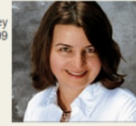


Measuring a meeting's return on investment

by Jeanne O'Brien Coffey
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ET Using ROI metrics can be a helpful tool in justifying your next meeting — to your own team or to other stakeholders.

The party is over. With every kind of company scrutinizing every dollar, chopping unnecessary spending and keeping close tabs on even the appearance of excess, only the most essential meetings are likely to survive. Confabs are already being cut. The Meeting Planners International/American Express 2009 FutureWatch survey of the meetings industry predicts a 9 percent reduction in the number of meetings held in 2009—and that is likely just the start.

"In this economy, very few legacy programs will continue without being scrutinized," says Todd Hanson, president and founder of Catalyst Performance Group, a people-performance management company in Appleton, Wis. So any meeting that continues to happen just because it always has will probably come under the microscope, he says, adding, "As we move forward, [meeting] money will be invested, rather than just spent."

The trouble is, proving that meetings are a worthwhile investment has never been high on anyone's list. But now it has to be. The following five-step process can help guarantee that events deliver maximum return on investment.

STEP 1: Set Specific Objectives and measurable goals



It all starts with determining a meeting's objective. As Marge Anderson, associate director of the Energy Center of Wisconsin and organizer of the Better Buildings, Better Business conference, explains, "The more time you can spend on developing really clear objectives, the more likely you are to get a high return on your investment."

Surprisingly, few meeting owners actually invest the necessary time in this first step—but without it, there is nothing to measure. Most meeting objectives tend to be very general, says Dr. Jack Phillips, chairman of the ROI Institute. To make sure that an event meets expectations, Phillips suggests creating objectives that explore the specifics of learning (what attendees will take away from the meeting), application (what you want them to do as a result of the meeting) and impact (if they do it, what will happen?). Establishing these objectives gives focus to the speakers, participants, sponsors and organizers, so everyone keeps the endgame in mind when preparing for the event.

Anderson understood her objective—to encourage attendees to build more energy-efficient homes. Using a complex set of equations, she and her staff were able to calculate how much energy was saved and translate it into a dollar value. But not every meeting has a distinct financial outcome. Networking, introducing a merger or presenting a new corporate strategy can be just as important. That's why some organizations prefer the term ROE (Return on Event), says Ira Kerns, managing director of MeetingMetrics, an online service designed to assist meeting professionals in measuring a wide variety of meeting outcomes, including psychological and motivational factors.

Measuring non-financial results is made easier through a pre-meeting survey, he says, which gives a baseline against which to compare improvements, while also setting attendees' expectations for the meeting by getting them to focus on the purpose of the event.

Not many planners have the luxury of a pre-meeting survey, especially with ever shorter lead times. That was the case when Cordelia Hecko, project manager for Concepts Worldwide, a strategic meeting management consulting company in Carlsbad, Calif., set out to measure the return on investment for a sales and training meeting she planned in Cancun for one of her clients, a technology company that had recently been acquired. Without a pre-meeting survey baseline, Hecko worked closely with the client to set measurable goals: to increase revenue by 10 percent for existing customers and 5 percent for new customers.

The company also wanted to motivate and reward its sales staff, as well as teach them about the new parent company and its sales and marketing strategies. To measure these less tangible attributes, Hecko turned to MeetingMetrics for help in choosing questions for a post-event survey. "The toughest part is figuring out which questions to ask," she says. "We couldn't ask too many, and your data is only as good as the questions you ask."

STEP 2: Target education and create takeaways that emphasize the meeting goals

Crafting an agenda that reflects objectives and goals, as well as the learning style of the participants, is an important way to improve ROI. At the Energy Center, the staff trains presenters to create engaging seminars for their bolder attendees.

"In a world that is mostly death by PowerPoint, we've worked really hard to create an active learning program," says Anderson, who adds that that training is expensive but has paid off.

While most meeting owners strive to ensure that onsite seminars reflect meeting goals, many neglect a post-meeting call to action. Even so, providing useful takeaway materials can go a long way toward boosting ROI.

At a national sales meeting for Clark National, an Elk Grove Village, Ill.-based food-service packaging and janitorial specialist, the main objective was to train sales staff on a companywide restructuring that reorganized them into groups that sold specific silos instead of broad categories. The training materials used in the meeting were specifically designed for application in the field, explains Hanson, who helped plan and measure Clark's event. This assisted retention, which in turn contributed to the company's 338 percent return on investment at the event—meaning that for every dollar spent on the meeting, there was a \$338 increase in sales directly attributable to it, according to an online survey conducted by Catalyst five months after the event.

"Education and training are often the first things cut in tough economic times," notes Michael G. Sengstock, corporate vice president of sales and marketing at Clark. "[The ROI] study helped us to quantify the value of education and training in our business environment, so that we can justify the investment and reap the long-term benefits for our company."

STEP 3: Stick to your budget

If your costs are spiraling out of control, a high ROI is just a pipe dream. "People get off-track and get all tied up in the destination, or they tack on their own pet projects to the meeting," Anderson says. "You have to streamline to ensure you meet your goals."

That isn't to say that you have to downscale your event. After all, moving the annual sales conference from a five-star resort to the motel down the street is not likely to inspire participants and engender loyalty. "The way to prosperity can't be just cutting costs," Anderson says.

The proof is in the pudding: The tech company whose meeting was put together by Concepts Worldwide didn't skimp on the details—the four-day program cost \$1.6 million. That figure includes the cost of having 200 employees out of the office for four days, as well as all the direct costs of the event. Not only was the meeting held in Cancun, but it also offered social and networking opportunities, a motivational element and training sessions. The meeting saw a 200 percent return on investment. Some \$4.9 million in increased profits could be attributed directly to the sales meeting.

STEP 4: Do a comprehensive post-event survey

While most meeting owners conduct a satisfaction survey at the end of an event, the standard questions don't provide much data on what participants really got from the meeting.

"Post-meeting questionnaires spend a lot of time asking, 'Did you like it?'" notes Anderson. What questionnaires should really explore is if behavior has changed, which isn't a factor you can measure at the meeting. In Anderson's case, she checked back with the attendees at the Better Buildings, Better Business conference two months after the event—no small task, since contractors don't tend to use email often. Instead, surveyors called the participants on their cell phones at 7:30 a.m. to catch them on their way to work. But it was worth the effort. Calculating the changes these contractors reported making in everything from using energy-efficient windows to improved insulation enabled Anderson to determine her 425 percent return on investment.

When measuring a sales meeting or other corporate event, reaching the attendees is likely to be easier than reaching contractors, but the timeline might be even longer. Concepts Worldwide waited eight months before following up on the Cancun event with the tech company's attendees. The online survey asked attendees how frequently they applied what they learned, as well as actual sales data, which they annualized to determine the 200 percent return on investment.

To ensure that you get data when you go back to participants post-event, especially with such a long timeline, the ROI Institute's Phillips suggests planting the seeds early, perhaps even with the announcement of the meeting. That way, you can ensure that attendees are prepared when you approach them months later to collect data. As a bonus, you're also getting everyone focused on the results right from the start. "It changes the dynamic of the meeting," Phillips says.

STEP 5: Invest in continuous improvement

The post-meeting questionnaire should also aim to get attendees to tell you what areas of the event need improvement, which will allow you to focus on building greater ROI in the future. "Measuring provides an interesting retrospective, but also allows continuous improvement to be fact-based," notes Hanson. At the meeting he put together for Clark, the ROI study identified gaps in learning that will be addressed at this year's meeting. For example, while attendees absorbed product knowledge, it became clear during the survey, five months later, that they didn't fully understand the alignment of their roles with the overall corporate strategy.

With the restructuring, Hanson says, it was important to company executives that the sales staff understand how they fit into helping the company meet its overall goals, so that will be reemphasized at the next event.

Take these lessons to heart, and your event will become a must-hold rather than a must-cut, says MeetingMetrics' Kerns. "The economy has changed everything," he says. "Meetings that aren't designed to be measured or aren't measured will disappear."

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