

Source: [Corporate & Incentive Travel](#), April 1997

FATAL ATTRACTIONS?

It may just be your DMC

by CYNTHIA DIAL

Try to imagine this scene. The stage is set for the corporation's biggest night of the year, and as meeting planner you are the "director" of this major production. The group is more excited than normal – it's the organization's first visit to the area, put together in record time and boasts of an unheralded attendance. Even the weather is cooperative. But while rain won't mar your event, everything else manages to go wrong.

Despite the motor coaches departing punctually, it takes an additional 45 minutes to reach the beach, affecting the timing of food preparation. The one bus in which the air conditioner malfunctions could be a case study for Murphy's Law – it contains the board of directors. Due to unseasonably warm weather, iced cold drinks are the beverage of choice and become as coveted as chestnuts at Christmas. And while the reggae band is a definite hit, the dance floor is far too small to accommodate the number of enthusiastic John Travolta imitators. By

Some say there's no such thing as bad luck, just ill prepared DMCs.

Learn how to find the best one for your event

evening's end, the company president has his arms crossed. He is not pleased.

There are a host of reasons that the event did not run as smoothly as it should have. Planning time was minimal. The destination was a new one. And the weather surprised everyone. But the president views "reasons" as "excuses" and in basic boardroom lingo, excuses are simply unacceptable.

Could this situation have been avoided? Absolutely, say the experts. The answer

is as basic as your ABC's, and lies within the DMC and the meeting planner's selection of a good one.

Vince Aspromonte, president of The Masters Group, an incentive marketing company, echoes the importance of this selection. "We're entrusting our reputation and our service level to these people (the DMC). When our clients buy us, they're buying "insurance" not to let them down – exactly what we're doing when we work with a DMC," Emphasizes Aspromonte.

Meeting planner Elise Kert, owner of Corporate Meeting Concepts, has spent her career in the industry – first as a ground operator, followed by years with a DMC before running her own company. "With my background, I could set up myself in any city but would I get the best buses and limos, the city's top musicians and preferential treatment in the most popular restaurants? A part of what you're buying when you use a

“We’re entrusting our reputation and our service level to these people (the DMC). When our clients buy us, they’re buying ‘insurance’ not to let them down.”

**Vince Aspromonte
President
The Masters Group**

DMC is clout,” surmises Kert which should stand to reason after a local company’s repeated dealings with hotels, venues and ground operators.

The first tip on Kert’s DMC check list supports her belief in the importance of “clout.” 1) Entrenchment in the community. Being well known by CVBs, hotels and popular venues is an indication of constant work in the meetings and incentive industry. A red flag is if several popular venues are unfamiliar with the DMC. 2) Intimate knowledge of the city. 3) Solvency. As a meeting planner with a DMC background, Kert describes herself as acutely aware of the pitfalls. “I look for specifics in a proposal, not vague flowery descriptions,” explains Kert. “I want to know how many tables will be used, the capacity of the venue and the exact elements comprising the entertainment. Tell me there will be 400 red balloons, 400 white balloons and 400 blue balloons released in one-minute increments. Don’t say ‘You will be blinded by hues of patriotic color’.”

“You’re no better than your last job,” says Carling Dinkler, owner and founder of Custom Conventions, New Orleans’ first destination management company. “That’s why I would insist upon reference letters, ‘current,’” emphasizes Dinkler, “reference letters.”

While standing on the opposite side of the “DMC fence,” Dinkler urges the meeting planner in search of the right DMC to conduct an extensive phone interview. “If they can’t give you adequate time and don’t demonstrate a certain level of service on the telephone, you can’t expect the kind of service you should as a client,” explains Dinkler. “I

go through a basic interview process every time a meeting planner contacts me,” he elaborates, “even if the referral is by word of mouth.”

The DMC selection process is critical. “You can only lose your job by picking the wrong DMC, not by picking the wrong hotel,” states Dinkler.

Selecting the Right Destination Company

Guidelines for Outsourcing a DMC

I. IDENTIFY CANDIDATES

- **Where to look:**
- The Association of Destination Management Executives (ADME). The most professional DMCs will be members.
- Membership directories (i.e. ASAE, MPI, SITE).
- Word of mouth (your peers).
- The city’s convention/visitors bureau.
- Ask the hotel for their top three recommendations.

II. NARROW THE FIELD

- **Evaluate companies based on:**
- How long the firm has been in business.
- Are they a licensed business or Corporation?
- Visit / inspect their offices.
- What is the experience level of the employees?
- Are their values & personalities compatible with yours?
- Who will be on-site during your program?
- Can they be reached after hours?
- Preview their contracts and terms.
- Require proof of at least \$1million insurance coverage.
- Ask for certificates of insurance from vendors.
- Request a list of references that you can contact with programs similar to yours in size and scope.

III. MAKE YOUR CHOICE

- **Schedule Presentations:**
- Notify eliminated firms and thank them for their efforts.
- Give your finalist(s) all the group particulars:
 - Group Demographics
 - Specific Interests/Activities
 - Program Agenda/Time constraints
 - Past Program Information/History
 - Program Budget

IV. REQUEST A PROPOSAL

- **Specify requested services:**
- Meet & Greet/Airport transfers
- Shuttle/Transportation Services
- Tours & Recreation
- Special events/Parties
- Dining Arrangements
- Gifts & Amenities
- Other Services

V. SHUTTLE SERVICES

- **Elements to compare:**
- Number of passengers assumed.
- Quality & quantity of vehicles.
- Proposed routes.
- Average passenger wait times.
- Number of staff included (on vehicles?).
- Quality & quantity of signage
- Shuttle experience of bidders
- Give them group patterns/history

VI. TOURS & RECREATION

- **Establish parameters:**
- Times/Dates available for tours & recreation.
- Are they hosted, or do individuals pay?
- Do spouses/guests participate?
- Include lunch/dinner as part of the activities?
- Include on-property programs at the hotel; fashion shows, educational seminars, craft workshops, local speakers, or celebrities?

VII. SPECIAL EVENTS

- **Special Considerations for Special Events:**
- How much experience does the DMC have producing special events?
- What events has the DMC created (similar to yours)? Check references & request photos/video.
- What resources does the DMC have in-house vs. subcontracted?
- Has the DMC produced events at the venue before?
- Are all expenses (i.e. power) included in the proposal?

VIII. PROGRAM FOLLOWUP

- **At the end of your program:**
- Ask attendees to evaluate the DMC services.
- Record actual numbers of participants on each activity (tours, shuttle, etc.) for next program.
- If you were pleased with your DMC, ask for suggestions for future programs.
- Ask them for a listing of their other locations, or recommendations of other companies in cities where you will be planning programs.

Adapted with permission from “Selecting the Right Destination Management Company,” © By Christopher H. Lee, 1995.

A meeting planner recently contacted Custom Conventions to transport a group from the French Quarter to the Garden District via horse and buggy. "I knew what they wanted to accomplish. It's an old Disney trick, moving you without knowing you're being moved. But it's too far," explains Dinkler. Instead he suggested a horse drawn buggy ride from the French Quarter to a street car for a ride to the Garden District, followed by a short walk from St. Charles Avenue to the mansion hosting the function.

By wisely redesigning this one small but significantly key aspect of the meeting planner's event, Dinkler illustrates the credo from which his destination management company operates. "The job of the DMC is to make a meeting planner very smart, very fast about your city."

Across the country, DMC president Christopher Lee, California Leisure Consultants, [CEO, *ACCESS* Destination Services] admits he's become a reference for his clients when selecting DMCs in other cities. Because the same company is not necessarily the best choice for every program, Lee developed a handout, "Selecting the Right Destination Management Company," subtitled "Some questions to ask when choosing a Destination Management Company."

"Don't just give them a fish," said Lee, "teach them how to fish."

Lee considers the evaluation one of the most important components of the entire program. His company conducts informal polls during the course of multi-day meetings which many times, because of the feedback collected on site, result in changes with the remainder of the program.

"Chemistry." After the practical side is evaluated and satisfied, the decisive factor can be as simple as chemistry. How well does the DMC listen to your desires and needs? Meeting planner Brian Robinson, vice president sales & marketing/meetings and conventions with Expert

Travel, notes that a good relationship between a DMC and meeting planner gives the client a certain sense of confidence...they know the job will get done.

Is the DMC creative? During the selection process, Robinson has accessed [sic] creativity by giving DMCs under consideration an assignment: design a creativity-themed event for \$8,000. The meeting planner then evaluates the results, which many times are the deciding factor for Robinson.

**"Don't just give them a fish,
teach them how to fish."**

**Christopher H. Lee
President**

**California Leisure Consultants
(CEO, *ACCESS* Destination Services)**

The DMC should be computerized, complete with E-mail and a Web site. This indicates professionalism. Professionalism and legitimacy can also be accessed [sic] by the availability of a tariff book...detailing sample tours, sample theme parties and pricing.

"The lowest price, however, is not necessarily the best," cautions Robinson. Formerly with Patti Roscoe & Associates, a well-known Southern California DMC, Robinson is thoroughly familiar with pricing from both sides. "I know what volume discounts can be and I also know that mark-ups are about the same because DMCs want to be competitive. So if there's a big discrepancy, it's a red flag to me."

Aspromonte of The Masters Group notes, "There's a general subtle equation between the DMC providing personalized service and its capability to execute the meeting planner's program. It's a delicate balance but locating a DMC with that equilibrium is crucial."

And when it comes to ferreting out the right DMC internationally, the same rules and logic apply. For years, Aspromonte's worked with a woman in London as she has relocated from one DMC to another. "Her word is her bond and we go where she is," he explains. "I've even relied upon my competitors. If I'm gong to an unknown destination, I ask who they've used, who they trust."

Just as they are good domestic resources, industry directories like ICCA (International Congress & Convention Association) are reliable sources. The CVB, a popular venue (e.g. London's Madame Tussaud's) and the hotel you are using can provide references says meeting planner Kert. Be sure to ask hotels in addition to the one you are using. "You may be referred to the hotel owner's brother-in-law," she warns.

Don't become a meeting planner statistic. A recent incident sadly illustrates the importance of selecting a reputable DMC. What should have been one of the conference's highlights, a hot air balloon ride over the Arizona desert, had a tragic twist when it crashed, killing one and hospitalizing another. The DMC, unbeknownst to the meeting planner, operated from a home, was uninsured. This true tale only serves to underscore the importance of doing your homework – check out the DMC.

C&IT