



Is the Success of Your Next Meeting in the Hands of the Wrong Person?

By Joanne Ireland, President of Ireland Presentations

Introduction

Here's a study in contrasts:

Scenario A: The user group meeting was even better than anticipated: from registration and delegate correspondence, from guest accommodations to meeting rooms, from large group meetings to break-out sessions, from buffet breakfasts, morning and afternoon breaks to gala dinners and sponsored events, everything was in place, everything had been anticipated and everything went smoothly, so delegates could concentrate on building alliances and strengthening their ties with the host company.

Scenario B: The user group meeting was a disaster: hotel reservations were confused and guest rooms were substandard since "run of the house" actually meant "back of the house" accommodations; the company had to pay for minimum food and beverage guarantees, although the final attendee count was much smaller than originally planned (since the final guarantee date was missed and the hotel used the original counts provided months ago). On-site registration was unorganized, conference materials were minimal and inaccurate, and directional signage was left up to the hotel's lobby monitors. Meeting rooms were noisy and the wrong size with the wrong setup. AV equipment was inadequate and the presenters couldn't get help. Meals were chaotic, complaints were many, and the outcome was, as expressed in delegate' blogs and tweets, embarrassing and unprofessional.

Why the Difference?

It all comes down to selecting the right person for the job. In Scenario A, the company hired an experienced meeting planner, who knew what to expect, knew what works and how it works and ensured that every aspect of the event went as planned. No surprises, no drama – and both the delegates and the company were convinced of the value of the money they spent. In Scenario B, the company decided to cut costs and use an internal person for the job. After all, this person is detail-oriented, has planned the company picnic and a few training programs, already handles negotiations with a lot of vendors (e.g. a local printer or online sites for ordering USB drives for giveaways), understands the corporate culture, and is expert at juggling multiple tasks. What's one more little job like the planning of a major meeting?

Experience is Key

The reality is that, while internal people may bring strong capabilities, they are rarely professional event planners with the capabilities and know-how that years of experience have provided. The skills may seem similar, even familiar, but the background and experience are miles apart. Each is a professional, but they are not interchangeable. The biggest issue is experience. The internal person probably lacks experience in one or more of the many crucial aspects of event planning:

- How to target cities/venues during off-peak times to get better rates
- The importance of site inspections to ensure you're picking the right place for the meeting
- Contract negotiations – what the clauses really mean, what is negotiable and what isn't and what the real financial implications are
- Problem-solving and contingency planning
- Leveraging relationships with multiple vendors to get the best overall value

- Important questions to ask – especially with regard to other guests/groups
- Realistic budgeting, including allowance for unforeseen costs
- Ability to communicate clearly with the venue regarding room layouts, food and beverage menus, AV requirements, rooming lists, etc.
- Managing multiple events within one main event

Lack of Experience is Obvious

Most hotels and venues know right from the first phone call how much experience the caller has in planning meetings. It's all in the questions they ask, and how they ask them. While an internal person can ask the basic questions, it is the seasoned planner who knows all the other questions to ask, and can use those answers to negotiate contracts for the best rates, get discounted or comp'd amenities, minimize or eliminate clauses and the like. Plus, the event planner can bring to bear their own extensive databases of contacts, and knowledge of venues in various cities and countries.

Teamwork – A Better Approach

Companies must decide internally what and when it can be handled by an internal person and when to call in the pros. They need to be cognizant of the many ways in which an inexperienced person can make major blunders and incur financial risks without even realizing it. With that in mind, the company may decide to separate events into three categories:

- **Internal Meetings:** Use an internal person for a meeting that will be held at the company offices – with a minimal number of vendors to organize, and where costs are more contained and company exposure is nominal.
- **Complex, detailed external meetings when the company's reputation is at stake:** Bring in the pros for off-site and out-of-town meetings where the logistical planning is grand, a more complex/detailed budget needs to be managed, and there is a need for organization of multiple vendors, contract negotiations, cost containment, project management skills, relationship development skills and just plain know-how.
- **Meetings worked as a team:** For some large external meetings, it makes sense to partner an internal person with an external event planner. That way, the internal person can focus on communicating the goals and objectives (which might change during the planning process), provide content development, stay in touch with VIP meeting participants, communicate with company executives, and provide perspective on the company's culture. The event planner can then focus on all the logistical details that make the event run smoothly and ensure a professional ambiance.

Conclusion

When an event really matters, choose the right person for the job. Remember, planning a large meeting or conference where your company is exposed either internally or externally to your customers isn't supposed to be "fun" – it's a serious job with serious consequences. Internal people are very good at what they do – but planning this event isn't their full time job and they don't often organize and manage large events. Either hand off such events to a professional event manager entirely, or let your internal person team with the professionals to ensure a smooth and successful event. You, your company executives, your sponsors and delegates will be much happier with the end result!

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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