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Making Face Time On The Cheap

By EMILY MALTBY

Any business owner knows that face time with an important client is critical. With budgets tight, entrepreneurs are coming up with creative strategies to attend cross-country meetings.

Take Aurora Paradise, owner of Topical Biomedics, a Rhineback, N.Y., developer of pain relief products, who assembled her 13 employees in January to brainstorm on how to maintain face-to-face contact with customers such as store managers, therapists and hospital staff

"In January everyone stopped buying," Ms. Paradise says. "We knew we'd need to push further than our comfort zone and think-out-of-the-box."



Associated Press

The first strategy her group devised was to stick to ground transportation whenever possible. That meant road trips from Southern California to Seattle and from

New York to Maryland. Cheaper than airfare, the drives had another perk: sales representatives could visit more customers en route.

Ms. Paradise isn't the only one keeping to the roads these days. According to an April report from the Government Accountability Office in Washington, D.C., airline passenger traffic began to decline in the second quarter of 2008 and was down almost 8% by the fourth quarter.

The employees took their road trips a step further. Once at a destination, sleepovers at the homes of family and friends became the preferred method of lodging. The staff shared contacts across the country to spread the network of free beds and couches.

Then, once back in the office, the sales representatives would conduct follow-up meetings – virtually. "We do a lot of teleconferencing," says Ms. Paradise. "Through Skype and WebEx, we can solidify relationships and the education of product."

The company has managed to reduce travel overhead by 20% compared to last year while boosting sales by 13%.

For some, however, evading air carriers isn't a practical solution. The good news for those business owners is that airlines are trying to fill seats by advertising rock-bottom deals. According to a report by the International Air Transportation Association in Montreal, premium seats on flights in June were down 21% from last year. Economy seats were down 5%.

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"It's a buyer's market," says Peter Greenberg, travel editor for CBS news in New York and Los Angeles. "And you can beat the airlines at their own game if you can think differently about bundling business trips." Design flights with multiple destinations in mind and avoid one-way trips, which can substantially raise costs, he says.

The hotel industry, struggling from the effects of the recession, is actively trying to land customers. So when the contact-swap system is out of the question, business travelers can at least find or negotiate decent deals. "Rates of hotels are pretty low and they won't budge on those," says Mr. Greenberg. "But that's a starting point with negotiating the deal. Once you accept the rate, ask if they'll throw in free parking or waive the Internet charge."

Or, business owners can reduce lodging prices by avoiding the big hotel chains altogether, following the example of Bob Quinn, president and founder of Kamut International. Mr. Quinn's company, based in Great Falls, Mont., sells khorasan wheat to food companies in the U. S. and abroad. His product's international market requires him to travel across the Atlantic four to six times a year.

In Italy, Germany and England, he frequents smaller, family-owned establishments and has befriended the management at each. "I like to immerse myself in the culture," he says. "It adds a dimension of enjoyment."

But in the long run, that drive to interact with the locals has had an added benefit: "We patronize them year after year," he explains. "And they give us better deals because of our history with them."

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