 9.7 Technology - - at least one complimentary high-speed Internet connection
- 9.6 Technology - - skilled on-site AV/IT technicians
- 9.6 Guestroom - - wireless high-speed Internet access
- 9.6 Meeting Room - - acoustically rated walls to eliminate sound distraction
- 9.5 Technology - - at least one LCD projector
- 9.5 Business Services - - a single point of contact/one-stop-shop conference mgr.
- 9.5 Financial - - easy-to-read, one-page invoice
- 9.3 Meeting Room - - individually controlled meeting room climate control

While those execs surveyed preferred overwhelmingly face-to-face v. virtual meetings, it is very apparent that technology continues to play a vital role in the success of any meeting, but only as meetings "enablers", not total substitutes.
