



The Show Must Go On: Strategies for Planning Recession-Friendly Events

It's no secret that the "AIG effect" has toned down lavish business events in recent months, but what does that mean for event planning as we look at 2009 and beyond?

As communications professionals, you either serve as the in-house PR support for event planning staff, work for a PR agency or work with an outsourced event planner to ensure the event is in line with your team's ultimate vision. As the AIG effect has become the standard rationale for cancelling or drastically altering corporate party plans, it's important to highlight and defend the importance of hosting meetings and events as a natural part of doing business, whether for sales, brand strategy, training or team building.

Corporate events are a strategic part of doing business—both for internal motivation and communication with outside prospects and alliances. Meetings are also necessary to boost the morale of all employees left in the wake of layoffs. This is reason alone to utilize the know-how of experienced event planners to coordinate meetings on a smaller scale that still effectively show appreciation for remaining employees, who are often responsible for taking on extra work created by downsizing.

In fact, event planners can pull off successful meetings and events for their corporate clients in this current economic climate—they just need to do it tastefully and with a sharp eye toward budget. Essentially, it's all about embracing meetings as a responsible economic stimulant and redefining a client's expectation of what is "wow."

If a company's financial outlook has them avoiding celebrations, there are so many

creative ways to keep meetings or events financially focused and infused with excitement.

As event planners are challenged to cut costs while maintaining high impact, a steadfast solution is to keep things fresh while getting back to basics. The following are tips for doing so effectively:

- **Make meetings work harder:** Help shorten the selling cycle by working to land business during the course of an event. At a trade show, create a hospitality suite specifically to generate leads off the show floor and soften the selling environment with comfort and food—or both! Gone are the days of collecting names and following up at a later date. Today's event carries the added burden of getting attendees to sign on the dotted line.
- **Pair the event with something worthwhile:** Look to pair your event with a team building or volunteer opportunity, or a charitable cause. This provides a chance to connect with each other, and might even stimulate interesting dinner conversation. Events that serve a purpose, especially charitable, are received favorably in this business climate. For example, a Fortune 500 pharmaceutical company hosted an event whereby a mother of a deployed troop member created all the centerpieces that would eventually be sent overseas as care packages. Who can argue with that spend?
- **Use pop culture and current events to your advantage:** For theme selection, go with the theme of the season, or

what's hot in reality television. Investigate various entertainment concepts to keep the flow of the meetings fresh and fun. Interactive elements that "bring out the kid in all of us" can include renditions of game shows, caricature artists, magicians and casino games. And, remember, with advances in technology like the new Nintendo Wii, costs to execute these games can be relatively minimal. You can even consider a kid-inspired menu like an ice cream sundae bar.

- **Location, location, location:** Stay closer to home. Use the home office as a great choice for an event venue. This saves money on booking an alternate location and provides an opportunity to use the savings on something else worthwhile.
- **Splurge on something, but not everything:** Choose one or two things to splurge on that will make the event memorable—maybe the entertainment, theme, giveaway or a special moment dedicated to employees. Make a decision and stick to it, and ensure the client is on board.
- **Connect your menu of food and beverage to the meeting theme:** This could entail a menu inspired by pop culture or making the food preparation the actual entertainment for the evening (think of cooking demonstration samples for everyone to enjoy). More important, pay attention to menu detail and don't pay for wasted food and drink. Stop coffee at 3 p.m., and/or take juice

off the bar after breakfast is finished. Buy snacks on consumption and look critically at menu choices—do you really need multiple stations and a dessert bar?

- **Pay close attention to hotel room cancellation policies:** Adhere to their deadlines to give rooms back without penalty and do not wind up paying for hotel rooms that will go unused.
- **Arrange travel on site in the most appropriate, cost-effective manner:** Instead of individual sedans, try a multi-person motor coach.
- **Use high-tech audiovisual capabilities of the venue to your advantage:** To save money, ensure you're using as many in-stock pieces as possible versus bringing in extra, rented A/V equipment.

In this tense time period of layoffs and image concerns, meetings are still necessary to sustain "business as usual" and to acknowledge and motivate remaining employees that are most deserving of recognition.

While the level of extravagance at meetings will need to be toned down, this should not negate the importance of hosting them in the first place. Event planners just need to put their best foot forward in maintaining current client relationships and seeking out new ones. Are you ready for the challenge? **PRN**

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