



NIK WEST



COURTESY: OPUS HOTEL

Cultural Nuances

Planning international meetings | by Crai S. Bower



CHASE JARVIS

International hotelier John deC. Evans thought designing a hotel within Mexico would prove both stimulating and culturally challenging. He planned to combine business with pleasure on his trips away from Vancouver, Canada, where Evans is president and CEO of Trilogy Properties Corporation. He assumed that, once each day's meeting ended, there would be time to enjoy dinner and explore the area's nightlife. But Evans soon discovered the Mexican workday doesn't really end, ever. "So much business gets done over the table, both at lunch and, especially, at dinner," says Evans, who owns Vancouver's Opus Hotel, considered one of the world's premier properties. "Lunch often runs from 2:30 to 5, then people return to work for a few hours before reconvening for a dinner meeting that typically runs late into the night or, more likely, into the next day." Evans lists time management, a critical skill in

property development, among his strengths, so he found this blurring of social situations and business meetings somewhat challenging at first. Like all successful international businesspeople, Evans learned to adapt. He enjoyed the long dinners and embraced the culture. He would often leave after a series of lengthy Mexican days (and nights!) and fly straight to Montreal to conduct meetings for another Trilogy property, Opus Montreal. "You just have to recognize the cultural differences immediately," the proprietor says. Evans credits his administrative staff with placing him in the right city in front of the right people at the right time. Preplanning is critical, as one cannot be overprepared for any business meeting, especially if it occurs abroad within a narrow window of opportunity. Even within North America, one should plan for cultural differences. Meetings might run differently in Calgary than they do in Chicago, Cancún or in Ketchikan. "You have to brush up on the history and culture of the countries as part of your preplanning," Evans advises, "and tactfully introduce your cultural awareness into the meeting, especially when food is served." Understanding cultural differences and being able to plan well in advance are directly related to

Left: Hotelier John deC. Evans advises, "You just have to recognize the cultural differences immediately." Above: Commercial photographer Chase Jarvis (right) notes, "We are taking our expertise and applying it distinctly to their cultural expectations."

Fairmont Olympic 1/3 sq.

Hotel Bellwether
1/3 sq.

your experience working within a foreign country. When you conduct business within a different culture for the first time, you are bound to make gaffes. The question really is how to avoid a big faux pas.

The ability to change tactics nimbly can prove invaluable, even when the winds of change blow from confounding directions.

"I was working on a three-hour keynote ceremony for the United Nations' International Telecommunications Union" in Geneva, recalls Gail Rice, principal at Seattle-based Silverstein Thomas Rice & Associates. The ceremony included 11 heads of state and four separate drumming performances. Rice also had to schedule a 90-minute UN security check before the ceremony.

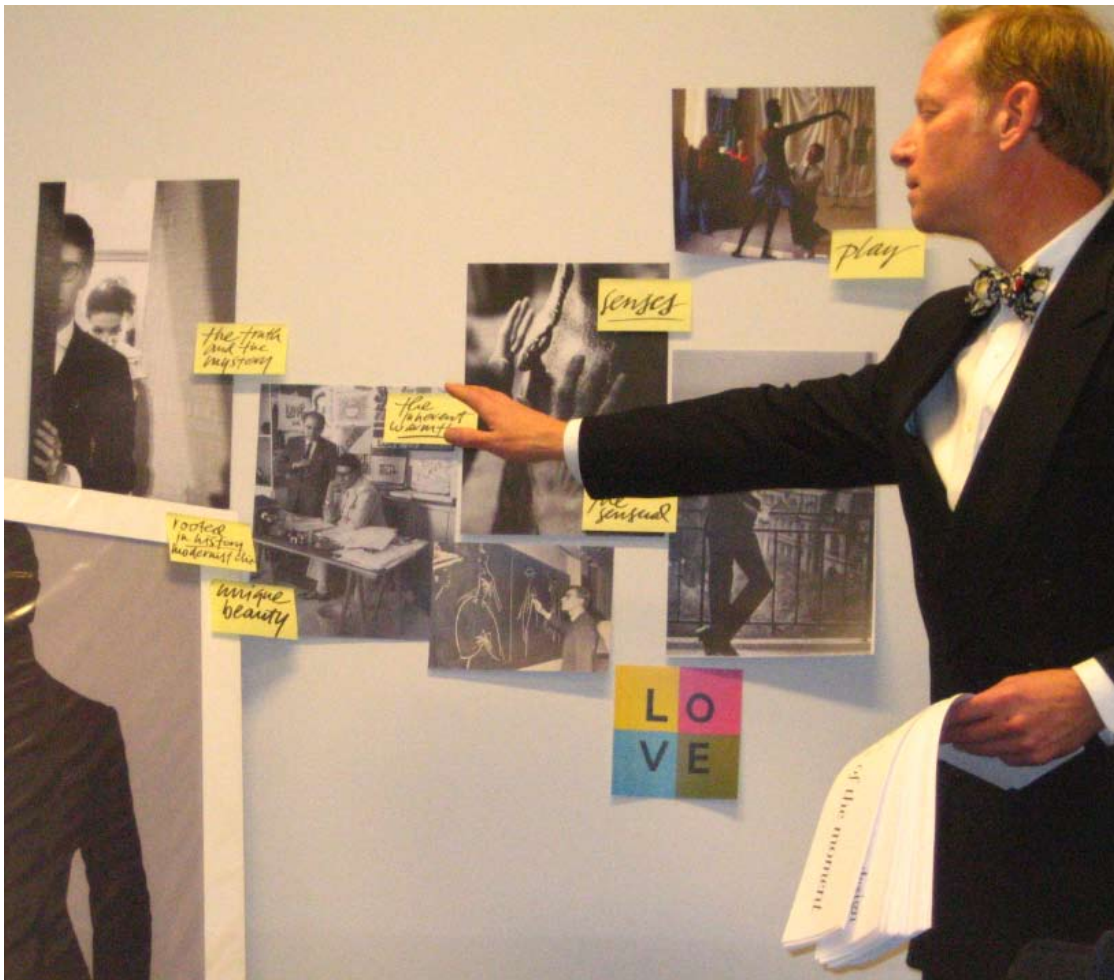
"The local sponsor wanted to have a string quartet play as an interlude in the middle of a two-and-a-half-hour presentation," Rice laughs, "which just didn't work. Yet the "offending" line was very thin, because performances are a vital part of meetings in many countries. So I finally sat down in the middle of the rehearsal for this huge event and had a cup of tea with the local representative to discuss canceling the quartet."

While a direct approach is considered efficient in America, Europeans have a different conversational style, says Rice. "The biggest challenge," she says, "is to determine where the two worlds shall meet."

Preproduction is another key component to a successful international meeting. Draw a comprehensive diagram—or schematic—that covers every possible variable, including the technical. Do that and you can anticipate and avoid problems such as the one Rice once faced in China.

"I was in Beijing for a high-tech business meeting, and we needed to use a high-end projector," says Rice. "First, they didn't have the peripheral equipment [such as cables and microphones], which we had sent overnight. The next day when I came back from lunch, the projectors and soundboard had arrived but they were disassembled. The local AV staff was hovering over them, reading the manuals."

Rice says keys to success include determining the desired outcome of the meeting and always visiting the venue ahead of time. Establish a weekly conference call and maintain status checks with every vendor, every week. Rice says the Internet and e-mail have revolutionized the communication cycle, but she states unequivocally that nothing compares to actually being onsite.



COURTESY: GIRVIN, INC

Like Rice, Chase Jarvis, a globe-trotting commercial photographer (he'll shoot in at least 20 countries this year), remains hypervigilant when it comes to cultural nuances. The action photographer—his video shorts receive thousands of YouTube hits each week—maintains offices in Seattle and Paris.

"My work requires all the subtlety of a corporate meeting," he muses, "only we often conduct our sessions outdoors. When you're trying to film a skier in fading light at 12,000 feet, getting along with the locals is vital."

Jarvis typically selects models and a production crew from the local talent. (He might also take a crew of as many as 35 people, consisting of his own staff and experienced freelancers.) Traveling from Santiago to Atlanta to Aspen to Paris during a two-week span is not atypical, so Jarvis and his team must transition well and focus quickly to be successful. The language barrier is often the first obstacle he faces.

"I always acknowledge and apologize that I don't speak the native language before asking someone if he speaks English. It makes a huge difference," he says. "We also start out with a series of strictly focused meetings. These are completely planned out preproduction meetings with layouts and project goals."

The client's art director and Jarvis work hard to try to eliminate every variable and to make sure

they share the same vision for the project.

Jarvis offers these ABC's of preplanning: (A) Ask lots of questions of all interested parties, so that an agenda is set to keep everyone on the same page; (B) Build in buffers, e.g., extra time for travel mishaps, missed connections, and misunderstandings—unused time can be used for R&R; and (C) Communicate. Before, during, and after the meeting/shoot, there is no substitute for good communication. Ask questions in advance of the meeting, so

"Plan and prepare the presentation," Tim Girvin says. "And practice it, with your entire team, including interpreters."

The Tips and Tricks of Planning International Meetings

- Visit the meeting venue at least once before the event.
- Conduct a dress rehearsal, especially for large meetings.
- Research cultural norms and plan meeting duration, breaks and refreshments accordingly.
- Prepare a primer on cultural nuances; distribute and review it with participants.
- Build in flexibility for unforeseen delays and challenges.
- Draw a diagram, or schematic, to

anticipate and avoid potential issues.

- Predetermine the meeting's desired outcome.
- Have your team learn common phrases, and provide a pocket-size cheat sheet, as well.
- Complete at least one run-through with your interpreters.
- Carefully pack equipment and send it with a reliable carrier.
- Conduct status checks with all of your vendors each week before the meeting.
- Learn to say, "It will be fine" in every language.

Hotel Max
1/3 sq.

Oxarc
1/3 sq.

that planning is accurate and efficient. Afterward, get feedback.

Jarvis' team works arduously to avoid travel-related issues, most notably the equipment's safe passage. Jarvis invests heavily in the best travel cases (including custom-made laptop cases), expedites shipping, tags materials with priority labels and maintains excellent insurance.

While Jarvis travels around the globe shooting primarily for American companies, designer Tim Girvin frequently trav-

“Learn how to interpret what’s being said,” Girvin says. “It’s never about the language translation alone; it’s about what’s really happening.”

els to Asia to design for Asian companies. Girvin is founder of Girvin|Creative Intelligence, a design firm with offices in Seattle and New York City, and with partners in Tokyo. He travels to Asia to assist with complex presentations involving packaging, brand strategy, retail design and environmental graphics.

“We’re not taking American design, per se, and applying it there,” he explains. “We are taking our expertise and applying it distinctly to their cultural expectations. This means that we are specifically creating solutions that are culturally defined, and relevant, to that market.”

Girvin believes there can never be enough preplanning, especially when conducting a meeting in a foreign language.

“If you plan to manage the entire presentation in another language,” he says, “then it’s important to plan and

prepare the entire presentation. And practice it with your entire team, including interpreters!

"Cultural preparation is also essential," the designer continues. "Understand the culture's business formality, even the meeting's pacing. Finally, eliminate possible 'on-the-fly' situations, especially with your translation team."

Girvin adds that running through issues such as phrasings and specific technicalities with the translators in advance can boost a meeting's success. He's also a proponent of learning some of the local language yourself.

"Preparing a few key phrases and greetings serves as a great icebreaker," Girvin says. "Then be open. Listen, pay attention, watch the body language of colleagues and the people to whom you are presenting—learn how to interpret what's being said. It's never about the language translation alone; it's about what's really happening."

But don't assume you understand everything that's going on. Admit you'll always be a foreigner. Presuming you "get it" will be quickly interpreted as arrogant by your hosts.

"Interestingly enough," he adds, "the ability to humble oneself is the fastest way of constructively fostering relationships."

Girvin also says planning for limited rest periods is vital for successive meetings in multiple countries. A predinner nap may be the only rest available in a 20-hour period.

"Know what you need," Girvin advises, "like just when to grab an espresso, when to head out for a brisk walk in the sun, when to break for some boosted energy—and when, finally, to offer the idea that your day might be done."

International business provides an outstanding opportunity to expand one's business and to learn from another country's corporate culture. Staging successful meetings demands proper planning that anticipates cultural differences.

Rice, who has organized meetings from Warsaw to Tokyo, Buenos Aires to Manila, suggests scouting and planning international meetings with the intensity of charting the movements of a Broadway play, complete with a dress rehearsal.

And like Girvin, Rice acknowledges the importance of learning significant phrases from the host lexicon. "We figured out how to say, 'It will be fine' in every language," she says, smiling. ^m

Crai S. Bower is a freelance writer living in Seattle.

Hotel Andra
1/3 sq.

Hotel deLuxe
1/3 sq.