



# Need A Hand?

BY RONNIE GARRETT

FIVE REASONS FOR CONSIDERING A PROFESSIONAL  
PLANNER FOR SMALLER CORPORATE MEETINGS,  
PARTIES AND EVENTS

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Denice Waldhuetter, Vice President, PEC Meetings

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Ann Craig, Vice President, Strategic Meetings Management, Meetings & Incentives Worldwide Inc.

Outsourcing a meeting can be a hard sell sometimes. As companies scale back their budgets and trim their workforce, they may also decide to bring the planning duties for smaller meetings, parties and other events in-house. However such a strategy doesn’t always make sense from a financial, risk and time standpoint.

But there are five very real reasons why corporations should consider a planner for their events, whether it’s a \$5,000 spend for a 10-person strategy meeting or a \$50,000+ capital outlay for a 300-attendee convention.

#### 1. TIME.

“Often companies do not take into consideration the intangible amount of time it takes for someone in-house to plan a meeting or event,” says Joey Reader, owner of A-Mazing Events, a corporate event planning firm based in Appleton, Wis. “This line item never makes the budget.”

Reader suggests that companies calculate the amount of time it will take their admin, human resources professional or marketing team to plan a meeting, and then multiply that number by three. According to Reader, companies typically under-estimate how long the planning will take.

Often corporations think certain size events are too small to justify a planner. In some corporations, if the meeting is smaller than 15 people or less than \$25,000 the planning is done in-house, for others that threshold may be higher or lower, according to Ann Craig, vice president, Strategic Meetings Management for Meetings & Incentives Worldwide Inc., an event planning firm based in Caledonia, Wis.

What Reader wants corporations to consider is that asking an internal person to perform this function, which is typically

not part of their job description, takes time away from the tasks they should be doing. “Corporations have a business to run,” she says. “The hours an employee spends on that event takes away from the tasks they are supposed to be doing to serve the company’s internal or external customers.”

#### 2. LOWER FINANCIAL RISK.

Nearly every event at an off-site venue involves a contract. What Craig has found is that in-house employees who must get approval to purchase a laptop or office supplies, can often sign a contract worth thousands with an event venue without a second set of eyes reviewing it. “We run into this a lot; the in-house planner signs the contract without a full understanding of what’s in it,” she says.

A contract may include penalties for cancellation, for instance, but these are penalties an experienced planner may have negotiated out. A professional planner may have included a cancellation timetable that says if there’s a cancellation within six months there’s no penalty; if it’s within two months, there’s some penalty; and if it’s less than 30 days, there’s a full penalty. “A planner can mitigate that risk for clients,” she says, adding that sometimes a planner can make it right by agreeing to bring future business to the venue should a cancellation occur.

Denice Waldhuetter, vice president of Milwaukee-based PEC Meetings, says contract review is one of the greatest values a professional planner can bring to the table. “We can mitigate professional risk,” she says. “A contract needs to be molded so that we are getting the highest concessions, desirable rates and reducing risk.” Planners review everything from room block clauses, attrition clauses, cancellation clauses and more.

Contracts also contain hidden charges that only an experienced contract reviewer would know. For instance, the contract may state it costs \$50 to hang banners. The company shows up with 50 banners to hang and is told that it's \$50 a banner, not \$50 for all of them. "Companies can be impeded by costs that are hidden because of a lack of interpretation in the contract," she says.

"Contracts are written in the best interest of the venue," she adds. "We're not attorneys but we've been in the business long enough to know and interpret the language in these clauses to infer the risk to our client."

Finally, get everything in writing. Waldhuetter recalls how PEC once inherited a contract where the hotel had agreed to darken skylights in its atrium and put on a laser light show for meeting attendees. "This was negotiated one year, on a handshake, and then the following year, new management was in charge," she recalls. "The new manager said absolutely no to these things. Everything that is agreed to at the time of the first meeting must be in writing."



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### 3. VETTED VENDORS.

Planners have contacts with vendors within the industry and have thoroughly screened those contacts, says Reader, who indicates that A-Mazing Events reviews every partner after every event. The vendors they work with must meet a set level of standards and if they fall below a certain point on their scale, they will not work with them again.

"A planner knows the best caterers, best event venues and entertainers, and has ongoing relationships with those partners," she says.

Solid relationships translate into a give-take partnership, where the planner may be able to negotiate on price, services and get service on the fly. "The favors go back and forth," says Reader. "If we are on the job and realize, 'Oh we need an extra table here,' they will bring it on a moment's notice."

Waldhuetter points out that oftentimes the in-house planner Googles their options but reminds that in today's society anyone can have a website and look legitimate. A planner knows who actually is legitimate

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and works only with reputable vendors. "We can offer prequalified and excellent choices for events at different price points," she says.

#### 4. LEVERAGING NEGOTIATIONS.

Everything in a contract is negotiable. "Often a professional planner can negotiate for better rates," says Craig. "An in-house planner may not realize that they can negotiate." She explains that a planner may have worked with the venue multiple times and may have more buying power because they can leverage that event with the others they've done at that location to obtain better rates, concessions, penalty clauses and so on.

Reader adds that it's not that in-house planners cannot negotiate for a better deal, but points out they may not know what they can and cannot negotiate for. For instance, she says they may not realize they can get a discount on food and beverage, audio-visual equipment, or Internet charges. "I won't sign a contract without asking what the venue can do in terms of a discount on food and beverage or audio visual," she says. "We recently had a venue charging for Internet, and we were able to get that cut in half. Another person may not think to ask for those things."

#### 5. EXPERIENCE.

"This is what planners do daily," says Craig. Planners have their fingers on the pulse of the industry, they are aware of industry trends, they know what works and what doesn't, and they know what details are important to focus on. "A planner who works full-time in the industry, is aware of event trends, has contacts and connections that can help the event succeed," Waldhuetter says.

Consider the following situations from actual corporate events planned in-house:

- A company picnic in July. The in-house planning team did get a tent in case of rain, but no one considered what they would do if the weather was both rainy and windy and the tent needed sides.
- An assistant remembered to order a screen to put up for presentations in the meeting room, but failed to check whether or not the screen fit in the meeting room. It didn't.

- The employee did a wonderful job of planning the meeting but invoices were grossly delayed as she got caught up in the tasks of her daily job.

"Your team can come up with the ideas and we can execute them," says Craig.

"A planner isn't trying to take away the fun of planning a meeting or event, just acting as an extension of the staff. We are

consultants that can say that's a good idea, or that idea didn't work elsewhere and here's what might work better. In the end they are still making the final choices. It's still their meeting!" [www](#)



Ronnie Garrett is a freelance writer based in Fort Atkinson, Wis.

## Considerations for Outsourcing

- Do you need a planner? Companies should weigh the value of hiring and outsourcing the event. How much time will it take? Does anyone have time to take it on? It's a viable solution for companies that have experienced downsizing, notes Denise Waldhuetter, vice president of Milwaukee-based PEC Meetings.
- Find the right planner. Look for a planner that understands your needs and the event's goals and objectives. In fact, Joey Reader, owner of A-Mazing Events says a planner's first question should be what are the event's goals and objectives? "If a planner doesn't know these things, they cannot be effective," she says. "You need a planner who understands the company culture."
- Make sure the planner is legitimate and insured, and comes with references, adds Waldhuetter.
- Find a planner experienced in planning your type of event. If you're hosting a golf outing, find a planner who has done one. If planning a strategy meeting, find one who has done that.
- Cost. Expect to pay around \$75 an hour or a percentage of the total event spend to cover the planner's services.
- Determine the services you really need. A planner can be hired to do an entire event, or just to read over a venue contract before you sign. It's really up to the company's wishes. "We can help with everything from researching the venue to complete event design," says Reader. "It's important to consider what services you really need."