

GLOBAL VIRTUAL MEETING

context

ABC Systems (ABC) is one of the five biggest IT solutions providers with offices throughout the world. Its largest strategic account is a major mobile network operator, and ABC have 60 staff managing the account either as their sole responsibility (in markets where the client has a large presence and heavy reliance on ABC) or as part of their responsibilities (in developing markets where the client has a smaller presence).

To ensure a consistent service, the core account team based in the UK works hard to engage the whole global account team in effective and regular communication. The centre-piece of the communication strategy is a three day, highly interactive conference which gives the team the opportunity to share experiences, to learn about the latest thinking on the account and to work jointly to resolve challenges. But it is costly - both in time and resources - and the core team wanted to complement the conference with more regular, light-touch opportunities to interact. The solution, a virtual meeting held on the first Tuesday of each month, had the following critical success factors:

- 1.** Easy access – not all offices have video conferencing equipment. The meeting had to use basic phone and web access.
- 2.** Two-way communication – the core team wanted to ensure participants contributed ideas as well as passively listening.
- 3.** Short and sharp – the core team felt that the shorter the session, the more participants would attend and the greater their level of concentration and engagement.

solution

The call was staged as a fast-paced, one hour radio show in which main presenters were interviewed by a meeting host on a set of pre-determined (and prepared) topics. While it was an effective mechanism for disseminating messages (and much more engaging than a straight presentation with PowerPoint), experience showed that with more than 10 participants on a call, it was unlikely they would contribute ideas, voice concerns or pose questions.

Crystal provided a mechanism for delegates to enter ideas anonymously on a range of topics, as well as to vote on key issues via a simple web-based interface. In practice, in the one hour call, the participants contributed up to 50 ideas, challenges and questions which the host put to the main speakers.

The balance of un-answered questions was addressed as part of the post-call communication. This was wrapped into a podcast of the discussions, together with a transcript of delegate contributions with answers to outstanding questions.

After each call, we conducted post event analysis with a selection of delegates to further refine the format and collect topics for future calls.

learning from the calls

Altogether, we have so far run 10 calls. This allowed the team to experiment with ways to enhance the meetings. Below is a summary of the learnings from the calls:

Positive elements

- **Keep it short and sharp, and let the participants guide the content.** We used extensive “pre-search” with delegates to ensure that only relevant topics made it onto the call. This allowed us to keep the call short, and concentration levels high. The radio-show format also significantly aided concentration.
- **Capturing anonymous feedback and questions** – participants in virtual meetings are very reticent. Providing an anonymous channel for delegates to pose questions and make suggestions significantly helped engagement.

Ideas for improvement

- **Individuals vs. clusters** – Participants who clustered together (typically congregating in a small meeting room with a speaker phone) reported much higher satisfaction with the calls than those who dialed in individually. We now routinely promote “clustering” as a way of improving participants’ experience.
- **Dedicating time to interaction** – While the anonymous input helped participants to feedback, the level of interaction increased dramatically when participants were given dedicated time to input ideas (rather than simply doing it in the background). This is particularly powerful when working in clusters and enhances the feeling of being in a ‘real’ meeting.
- **Mandatory vs. voluntary participation** – the greatest challenge with virtual calls is to ensure a consistently high level of participation. Clearly, making the calls mandatory solves the issue. Our experience from ABC suggests that a quarterly or biannual mandatory meeting may be preferable to a monthly voluntary meeting.