

Chapter 1

Gearing Up for Meetings and Events

In This Chapter

- ▶ Deciding whether a meeting or event is necessary
- ▶ Distinguishing between meetings and events
- ▶ Inviting the right participants
- ▶ Determining meeting length and location
- ▶ Asking for planning assistance

Meetings and events can be a total waste of time, or they can be powerful and productive communication tools that solve problems, stimulate ideas, promote team spirit, and generate action. The end results lie totally in how they're run. These days, people seem to be meeting more, enjoying it less, and growing increasingly frustrated that they have so little time to get their "real" work done. Executives can spend as much as 50 percent of their working hours in meetings, and much of that time is unproductive — often it's wasted discussing irrelevant issues.

Having experienced the wonderful sense of satisfaction from productive sessions, as well as the frustration and anger from ineffective sessions, I believe the key to success lies in preparation and organization, as well as the actual meeting management. In this chapter, I encourage you to make thoughtful choices about when to hold meetings and events, and when to use other means to accomplish your goals. I also begin to lay the groundwork for making your business functions — from small meetings to international trade fairs — productive and fun.

Being Wise About Holding Meetings

Are meetings really necessary? Well, sometimes they are, and sometimes they aren't. Wisdom lies in knowing the difference.

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Ineffective meetings: Avoiding common mistakes

It's easy to make mistakes running meetings. However, if you learn to recognize common problems, you can increase your chances for a more successful and effective meeting. Here's what to avoid:

- ✓ Taking up more time than necessary
- ✓ Allowing one participant to dominate the entire meeting
- ✓ Permitting the meeting to be a one-way dialogue
- ✓ Leaving items discussed hanging with no completion date or action plan
- ✓ Allowing the discussion to ramble on into unrelated topics
- ✓ Rejecting wacky or creative ideas without a second thought
- ✓ Including discussion points that aren't relevant to the people present
- ✓ Inviting too many people and diluting the group's effectiveness

Humans need a connection with others to survive. I'm sure that, like me, you may occasionally fantasize about being alone on a desert island, far away from the trials and tribulations of everyday life. But people also need to belong, communicate, and share a common purpose with like-minded individuals. In essence, what this means is simply that meeting is a natural function of our existence. In reality, doing things alone for any length of time is counterproductive. Working in partnership with others and pooling resources can lead to getting things done more effectively and efficiently.

People need to come together to share information, make decisions, plan, discuss, argue, question, iron out differences, celebrate, gossip, chitchat, schmooze, and much more. Families, schools, clubs, businesses, and governments are key examples of groups of men, women, and children who regularly come together for specific purposes.

These days, with the plethora of entrepreneurs operating home-based businesses and employees telecommuting or working endless hours in front of computer screens, meetings are becoming even more necessary for people's survival. The need for human interaction is critical. In addition, meetings can minimize or eliminate many time-wasting activities such as playing phone tag, sending unnecessary e-mails, or exchanging volumes of paper. But, when you consider the myriad business meetings held every year, many should never (ever) take place. The \$64,000 question is "When should you hold a meeting or organize an event (and when should you not)?"

Choosing to hold a meeting or event

Deciding to hold a meeting or event demands serious consideration because of the many costs involved, both direct and indirect. Direct costs include travel, food, facility rental, and possibly lodging. Indirect costs include people's time and lost productivity. (I cover costs in more detail in Chapter 14.)

People today suffer from *time poverty* — they don't have enough time to do all the things they want and need to do. Based on this realization, the first thing the person responsible for holding a meeting or event has to determine is how necessary it is to meet. Use the following list to double-check your rationale for holding a meeting or event. Some major reasons that justify getting a group of people together include:

- ✓ To communicate or request vital information
- ✓ To achieve a group consensus
- ✓ To respond to questions or concerns
- ✓ To decide on or evaluate an issue
- ✓ To gain acceptance or support of an idea
- ✓ To create awareness of or to sell an idea, product, or service
- ✓ To brainstorm ideas
- ✓ To solve a problem, conflict, or difference of opinion
- ✓ To generate a sense of team spirit
- ✓ To provide training or clarification of a project
- ✓ To provide reassurance on an issue or situation
- ✓ To give new information about your product or company
- ✓ To bring people together outside the normal office environment
- ✓ To launch or introduce a new product/service
- ✓ To offer training opportunities
- ✓ To obtain media exposure

Breaking the meeting habit

Meetings can easily become addictive, but meeting for the sake of meeting is not a productive use of time. Prioritization is key. You must decide whether a

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potential meeting is a must-do, a should-do, or a nice-to-do — eeny meeny miney mo. If any of the following apply to your situation, it's time to consider an alternative to meeting. (For some suggestions, see Chapter 22.)

- ✓ Meeting for the sake of meeting — same time, same place, every week
- ✓ Meeting when the information could be communicated another way
- ✓ Meeting when key people are unavailable
- ✓ Meeting when participants don't have time to prepare
- ✓ Meeting when the costs (both direct and indirect) are greater than the benefits
- ✓ Meeting when other issues blur the issue at hand
- ✓ Meeting when nothing would be gained or lost by not having a meeting

Focusing on Your Purpose

The adage “if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there” directly applies to knowing the purpose of your meeting or event. Naturally, meetings and events can be held for myriad reasons. The key to success is to be crystal clear about your purpose, aim, and end result. Clarify in your own mind the acceptable outcomes. After you have determined acceptable outcomes, your job is to communicate them to the people you want to attend.

People hate being invited to a meeting and not knowing what will be discussed — that's a sure way to start the rumor mill working overtime, cause paranoia to set in, and give people a reason to start assuming the worst. And if your target audience doesn't know the purpose of your event, you can be certain they won't be attending.

To make sure that these scenarios don't occur, you must determine your justification and motivation for holding a meeting or event. Ask yourself three essential questions:

- ✓ What do you expect to accomplish?
- ✓ What do you want participants to do, think, or feel as a result of the meeting or event?
- ✓ What must you do if the meeting or event doesn't accomplish your goals?

The third question is a safety net that forces you to think about a contingency plan. For example, just in case participants don't see eye to eye when

resolving issues or generating new ideas to move a project along, having a prudent follow-up strategy can give you enormous peace of mind. As you know, even the best-laid plans can often go astray.

Differentiating Between Meetings and Events

A multitude of different meetings and events may require your planning expertise. Table 1-1 shows some common business meetings and special events. Although some gatherings clearly fall into one category or the other, there can be some overlap. For example, a sales conference or product launch might be considered a business meeting, or it could be considered a special event — especially if it's held in an exotic location.

Table 1-1 Common Types of Meetings and Events	
<i>Business Meetings</i>	<i>Special Events</i>
Ad hoc and regular committee meetings	Community events
Board meetings	Corporate events
Brainstorming sessions	Facility tours
Conferences, conventions, and trade shows	Fundraising events
Corporate retreats	Grand openings
Incentive meetings	Groundbreakings
Management meetings	Holiday parties
Product launches and presentations	Hospitality suites
Professional organization meetings	Milestone celebrations such as anniversary parties
Public meetings	Open houses
Sales conferences and meetings	Press conferences
Seminars	Reunions
Shareholder meetings	Sponsorship events
Staff or team meetings	Sporting events
Training sessions	Spouse programs

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Figuring Out Who Should Be Involved

Before you decide who to invite to any meeting or event, revisit your purpose and analyze who would be the very best people to help you achieve it. Don't fall into the trap of inviting people just because you don't want to hurt their feelings or because it's the politically correct thing to do. (For more on identifying meeting participants, see Chapter 3.)

Keeping your meetings lean and mean

For the sake of efficiency and productivity, the fewer people involved in a business meeting, the better. Keeping attendance to a minimum enables you to keep the discussion as focused as a laser and get done what needs to get done. Decide on the optimum number of people necessary to give you the result you want. Research indicates that a group of ten is a recommended size for general discussion. However, for making decisions and generating ideas, five to eight is considered optimum.

As you think through your invitation list, remember that certain people must attend, such as those who can help achieve your outcome or who play an important influencing role. Add to that the people with specific expertise who could improve the decision-making process. Also consider including anyone who may be directly affected by decisions made. And finally, you can't go wrong by including a good problem solver or idea generator.

If the purpose of the meeting is simply to impart one-way information to a large group, then naturally everyone should be invited. But bear in mind that a meeting's productivity is inversely proportional to the number of people attending. According to research, when more than five people attend, the meeting's productivity goes down exponentially.

**Susan's simple three-step system**

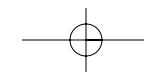
Before you devise your invitation list, try the following three-step system for creating a lean and mean list for optimal meeting productivity:

1. List everyone and anyone you think you should invite.
2. Go through each name and ask yourself two questions: "What will/can this person

contribute to the meeting?" and "What would happen if he/she didn't attend?"

3. Cut your list in half.

Alternatively, try this scenario: If you could invite only three people to your meeting, who would they be? Having this answer in mind would certainly streamline your planning!



Perfect timing

Because the timing of your meeting or event is often the key to its success, I have developed the following ideal meeting time formula:

Use this simple formula, and you should get a perfect answer every time.

Meeting goals + people availability + length of meeting + facility convenience and availability = ideal meeting time



Think twice about inviting those wonderful people who have a volatile or dysfunctional personality or have a reputation for any kind of disruptive behavior at meetings. Also avoid the naysayers. You're looking for positive, constructive discussions rather than negative, destructive ones.

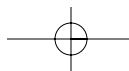
Identifying your event audience

Know your event objectives, and you'll know who belongs on the invitation list. A few guidelines to think about include the following:

- ✓ Consider who has a vested interest in the company, the product, or the event itself. Potential persons include stockholders, upper management, local dignitaries, key employees and their families, customers, and vendors.
- ✓ Think about who made the event possible, such as bankers or other community leaders.
- ✓ Whenever possible, try to build good relationships with the media — print, radio, and TV — and include them on your invitation list.

Knowing How Long a Meeting or Event Should Last

You may think that shorter meetings are more productive than longer ones. However, research illustrates that longer meetings (especially those that last five hours or more) are more likely to be productive than shorter meetings.



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The long and short of it: Meeting length gauge

The following meeting length gauge will help determine how best to break up your meeting to maximize effectiveness.

30 minutes	=	Tolerable
60 minutes	=	Restlessness starts setting in
90 minutes	=	Intolerable danger zone (people need to get up and stretch, take a bathroom break, and have something to eat or drink)

Don't even think about going longer than 90 minutes without having a 5- to 15-minute break.

Studies have shown that the average adult can pay attention in a meeting for approximately 20 minutes before starting to daydream, doodle, or fidget. If you include any kind of presentation, change what you're doing every 8 minutes. For example, switch from an LCD projector to a flip chart or whiteboard.

This doesn't mean that you have to turn all your one-hour meetings into five-hour marathons, but you may want to look into having one long meeting every quarter, for example, rather than holding short weekly or monthly meetings. The end result may increase productivity dramatically.

In the meantime, for those of you who are addicted to the daily, weekly, or monthly must-have meetings, remember to keep them short, sweet, and to the point.

When it comes to events, keep in mind that no one wants to stay longer than they have to. Meticulously plan the necessary activities that make up your event. Encourage your speakers to keep their remarks short and sweet while still accomplishing the event's goals. There's nothing worse than a civic leader in love with his or her own voice droning on unnecessarily.

Finding the Right Setting

The meeting or event location can help make or break your success. The location sets the stage and creates the right environment for the action to happen. Budget, of course, plays a major role. Using your own internal conference room saves money, but is it the right place to meet? Think about a place that minimizes disturbances, offers comfort and convenience, meets your equipment and space needs, and projects the right image. I cover large and small meeting room layouts in Chapter 11.

You also have the choice of going the social route by using breakfast, lunch, or dinner as a meeting time. If building and nurturing relationships is your goal, consider doing business over a shared meal.

For larger events, match the meeting to the facility. For example, consider using a corporate conference center or a secluded resort for training sessions, and many large hotels are equipped for conferences. I discuss venue options in detail in Chapter 5.

Getting Help When You Can

Meeting and event planning is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle: Hundreds of pieces need to fit together for the picture to evolve. The planner or person overseeing the project has multiple responsibilities related to the planning, preparation, development, and execution of an event.

The key to success is really knowing your strengths and also knowing what someone else can do best — in other words, what should be handled internally and what should be contracted to outside experts. Recognize your limitations and seek appropriate help where you can. Depending on your budget, you can outsource many tasks, or maybe you can count on some hidden talent within the four walls of your company. Put on your Sherlock Holmes garb and investigate what gems lie in your own backyard! I give you a more comprehensive understanding of outsourcing in Chapter 13.

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