

GLFs: Big Issues and What's for Dinner

MS' decade-old Government Leaders Forum series is about building business relationships, but details such as who sits next to whom need to be managed, too.

By Aaron Halabe

Microsoft is no shrinking violet when it comes to promoting its products. But the company has learned that it's beneficial to dial back its inclination to self-promote when working with one constituency: world leaders.

The past two days in Beijing, Microsoft took the soft-sell tack at its Government Leaders Forum (GLF). These two-day summits draw presidents, prime ministers, and cabinet officials to discuss how computer technology can help them address issues in education, health, and economies.

"The events are not a Microsoft commercial. We really try to take a backstage role," said Mona Bonaci, director of marketing for the [Worldwide Public Sector](#).

For 10 years, Microsoft executives have used these summits to meet privately and incrementally build relations with public-sector leaders. Many represent prospective customers, but Bonaci said these decision makers disdain hard-sell tactics, and prefer technology guidance and best practices to advance country agendas.

"We try to avoid discussions about just Microsoft," Bonaci said. "It's really to show the critical ways technology is used," Bonaci said. "What we offer is part of the message but not the main message. ...We are showing that we understand their problems and we're there to help them."



Bill Gates meets with Colombia President Alvaro Uribe at the GLF in Cartagena.



Kandeh Yumkella of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and Microsoft's Gerri Elliott sign a memorandum of understanding at GLF Africa 2006.

Getting Out of Redmond Helped

There are four summits a year in host countries in Europe, the Americas, and Asia, and the final forum rotates between African and Middle Eastern nations. During the program's first seven years, the forums were held in Redmond. Moving them regionally generated higher satisfaction ratings from attendees and attracted higher-level attendees.

"By focusing on regional topics ... we're able to go deeper in discussing the issues that our public-sector customers care about most," Bonaci said. "That's helping to position Microsoft as a thought leader in those markets as well as giving us greater visibility into customer issues."

Forums are limited to about 250 attendees, a cap that facilitates networking and open dialogue. Attendees love to see how other governments are making strides, Bonaci said. At the March forum in Cartagena, Colombia, a Chilean government official described an online system that streamlines government purchasing. A representative of Spain described his nation's deployment of an online portal to communicate tourist information.

Meetings Are Attention Getters

Critical success indicators are the number of representatives of government and non-governmental organizations who attend and the relationships Microsoft cultivates.

Nine current or former heads of state, including President Clinton, attended last July's forum in Cape Town, South Africa. Other sessions have drawn Colin Powell, European Commission President General José Manuel Barroso, and former World Trade Organization Director Mike Moore.

As GLF sessions have gained a reputation for attracting prominent officials, so they have also attracted significant media interest. Microsoft tracked 1,349 online and print stories about GLF in the past 18 months, and 625 million broadcast-news impressions. Many stories identify Microsoft as the program's sponsor and favorably convey that the company is interested in helping solve national and regional problems.

Main Benefit to MS: Building Business Trust

Ruben Bravo, managing director for Microsoft's LATAM Public Sector, said the Cartagena summit "[gave] us a huge opportunity to prove our business." The company signed agreements to work with regional governments and discussed an economic development project with the Organization of American States.

Danilo Piaggese, a representative of the Inter-American Development Bank, said he and Microsoft had "identified two new concrete tracks" of cooperation at the summit: electronic health and tourism initiatives.

Bravo added, "One of our executives was able to talk to a Chilean leader about a specific challenge that requires our technology to make it happen. He wanted to make Microsoft a real partner ... and we committed to be that partner and trusted advisor."



Gates and Gordon Brown, UK's Chancellor of the Exchequer, at the GLF in Edinburgh in January.

Pomp and Protocol

Microsoft is largely on its own to address the myriad cultural and protocol details involved in bringing together heads of state. Scrupulous research and planning ensures that no feathers are ruffled.

Every detail must be handled with diplomatic aplomb, and numerous questions must be addressed:

- Which dignitary enters a room first?
- Who sits at the head table?
- Are attendees required to stand when a head of state walks on stage?
- How are honorifics expressed – "his Majesty" or "his Honor"?
- What are seating arrangements at the welcome reception, the plenary sessions, and the gala dinner?

Microsoft also must be mindful of existing tensions among participant nations, Bonaci said, noting the invaluable counsel of one nation's protocol officer regarding potential negative consequence of seating two leaders together.

Security considerations are critical, as well. Microsoft Security coordinates arrangements with national police and governmental protection agencies. "Governments will not commit to attending until they are convinced that their



"Governments will not commit to attending until they are convinced that their specific security requirements are met," Mona Bonaci said.

specific security requirements are met," Bonaci said. "We've had no breaches."

Microsoft customizes the cultural aspects of GLF events, too. At GLF Europe, held in January in Edinburgh, a traditional Scottish dish, haggis, was on the menu despite being a gustatory challenge for some attendees. "Culturally, we observe these requirements, ensuring that the history and culture of the country are visible and part of the event," Bonaci said.

"We are committed to building long-lasting relationships with nations and being a good partner with governments," she added. "Those relationships are worth investing in."