

THE TENNESSEAN

Nashville songwriters give company team building a new twist

BY BONNA JOHNSON



Nashville songwriter Billy Kirsch consults with Matt Ramsey as they lead corporate team-building activities by helping employees of Telcordia write a song about their company. The aim is for corporate groups to share experiences, tap into their creativity and work toward a common goal. LARRY MCCORMACK / THE TENNESSEAN

It's said that the perfect country and western song talks about mama, trains, trucks, prison and getting drunk. But for employees of a New Jersey-based telecommunications company, their keys to a great country song included terms like broadband, wireless, download, convergence and data. Eat your heart out, David Allan Coe — or not. Scoff if you will, but writing a song together about your company has emerged as the latest corporate team-building activity, putting a decidedly Nashville twist on how to

encourage creativity, build relationships and work together at the office.

In this case, employees of Telcordia were being led by 10 of Nashville's premier songwriters in penning songs about their communications software and services company during a sales leadership conference at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center this week.

"They're having fun and doing team bonding, but they're also pulling value out of it related to innovation, problem solving and using creativity in their work," said Billy Kirsch, a Nashville songwriter and owner of Kidbilly Music LLC, through which he organizes Team Building Through Song sessions for companies.

Kirsch, an accomplished jazz pianist, has penned several hit songs and co-wrote a No. 1 hit and CMA song of the year, Holes in the Floor of Heaven, with Steve Warier.

In the two years since Kirsch has been managing team-building programs full time he has led songwriting sessions for Microsoft's sales team and for employees at Healthways, XM Human Resource Solutions, Affinion Group, General Electric and Vanderbilt University.

Initially, some people thought they wouldn't be creative enough," said Erin Evans, director of client training at Franklin-based Affinion Benefits Group, who went through the program last summer. "We built off each other's ideas."

Suddenly, the bossy executive who likes telling everyone what to do couldn't get it done on his own. "He realized that to be successful, he had to rely on other people in the group to get a song that sounded good,"

And unlike other team-building exercises that Evans has done — like ropes courses — songwriting doesn't require special athletic skills.

Most corporate team-building exercises are designed as metaphors for working collectively and reaching a common goal, said Pat Galagan, executive editor at the American Society for Training & Development, an association for workplace learning and performance professionals.

The team-building heyday was about 10 years ago, though, and many companies have substantially cut back during the recession, she said. It's estimated that off-site corporate team building makes up just 1 percent of company's training budget now. Kirsch, though, is in growth mode. Bookings doubled last year over his first year in business, and he plans to hire someone to help him market the business so he can focus on leading sessions.



Julia Howells laughs as she and others in her group team up with Nashville songwriter Billy Montana at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center. LARRY MCCORMACK / THE TENNESSEAN

"It's a neat Nashville experience," said Lauren Lucas, one of the Nashville songwriters at the Telcordia program. "We're writing a song about what their business is all about, and hopefully they get a sneak peek about how to write a song," said Lucas, a former Warner Brothers recording artist and a Tony nominee for the Broadway production of *Urban Cowboy*. Plus, it's not every day you get to write a song with a hit tunesmith. "Almost immediately, you see them trying to solve problems," Grammy-winning songwriter Don Henry said.

Faced with blank sheets of paper on flip charts, the songwriting novices brainstorm phrases and words about their company, their work and the challenges they face. The

professional songwriters already have an original melody in mind and strum along on their guitars.

After about 90 minutes, a group generally has pieced together a couple of verses and a chorus. "I've never had a group where it hasn't worked," Kirsch said. "People tend to lose their inhibitions, loosen up and it starts to steamroll."

Vanderbilt's Owen School of Management went through its own songwriting exercise in January and came up with a tune called *On the Owen Road* penned by a small group of faculty, staff, students and alumni — all with Kirsch's help.

"We were a rather tone-deaf crowd," said Bill Dunbar, director of development at the Owen School. "You had a group of finance types. We stepped outside our boundaries a bit and we were forced to be more creative, certainly more than we're used to."

The song focused on making friends and creating wealth, both of which the group considered as goals of graduate school. "We tried to avoid writing about dogs and the over-indulgence of alcohol," Dunbar said.