Toys in Meetings?  You Must be Kidding!
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Toys are becoming very cool to bring into business meetings these days. Why? Because toys provide important benefits to participants and to the business they're conducting. You can reap some of those benefits too, by learning how to use and introduce toys appropriately. Toys...

...provide instant access to creativity. No matter how old we are, toys put us in a more youthful and playful frame of mind that can pay benefits in problem solving and creativity.

...diffuse anxiety. It's far better to get "beaned" by a nerf ball by the person who's budget you're attacking than for both of you to sit there ignoring your hostility. You're more likely to get the truth out and deal with it.

...provide mental breaks. Meetings can be draining because of the periods of sustained concentration. A squeeze ball or a slinky can provide a much-needed break for the conscious mind while the subconscious continues to flow with the meeting.

...are tactile and help to engage the whole person. Business conversations are typically very "left-brained." But creative solutions require using the whole brain and the whole person. Toys release the whole person behind the heady intellect.

...become useful visual aids and metaphors. Many of us are visual learners. Toys provide us with the props that help us to illustrate our ideas and see the ideas of others.

...are fun. Who wants to hang around in meetings that aren't?

...are memorable. Because of all of the above, toys provide opportunities for unforgettable experiences in meetings, usually of a humorous nature!

What kinds of toys?

Feel free to make it up as you go along. Here are some toys to start with that are easy to find, low cost, and don't take up much room in a bag or case. Many of these toys are given away now at trade shows and conventions.

Tactile, stress-relieving toys to play with and pass around such as gel-filled squeeze balls or a Slinky.

Balls for tossing or throwing in fun, amusement, mock disgust or anger! These include Nerf balls, Koosh balls, bean bags for juggling and fabric discs for tossing.

Honking horns, clickers, whistles, and other noise makers for providing timely feedback - either positive or negative. These are especially useful for celebrations, or to manage difficult participants in meetings.

Pretend toys, such as puppets, animals, or small wind-up toys to place on the conference table and send off in the direction of the quiet person, dominator, or overzealous meeting participant.

When should you bring toys to meetings?

The time to introduce toys in a meeting is whenever any of the qualities listed at the beginning of this guide are desired, AND, you won't violate any organizational norms or taboos about professionalism or the sanctity of certain meetings or spaces.

If it's your meeting, then that makes choosing to do it a little easier, and you can introduce toys anytime. If you're not in charge of the meeting but are a member, try just showing up with a couple of small squeeze balls or similar items. Handle one yourself and place the other on the table within reach of another at the meeting. See what happens. If you find out that someone objects, then you can easily make them disappear. Most likely, everyone will appreciate them. Then, you can bring a few more toys to the next meeting.

Experiment with the number and type of toys to see what gets the best results in your meetings. Whatever you choose, remember two things. First, the purpose of the toys is to enhance the quality of the meeting, not to take over the meeting with play. They should be put away if the meeting becomes non-productive. Second, don't let your play become a distraction to others in adjoining rooms or offices.

Play away!
Here are some good on-line catalogs with toys and other cool stuff for use in meetings:

http://www.trainerswarehouse.com/  Check out Trainer’s Warehouse **TOYS FOR LEARNERS**!

The Oriental Trading Company has a catalog filled with hundreds of low-cost toys. Order the catalog on their website: [http://www.orientaltrading.com](http://www.orientaltrading.com)

For an exotic and beautiful toy sculpture that everyone will want to play with, check out the Hoberman Spheres at: [http://www.hoberman.com](http://www.hoberman.com)

**Helpful Hints**

Arrive early and put the toys on the table before people arrive. Let people discover them for themselves.

Getting toys made with your company logo on them will make almost anything acceptable in the meeting room!

Start out slowly by introducing a couple of common toys to see how people react. Don’t shock people by turning your meeting room into a toy room!

**About the author**

*Christopher M. Avery, Ph.D. speaks out at conferences and corporate events about how smart, competitive and independent thinkers work together most productively. His company, Partnerwerks, supports collaborative leadership with corporate seminars and custom services.*