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## Keep it personal

WHILE VIRTUAL MEETINGS HAVE THEIR PLACE IN THE MODERN BUSINESS WORLD, FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION CAN STILL HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON SALES. **DAVE HOWELL** REPORTS

**N**inety-five per cent of small and medium-sized enterprises agree that meeting customers and partners face to face is vital, according to research from Concur, a provider of travel and expense management solutions. However, 77 per cent of sales executives acknowledged that the tough economic climate had prompted their companies to take a more cautious approach to spending on travel and client entertainment over the past few years.

Research from business card supplier MOO has revealed there is a financial advantage to be gained with personal contact. It says 42 per cent of the

businesses it surveyed believe handing out 100 business cards would generate £5,000 a year or more in revenue. Spread across the UK's 4.5 million SMEs, this adds up to £9.45 billion a year netted through personal contact.

### REVEALING

"Physical contact works better because it can often reveal more about the person you are dealing with than anything on social media sites like LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter," Richard Moross, founder and CEO of MOO, says. "Social media and other technology is incredibly helpful for keeping in touch, building relationships and reminding people you

are around and what you are up to. But if you want to win business and develop new contacts, nothing quite beats a face-to-face meeting."

With the advent of cheap video conferencing systems and the rise of mobile devices, a shift towards an increased use of these technologies has occurred. The question then remains whether FaceTime on an iPad can ever replace a face-to-face meeting with a customer or business partner?

In 2009 a survey by market research specialist Forbes Insight indicated that executives favoured physical meetings over their virtual counterparts. The report concluded that for capturing attention, inspiring a positive emotional environment and

building lasting relationships, physical meetings won over their virtual cousins.

However, with pressure on businesses to cut costs and the introduction of low cost video conferencing systems, a hybrid approach to meetings is becoming popular. What is powering this shift is how cloud-based video conferencing tools have removed the interoperability barriers that have previously existed. A good example is Blue Jeans, which allows all video conferencing systems to connect seamlessly.

"Every year about a billion minutes of audio conferencing and around 200 million minutes of video conferencing takes place," Stu Aaron, chief commercial officer at Blue Jeans, explains. "What we found was that complexity, incompatibility and cost were the major factors against video conferencing.

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*"Small businesses are attracted by the promise of increased efficiency and productivity"*

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Our system aims to resolve these issues with one platform that any business can use cost effectively."

#### COMPLEMENT

Mark Donnan, web conferencing specialist at technology company Brother UK, believes technology will never replace face-to-face meetings and the relationships they can build, but adds: "Affordable video conferencing can be a perfect complement to occasional face-to-face meetings, providing a more personable way of communication than a phone call or email.

"Companies, especially ones with a national or global network of offices, can save huge amounts of money and time by using web conferencing to communicate across their networks. A web conferencing solution that is compatible with iPhones and iPads will mean meetings can take place wherever your work takes you."

There is no denying that mobile technology in particular has transformed how businesses interact with each other and their customers. Where once video conferencing systems were expensive and difficult to set up and use, today collaborative working can be as easy as switching on a smartphone or tablet.

However, what is clear is that these low-cost systems are not a panacea. Small businesses are attracted by the promise of increased efficiency and productivity, but it is vital to assess how these tools will be used to ensure they deliver key goals.

The general consensus is that face-to-face meetings and networking are far from dead. Indeed, this type of interaction is being increasingly augmented, but not replaced by, technology. Look closely at how your business currently interacts with customers and commercial partners. Developing a medium that blends face-to-face and virtual systems will deliver the best results. **MM**

#### EXPERT ADVICE

Rob Brown is an internationally renowned authority on business networking. He is the author of *How to Build Your Reputation: The Secrets Of Becoming The Go To Professional In A Crowded Marketplace*.

#### HOW IMPORTANT ARE FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS?

They will always be crucial in business for three reasons. First, we live in a low trust world. Trust in the government, judicial system, police, armed forces and education system is at an all-time low. Relationship breakdown, litigation and divorce are at an all-time high. Looking someone in the eye is a powerful way to build trust and discern people's true motives.

Second, business is ultra-competitive. It's hard to stand out in a crowd of similar companies and differentiate yourself from your competitors. A face-to-face meeting allows people to get to know you, see why you're different and ultimately choose you above and beyond all of their other choices.

Third, a handshake still counts for a lot in business. It's a bond, a seal, a verbal contract. It means something. Shaking somebody's hand over a deal is the ultimate gesture of commitment in getting the business done.

#### WHAT IMPACT HAS TECHNOLOGY HAD ON FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS?

Even though face-to-face meetings continue to be crucial in today's world of business, they are not so commonplace. Many companies have a global footprint with multiple international clients or offices. It costs massive time, money and energy to physically put people in a room, which is why technology is becoming a more acceptable alternative. The bandwidth for high quality video conferencing is now at a sufficient level to have reliable, professional online meetings. In an effort to keep costs down and people productive, these are only going to be utilised more by businesses of all sizes.

#### HOW CAN SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS IMPROVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS THEY HAVE?

Many are unwarranted, unplanned and unproductive, which is why they frustrate so many people. Here are three simple ways business owners can improve their effectiveness:

One, have an agenda and stick to it. A meeting agenda is a roadmap. Anything on there that doesn't affect the majority of people in the meeting should be taken off.

Two, have a strong chair. This needn't be the boss, just someone with a strong personality or the respect of all in the room. Someone who will keep things on track, cut in to control those who would like to dominate and include the views of all stakeholders where required.

Three, invite only those people who absolutely have to be there. A one-hour meeting with eight people takes up one full day of productive work. Everybody who should be in the room should be in the room. The rest can submit views via a colleague and check the minutes or notes from the meeting afterwards to stay in the loop.

#### HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO CARRY FORWARD RELATIONSHIPS THAT HAVE BEGUN ON SOCIAL MEDIA INTO THE REAL WORLD WITH FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS?

Social media, technology and online networking have changed the business landscape. You can now do business with people you've never met. But almost all relationships will last longer, go deeper and stay more connected if they are a blend of online and face-to-face interaction.

It's rare that someone can build a better relationship on the phone or online than they can face-to-face. In truth, though, a blended approach of both is the optimum way to build deep, sustainable and profitable business relationships. The technology works, so let's use it. But shake that hand and make that eye contact whenever possible.

