

## **Key Management Tools: Feedback and Statistics**

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*Third in a series about the role of the conference planner in meeting-intensive business environments.*

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**Y**our conference planner team is an opportunity waiting to happen – it's up to you to guide this talented resource pool towards synergies with other service providers, and to become sources of executive management information useful to your program.

### **Customer Feedback**

The conference planners are in contact with your customers on a daily basis, listening to their requests, concerns, and complaints. How can these exchanges be channeled into useful information? Aside from formal customer satisfaction surveys, conference planners may be the best, up-to-the-minute source of customer feedback you have.

It's painful to discover a un-responded-to customer dissatisfaction issue that occurred weeks ago because the customer was reluctant to voice a concern via traditional means.

Ideally, your conference planners will have advanced people skills and be able to draw out a complaint if they sense an event or delivery did not go well. The conference planners will have been instructed by you to call immediately if they discover an issue, so that you or your designee can reach out to that customer before their complaint becomes a wide-scale episode.

### **Preventing Complaints**

Conference planners, through their observations, can help you avoid customer dissatisfaction. For instance, the audio-visual service team may be habitually late in setting up meeting rooms, but the events went ahead successfully nonetheless. Eventually, late delivery by the audio-visual staff will result in a gaffe that affects the perception of all vended services, resulting in widespread negative feedback.

Experienced conference planners will notify senior managers of developing issues, hopefully deflecting service errors and complaints in the future.

### **Defending the Budget**

It's time to prepare your annual budget, which may include the subsidized cost of the conference planners salaries. Someone in the budget department mentions to your superiors that they think there are too many conference planners, which may be a source of cost reductions. You think that your conference planner team is optimal, so how do you defend yourself?

Operational statistics compiled by the conference planners may be a source of data that will support this staffing level. The number of event requests submitted in the past fiscal year and customer satisfaction data are some ways to deflect criticism.

Moreover, you may have benchmarked your operation with other, comparable institutions, but in most cases, the number of events will be a common denominator. To my knowledge, there are no industry standard definitions of an event, which can range from a simple coffee delivery to a video-conference with 30 participants.

How you've instructed the conference planners to model operational statistics must have some

relevance to your benchmarking objectives. Define your events and compile data that works with your institutions business and financial structures.

### **Choose Wisely and Train**

As you're building your hospitality program, conference planners are a wonderful resource, if used wisely. Avoid burdening them with too many clerical duties or other tasks that distract from their core work.

Choose your conference planners wisely. Look for strong people skills, business acumen and a team-oriented attitude. Invest in quality training time so they can adapt to your business culture and "learn the ropes." Your customers will appreciate dealing with professionals and vendors' sales objectives should be achieved, if not exceeded.

*The fourth and final article in this series will discuss the handling of billing internal departments for conference services.*

*Clarion can assist you with the development of a hospitality service program that includes conference planning. Contact Ernie Wilder, vice president, 904/940-1208, or Tom Mac Dermott, 603/642-8011, or e-mail us at [info@clariongp.com](mailto:info@clariongp.com).*