Next-Generation Events
Cisco Company Meeting

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Overview

With the pressures of globalization, increased competition, and the continually accelerating information explosion, the need for employees, customers, and partners to come together, exchange knowledge, gain fresh perspectives, build networks, and nurture relationships has never been greater. Despite these important benefits, many organizations are questioning whether events deliver business impact commensurate with their costs, especially during an economic downturn. Traditional events suffer from high costs, limited audience reach, low flexibility, and inconsistent outcomes.

Many of the challenges associated with in-person events can be overcome by augmenting a traditional event with a wide range of technology-enabled enhancements. The resulting next-generation event expands options for participation in both space and time, enabling the attendee to choose to attend in person or remotely, live or on a delayed basis, and for the entire program or just selected sessions. This flexibility can help the event organizer attract a wider audience, engage that audience more effectively, and lower costs for both the host and attendees.

Cisco has been a pioneer in creating highly successful next-generation events, and we are sharing our experiences through a series of case studies and a strategic event management framework for getting started.[1] Cisco also provides a wide range of products and services that enable next-generation events under Cisco's Collaboration for Events experience[2] (see www.cisco.com/go/collaboration4events). In this paper, we profile the evolution of Cisco's internal employee company meeting into a next-generation event.

Figure 1.   How Next-Generation Events Differ from Traditional Events

From Traditional Events . . .	. . . To Next Generation Events
Incur cost, lost productivity, and environmental impact of travel	Reduce costs, lost productivity, and environmental impact from travel
One physical location	Multiple physical locations possible
Must attend in person, limiting participation	Can attend remotely, greatly expanding audience
Must attend in real-time	Can view on delayed basis
One-size fits all agenda	Individually tailored agendas
Experience is limited to event itself	Experience extends before and after event
Audience feedback given after event	Real-time feedback given during event
Personal networking is random process	Interest driven networking via social tools
Awareness generation via traditional marketing	Awareness generation amplified via social media

Source: Cisco IBSG, 2010

Cisco Company Meeting Highlights:

- Expanded access globally

- Increased employee participation from 17 percent to 67 percent

- Reduced cost per attendee by 78 percent

- Achieved high understanding of company plans and goals

- Enabled event to be hosted from any location

Introduction: Cisco Company Meeting

One of the earliest meeting types to use next-generation event capabilities at Cisco was our quarterly company meeting for all employees. These events are typically two hours long, feature presentations by several Cisco executives, and close with a Q&A session with employees. The purpose of these meetings is to communicate information of companywide interest, to enable the leadership team to receive direct feedback from employees, and to inspire and foster engagement of all employees. Over the last 15 years, these meetings have evolved through several different formats that have significantly increased participation.

Challenge

In Cisco's early days, the only way to participate was to attend in person. Cisco would rent an auditorium at a local convention center, since there were no rooms of sufficient size on our San Jose headquarters campus. The shortcoming with this approach was that employees outside the San Jose area were not able to participate. To remedy this, starting in 1997, we began real-time broadcasts of the meeting to remote employees via Cisco IPTV. Remote employees could provide feedback and question the speakers (via text, but not voice) during the event. These sessions were also recorded and made available for later replay via a VoD (video on demand).

Over time, the proportion of virtual participants increased, and even San Jose-based workers migrated to virtual attendance. By 2002, the virtual audience was larger than the in-person audience. With Cisco's continued global expansion, it became even more important to engage employees outside San Jose in an interactive manner. While IPTV and text Q&A improved participation and engagement, we wanted to take the company meeting to the next level in terms of interactions between the leadership team and the remote audience.

New Approach: Adding Virtual Capabilities

By 2007, we had shifted almost entirely to a virtual approach and stopped using the convention center. We kept a small group of employees in San Jose at the physical meeting site so the speakers could establish rapport with a live studio audience. In August 2007, we further enhanced the format by bringing remote employees into the studio audience via Cisco TelePresence. This not only improved the experience for remote workers (via higher-quality video and audio), but also enabled presenters to see and interact with these remote employees.

Our December 2009 company meeting, which included a special, highly anticipated 25th anniversary celebration, provided a compelling example of the full potential of this new approach. This event had a live studio audience of 350 employees in San Jose who were joined via Cisco TelePresence by 980 employees in nine locations across North America and Europe. Employees at these TelePresence sites participated in the Q&A session with Cisco Chairman and CEO John Chambers as if they were physically present. Outside of the locations linked by TelePresence, remaining employees had a range of options to view the event:

- Watch the event live as a group. This was done in San Jose, Boxborough, Richardson, and Research Triangle Park in large rooms (typically the cafeteria) using both large projection screens and digital signage.
- Gather to watch a VoD replay of the event as a large group. This accommodated time differences and was done in Bangalore, Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya.
- Watch individually or in small groups from a personal computer, either live by Cisco TV or later via a VoD replay.

Figure 2.   First Cisco Company Meeting Using TelePresence, August 2007

Results

The December 2009 meeting attracted more than 28,000 live viewers, or 43 percent of our employee population. Combined with the 15,000 employees who later viewed the VoD replay, we reached more than 43,000 employees, or 67 percent of our employee population at that time. This represents a significant increase from the 10 percent to 20 percent participation of 15 years ago, when options were much more limited. While this large attendance was due in part to the special guests for our 25th anniversary, it demonstrates the potential for high participation through virtual capabilities.

The December meeting was also highly successful in communicating the company's updated plans to employees, with 83 percent of attendees having a clear understanding of Cisco's evolving organizational model and 92 percent understanding our market opportunities. Ninety-four percent of attendees rated the December event favorably. Overall employee satisfaction with the company meeting has increased from 4.3 to 4.5 (out of 5.0) over the last three years.

Achieving such high participation and comprehension enhances organizational alignment and helps employees feel more connected to the company, fostering improved execution, morale, and retention.

An additional benefit of this new format is that the physical event no longer needs to be at our headquarters in San Jose. Earlier in 2009, we held a company meeting from our campus in Bangalore, India. This flexibility helps foster greater inclusion of employees located at remote sites and strengthens our global connections.

Figure 3.   Evolution of the Cisco Employee Company Meeting

	1997	2006	2009
Next-Generation Event Elements	None	IPTV VoD	IPTV VoD TelePresence
Physical Locales	1	1	9
Live: - In person - TelePresence - Live IPTV - Total Live VoD Replay **Total**	2,000 0 0 2,000 0 **2,000**	3,000 0 6,000 9,000 20,000 **29,000**	350 980 27,000 28,330 15,000 **43,330**
% of Employees Attending	17%	58%	67%
Event Cost	$100,000	$150,000	$300,000
Cost Per Live Attendee Cost Per Total Attendee	$50 $50	$17 $5	$11 $7
Employee Overall Satisfaction (5-point scale)	-	4.3	4.5

Source: Cisco IBSG, 2010

While our primary motivation in adding virtual capabilities was to increase participation, we have also dramatically lowered the cost per attendee. Back in 1997, the in-person meeting cost about $100,000 and attracted 2,000 employees, for a cost per attendee of $50. Our last large in-person meeting, in 2006, cost $150,000 and attracted 3,000 in-person attendees and 6,000 via IPTV, for a cost per live attendee of $17. In 2009, the typical meeting costs were about $300,000 (including costs for setting up Cisco TelePresence for large audiences

at remote sites), and we attracted a live audience of 28,000, for a cost per live attendee of just $11.

Over the last decade, with the shift from convention center to a predominantly virtual format using IPTV and Cisco TelePresence, the live audience attendance increased by a factor of 14 while costs increased by only a factor of 3, thus reducing the cost per live attendee by 78 percent. Including VoD replays, the total audience increased by a factor of 22.

Cisco's best practices have received external recognition, with our 25th anniversary company meeting winning the League of American Communications Professionals (LACP) 2009 "inspire award" in the category of internal and employee communications competition.[3]

References

1. "Cisco's Experience with Next-Generation Events: Enhancing Meetings and Events with Collaboration Capabilities To Improve Business Impact and Reduce Costs," Cisco IBSG, July 2010; series of additional white papers and case studies will be available under the "Featured Content" and "Experience" sections of http://www.cisco.com/web/about/ac79/innov/index.html

2. Overview of products and services offered by Cisco Collaboration for Events experience, www.cisco.com/go/collaboration4events

3. League of American Communications Professionals (LACP) 2009 "inspire award," http://www.lacp.com/2009inspire/8429.HTM

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More Information

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