

MEETING PLANNERS: IT'S TIME TO PROVE YOUR WORTH

In tough times, knowing that you bring value to the table isn't enough—you need to demonstrate it to your management.

Open the newspaper or click on the cable news and it's hard to miss the barrage of epithets being hurled at meetings and events these days. Names like "lavish," "excessive," and "extravagant." **By Megan Tsai**

FOR SOME PROFESSIONAL MEETING PLANNERS, THIS BOUT OF BAD PR HAS BECOME AN ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM. BUT MANY OTHERS ARE REALIZING THE BEST WAY TO ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM IS TO TACKLE IT HEAD-ON.

By arming their executives with hard facts about the return on investment their meetings deliver, they're helping company leaders derail any criticism that might arise while reinforcing their own value.

MEETINGS REMAIN CRUCIAL

Despite the ongoing pressure and the negative publicity meetings have received, planners understand that many meetings remain critical in a recession. In some cases, meetings become even more important, especially when a down economy requires organizational changes.

"If a company is going through a lot of change, employees need the opportunity to get together in a group," says Lithium Logistics Group Meeting Planner and Managing Partner Julie Ann Schmidt. "In a face-to-face meeting, participants get the opportunity to listen and ask questions. Change requires communication. It is how you keep your employees and teams feeling safe about what's going on, even if it's bad news."

For sales forces struggling to meet their goals in this economy, taking away incentive programs may mean a direct hit to the company's bottom line. "A huge percentage of people are immensely motivated by incentive programs," says Schmidt. "Cutting incentives can negatively impact sales for a company."

Incentive meeting programs also provide an important networking function. "You just can't get the relationship-building that takes place with both your peers and company executives outside an incentive conference," says Dan Young, director of event planning at Thrivent Financial for Lutherans.

DEMONSTRATING VALUE IS KEY

So what's the best way to tame the elephant in the room? By demonstrating the value of your meetings and events with numbers and facts, expert planners say.

"There are a lot of misperceptions out there," says Medtronic Meeting Solutions Manager Donna Foppoli Patrick. "Meetings and conferences are a way to motivate our sales people and our many other employees. We need to show that we're not just creating meetings where we have spas and boondoggles. We need to demonstrate clearly that this is not wasted money."

One important reason for demonstrating value is self-preservation. Meeting and event staffs are being cut, and those planners who can show they add value and bring savings to their company or client have the best shot at weathering this economic storm.

"When there is a clear return on investment, there is continued support," says Schmidt. "It gives executives something to hang their hat on if the meeting comes into question."

In addition, demonstrating meeting value helps highlight cost savings for your company or client, better aligns meetings with your organization's business goals and leads to a clearer understanding of the role you serve in your organization.

"By publicizing what we do, we've positioned our event planning department's value within the organization," says Young. "We actively promote our stewardship initiatives, letting others know that we're making sure company dollars are spent wisely."

EFFECTIVELY TRACKING VALUE

Every planner has several important tools for tracking value. The first is demonstrating your ability to stay within a budget. If a budget was considered a guideline in the past, now it is pretty well carved in stone. The trick is meeting (or better yet, beating) that shrinking number without sacrificing quality.

"Staying in budget starts at the very beginning," says Belinda Muehlbauer, director of meetings and events for Carson Wagonlit Travel. "We need to edu-

cate our customers away from thinking, 'That's where we've always gone so that's where we're going again.' Instead, they should be looking at three to six properties at a destination and comparison-shopping."

Other tricks include consolidating meetings, shortening meetings, cutting down on the number of attendees, scaling back meeting frequency or choosing destinations with a lower travel cost. Remember to keep track of the creative ways you find to keep each of your events within budget.

The next tool for tracking value is by presenting your negotiating prowess. The hallmark of every good meeting planner is top-notch negotiation skills—but your company leaders and clients will never know just how much these skills are worth unless you show them. For example, Patrick compares the package cost that a venue first offers (the "first-pass" rate) with the actual negotiated rate. You can also track this number year-over-year for annual events to demonstrate a consistent or improving level of negotiated savings.

The partner of negotiated cost savings is cost avoidance. It's a little trickier to quantify, but just

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as important. Schmidt's cost-avoidance strategy includes pushing hard for a rebooking clause in all her contracts. If her client's meeting is cancelled or postponed, which is happening increasingly often in this economy, she can slot in another meeting and avoid penalties. Tracking these types of negotiated cost avoidance measures shows you're protecting the company from potential pitfalls.

Perhaps the most important tool is a well-designed participant survey. Throw out all the old questions about how much participants enjoyed the meeting, and instead ask questions that track how well the meeting aligned with strategic business goals. "Be sure to set clear and specific objectives going into the meeting," says Young. "Then, track whether those objectives were achieved with post-conference surveys."

Other data you can collect at each meeting includes headcounts, walk-in counts, registration data and attendance of breakout sessions.

EDUCATING YOUR EXECUTIVES

Once you've compiled the data demonstrating your meeting's value, the next challenge is getting it in the hands of busy executives. There are many ways to package the data: monthly e-mail updates, easy-to-read report cards, detailed reports, quarterly in-person meetings and short cost-saving summaries. The key is making sure you find some way to get this information to company executives on a regular basis, in a form that works for them.


"The way you package this information is very unique to the person," says Schmidt. "Get to know your personality types and how they want to receive information. A good lead-in is always, 'Here's how much money I've saved you.' It's a universal way to get their attention."

You can also get your message out without direct communication with company executives. Many planners use company or department newsletters, company Intranet or even the employee bulletin board to highlight the value of meetings.

A NEVER-ENDING STORY

Sooner or later, the economy will rebound. Meeting and event budgets will likely recover as well, and planners will breathe a collective sigh of relief. But many planners say that even when the broader picture is sunnier, the need to demonstrate the value of meeting and event programs will stick around.

"Once the economy bounces back, this is not going to go away," says Schmidt. "A smart planner who wants to ensure their value is appreciated in good times and bad is going to always be showing the savings and results they bring."

By developing a process to track and demonstrate the value of meetings now, planners will reap immediate benefits. By continuing that process into the future, they'll also help strengthen the understanding and appreciation of the value they bring to their companies and clients for years to come. 

Keep Up with Professional Organizations

One of the best ways to develop effective methods for evaluating your meeting successes is to share tips and best practices with peers in your industry. Here's a list of some professional organizations that can help you get started:

CONVENTION INDUSTRY COUNCIL
conventionindustry.org

MEETING PROFESSIONALS INTERNATIONAL (MPI)
mpiweb.org

PROFESSIONAL CONVENTION MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION (PCMA)
pcma.org

ASSOCIATION FOR CONVENTION OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT (ACOM)
acomonline.org

INTERNATIONAL SPECIAL EVENTS SOCIETY
ises.com

FINANCIAL AND INSURANCE CONFERENCE PLANNERS
ficpnet.com

NATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVEL ASSOCIATION (NBTA)
nbta.org

other resources

MEETINGS MEAN BUSINESS
meetingsmeanbusiness.com

MEET IN MINNESOTA
meetinminnesota.com

KEEP AMERICA MEETING
keepamericameeting.org