Meetings Of The Minds

The prevailing wisdom in American "big" business is that too many companies hold too many meetings without getting too much of anything done. That viewpoint has been shared by a wide range of prominent business figures, from Tom Peters and Steven Covey to Mike Doonesbury and Dilbert.

I remember some of the meetings I attended during my own apprenticeship in Corporate America. As clichéd as it probably sounds, I have actually attended a meeting to plan a meeting to cut down on the number of meetings that people had to attend.

Having said all of that, though, I think quick/digital/small commercial printers probably don't hold enough meetings. And I think that's a significant contributing factor to the "communications gap" that keeps many printers from realizing their full profit potential.

Internal vs. External

Let's start this discussion by drawing a distinction between *internal* and *external* meetings. By my definition, an *internal* meeting concerns the owner(s) and staff of the printshop. An *external* meeting will involve customers, suppliers or others with some interest in your business.

My policy for external meetings without customers involved is to attend them only when I will gain real value from them. That might mean learning more about a new product or service from a supplier, or meeting with my accountant to stay on top of the financial health of my business. (By the way, you shouldn't have any doubt that your accountant is one of your suppliers. I define that term to mean anyone you pay to provide something you need for your business.) I guess the bottom line here is that I don't go to external meetings without customers involved for fun. If you have the time for that, more power to you.

I'm not sure I go to external meetings *with* customers involved for fun either, but I still want to set and attend as many of those meetings as I possibly can. In my vocabulary, those meetings often go by another name. They're called sales calls!

Team Meetings

Internal meetings aren't completely for fun either, but that's not to say that they can't have a fun component to them. I think a lot depends on how owners and managers perceive their relationships with employees—are they a *staff* that you supervise or a *team* that you lead? Experience has shown that people who think of themselves as a team tend to have more fun at work in general, and they also tend to have more enjoyable and more productive meetings.

Here's another way to look at this issue. You have a *staff*, your challenge is to create a *team*, and the staff/team meeting is one of the tools you can use to make that happen. It might be a production meeting, a sales meeting, or a full-team meeting, and in fact, I think you should be running all three of those on a regular basis.

Set An Agenda

The problem with most business meetings is not that they take time, it's that they waste time. The way to avoid that is to set—and follow!—an agenda. Another key is to hold every participant accountable for both timeliness and whatever preparation may be required.

One of my clients holds a very productive production meeting every morning. The meeting starts at 8:30 AM sharp. When he first started this practice about three years ago, getting started on time was a major issue. Everyone—including him—seemed to run into "situations" that delayed the start of the meeting. Often it wouldn't start until 9:00 AM, and typically three of the four regular participants would spend that half-hour "shooting the breeze" while waiting for the fourth.

I convinced my client that the solution to this problem started with *leadership*, and he made the commitment that he'd never be late for the meeting again. After a couple of weeks during which he was always ready to start the meeting on time, he found that his two key production people and his salesperson started to have fewer "situations" too. During that time, he also earned the credibility to hold these other people fully accountable for being on time.

This "stand-up" meeting now typically lasts less than ten minutes. The agenda is very straightforward. First, the lead press operator runs down the jobs that he expects to print that day, and where he expects each of those jobs to be in terms of press, bindery and/or other operations by the end of the day. He then reports on all of the jobs that have carried over from previous days. Next, the lead prepress person reports on the jobs she's working on, specifically noting which ones she expects to send to the presses or copiers by the end of the day. After that, the owner either approves the daily plan, or directs changes based on his “big picture” understanding of customer needs and business priorities.

I’m sure you’ll agree that this sounds like a pretty efficient meeting. Another of the keys to its success is that the fourth attendee—the salesperson—is not allowed to talk! For her, this meeting is intended to be purely informational. If she has any issues with the approved daily plan, she brings them up with the owner during the next meeting—a short daily discussion of her plans for the day. If the owner feels that her concerns justify changing the plan, he goes back to the lead press operator and/or lead prepress person himself after the conversation with the salesperson.

Sales Meetings

A short “stand-up” sales meeting every morning is one of two formats I recommend. The second is a weekly “sit-down” meeting which should probably last for at least an hour. The agenda I recommend is to talk first about activity levels—how many prospecting calls have been made during the previous week, how many letters sent, how many appointments with prospects and current customers, how many and what sort of quotes have been processed, and how many orders have been received. The next part of the conversation should be dedicated to problem solving, with the salesperson describing the obstacles he/she has been running into, and the owner suggesting possible solutions. The third part of the conversation should be the “commitment stage,” where the salesperson commits to certain activities and activity levels during the upcoming week.

I hope you’ll see how this agenda builds continuity into the ongoing sales management process. The commitment stage of one week’s meeting leads directly into the activity discussion stage of the next week’s. This, by the way, is the same agenda I use in my telephone sales coaching calls.

Full Team Meetings

I think you should get together with your entire team at least once each month, and I think the right length for this meeting is probably half an hour. At that length, you should be able to hold these meeting either before opening in the morning or after closing in the afternoon.

Within that 30 minutes, I think you agenda should have five components. First, I have always felt that your team should be aware of your sales goals, operational goals and certain components of your profit goals. During the first few minutes of each monthly meeting, I would let my team know how we performed against those goals over the last month, and where we are for the year-to-date.

The second component of each meeting should be about policy and/or procedure, perhaps a discussion of a new policy or procedure you want to implement, or a reminder regarding a policy or procedure that isn’t being followed as well as you want it to be. This is your opportunity to resolve any problems that develop, or maybe better still to head off a problem before it becomes a critical issue!

The third component of the monthly meeting should be the opportunity for your employees to bring up problems that they’re seeing in the operation. This may be the most important part of the meeting, because it’s been my observation that employees often have a better grasp of the problems in a printshop than the owners do. What they don’t always have, though, is the experience to know how to solve the problems, or the feeling of empowerment to try to solve them in the first place.

This can be a big part of meeting that challenge I mentioned earlier, to turn your *staff* into a *team*. Listen to what they have to say. *Think about* what they have to say. But don’t feel pressured to solve every problem in a 30 minute meeting. I hope you’ll see how the problems identified in this component of your meeting can be addressed by the policy or procedures you put into place at the next one!

The fourth component of a monthly team meeting should be an educational component, and the material presented can reflect either product knowledge or operational knowledge. Over the last three months, one of my clients has had his designer speak for 10 minutes about PDF files, and what both the customer service people and the production people should know about them; his press operator speak for 10 minutes about the capabilities and limitations of the press he runs; and his salesperson speak for 10 minutes about the reasons why the first jobs he gets from new customers are usually rush jobs. I hope you’ll agree that this is not just education defined as the presentation of knowledge, but the development of teamwork as well.

The fifth and final component of a monthly team meeting should be a reading of the goals for the coming month. In that way, you close every meeting with an understanding of what you want to accomplish over the next month, and you start the next meeting with a look at performance against those goals.

In terms of the time allocated to each agenda item, I think the first and last components should take about two minutes each. The policy/procedure segment should take perhaps 5-6 minutes. That leaves 10 minutes each for the discussion of problems that your employees are seeing and the educational component. If the problems discussion needed more time, I might take a little out of the educational component, but it might be a far better idea to say: “OK, let’s end this discussion for now and move on with our agenda. I’ll talk with (several of) you more later on and report back to everyone at or before next month’s meeting.”

Closing Thought

Here’s today’s closing thought. I’m often asked whether employees should be paid for attending a meeting held outside of normal business hours. The answer is very simple: YES! As an alternative, though, you might let each of your employees leave half-an-hour early one day each month in lieu of payment for the meeting. My best suggestion would be to ask each individual what he/she would prefer. That’s another of the ways you turn a staff into a team…your team!