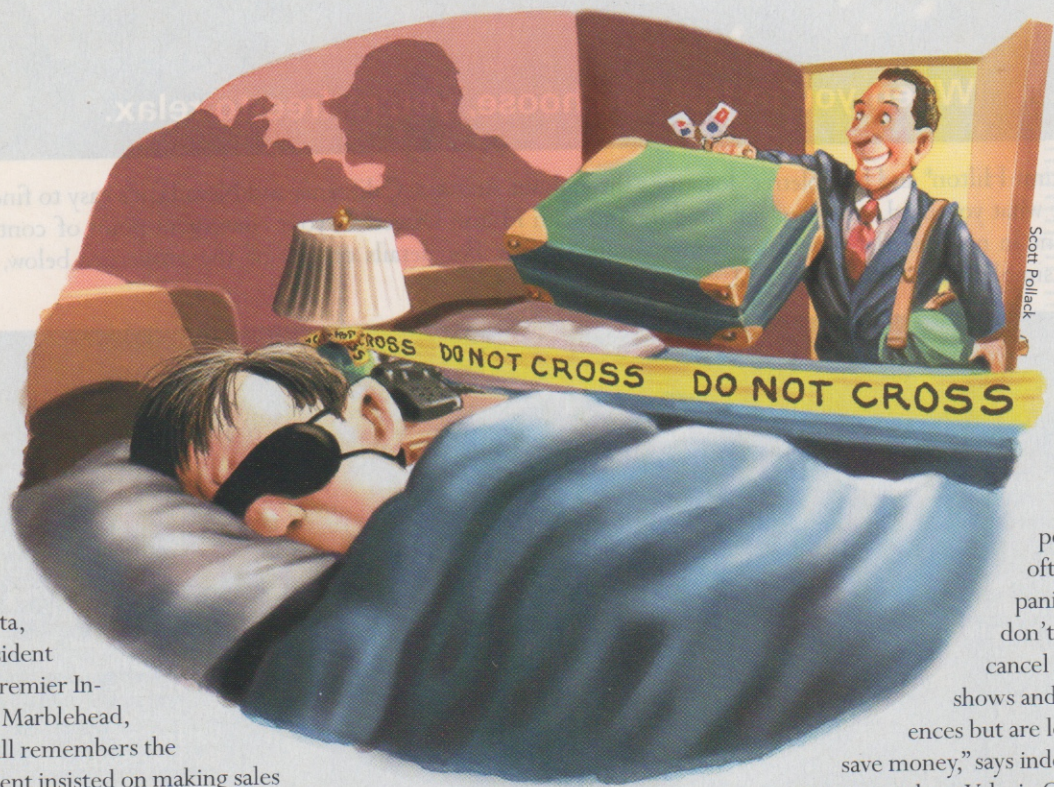


Room for

Thinking of asking attendees to share hotel rooms? Make sure you know what you're getting into.



Dick Gaeta, president of Premier Incentives, Marblehead, Mass., still remembers the time a client insisted on making sales reps share rooms on an incentive trip. "The first night, we had a scene involving two roommates who arrived at very different times. One gentleman checked in and went to bed. His roommate checked in later, apparently inebriated, and forgot he was sharing a room. When he found another man in his room, he went into a rage." The company might have been able to invite more distributors on its trip, but, says Gaeta, "there were so many complaints that they'll never share rooms again."

Who Gets the Window?

As purse strings are drawn tighter, more companies are asking meeting attendees to double up. "It's definitely hap-

pening more often in companies that don't want to cancel trade shows and conferences but are looking to save money," says independent meeting consultant Valerie Cienega, of

Mountain View, Calif.

Event planner Michelle Santee Tupps, president of Event Resource in Safety Harbor, Fla., says many clients have policies that *require* employees to share rooms. In addition to the cost savings, she says, "There's something to be said for the respect and understanding that comes from sharing a space for a few days. In the end, I think it helps to build a stronger team."

Linda Karitzkes, a human resources consultant in Haddonfield, N.J., also sees benefits for employees—in her case, sales reps—when they share rooms. "They're out by themselves all day long, but they do like being

Two?

By Lauren Walker

around people. I think it's a good chance for them to reconnect with some of their buddies."

It's all in how you present it, she says. "Sometimes it's a simple matter of saying, 'If you share rooms, we can have this meeting, and if you don't, we can't.'"

Sharing rooms can be a false economy, however, if it undermines the purpose of the meeting. Nearly everyone agrees it's a bad idea for incentive trips. "If you're sending your winners to a five-star property and then asking them to double up, it's self-defeating," says Dick Kisker, vice president of Premier Incentives. "You're telling them they're special on the one hand, and taking that away with the other."

Legal Risks

Room sharing may also expose companies to liabilities that outweigh any cost savings. "Twenty years ago, when I was first starting in the work force, companies required room-sharing frequently," says lawyer Shawn Smith of Next Level Consulting, Harrison, N.Y. "But in the current legal climate, I really wouldn't recommend it, for legal, safety, and morale reasons."

"We're in an age in which companies have increasing responsibility to protect the safety of their employees," she notes. "When you're sticking two people together in a

could be seen as bearing responsibility for things coming out of that meeting because they wanted to save a few dollars. Why put yourself at that type of risk?"

Sharing rooms can also be considered an invasion of an employee's privacy. Smith recalls a situation in which one woman on a trip had an eating disorder, and her roommate told everyone in the company about it. "Any health problem is basically the same story," she says. "If you have a condition that's private, and your employer forces a situation where people are going to know about it, it could be deemed a violation."

Perhaps the greatest risk of all, however, is to morale. "People are entitled legally to a reasonable expectation that when they leave a work situation to go home—whether that home is their permanent home or a hotel room—they're retreating from the workplace and getting some private time," says Smith. "If you're asking them to be 'on' in their workplace demeanor 24 hours a day for the duration of the conference, it's de-energizing. That could lead to a loss of efficiency, as well as a lot of resentment against the company."

Great Expectations

Despite all this, planners report that most of the time, things go pretty well when attendees are required to dou-

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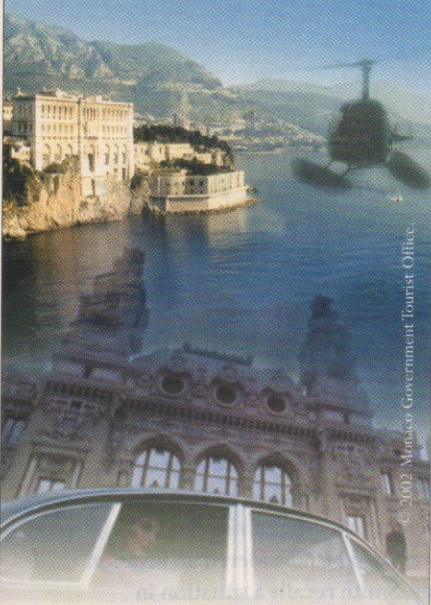
room, if something develops between them where one person threatens the safety of the other, the company could be legally liable."

Among the highest-stake areas of legal risk is sexual harassment. "As far as same-sex room sharing," says Smith, "misunderstandings can arise, and the company

ble up. "The first time I did a conference with shared hotel rooms, I thought, 'This is going to be awful, people are going to be calling me all night,'" says Cienega. "I didn't get a single call."

"My experiences have not been bad," adds Linda L. Bailey, who is a certified Senior Professional in Human

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Make the Best of It

■ **Let people choose their room-mates**—"In most cases they will arrange to ask for each other to ensure they get roomed with the person they want," says Valerie Cienega, an independent meeting planning consultant in Mountain View, Calif. Also, give a secondary option in case the first choice has already been placed with another attendee.

■ **Try to pair people who have something in common**—Pair the smokers with the smokers, the nonsmokers with the nonsmokers. Try to put people from the same office together. If possible, put people from the same department or work group together. "And never put a boss with a subordinate," says Michelle Santee Tupps, president of Event Resource in Safety Harbor, Fla.

■ **Always offer a way to opt out**—Michele Murdock, an independent meeting planner at ScopeCMS, Marcomm and Corporate Events Consulting, Cummings, Ga., arranges an annual meeting for a company that pays half the room cost for each attendee. "We submit a list of all attendees to the CFO, and the accounting staff reimburses everyone for half the lodging cost, whether they had a roommate or not," she explains. "When we submit the employee rooming list to the hotel, we specify which people are rooming together and give the hotel each individual's

Resources and president of Bailey Consulting Group Inc., St. Petersburg, Fla. "If the alternatives are going with shared rooms or not going, it's a small price to pay compared to what you could be exposed to and learn."

"Most of us don't display behavior while we're traveling that's

credit card, and the hotel splits the lodging charge in half, charging half to each guest. Those with no room-mates get charged for the whole stay, and accounting only reimburses them for half. This works out especially well for employees who want to bring their spouse or significant other, or tack on a vacation to the conference."

■ **Provide an out on-site if the roommate match goes bad**—"Most of the problems that arise are when someone who snores is placed in a room with a light sleeper," says Cienega. "Normally I hold back some of the rooms the hotel comps, so if we have to move somebody, there's a room available. And if we don't have to, a director or somebody who's a little higher up just gets his or her own room. Or if I'm lucky, me."

■ **Make sure everyone can connect with home and the office**—"There's usually only one data port in the hotel room, and it's usually kind of slow," says Cienega. "So one of the things we've started doing is setting up a cyber café. That way they can check e-mail and just get caught up on work things without feeling as if someone is looking over their shoulder."

■ **Do something special to make up for the situation**—Says Cienega: "To make things nicer, we try to stay in an all-suite hotel, or at least one with extra large rooms, so there's more space to spread out."

very different from that of our workplace," she adds. "So if people have these concerns, you have to listen to them, but it shouldn't result in problems as long as you give them some options. People rise to the level of your assumptions, so if we can maintain some high assumptions, it should work out."