

Technology provides instant access and convenience to everyone these days. It is a common sight to see someone checking their Blackberry or sending a text message during a meeting. It's a double-edged sword. We're all more productive on the road these days, but for the company who is spending extravagantly trying to create a meaningful meeting experience, it is getting harder to appeal to an audience so hooked on instant gratification.

An interesting phenomenon is starting to occur, though. It's impossible to overlook the fact that most technology has evolved to keep people more closely connected even if none of us is actually talking face to face. The argument is often made that people seem to be looking for connection more than ever – humanity in a technological society. In reality, human contact and doing good is the only way to reel 'em back in. Your target audience, that is.

We've all heard a lot lately about "Green Meetings" and increasingly, planners are looking for ways to keep meetings close to the majority of attendees to reduce the consumption of fossil fuels. They seek to use food, beverage, and meeting materials responsibly to reduce the "environmental footprint" of their meetings. But in reality, much is out of the planner's hands and depends on the decisions made and policies established by the hotel or convention center they have chosen to host their meeting. Planners can be conscientious in their supplier choices, but in some locales, it is simply not possible to uphold the challenge of adhering to the principles of re-use, reduce, and recycle. In these instances and perhaps in many instances, focusing on what can be accomplished (rather than conserved) in the context of a meeting might be a refreshing approach.

The focus on volunteerism and giving back in American culture appears to be here to stay. Taking care of each other and common decency is nothing new, but for generations, ideas of philanthropy were the exclusive province of the very wealthy. Not so much these days. Everyone knows that big companies get big tax write-offs for charitable donations, but, according to Scott Tattar (who runs the Corporate Social Responsibility practice at LevLane Public Relations in Philadelphia), American consumers are increasingly drawn to companies who "Seek to do good in the communities in which they do well."

Maybe it's time for volunteerism and corporate social responsibility to find their way more permanently into the fabric of our industry. Maybe doing good and including calculated acts of local kindness are an interesting means for increasing the ROI of a meeting. Maybe the way to reach tech'd-out meeting attendees is to help them do good while their employer foots the bill...as Tattar says, "Corporate America is the real driver of social change, and frequently their actions create the positive domino affect to encourage all to take action."

Charitable initiatives such as Alex's Lemonade Stand and fundraising walks of all kinds are a common occurrence in the American workplace. In recent years, teambuilding companies have created such great options as "Build a Bike" programs. These programs work by having teams of meeting-goers assemble bikes that are immediately donated to community organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs of America. But this is the tip of the iceberg; plans for giving back to the community in which a meeting is hosted are limited only by imagination.

Realistically, using a reputable DMC in the market you're planning in is essential. Planners are stretched thin, and good DMCs are not only experts in their markets, but are resources

for creativity and local flavor. In New Orleans, for example, DMC Bonnie Boyd & Co. actually specializes in “Voluntourism.” While the need for this new specialty was clearly created by Hurricane Katrina, these types of community-based initiatives are inspiring and repeatable in almost any market, but knowing where to look is key.

Ideas for new angles to keep meeting-savvy attendees engaged and surprised are becoming increasingly hard to come by. Adding a component of giving back to the community that hosts a meeting amounts to a guarantee that the planner will hit the mark for their audience, for their client, and for themselves.

Here are some practical tips to keep in mind as you plan to give back:

1. Remember that any charitable activity within the context of a meeting needs to be clearly explained. When people arrive at the meeting room, have teams and individual responsibilities clearly delineated and provide plenty of guidance to help people adhere to a time-line. Nothing is worse than a situation where people who are trying to do good are confused or working at cross-purposes!
2. It is crucial to relate the charitable activity to the meeting content. Connect the company’s mission or product to the act of doing good in a community.
3. Consider, first and foremost, the recipients. If the beneficiaries of the charitable donation are children it may be tempting to have them at the meeting to receive the gifts, but it’s not always appropriate. While you want to have your meeting attendees see the direct results of their efforts, you do not want to make anyone feel uncomfortable, least of all the people you seek to help.
4. Find out if the organization you’re planning for has links to charitable entities. You will have served multiple purposes for your client.
5. It is advisable to find an organization that has a demonstrated track record and a broad appeal. People want to connect with charitable organizations that are well-run and have low administrative overhead.
6. Make sure that the gift fits the need. For example, if you are assembling care packages, find out whether or not the charity has ample and secure storage. The gift should not create a financial or logistical burden for the recipient organization.
7. Seek to find matching donations in any way possible. If you are building bikes, see if the manufacturer will donate a bike for every two that you purchase to give to charity. If you are assembling hygiene kits for shelters, see if you can get products donated. If you need to have things delivered, see if a local courier service is willing to assist.
8. Bear in mind that planning events such as these is not an easy task, but it carries far-reaching benefits including increased ROI. Meeting attendees will leave feeling that they have personally contributed and that their company cares about more than their bottom line.
9. Seek assistance – there are a lot of logistics to consider. Ask a reputable DMC to help you navigate the challenge.
10. Relax. Even though you are introducing what will in all likelihood be a new concept, people will be receptive.

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