



How the Magic “Happens”

By Joanne Ireland, President of Ireland Presentations

When we attend a conference, we are blissfully ignorant of the thousands of activities, groups, vendors and details that must come together to make it work like magic, without major glitches. All the things we don't pay attention to, the things we don't know about behind the scenes – the signage, the fact that the right speakers show up in the right rooms at the appointed times, the morning coffee service that just appears, the sponsor booths that are ready to go when the exhibit hall opens – remain a mystery to most of us. The fact is, we don't care how things happen, as long as everything works.

But, everything changes when it's your own event! Whether it's your first big user group conference, a technology symposium, or any other major event involving hundreds or thousands of attendees, the sheer number of things that must be done can seem monumental. Where do you even start? How do you determine where to hold the conference – what's the best city and location? What about the date – should it be in February or June, August or November? How will you get the word out – what is your promotion and publicity strategy? How can you possibly juggle all the minute details and logistics, involving vendors, sponsors, speakers, attendees, and all the behind-the-scenes people and organizations that must be involved? What will you do if something goes wrong: the on-site registration lines back up, the audio for the keynote fails, you have 100 more attendees than expected or worse, you have 100 fewer attendees than expected, your shipment of conference bags didn't show up, someone's laptop is stolen, a speaker becomes ill?

Who's in charge?

Most successful events are made possible through the services of an experienced conference organizer. While there are many companies that claim to “do events”, in reality most of them only handle one or two aspects of the event. They may rent furniture, provide a lead tracking system, or offer other services. In contrast, an experienced conference organizer understands every aspect of conference planning and execution, and can make life much easier for you. They understand all the details, the timing, how to work with the vast number of vendors who will necessarily be involved, and how to pull together all the bits and pieces to make it a success.

Five Major Aspects to Successful Conferences

There are five major aspects to successful conference organization, and an experienced conference organizer can guide you through all of them. In general, and depending on the size of the event, they will start at least a year (yes, a year!) before the event, in order to make sure that there is time to complete all necessary activities, yet leave room for issues that will inevitably arise.



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1. Location and Venue – scope, language, city, core organizers, dates, name, venue, hotel, restaurants and bars, distance between hotel, venue and restaurants/bars, target audience, target number of attendees, sponsors, catering, equipment, internet, electrical, entertainment, venue layout, room layouts, look and feel, flow, floor management, staffing, MC, speaker changeover, room monitors, timekeeping, slide template. Timing and follow-through on all.
2. Administration – budget forecast & tracking, sales, attendee management, speaker management, sponsor management, customer support. Topic, speakers, schedule, tracks, panels, workshops, and recording of the sessions, registration management & badge scanning equipment. Timing and follow-through on all.
3. Marketing – promotion and publicity strategy, website and content, media partners, social media, outreach, invitations, signage & branding, conference guide, badges, lanyards, conference bag, etc. Timing and follow-through on all.
4. Speaker – speaker information and management, flights and hotel rooms, slide templates, rehearsal schedules, AV requirements. Timing and follow-through on all.
5. Sponsor & Exhibitors – sponsor/exhibitor information, deliverables, tracking and management, exhibit hall floor plans, special events and acknowledgments. Timing and follow-through on all.

Single Point of Contact

An experienced conference organizer is a "Single Point of Contact" for all of your conference and event needs. Together with their staff, they will hold your hand throughout the process, ensuring that nothing is left to chance. From the initial planning session, with its in-depth discussion of goals, timing and expectations, to a detailed assessment of all likely conference expenditures and assistance developing a budget and timeline, the team works with you to ensure success. They will handle the vendor bidding process, negotiation and resolution of any related issues per budget guidelines. Throughout the process, they will closely monitor the timeline and ensure that you receive early warning of any anticipated slippage. More importantly, they will act as the single point of contact for all the vendors who will participate:

- Hotel, convention center or other venue
- Food and beverage
- Exhibit services
- Audio visual production, printers, designers, photographers, videographers
- Speakers, sponsors and exhibitors
- Electrical, Internet, Registration Management
- Entertainment
- Ancillary Events



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In addition, they can manage your speakers and sponsors/exhibitors by sending out all of their deliverables and managing their deadlines to ensure that all of the necessary items needed for the Conference guide are received, that they are registered for the conference and have reserved their sleeping rooms, and the other thousands of details that must be attended to.

Don't Settle for Less

Your event matters – it's your company's reputation (and maybe even yours?) on the line. There is a lot of time, money and resources that will be dedicated to making this program a big success. Make sure you choose an experienced conference organizer who is comfortable with and fully understands all aspects of conference planning and execution. They don't have to be big, but they do need the experience and attention to detail that goes into every successful conference. Check references and talk with their previous clients to better understand what they can provide, and to get a feel for the overall success of events they have managed. Make sure your conference organizer and their team will truly be part of your team, providing hands-on management, experienced guidance and the extra touches that will make your event a resounding success.

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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