



How can companies make their annual company meetings more interactive and valuable? Nicola O'Connell gets the views of Kevan Hall, CEO of Global Integration, about what needs to change.

The mere thought of the 'big annual meeting' is enough to make some employees despair. This is when people are expected to take a couple of days out of their schedules to listen to senior managers droning on about figures achieved and ambitious plans for the coming year. Much of this has little bearing on an individual's day-to-day job, and, what's worse, the dull presentations are often followed by forced social situations.

Are such get-togethers useful? They can be used for brainstorming, agreeing strategy, celebrating successes, building community and motivation for the following year. But in too many cases the meetings are not successful enough to warrant their costs and the amount of time that they consume. All too often, people return to their offices feeling more resentful for the wasted time

and company funds, rather than fired up to tackle the following year's challenges.

Global Integration, which has consulted with over 300 major multinationals and trained more than 50,000 people, has observed many of the key errors that businesses make when it comes to organising major meetings. Its international CEO, Kevan Hall, believes that too many organisations fail to make these events successful because they stick by the same tired format of multiple passive presentations.

Celebration, learning and closure

Hall believes that the single biggest mistake that managers make at such events is to share what they have done throughout the year – rather than what they have learned

or what is transferable. He said: "Annual meetings should focus on three things: celebration, learning and closure. It's important to celebrate successes and highlight specific achievements but, if it's been a bad year, the effort should still be recognised – with a focus on what has been learned."

Another problem, says Hall, is irrelevant senior management presentations.

"What is happening in IT probably is not relevant to sales, for example, so the audience doesn't want to have to sit through and listen to all of that," he said. "People want to hear from the chief executive how the business is doing at a high level, what the business has achieved that year, any particular recognised contributions and what is important for next year."

Key points

- Annual meetings need to focus on three things: celebration, learning and closure.
- People want to hear from the chief executive how the business is doing at a high level, what the business has achieved that year, any particular recognised contributions and what is important for next year.
- Passive consumption of information is not a good enough reason to get together.

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Problems in such meetings are often compounded by the sheer boredom of the style of so many presentations – or ‘death by PowerPoint’.

“Passive consumption of information is not a good enough reason to get together these days,” Hall stated. “If all you are doing is transmitting large amounts of information, why not email it? People should also ask themselves how important that information is to the audience anyway. If the only way you can get people to pay attention to your information is to sit them down in a room then, almost by definition, this information isn’t worth receiving.”

Encourage interaction

Rather than force people to yawn through a long PowerPoint presentation, the information could be presented in a trade show. So, if companies swap six 45-minute presentations for six booths, allowing participants to circulate and talk to the people they are interested in, they would find that people retain far more information and enjoy the experience.

Hall recommends that each booth has a subject expert who has a small display of information or poster. He said: “This allows people to ask specific questions of interest and to circulate in smaller groups, promoting higher levels of interaction. If you create interaction from the start, you’ll encourage plenty of conversation throughout the event.”

Citing an example of a meeting he facilitated last year, on behalf of a leading player in the food and beverage industry, Hall explains how a four-day meeting with 300 people was designed to be as interactive as possible. Hall advised doing as few PowerPoint presentations as possible and by far the biggest success of the event was the two-day trade show.

“After the second day, the audience members spontaneously asked for more time to do the tradeshow. You never get people asking for more time to do PowerPoint presentations!” said Hall.

‘Blank paper sessions’ proved to be another major success of the meeting. Within this exercise, different subject experts asked delegates a number of questions (for

example, what do you think we need to focus on next year and/or what are the priorities from your point of view?) Once the responses were completed, the experts grouped the responses to show they were listening and explained how they would build these points into their plan – or not.

“The important thing is to keep making a ‘state change’. If people have been sitting down for 20 minutes, then it’s time for them to do something else, like have a group discussion. Interaction with people is more important than interaction with screens. Most people spend much of their days in front of screens,” said Hall. “It is particularly important to set the tone at the beginning of the meeting. If you present to an audience with no opportunity for interaction for the first hour, then you are training them that you want them to just shut up and listen. Don’t be surprised if you then fail to get questions and participation.”

Forced socialising or useful networking?

At best, the socialising part of annual get-togethers is enjoyable and provides a good opportunity for employees to catch up with one another. At worst, it is awkward and feels forced, leaving people feeling trapped and wondering why they are obligated to be part of it.

Free time during conferences has the potential to be highly beneficial. It’s no secret that some people find the coffee breaks the most useful part of any organised event. They value the chance to network freely and have face-to-face conversations with people who are usually only phone and email contacts.

Companies, however, often fail to maximise these opportunities. In their quest to provide a relaxed and social environment, they typically arrange activities where good networking with many colleagues becomes restricted – such as a formal sit-down meal, a visit to a theatre or a disco/dance where the music is usually far too loud for any proper conversation.

“A celebration is important – it can be used to recognise success and make people feel good,” said Hall, “but the nature of the event should lend itself towards making networking and conversation easy. Go to any great party and you will have some people dancing while others just want to chat. My advice is to provide areas where people can talk if they want to – and mix up seating arrangements so that people can mingle more easily.”

Less really is more when it comes to big annual meetings. Tempting as it might be to pack as much in as possible, this will backfire, Hall believes. He said: “Don’t start at 8am and work through until 10pm. People just cannot pay attention for that long and it inhibits networking.”

“Don’t overdo the duration either. Even with the best meetings, four days is enough time with your colleagues. Building a community is beneficial – but you can get too much of that. The best meetings are those that are well-organised with plenty of variety; are interactive with sufficient opportunity for everyone to participate, and are as brief as possible. If you can get through everything in little more than a couple of days, then so much the better.”

By Nicola O’Connell

How to stop the dreaded annual meeting

- Don’t focus on what everyone else has spent the year doing. Don’t give individuals or departments the time to present. Most people simply will not be interested. Alternatives like ‘trade shows’ can be much more relevant.
- Scrap best practice reviews. People tend to present what they are proud of, but not what the audience needs. Instead consider asking the audience what they want to learn about in advance and offer short, flexible sessions where they can ask subject matter experts what they need to know.

- Forget passive presentations. Face-to-face time should be for participation, not consumption. If you must present, make it short, participative and interactive. Better yet, take a more spontaneous approach, inviting feedback from colleagues.

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