



The Ultimate Contingency Plan: Expect the Unexpected

By Joanne Ireland, President of Ireland Presentations

How many times have you picked up the phone or opened an email and faced those dreaded words: “We have a problem.” The hotel hasn’t finished its renovations, and can’t provide the promised meeting space. Or your client needs to cancel the user group meeting you’ve been planning for months. Or the booth doesn’t show up at the trade show. Or there will be a much smaller (or larger) number of attendees than what you’ve contracted for. Or...

As event planners, we spend hours upon hours worrying about what might go wrong, and making contingency plan on top of contingency plan. Nothing wrong with that – that’s part of our job. Let’s face it, there are some things you simply can’t anticipate, but that doesn’t mean it has to ruin your meeting or event. You just have to be prepared and understand that no matter how much planning you do or how detailed you think you are, something can (and with most events will) go wrong or take an unexpected turn. Good planners need to respond quickly to crises, without losing their cool.

After years of dealing with the unexpected, I have come up with my own ways to plan for the unexpected– a checklist of to-dos that gives a framework for dealing with potential crises. Here are the basic steps:

Document the agreement. Make sure you have included some contingency clauses, so that you, your client and the hotel/venue are covered in case something unexpected comes up. A good meeting planner will review the “standard” contract in detail, making edits and adjustments to ensure that it’s in the client’s best interest. But remember - you have to be fair in what you are asking for. What should you include? Clauses for anything that might potentially ruin the event:

- Attrition- sleeping rooms, food & beverage, meeting space requirements
- Unavailability of the venue or promised space due to unexpected circumstances
- Postponement and cancellation clauses
- Early information on what other groups will be in-house during your meeting-you don’t want your biggest competitor right next door
- Weather-related issues, employee/union strikes, etc.

Include clauses or edits in the agreement that are clear and concise and aren’t open to interpretation; spell out what advance notification is required, and the financial obligations of each party in the event of a problem. In general be very thorough in your contract negotiations.

Details, Details, Details. Check it once, check it twice, check it three times. This is the first rule I teach new staff and it doesn’t matter how much experience you have – keep checking the details. Sometimes the simplest details are missed – but those simple details can cause BIG problems.

Communicate. Communicate early and often with the client, as well as with the venue and other vendors you've contracted with. Building a good rapport and a relationship will help in times of crisis. If you suspect that the client is reluctant to commit to final preparations for an event, arrange a face-to-face meeting during which you can get all the facts out on the table. If the client is having second thoughts, make sure they understand the penalties involved (e.g. those related to smaller room blocks, minimum food and beverage contracts, their financial obligations) and what other alternatives might be available.

Look at the situation from both sides. Make sure you understand that any contractual relationship contains costs and benefits to both sides. Understanding the business relationship as well as the personal (emotional) side of things can help smooth over rough patches. If you know your client needs to downsize or delay the event, let the venue know as early as possible, and work with them to find a solution. Most properties don't want to lose the business entirely, even if they can collect a healthy deposit. In many cases they may offer to move the program to another date in order to keep a good relationship with both the planner and client – they want you to come back. If the problem arises during the event, make sure you alert the venue management or responsible vendor as quickly as possible, knowing that they want your event to succeed as much as you do, and will work with you.

Be creative. There are usually a number of ways to positively resolve problems, but they won't come to mind when the crisis arises. Those of us who have planned hundreds of meetings and events have already encountered problems – some minor, and some very major. The most important things to remember are:

- a) keep your cool – yelling or scolding won't get the problem solved and will only make things worse
- b) ask what "WE" can do to make this happen or fix the problem – remember, everyone involved owns the problem and has a stake in fixing it so the event will be a success
- c) don't point fingers and blame – this isn't the time and you need "all hands on deck" and all parties involved to resolve it
- d) try to think out of the box – what's another way to accomplish what the original plan was?
- e) Offer to help – don't be bossy.

The best way to explain creativity is through an actual situation that happened to me recently.

I was organizing an offsite dinner for a client. I had been working with the restaurant for a month and everything was in place – date, time, private room, menu & wine selection. I met with the banquet manager at the restaurant the day before just to be sure all details were in place. As I left, we shook hands and said "See you tomorrow". The next day, I arrived an hour early to set up my welcome table and make sure everything was ready for my client's guests, only to be told by the hostess "I'm sorry but we don't have you down for a dinner tonight – you're down for tomorrow night". I actually thought she was joking; unfortunately, she wasn't.

My contact had left for the day, so I asked for the manager on duty. He reiterated that indeed they were expecting us the next night. I explained I had 50 people who were going to walk in the door in 30 minutes and asked what we could do to “make this happen”. Forget the original menu and the wine selection –serve from the main menu if necessary. What wines could he pour in quantity? What appetizers could he pull together quickly? I didn’t care whose fault this was – I just wanted to make sure my client’s dinner happened.

So we all rolled up our sleeves: he called his extra staff and we all moved tables and chairs, and got a bar set up while his chef and kitchen started pulling items together. The banquet manager even came back to help. I was lighting votives on the dinner tables as my client and guests were walking in. By keeping everyone focused on the end result – a successful event- we made it happen and no one knew any different!

Learn. Some of the best event ideas have come out of adversity. Remember – what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger – and better! When you deal with adversity while remaining calm and in control, your clients and vendors increase their level of respect for you. When you work with a vendor to circumvent a problem and make them look good, you cement your relationship – they will be there to support you in the future. You will learn which hotels are the best from contract negotiations to banquet staff, which treat you fairly, what techniques work to ease the strain on clients, and much more. And, remember, although this is not easy much of the time – smile.

Being experienced and being prepared to plan for the unexpected can help meeting planners get a good night’s sleep, secure in the knowledge that they have thought through the event in every detail. But always remember – expect the unexpected – it’s just around the next corner. And, how you handle it will show just how good you are.

About the Author:

Joanne Ireland, a 20 year veteran of the meeting and event planning industry, is Founder and President of Ireland Presentations, a meeting, conference and event planning company based in San Francisco. Joanne is one of San Francisco’s leading consultants in planning, coordination & management of conferences, meetings & events. Her expertise is design, project standards/content, conceptualization & design of project strategy, and contract negotiations. Joanne and her team continue to produce successful events and meetings for a wide range of corporate and non-profit clients both large and small, domestically and abroad. More about Joanne and Ireland Presentations can be found at www.irelandpresentations.com.

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