

Meeting planners provide the benefit of experience

BY LYNN LEWIS-BJOSTAD | SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR

Whether you are responsible for coordinating a small event focused on a select group of clients or a major conference catering to thousands of industry professionals, you may benefit from the services of an experienced meeting and event planner.

The right planner can help maximize the creative potential of your event while also saving you time, money and the headaches often associated with trying to balance high-level strategy with the tiniest of details — not to mention troubleshooting throughout the event.

Why use a planner?

The most important considerations for every event are your objectives and the budget.

Without the proper expertise, it is easy to find yourself in a financial bind and scrambling for additional resources.

Many people instinctively think that having an event planner is an expensive luxury.

In reality, because of their bulk-buying power, knowledge of the marketplace and negotiating skills, experienced planners can actually stretch your budget and find cost savings where the average person probably would not.

Planners often receive discounts on services from meeting space to food to transportation because they direct so much business to preferred vendors who consistently provide quality service. Meeting planners also know which vendor costs are open to negotiation.

Defining the purpose

Too many organizations hold events without defining a purpose. The desired outcome should drive every decision in choreographing a meeting.

A good meeting planner can help a company determine an end goal.

Many companies enlist the services of an event planner to leverage creative possibilities to achieve a specific end result and to ensure a return on investment.

Planners see and experience many different types of events and can help develop a consistent brand experience from the first moment to the final goodbyes.

They keep abreast of current trends, best practices and unique touches such as memorable gifts for attendees. They know what works and, more importantly, what doesn't.

Avoiding pitfalls

Event and meeting planners also are aware of common pitfalls and how to insulate a program in anticipation of possible challenges.

In dealing with host facilities, caterers, entertainers and other vendors, there are always numerous contracts and agreements.

Good planners know what to look for and how to revise such documents to protect their clients' best interests.

Audio/video backup, weather contingencies, medical support and security preparations are other important considerations that a planner typically can arrange in advance.

Choosing a planner

There are a number of ways to identify the right meeting and event planner for your programs.

Just as you would ask around to find the best financial planner, doctor, or



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lawyer, referrals an important mechanism for choosing just the right person to organize your events.

Attend special events in your community and ask who produced them. Contact business representatives you trust and ask who they trust with their events. Ask vendors who they recommend.

And always ask for a list of references from prospective planners and ask what they did and did not like about the services they received.

Validation

Achievement of professional certification or accreditation by an event planner also can represent one validation of his or her competence in and commitment to the industry.

Some of these marks of distinction include Certification in Meeting Management (CMM), Certified Meeting Professional (CMP), and Certified Special Events Professional (CSEP).

Ask several planners to submit a proposal in response to a specific event you want to coordinate.

Ask for possible creative ideas, staffing and outsourcing options, timelines and estimated pricing.

Measure responses against the stated goals, objectives and target audiences you outlined in the Request For Proposals.

Solid estimate

To ensure budgeting predictability, you will want a planner who can provide a solid estimate of all anticipated costs up front.

Then meet with the finalists and get to know them. Even though they will take a lot of responsibility off your shoulders, you will still need to work closely with them leading up to the event.

You should choose someone who you are comfortable with and relate well to on a personal and professional level.

The event planner's job is to make you a hero among your key constituencies.

And when your guests thank you for a wonderful time and say that you made everything look so easy, that's when you know the job was well done.

Whoever it was that said "good events are hard to pull off" should have hired a meeting planner.

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