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Meeting on the Right Side of the Brain

By ELAINE GLUSAC

WHEN Leslie Marquard, an executive coach, holds strategy sessions for consulting firms or university administrators, she ushers her buttoned-up clientele into rooms full of Pogo sticks, ethnic art, hammocks, vintage furniture and a pillow “harem.”

“They are surprised and also endeared by it,” said Ms. Marquard, a co-founder of Marble Leadership Partners in Chicago. The “it” she referred to is Catalyst Ranch, an independent alternative meeting space in a former sausage factory near the Loop in Chicago. “They’ll say, ‘That table looks just like one I grew up with.’ It subconsciously releases the mind.”

“Right-brain meetings” — conferences that use comfortable, colorful furnishings and accessories ranging from Slinkys to the video game Guitar Hero to help drum up better brainstorming — may be a trend, but professionals like Ms. Marquard say that such environments have not been readily available in the cities she does business in.

“When I can’t get clients to come to Chicago, I am stuck with hotels, endothermic hotel rooms with no windows and natural air,” Ms. Marquard said. “It’s really hard to have productive meetings in rooms that suck the life right out of you.”

Now, vanguard hotels seem to have heard Ms. Marquard’s complaints and are offering meeting spaces that look more like lounges than boardrooms, with high-tech replacements for flip charts and yoga and wheat-grass shots on breaks.

Such surroundings are meant to stimulate the right half of the brain, which has been linked to creativity, versus the left brain, said to be responsible for logic and other thinking. Rather than dictate through PowerPoints, right-brain meetings are geared toward playfulness and hands-on learning to inspire employees and help them solve problems.

The new method owes some debt to the books “A Whole New Mind,” by Daniel H. Pink, and “The Rise of the Creative Class,” by Richard Florida. Both books expound on the need for creative thinking in the marketplace.

But the setting, as meeting leaders know, has to be right, too.

“Hard wooden chairs don’t do it anymore,” said Bruce MacMillan, chief executive of the trade association Meeting Professionals International. He credits [Starbucks](#) — wired for productivity yet comfortably furnished — for the rise of the casual meeting room.

The Westin Crown Center in Kansas City, Mo., projects brain-teaser puzzles in meeting rooms at the beginning of sessions, a practice that Westin Hotels and Resorts, the parent, plans to introduce globally this month. W Hotels in New York provide Etch A Sketches and other toys in meeting rooms, while the W Seattle offers a “sensory setup” for meeting rooms, furnishing aromatherapy candles, stress balls and puzzles, mood [music](#) and black notepads with white lead pencils.

Meeting rooms at the Curtis Hotel in Denver are named after children’s games; it also has customized meetings to include team-building through banana-split making and supplying oversize Jenga wood blocks.

Applying the right-brain concept to its floor plan, Hotel Sax Chicago has opened irregularly shaped meeting rooms with few right angles, including an oval foyer with a video wall and a room with a curved wall, low armchairs and an electric fireplace. In the quadrangular boardroom, notebook computers that record handwritten notes replace flip charts. One L-shaped space features a recessed bank of white leather seat pods opposite a water wall.

“It’s a technology and design counterpart to the business world looking to meet and develop something new,” said Adam Kaplan, marketing director at the Hotel Sax. “Whether you’re in law or accounting, every business needs to innovate.”

Stacy Evans, an executive administrator at the Chicago office of [Cisco Systems](#), the huge technology company based in San Jose, Calif., had never heard the term “right-brain meetings” before organizing the first of two recent events at the Hotel Sax.

The meeting room included modular couches and armchairs as well as classroom-style tables, allowing participants to break into groups. “People tend to shut down if they can’t get up and move around,” Ms. Evans said. “We want them thinking. When they move around, they think.”

With movement in mind, the Viceroy Santa Monica offers its business-group customers, which tend to be in the entertainment industry, a “left-brain-right-brain tai chi break,” where an instructor helps participants channel “chi,” or “life energy,” through standing poses. The hotel also offers yoga breaks, chair massages, wheat-grass shots at the pool and wine and cheese tastings.

“The coffee-urn approach has gone by the wayside,” said Janne Clare, general manager of the hotel.

Right-brain meetings can literally be fun and games. In February, Meeting Professionals International held a conference for 2,500 people, titled “Meet Different,” to address the concept of meeting designs that explored, among other topics, playing electronic games with a purpose.

“In my generation, games were something you did after class or after the bar or on a rainy Sunday,” said Mr. MacMillan of Meeting Professionals. “Now it’s huge in terms of corporate training.” One session covered how meeting planners could use the Internet game Second Life before events to solicit ideas from participants. “It uses the right brain and engages people in process much more robustly.”

Games are serious business at the Curtis in Denver, where the “rock star break” involves projecting Guitar Hero, the video game, on a large screen and offering Rockstar energy drinks served by waiters wearing

bowling shirts.

All the talk of innovation seems to lift the left-brain's bottom line. Last spring, Diana Peterson, senior director for product management at GroupSystems, a meetings software company in Broomfield, Colo., arranged a sales conference at the Curtis for about 130 people, including potential customers.

"It had a fun energy from the moment you walked in the door," said Ms. Peterson, whose group used games supplied by the hotel as ice-breakers. Ms. Peterson credited the setting for an increase in sales of 40 to 50 percent after the conference, versus flatter results from similar events in traditional settings.

"It was about getting people in the right frame of mind," she said, "breaking down barriers, getting people talking and making decisions they might not make because maybe they feel more daring."

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