

BUSINESS TRAVEL
 Every Tuesday

More companies schedule their meetings closer to home

Switch saves money, time

 By Salina Khan
 USA TODAY

Trips for business meetings are turning into shorter hops. While the big once-a-year conventions and trade shows are as strong as ever, companies and associations also are holding more small meetings for regional audiences.

In a booming economy, more companies are doing investor road shows across the country. And improving technology has made working over the Internet or by videoconference viable alternatives to long-distance travel.

While annual conferences may touch on many issues, regional meetings tend to have shorter, more-focused agendas.

"They're more roll-up-your-sleeves meetings," says Linda Nessim, vice president of the Princeton Review, a test preparation company.

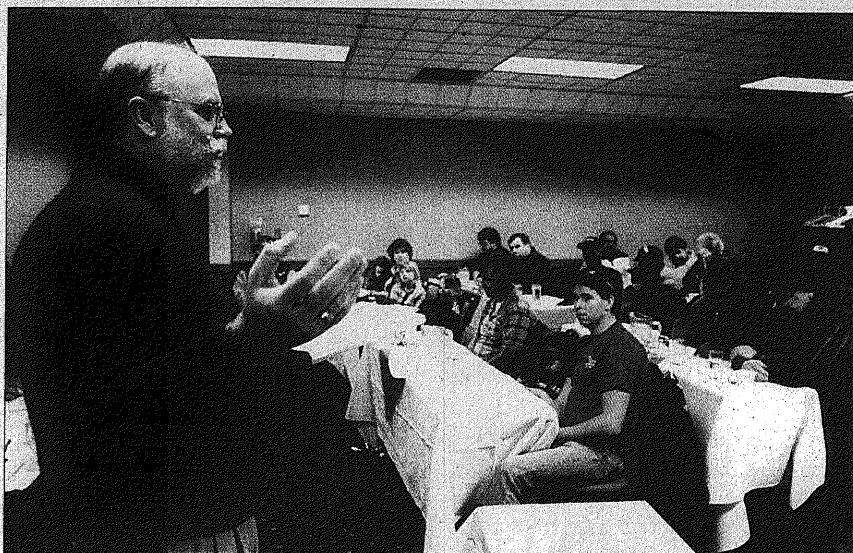
It added five regional meetings a year in 1998 so that staff members could discuss specialized issues, such as state funding of education, in depth.

Regional meetings are good for brainstorming solutions to common problems, building cooperation among nearby offices and developing local marketing strategies, Nessim says.

Businesses' quest for more efficiency and a tighter rein on travel costs also promote regional meetings.

Some meeting planners say regional meetings often get higher attendance because they are less costly and time-consuming than national or international meetings. Unlike the annual sessions, most regional meetings typically do not include nightly entertainment. Many such meetings are held in budget hotels, and people often drive in.

Thirty Washington-based drivers of Garner Transportation of Milton, Wash., convened Saturday at the Best Western Executive Inn in Tacoma, Wash., for their quarterly security meeting. Last year, the



Driving for change: Dean Lubke, head of safety for Garner Transportation, introduces a video on tailgating at a meeting in Tacoma, Wash. The company opted for a regional meeting, making it more convenient for the firm's drivers to attend.

company replaced company-wide meetings with multiple ones throughout the Northwest to save drivers time and reduce travel costs, co-owner Ron Garner says.

Regionalization of meetings is providing a windfall for smaller hotels and hotels in smaller cities. Wingate Inn franchisees are dedicating whole floors to meeting space areas in response to the demand. The limited-service brand has retooled its basic hotel design to provide meeting space for 125 to 250 people. Some U.S. Franchise Systems' Microtel Inn & Suites franchisees are converting guestroom suites to boardrooms to accommodate more meetings.

Factors spurring growth of regional meetings:

► **A hot economy.** Companies are hitting the road to tell their stories to investors, do product launches, conduct market research and hold

brainstorming sessions with sales teams.

The Nasdaq system has held meetings in San Antonio, Columbus, Ohio, and 28 other cities with groups of 25 to 75 traders and brokers since November.

"Rather than create a one-size-fits-all message, they can specialize and personalize the message," says Elizabeth Zielinski, who coordinates Nasdaq's meetings.

Boston's "seen a burst of activity in regional meetings" as a result of the growth of locally based dot-com companies, says Patrick Moscaritolo, president of the Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau. The bureau booked 580 small meetings (with 300 rooms or less) last year, up from 388 in 1998.

► **Telecommuters need to connect.** "People who are telecommuting need to be brought together to network, get in touch with everyone else and

Traveling for business

Attending meetings is a primary reason for business travel. Percentage of business travelers who took trips for:

	1998	1999
Association meetings	69%	62%
Corporate meetings	27%	32%
Individual business trips	40%	42%

Sources: Veevaich Pepperdine & Brown and Yankelovich Partners National Business Travel Monitor

Companies and associations are scheduling more regional meetings to reduce costs and bring together smaller groups. Types of meetings planned this year:

	Associations	Corporations
More regional meetings	21%	30%
More national meetings	12%	19%
More international meetings	18%	15%

Source: Meetings Professionals International survey of 300 members

get a sense of corporate feeling," says Julie Barker, editor-in-chief of *Successful Meetings*.

Horace Mann Insurance in South Carolina convened 15 sales reps from the northern half of the state on Friday at

the Greenville Wingate Inn for a monthly meeting.

"It builds a little camaraderie," manager Bill Beckman says. "The sales business is kind of a lonely deal."

Some business travelers say staying regional deprives them

Companies develop more uses for videoconferences

This year for the first time, Texaco isn't flying MBA students to its headquarters for second rounds of job interviews.

Interviews are being done by videoconference instead. Last month, Texaco managers saw and spoke with 120 MBA students at about 25 campus and hotel locations around the world. The company saved 20 days of interviewing time and \$300,000 in travel costs.

Texaco's experience is an example of how businesses are finding wider uses for videoconferencing systems. As the technology improves, its costs fall and corporate demands for better productivity rise. In addition to job interviews, videoconferences also are frequently used for employee training and state-of-the-company speeches to employees and investors.

"It used to be just executive meetings, but now everybody's doing videoconferencing," says Amy Holmes, group manager for Sprint Business' collaborative services.

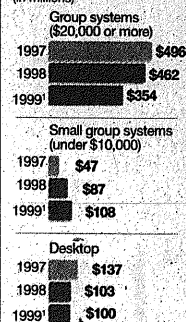
Videoconferencing equipment sales are rising as costs decline sharply. But unit sales have not increased enough to offset the lower dollar volume caused by falling prices, according to Frost & Sullivan. Small, easy-to-use systems are growing in popularity, especially among small and midsize companies.

Some hotel companies are outfitting their meeting rooms with videoconferencing equipment to attract more business. VirtusLine has contracted to install videoconferencing systems in business-class Candiant and Carlson Hospitality Worldwide hotels. Candiant brands include Ramada, Days Inn and Wingate Inn; Carlson hotel chains include Radisson and Regent. Wingate Inn is considering providing videoconferencing equipment as a value-added amenity for meetings.

By Salina Khan

On screen

Annual sales of videoconferencing equipment (in millions)



1. 1999 figures are estimates. Source: The Gartner Group

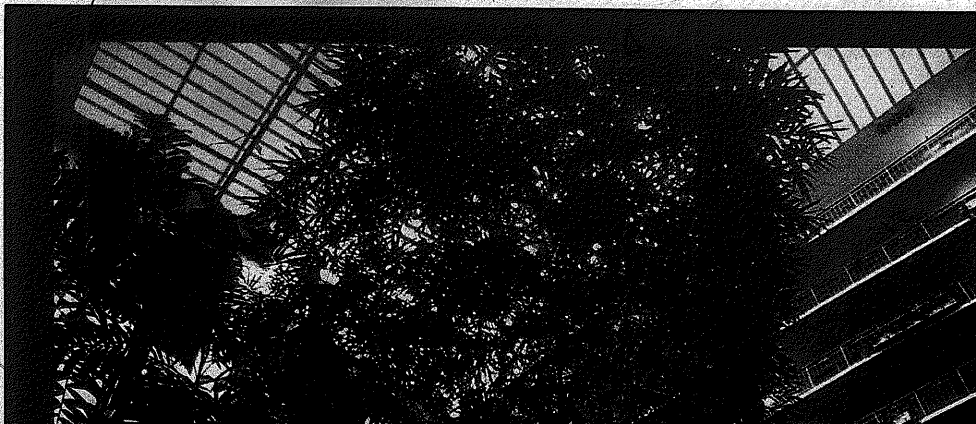
By Quin Tian, USA TODAY

of better networking opportunities. Tom Powell says his company has moved from quarterly companywide sales meetings to regional ones.

"We'd be sitting around having drinks, and someone would bring up a problem," says Pow-

ell of SBA in Knoxville, Tenn. "Someone from a different part of the country would be like, 'Oh, we had that same problem two years ago and this is what we did.'"

► **Negotiating by Internet, 1B**



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