

Why Do You Need a Conference Planner?

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First in a series of articles about the role of the conference planner in meeting-intensive business environments.

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Let's say you have a large facility containing many rooms and spaces capable of supporting meetings.

Those meetings may require food and beverages, from water and coffee service to lunches and receptions, and may also require special audio/visual and furniture setups. Your customers are demanding. Their meeting and dining venues can't afford delivery errors, much less post-event billing disputes.

The food service provider's catering manager has notes taped around the PC screen and an overflowing in-box of e-mail and voice mail requests that never seem to get answered in a timely manner. Confidence in your vendor's ability to supply the simplest coffee service is on the wane, resulting in a steady decline in catering sales.

You ask yourself:

How do I schedule the use of these rooms, set them up properly for each meeting and provide food and beverages and other amenities at the appropriate times and cost?

The concept of a professional conference planner may, at the outset, appear to be an excessive payroll expense, but weigh that cost against negative customer relations, lost sales and error-related credits back to unhappy customers. A professional conference planner with adequate administrative resources can keep track of customer requests, schedule deliveries and create accurate billing statements.

The keys to success lie in effective customer communications and a staffing plan with long-term stability.

Communications

Back to the question about customer request messages that go unanswered: How are your customers making their requests known? Do they call a central catering number and/or email to a catering email address? Do you have a person answer this phone during business hours or a policy that says you'll be back in touch within 30 minutes or an hour? Are requesters' calls and emails forwarded to a mobile device?

There's quite a bit of interplay between on-site policies, staffing, and the operating budget, but a close examination of how information flows from the requestor to the service delivery team needs to be undertaken first.

A third party should be commissioned to review the process, note deficiencies and recommend improvements. Regardless of service delivery team competency, everyone's best efforts are not enough when the catering product is delivered to the wrong room at the wrong time.

Clarion consultants prepare flow diagrams and document existing processes that show where the "ball is dropped". A consultant's review also avoids blame-laying by treating changes and improvements as best practice issues that are beneficial to both the food service operator and the

client /owner.

Staffing

If you're clear on information flow, the next step is to look at staffing. Catering sales volume and related meeting room usage are valuable statistics for determining if your institution should have conference planners.

What are your catering sales goals? Do your customers know what they can obtain from your vendors after they've secured the meeting room? Does the current staffing model adequately meet today's expectations? Looking ahead three to five years, how will these statistics help you to decide on the best program solution?

There are so many questions, but it all goes back to creating a lasting and stable service platform that can survive changes in service vendor companies as well as staffing changes at the owner level.

Hiring Options

Preserving institutional knowledge is an important objective. The conference planner can be employed by the food service vendor, if they have this talent in their resource pool, but their knowledge goes with them if you change vendors. It might be better to employ the planner(s) directly.

Another option is to competitively procure conference planners through companies that provide this sort of professional service. Short-term staffing agencies are not a good alternative. They may not be able to supply individuals trained in this expertise.

Even with these approaches, the question of money remains. In a profit and loss contracting environment, it may be difficult to reconcile this payroll expense against a traditional business operating environment – conference planners do not work for minimum wage.

In a meeting-intensive environment, conference planners work closely with customers by guiding them into cost-effective and practical event planning decisions. These relationships create a team-like atmosphere by engendering trust and cooperation, which ultimately improve catering sales.

The next article will discuss policies and procedures: customer expectations, legal liabilities imposed by vendor agreements, and policy enforcement that are crucial to the conference planner/customer relationship.

To learn how Clarion can help you develop a comprehensive, efficient and economical conference planning system, contact Tom Mac Dermott, FCSI, president, 603/642-8011 or Ernie Wilder, vice president, 904/940-1208, or e-mail us at info@clariongp.com.