



Event Planning Expectations Shift

Corporate event planners take on new ways of catering to clients

By Joalien Johnson -- Tradeshaw Week, 8/31/2009

In these turbulent times, the corporate event planning business has shifted as its clients have cut back on services, focused more closely on strategy, built their online presence and gone green.

To keep up with their clients, and to grow their businesses, when staying afloat is considered a success by many, corporate event planners have changed not only the services they offer, but also the way in which they deliver the services.

Many event planners Tradeshaw Week spoke with said their clients in the software and health care fields continue to hold meetings much as they always did, while financial analysts and sales-meetings planners generally have scaled back. But, even those still seeking planners for their corporate events have trimmed the fat.

According to Jeff Peck, president and CEO of Atlanta-based Jeff Peck Productions, a 10-year-old full-service event planning company, events today are shorter, people are less likely to travel and they're opting to conduct more events online. "We're seeing smaller events and more cost-effective events that are shorter," Peck said. "A three-day event may be down to a day and a half. We're also seeing more requests for webcasting."

Ellen Michaels, CEO of Ellen Michaels Presents, a 20-year-old event planning and production company in San Jose, Calif., said, too, timing has changed. Clients are asking for shorter events, but they're also waiting until the last minute to book services, she added.

"It's probably because they don't have the OK to spend money in advance," Michaels said. "They don't get that until the last minute, and they may need to get their budgets approved."

But, she added, she doesn't see clients cutting out specific services. "I think they just toned everything back. They're coming from a perspective of being professional and lower-key, not building gigantic sets or hiring top-name entertainment and speakers," Michaels said.

They are, however, putting more focus on other elements of planning.

According to Jeff Simon, senior event manager at Tustin, Calif.-based The Event Wizard, a 17-year-old event planning company, clients definitely are asking that their events be sustainable, even if it does require them to spend more money. "A lot of hotels, to gain business themselves, are making it a lot easier," he said. "The hotels will be green, and the suppliers will be trying to retrofit whatever they do to go green as well."

Peck, whose company has taken on green initiatives, agreed. "Clients are starting to ask us about being green and are working that into their own corporate sustainability," he said. "It's a very big issue."

In addition, according to Sherry Parks, CEO and chairman of 25-year-old Dana Point, Calif.-based Corporate Planners Unlimited, clients have become more interested in social networking. "It's a way to cut their marketing budgets by a certain amount of money and still have the impact they're looking for," she said.

And, according to Michaels, clients also have been more alert and strategic when it comes to conducting business. "A lot of companies have realized that this is a really good time to gain market share," she said.

To address all the new needs and interests of their clients, many corporate event planners have had to adapt their way of conducting business, by doing research and keeping the value of their services higher than ever. But their efforts run the gamut.

According to Parks, her company's ability to stay afloat – and grow – largely has been because of several products it designed to help clients increase their own budgets, such as a meeting solutions platform that allows companies to track their past, present and future event, travel and entertainment-related spend. "A lot of people take advantage of it," she said. "They can put it on their intranet, see what the overall commitments are dollar-wise ... (and) they could all look on it at different levels of secured viewing."

Many event-planning companies, like Parks', also are taking more services for their clients in-house that they used to outsource.

"We house and manage our own staffing, so that's a 40-percent reduction to our client base right away," Parks said.

Liron David, president of New York City-based Eventique, a three-year-old event planning and production company, said his business owns all of its own equipment. "Because we do production in-house, we're able to save on a lot of the outsourcing costs that we would have if we didn't own our own equipment," he added.

Event planners also have been marketing more aggressively.

According to Marion Reffas, event manager at New York City-based Event Premiere, a full-service planning company, her business has done a lot more e-marketing, networking events and distributing brochures and business cards to potential clients.

Simon said his colleagues at The Event Wizard aggressively have followed up on people who in the past expressed interest in the company. "We're doing a lot of going back to those people," he added. "We also produce a newsletter, which we send out to all those people who have contacted us, including current clients and prospects ... basically to say, hey, we're out here and, if you need anything done, let us know." Also, cutting back, where possible, on their own overhead has helped many event planning companies.

Carol Galle, president of Royal Oak, Mich.-based Special D Events, said her company has negotiated a lower lease with its landlord, cut back on meals and entertainment and looked for cost savings on telephone services and supplies.

Several companies revealed they feel their businesses have survived the economic downturn because they have broadened their services to a more diverse market.

"If you really can diversify the different levels of services you can do as a planner, these days you're more wanted," David said.

Galle agreed. "Because our client base is so diverse, and our events are nationwide, we have been able to weather the storm better than most," she said.