

# Strike up the brand

HOW AN EVENT MANAGEMENT FIRM CAN IMPROVE YOUR CORPORATE IMAGE

BY MATTHEW LAWELL

During the course of the last year, executives at a large company in one Midwestern city scheduled an event to thank their present clients for remaining with them through the recession and to reach out to potential clients in an effort to prepare for growth. They rented a hall in a beautiful building for the morning, hired a speaker with a prominent name and attracted a crowd of about 2,500 people.

Nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps, you have even scheduled a similar event.

But as the event neared, the executives realized that they had a large problem. They had scheduled the event during the middle of the week, and with hundreds of thousands of other people already in the city, there was no parking anywhere near the building. So they scratched their heads. They worried. They wondered how they could have overlooked such a simple detail. They wondered how they might solve the problem. And only then did they call an event management firm.

When the recession started to rock the financial world in 2008, internal event management personnel were among the first to be laid off. Many then planted roots with independent firms or started firms of their own. Less than two years later, a December 2009 feature in U.S. News & World Report posited that a position as an event manager or event planner ranked among the 50 best jobs for 2010. The industry has transitioned and is positioned to grow a projected 16 percent between now and 2018.

That might be good news for you and your business, because the odds are high that, at some point, you will want to hold some sort of event, and unless you have an event manager on staff, you might find yourself in a situation every bit as sticky as those Midwestern executives with thousands of guests and no parking spaces.

"In today's environment, destination and event management firms help companies do more with less," says Christopher Lee, CEO, ACCESS Destination Services. "They save time and stress by leveraging their expertise, experience and extensive local knowledge and connections for their client's benefit in planning and producing corporate events."



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Christopher Lee  
CEO  
ACCESS Destination Services

## Plan in advance

Event managers are more than just party planners. In fact, those words are like nails on a chalkboard to many in the industry. Event managers aim to feature your message and work with you to help you reach your goals for each event. They are able to save you significant amounts of money and time, measure the returns on your investment, and, of course, coordinate an event that will be effective and leave your employees and clients talking.

"The best way to ensure that you are working with a professional event manager is to check their professional credentials, memberships and references thoroughly," Lee says.

Just look at those Midwest executives, for example. They worked with a good professional firm, and during the 24 hours after they called the event management firm, the firm started to contact all of its guests to relay the parking situation, paid parking lot fees to ensure there would be available spaces somewhere within the city limits, hired buses and created a route to the building. All of that would have taken weeks if an internal employee with little event management experience had handled the task. On the morning of the event, those thousands of guests parked at remote lots and were shuttled a couple of miles on city roads. It was hardly ideal, but it worked.

It also cost the company an extra \$20,000.

"I don't want to contribute to the misnomer that it's going to cost you less to hire us than to do your event," Lee says. "But if you add up the true cost of doing it yourself, including your time and the time of your employees, then we are definitely saving you money. You have to look at the whole cost."

Many firms also have considerable influence at hotels and venues and with vendors. Because they direct so much business and so many sales to those outlets, they often receive a discount somewhere between 10 and 20 percent, which they normally pass along directly to you. Their knowledge of your city allows them to track down the lowest prices in a matter of hours or minutes, as opposed to days or weeks.

There are four primary reasons to work with an event management firm. First, you will save a little more money in the end, even if you spend a little more at the beginning. Second, companies often need fresh ideas for old events, and an objective pair of eyes can provide those new thoughts. Third, it does simplify your work. And fourth, many businesses no longer have the internal resources necessary to handle events.

"Most companies see the value upfront and understand that they don't have the manpower or the resources or they may not

have a person on board who has that expertise," says Greg Jenkins, partner, Bravo Productions.

## Open your doors

Just as with any business partner who provides value-added services, you need to develop a relationship with your event management firm. It is not enough to call once and spend a couple of minutes determining when and where you should hold the annual sales meeting.

The more your firm knows about you and your business, the more it will be able to implement continuity in your events from one year to the next. The firm will also be able to understand how each event fits into the larger scope and culture of your business and be able to remain on budget throughout the year.

"Once you gain their trust, you do receive some inside information, and there is that trust and partnership," Jenkins says. "You need to know certain things so you're not making any mistakes. It goes down to the smallest kind of things, but if you don't have that information, it defeats the purpose. You can only give as much as the client is willing to give."

They can help keep you up to date on newer technology, too. Online event registration has proved popular during recent years because of low costs and the relative ease with which event attendees can sign up. Virtual events are also popular, especially now that travel budgets are reduced and fewer people are flying extensively. And social media is gaining momentum. Event management and social media work hand in hand. Whether promoting an event or a product launch, many event managers embrace the technology because of its ability to all but eliminate marketing costs while also reaching a far wider potential audience.

"There is a responsibility in social media," Lee says. "We have clients now who are putting wording in the confidentiality section of their contract that applies to their company and ours. No one is allowed to put information about the company on Facebook or Twitter, what they're doing at their event, who they're having there."

"Social media is now being held to the same standard as professional e-mail, in terms of confidentiality."

The world is smaller. Your events might be, too, but keep holding them. Maintain your public image. The business world, after all, might not be a party right now, but it is an event not to be missed. <<

## 3 Questions

Christopher Lee  
CEO

ACCESS Destination Services

Christopher Lee is the CEO of ACCESS Destination Services and a leader in the industry. He helped found the Association of Destination Management Executives during the late 1990s and is a destination management certified professional. The company has five offices, including San Diego, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Orange County and Palm Springs.

**Q. Why should a business work with an event management or destination management firm?**

In today's environment of reduced staff, reduced budgets and shorter deadlines, destination and event management firms help companies do more with less. Destination and event management firms save time and stress by leveraging their expertise, experience, and extensive local knowledge and connections for their client's benefit in planning and producing corporate events.

**Q. What are some of the costs associated with working with a firm?**

Rather than say that we save our clients money, and we absolutely do on the purchasing and consolidation of what we do, we do point out that there is a fee for our services. So the question becomes, how much more are you paying us to do it than if you did it yourself? Our cost is less than the cost you would pay to do it yourself. I don't want to contribute to the misnomer that it's going to cost you less to hire us than to do your event, but if you add up the true cost of doing it yourself, including your time and the time of your employees, then we are definitely saving you money. You have to look at the whole cost.

**Q. What are some of the challenges a business faces when working with a firm in this economy?**

Unfortunately, there are many people out there who claim to be professional event managers and destination management companies, who are not properly licensed, insured and accredited. Most of the 'bad experiences' I hear about from businesses who have hired what they thought were professional event management firms turned out to be frauds. The best way to ensure that you are working with a professional is to check their professional credentials, memberships and references thoroughly.