

The Cannes Mutiny

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Do you know about "incentive meetings," or "incentive travel?" Here's how it works: Large corporations operate on the belief (or the observed fact) that their employees -- especially their external representatives, such as salespeople -- cannot be sufficiently motivated intrinsically, by the satisfaction gained from meaningful work, or even extrinsically, by very large salaries and commissions. So they sweeten the pot, up the ante.

The deal is exactly like the one you make with your kids: "Be good and you get to stay up late," or "Do well and you get to go to the party this weekend." There are two differences -- the corporation cares not about your being good, only about your doing well, and the party is not down the block or across town. It's in a very lavish resort setting, always, and the better you do, the more distant and lavish the resort. And the pot can get very sweet, indeed.

I was a successful professional speaker. I was in demand mostly from American corporations and, to a lesser extent since I'm not a celebrity, foreign ones. But I traveled abroad quite a bit. I was a gift, a present, part of an incentive package to motivate people to meet ever loftier goals. In particular, I was usually the closing speaker, sending everyone off for the trip home with a smile on their lips, a tear in their eye and, I fervently hoped, some thoughts on their minds.

I'd given such talks in Fiji, Japan, Australia, England, Switzerland, to name a varied few, but this one was special -- Cannes! Cannes before the weather got too warm; Cannes without the film festival crowds; Cannes with my lover, and time to play.

The conference was to last a full week, and the company was paying all expenses for two, including First Class airfare -- plus my full off-shore fee. In return, I was to give one 60 minute talk. Very nice work if you can get it, and I felt rewarded for all those one night stands in drab locations, in those hotel rooms with the combined heater/air conditioner under the window, which keeps you awake all night going on and off.

Patty and I had a wonderful trip over, were met at the airport by an appropriately clad representative with our names on a sign, and accompanied to the hotel by limousine. We were introduced at the registration desk, warmly welcomed, and given the very thick booklet which contained all relevant tourist information and the schedule of presentations and meetings for the week.

Later, in our large, comfortable, very Old World room, I responsibly read through the program for the week, finding that I was scheduled on the morning of the middle day. I also found page after page of very serious topics of significance. I was impressed! These people were here to learn something, to do something; to enjoy the Riviera, certainly, but to get some work done to whet their appetites for relaxation.

I decided then and there to be far more dutiful and responsible than my hosts ever expected. I would go to a large number of these meetings, though my presence was in no way required or expected. I would hear the program, thus my talk would have an immediacy and a relevance that it could not otherwise, filled as it would be with references to what had gone before. Patty and I had a fine evening on the promenade, gratefully charged everything to the company, and retired early, tired from travel.

Next morning, the wake-up call came earlier than I would have liked, but it seemed especially important to be there for the opening session, the welcoming, the introductions, the laying out of the week. Leaving Patty asleep, I dressed in "dressy casual" (this is nearly always the instruction for these gatherings) and found my way to the meeting room.

I was alone. No other human being was in sight. The registration desk was not staffed. There was not a soul in the meeting room. The room was not set up for a meeting. It was dark and empty. I had done hundreds of these, and I knew what a prepared meeting room looked like. I was confused. I checked my schedule. I had the time right. I was at the right room. I was alone.

A member of the hotel staff came by. We did not share a language, but it wasn't hard to determine that no meeting was scheduled in the room, then or at any other time that day. I wandered slowly away.

I found the two women who had been staffing the registration desk. They were dressed very casually, and enjoying a leisurely breakfast. I voiced my confusion. Just as in a situation comedy, as I talked I could see their eyes looking back and forth, one to the other. Their smiles grew. As I finished my plaintive query, they exploded into laughter.

"You took that program seriously? You thought all those presentations were for real? Oh, that's wonderful. Bill (the convention planner) will love this. And it's so sweet of you to come down here. Did you see the newsprint pad on the easel outside the meeting room describing the tours and sightseeing and dinner spots for the day? That's the real schedule. WE PRINT IT THERE SO THERE'S NO PERMANENT RECORD OF IT ANYWHERE.

"NO, NO, THAT OFFICIAL PROGRAM BOOKLET IS FOR THE IRS. It's not for real, it's for tax purposes. Everyone who attends the convention gets one, and each person will get some certification of having attended the required number of meetings to qualify for a tax-exempt meeting. That way they can deduct the money they spend while they are here, and the Company can deduct the money it spends as well, including the money you spend. You're a fully deductible expense of doing business, so have a wonderful time. It's on us!"

Actually, it wasn't on them, it was on us taxpayers. The company's huge expenses incurred for a sham program at one of the world's most expensive destinations were tax deductible. That means the company paid less tax, and you and I made up the difference.

And the very affluent and successful attendees could spend freely and deduct the expense from their personal taxes. The less affluent, who were not invited, could have the double indignity of subsidizing the affluent who were.

Much --most? -- of the money those very affluent attendees spent to entertain themselves on the French Riviera was termed a "business expense," to attend an "educational meeting," so it was tax deductible. They paid less tax. You and I made up the difference.

The entire expense of this lavish treatment is considered a "cost of doing business." That means the company's products cost more. You and I therefore pay more.

I did give my talk, by the way. The morning of the middle day was the one program that was for real. And Patty and I really enjoyed the rented Ferrari. Thanks. You and she and I paid for it.