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White Paper

“Trainertainment”

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achieve advice benefit book boss budget
conference corporations cost desire don done
entertainment event exactly experts
extravagant fun government honest human included jesters las
leader leadership meeting modern money options organizers
overseas pay people planner pretend productivity
programs provided real results scandals services
spending team
trainertainment training
vegas work wrong

train-er-tain-ment *noun* \ˈtrā-nar-ˈtān-mənt\

Definition of TRAINERTAINMENT

1. the act of providing entertainment masquerading as training so as to make the employer pay for it
2. **a** *archaic* : JESTERS, JUGGLERS
b *obsolete* : WORK BREAK, FUN
3. **a** : amusement or diversion provided especially by performers who pretend there is training benefit
<built a bicycle to provide *trainertainment*>
b : something diverting or engaging: as (1) : a public performance (2) : private fun or benefits

Examples of TRAINERTAINMENT

- *Trainertainment* was provided in a two-hour session for 300 conference attendees who had just had a liquid lunch.
- bundling in the *trainertainment* budget with other items so it doesn't show
- Programs with no training benefit and no measurable results are just *trainertainment*
- pretend leadership coaching sessions held poolside, and other *trainentertainments*

Usually, we only notice it when it makes the headlines every couple of years.

Recent conference spending scandals have included an alleged extravagant, \$900,000-plus conference in Las Vegas in October 2010 for around 190 employees of the Goods and Services Administration, and two conferences costing a total of \$5M run by the Veterans' Administration in Orlando FL in late 2011. Both were the subject of adverse reports by the Office of the Inspector-General in their respective Departments.

Among other alleged acts of waste, both of the recent scandals included examples of reckless and valueless spending on "Team Building" events. At the GSA conference in Las Vegas, \$75,000 was spent on a three-hour event during which the 190 attendees built 24 bicycles - averaging out to \$3,125 a bicycle. At the VA events in Orlando, costs included \$ 49,516 for a video with an actor posing as General George S. Patton.

Nor are such scandals limited to the Government sector. While some corporations still have extravagant parties in the style of the 1960's "Mad-Men" era, most modern

organizations are focused on productivity and are conscious of both cost and example. This is especially true of publicly-owned corporations which have to answer to shareholders. Spending scandals occur here too, and the consequences for peoples' careers, wise use of money and any hope of real training are equally dramatic.

It's high time we set some ground rules for what is, and is not, a worthwhile way to spend team development dollars. It's also high time that we got honest about the human desire for fun and entertainment while people are away from home at a conference or a seminar. If we want fun and entertainment, let's have fun and entertainment, and let's pay for it from a fun and entertainment budget - not a training budget - and call it what it is. In the government, people will have to pay for their own fun - a side trip to a show at the end of the day, perhaps - and in the private sector there's often a little more room to say "thanks" for work well done.

Where people get into trouble is when they know perfectly well that they can't justify spending money on fun and entertainment, but still want fun and entertainment. That's when they get the bright idea of using the training budget for their fun and entertainment - after all, who could be against training? This is "trainertainment", entertainment dressed up and masquerading as training, and there is no shortage of suppliers willing to charge for it. Many conference centers in their own right see trainertainment as a handy way to make extra income during a meeting, along with food and bar charges, trip bookings and other ways of servicing their client.

Trainertainment is a giant trap for conference organizers, and is remarkably easy to fall into. In part this is because - until the wheels come off - trainertainment can be very appealing to CEOs and other big bosses because it seems to achieve two things that leaders have wanted since mediaeval times. Firstly, it buys loyalty by providing fun to the troops; and secondly, it demonstrates the power of the leader. This is exactly why medieval kings held banquets with jousting, jesters and other entertainment. The October 2010 GSA event in Las Vegas staged with horses instead of bikes, but with exactly the same extravagances, the same palatial setting and the same magicians and jesters, would have been completely understandable to any worker in any royal court in 17th century France.

The difficulty in the modern world is that we have the same human desires, but now every penny is watched and must be justified, and we are resistant to leaders who decide to spend money as though they were King Louis XIV. The danger of trainertainment to a modern leader is very simply stated - it can get you fired.

It's easy to be critical after the event - and there can be no argument that the bike-building activity and the Patton video, as legitimate training events, were worthless and outrageous - but the challenges and pressures facing a government or corporate

event planner are formidable. How, exactly, are they to make smart decisions when they are beset by assurances from hungry vendors on all sides, pressured to book activities that senior people want/are familiar with/remember from years past/want to “top” this year, and generally only given guidance after the event that what they did - often wildly acclaimed at the time - was in fact wrong?

There are four tests that can save you in this situation, winnowing out almost all trainertainment and leaving only legitimate options for the training budget.

1. **Look for the Original.** The same-old teambuilding games, talks and hackneyed aphorisms will be greeted with politeness and rolled eyes. The fun will be forced and often sarcastic, and there will be no training benefit at all.
2. **Look for the Credible.** Why would you hire a facilitator to stand in front of your people if all they have ever done is train? Look for people whose own track records and achievements in the real leadership of real organizations would make your most cynical people nod with respect.
3. **Insist on Results.** Real business relevance and real productivity benefit are very hard to achieve - it takes professionals and experts - but it absolutely can be done. Work only with people who have created real and dramatic results back in the client workplace, and talk to referees personally.
4. **Demand Measurement.** It is fashionable to argue that “the human being can’t be measured”, and also wrong. You can, should and must measure short- and long-term productivity improvement, and while doing this well is difficult and requires experts once again, it definitely can be done. Without measurement there is no science, just trainertainment and charlatanism.

Conference and event planners also have logistic limitations to contend with, and there are three useful hints for preventing practical limitations from steering you down the wrong and risky road of trainertainment.

1. If you (or the boss) really want entertainment, do that. Call it entertainment from the beginning, budget it as entertainment, and keep it honest.
2. If all you have is a gap of half a day or less, don’t pretend that any training squeezed into that space will have an effect on a 20-year career. Consider getting a really distinguished speaker instead, or go back to the “fun” option. One of the best “fun” options is to just give people a long break. It validates the diversity of your group and is much more appreciated than enforced “fun” which people often dread. Fun for some of your people may be gambling on the casino floor; for others, the gym or the pool; for others, reading a book.

3. If you are meeting overseas, be careful. Many event providers will struggle to deliver events well overseas, and some local overseas events can be culturally inappropriate or even dangerous. Don't be afraid to seek expert advice.

The bottom line is that you don't need to settle for the career minefield of trainertainment just to make a great conference or meeting happen.

If you are serious about team productivity - and if that is an important goal for your organization - then don't try to squeeze it in to a general-purpose conference; schedule a full two-day team productivity program and hire professionals who can meet the criteria listed above. Leave the original conference to its main purpose.

And if the team productivity piece is just a secondary thought, take one of the other roads that doesn't gently waltz you, your boss and your organization off the trainertainment cliff.

Postscript

Team Results USA frequently advises conference and event organizers, and while we almost never recommend our own services for conference events of less than a day, we do give honest feedback and would be happy to help.

If you want some fast, free advice, there's an instant automated team event planner called "TESSA" (Team Event Supplier Selection Adviser") on the Team Results homepage. TESSA encodes a lot of the advice in this paper and, given your requirements of team size, available time, budget, location and desired outcome, will recommend an approach - not necessarily one of our own programs - that is exactly right for your requirements.

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