

# Corporate Incentive Travel

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS



Alternative meeting environments such as this one at SoHoSoleil in Manhattan's trendy SoHo district engage and inspire participants for more effective learning.

Photo courtesy of SoHoSoleil

## Bullet Points For Planners

By Karen Brost

When he wasn't busy discovering the law of relativity, Albert Einstein discovered a thing or two about training. He once said, "I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn." Creating that ideal environment for learners continues to be just as important today.

Thea Lobell, Ph.D., principal of The Strategies Source LLC in Baton Rouge, LA, knows firsthand about the value of creating the right conditions for learning. She's been delivering training programs since 1997. "While I'm passionate about my delivery of training," she said, "the wrong environment can undermine the client's goals for the training."

"You really have to be clear about what you want to accomplish," stated Eleanor Lyons, a partner with Human Edge Resources LLC in Newtown, PA, who has been in the training industry for 17 years. "Be really clear about what you want to walk away with as the meeting owner, but more importantly, what the participants should walk away with. If you're really clear about that from the get-go, you can design your meeting environment to fit that."



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Eleanor Lyons, Partner  
Human Edge Resources LLC, Newtown, PA

out Chicago’s Catalyst Ranch (see sidebar on page 18). Use that for your inspiration.”

Lobell also recommended considering the distance attendees will have to travel. “If participants are expected to drive and return home on the same day, the hotel/conference center should ideally be not more than two hours from their home. If individuals have to drive more than two hours for the training, they are usually tired and unable to perform at their best.”

Alicia Newton, event manager for F+W Media in Cincinnati, took attendees’ drive times into consideration when she planned a regional educational conference for 165 freelance graphic designers and copywriters. The August event took place at the 511-room Omni San Diego Hotel located in the city’s historic Gaslamp Quarter. “We didn’t start on the first day until 4:00 in the afternoon,” she explained. “That gave people plenty of time to drive in throughout the day.” She also noted that the late starting time gave those who arrived early a chance to explore the city.

Newton determined that San Diego was a good fit after considering several locations in Southern California. “We thought it would be a city that would draw, based on the population in that area. From there, we started to whittle down our RFPs, and it came down to who could offer us the best value for our money and what kind of hotel room rate they could give us to extend

back to our freelancers.” Room rates were an important factor in the decision, since attendees paid their own way to the conference.

- **Know thy neighbor.** One thing that can quickly break a group’s attention span is to have a noisy meeting going on in the meeting room next door. “Meeting planners need to check and see which other groups will be there on the same day,” Lobell stated. “Having a large group in the meeting room next door with loud music and cheering is disruptive.”

- **Set up the room for learning.** Lobell believes that the way in which the room is set up can greatly impact the outcome of the training. “To facilitate interaction among participants and comfort for a full day of training, I prefer



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Nick Morgan, Ph.D., Communications Coach  
Public Words Inc., Boston, MA

presentation. If you want to get people involved, walk among them. Circulate.”

- **Defuse distractions.** Having the freedom to walk around the room gives Zahn another advantage. “If there are people who are being distracting and chattering away, if you just walk towards them, they’ll stop talking. People’s eyes follow the facilitator.”

Of course, talking isn’t the only distraction training facilitators have to contend with these days. Attendees often find it difficult to ignore their cell phones and BlackBerrys. Zahn has a solution.

“I will ordinarily announce at the beginning of a presentation that I recognize that people have lives outside of the room that we’re in,” he said. He then tells them, “If you truly must be in contact with the office or home or any other

- **Start with the right location.** Nick Morgan, Ph.D., is an author and communications coach for Boston-based Public Words Inc. He believes that holding training sessions in an unusual setting helps “jolt” participants with new ideas and new experiences.

“Instead of the common ballroom, when hosting a training meeting, look for alternatives,” he recommended. “A good place to start is by checking



Doing exercises, participative surveying and role playing help “to prevent people from nodding off,” said corporate trainer David Zahn.

Photo courtesy of David Zahn

three-quarter rounds,” she stated. “I place participants in rounds but leave the area facing the trainer empty. This way no one has the seats where they have to turn around and not have a table surface to write on during the training.”

David Zahn, president of Zahn Consulting LLC in Wallingford, CT, spends anywhere from 35–40 weeks each year doing training programs for corporate clients. He offered some advice for facilitators. “Set up the room so you have an aisle to go up and down. Do not stand behind a podium as if you’re making this grandiose





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Angela Gala  
Principal  
Rogers & Gala Creative Partners  
Charlotte, NC

individual, please put your cell phone on vibrate, or if it’s at all possible, if you could turn it off entirely, it would be appreciated. However, if the phone should ring and you are needed, I respectfully request that you take that call outside the room so as not to further distract us.

“By and large, most people are respectful,” he continued. “What happens more commonly is that people have forgotten because they’ve just come from a break and forgot to turn it off.”

have far more breaks than I did in years past. I used to schedule bathroom breaks every 90–120 minutes for 15–20 minutes. Today, I also schedule ‘social media breaks,’ which means that I give five-minute breaks every hour and 15-minute breaks every two hours during each training session. I found that it really helps to keep the attention of the participants.”

Newton also finds that attendees need more breaks than in the past. As a result, to give them ample time to take care of business, she now schedules a two-hour lunch break in addition to the regular morning and afternoon breaks. “No one person can just sit there and dial in from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and concentrate,” she said. “It’s impossible.”

- **Focus on audio-visual.** Audio-visual equipment also plays a critical role in the learning process. “This is the area I’ve seen the most mistakes made by both meeting planners and trainers,” said Lobell. “Approximately 8 percent of the general population of the United States has some type of hearing impairment. As the age of participants increases, the rate of hearing impairments increase substantially. If there are 25 or more participants, the trainer needs a microphone.

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Crystal Kendrick, President  
The Voice of Your Customer, Cincinnati, OH

“Sometimes,” she continued, “trainers ask ‘Can everyone hear me? I talk loudly. I don’t think I need a microphone today.’ Individuals with hearing impairments are more than likely not going to raise their hands and say ‘I can’t hear you.’ They shouldn’t have to self-identify with any type of disability to a room full of possible strangers. Meeting planners and trainers should assume their

participants have hearing impairments and use microphones.”

How well attendees can see is another factor to consider. “From an ambient condition perspective, lighting is critical,” Zahn explained. “What happens all too often is that somebody creates a PowerPoint with a 12–14 point font [size], with a dark background and a non-contrast lettering font. Then they lower the lights to try to create as much of a contrast as they can from the projection device. People start squinting. It causes static and confusion from a visual perspective.

“The next thing is too many words on a slide,” he added. “You want to use bullet points on the slides to cause the facilitator to remember the points, not to create a novel on the screen.”

Even something as simple as how flip charts are used can make a difference. “Write much larger than you normally would, and only use the top two-thirds of the flip chart,” Zahn noted, explaining that participants’ views are often blocked by the people who are sitting in front of them.

Zahn brought up another interesting point that relates to PowerPoint presentations and flip charts: “Be aware that a large percentage of men are color blind to the color red, so use red sparingly.”

- **Keep it interactive.** Lyons stressed the importance of maintaining the right balance between training and facilitation. “With adults, you’re better off if you have a facilitative style,” she said. “That creates an environment that opens up dialogue to test the concept and push back on the facilitator. You need a facilitator that can be pushed back on, somebody who’s not afraid to learn when they’re up there facilitating.

“Even when you have to teach a concept or a model or a mindset, that should be seven minutes, or 10 minutes maybe, then get them into an activity where they can discuss it, apply it or challenge it.” Otherwise, she explained, adults will lose interest.

“Be intentional about making your training active,” said Angela Gala, principal of the Charlotte, NC-based event planning firm Rogers & Gala Creative Partners. “Avoid ‘death by PowerPoint’ and engage your group with the training and with each other. People learn more by doing than by listening.”

“Think about your training seminar as a kinesthetic opportunity,” Morgan stated. “Give your attendees the opportunity to touch, hold or do. Provide props or tactile objects as part of the training. Instead of showing a photo on a slide, bring in the real object. It provides for a better learning opportunity and gives people something to talk about.”

Newton described a method her company uses to encourage interaction among attendees. “We actually do a breakfast round table,” she said. “We put a different topic up at each table and encourage attendees to sit down and discuss them. They can sit at whatever table they want. It’s more of an open forum conversation to get their creative juices flowing. If they don’t choose to participate, we still have tables set up where they can sit with their peers and talk among themselves. It works well at an event like this because these people are all freelancers, and they really thrive on discussing ideas with people who are in similar situations. That’s what we try to do with this event...create a community of freelancers.”

- **Break the ice.** Sometimes, one of the many goals of a training session is to build relationships among employees and create a sense of teamwork. Lyons offered one simple strategy she has used: “We might assign seats specifically so people can meet new people.” This pre-planned seating arrangement eliminates the possibility of having attendees only sit with people they know, and encourages them to move out of their comfort zone.

Doing some type of icebreaker activity can be another useful strategy. “When you do an icebreaker, it has to be tied to the purpose of the training,” Lyons said. She shared one of her favorite icebreakers: “It’s a lot of fun. You just go to the dollar store and grab a bunch of funky things, anything from office supplies to cotton balls to a bottle of juice, and you put them into a grab bag at each table.”

Attendees are then each directed to take an item out of the bag and create an analogy to it that relates to their job. “I did that for an HR and senior leadership team, and it was about how they see their role on the leadership team.” She gave an example. “If it was a blue pen (he pulled out of the bag), the guy could have said, ‘When I’m on the leadership team, I’m always trying to do some of that blue sky thinking.’”

Laurence J. Stybel, Ed.D., executive in residence at the department of management and entrepreneurship at the Sawyer School of Business in Boston, offered another idea. “I ask each participant to define a hero or heroine in their lives and tell why. It is a good icebreaker because they are immediately revealing something about themselves without seeming to talk about themselves. I intertwine their heroes into my talk.”



The Catalyst Ranch, housed in an historic downtown Chicago building, offers 15,000 square feet of inspirational space spiced up with colorful and eclectic furnishings.

Photo courtesy of Catalyst Ranch

- **Feed their brains.** While attendees need food and drink to keep their energy levels high, too much sugar can have the opposite effect. “I’m not really big on all the sugary stuff,” Lyons noted. “The sugar lasts for a short burst of time, then you’re going to lose them. Feed them protein. It lasts longer.”

Gala offered a few suggestions. “For refreshments during breaks, go for something interesting and interactive but not full of sugar. Have a make-your-own smoothie station where guests can add different vitamins that will boost their energy. Drink machines with limited choices of the smoothie base and hand blenders will make this a lot more efficient.”

She also recommended having a peanut butter and jelly station. “Have unusual toppings and suggestions for building your own (snacks) on the station such as The Uptown Reese’s Sandwich: Peanut butter on chocolate brioche with Nutella. Adding the peanut butter will give a healthy dose of protein to combat the sugar crash.” She also advises placing almond or soy butter on a separate table for those with allergies.

“When possible, I like to be able to include the break refreshments in the room, so that people don’t have to physically leave the room, and they can still participate,” said Zahn. “Rather than having a scheduled break, I like to have it as a constant refreshment.” He explained that this tactic helps avoid disrupting the flow of the training session should the scheduled refreshment break occur at an inconvenient time.

- **Know when to quit.** “What I really try not to do is keep people past 4 p.m.,” Lyons noted. “Once 4:00 rolls around, people are starting to think, ‘Am I going to make my train? Will I be able to pick up the kids?’ If you’ve started at 8:30 or 9:00, that’s a long day.”

- **Make it a two-way street.** “The biggest issue is to get people involved in the training, so it’s not somebody 8]

standing before them lecturing at them,” Zahn said. “That’s key. It’s doing exercises, it’s doing participative surveying and role playing as appropriate. Those would be the things that above all else, people who are trainers need to be considering to prevent people from nodding off.”

Of course, even the best planned training program might “lose” the occasional attendee who gets distracted by something else. When this happens, Zahn offers attendees somewhat of a “get out of jail free” card. He introduces a concept called MEGO, which stands for “My Eyes Glazed Over.” “Upon occasion, I may call on people,” he said, “ but I’m certainly not here to embarrass anybody. So if they weren’t paying attention, I just tell them to call out ‘MEGO!’ and I’ll move on to somebody else.” **C&IT**

## Meet Outside The Box

If the goal is to get employees to think outside the box, it can sometimes be helpful to meet outside the box. As Angela Gala of the event planning firm Rogers & Gala Creative Partners in Charlotte, NC, said, “Choose a venue that’s conducive to your subject. If you are training about something that will require your attendees to be out of their comfort zone, take them someplace they won’t expect. Go to an art museum that has event space or warehouse-style spaces where you can tape big pieces of paper to the walls and write ideas.”

Here are a few venues that offer unique environments for training and brainstorming sessions:

**Catalyst Ranch, Chicago, IL.** This historic 1880s loft-style venue features brightly colored walls, 11-foot ceilings and funky vintage furnishings from the ’40s through the ’70s. With meeting spaces named The Polka Room, The Cha Cha Room, The Mambo Room and The Tango Room, it’s anything but boring.  
[catalystranch.com](http://catalystranch.com)

**SoHoSoleil, New York, NY.** Set in Manhattan’s trendy SoHo district, SoHoSoleil offers a choice of venues including the 3,200-square-foot MeetingSite, which comes equipped with a conversation area with green velvet



Can we have class outside today? At Cincinnati’s Boost! the answer is yes! Boost! offers a rooftop deck for meetings as well as indoor space featuring an urban loft décor.  
Photo courtesy of Boost!



couches, hardwood floors and a professional chef's kitchen. [sohosoleil.com](http://sohosoleil.com)

**The Strategy Loft in Denver bills itself as an “urban think-space.”**

Photo courtesy of Strategy Loft

**Sparkspace, Columbus, OH.** Featuring a choice of meeting spaces called the loft, the retro room, the board room, the zenenergy room and the think tank, sparkspace also offers a variety of teambuilding activities. A few examples are the Five Sparks of Super Service, Urban Adventure, and Spud vs. Stud, an event that teaches participants to build a better team with Mr. Potato Heads. [sparkspace.com](http://sparkspace.com)

**WorkShop, Louisville, KY.** This venue offers a choice of four meeting spaces as well as amenities that include walls of whiteboards, snack canisters, toys and games to stimulate creative thinking, and an outdoor patio. [creativeworkplace.com](http://creativeworkplace.com)

**Boost! Cincinnati, OH.** Named the “Best Place to Have a Non-Boring Meeting” by CityBeat, a local media outlet, Boost! offers 4,600 square feet of meeting space with natural light, hardwood floors and exposed brick walls. [boostmeeting.com](http://boostmeeting.com)

**Strategy Loft, Denver, CO.** The loft's 1,800 square feet of meeting space include three seating areas, dry-erase walls, a kitchen, floor-to-ceiling windows, a basketball hoop and hopscotch court. [strategyloft.com](http://strategyloft.com) — **KB**