

### The change

Recently, I changed from being an association meeting planner to a sales manager selling to associations and government agencies throughout the state and country. In speaking to industry colleagues and clients, each day I am asked two specific questions without fail.

First, they ask why I made the change from planner to supplier. After all, don't most professionals change from the supplier side to the planner side? That question is easy. I wanted to broaden my understanding of the meeting industry and challenge myself. I felt my experiences as a planner would benefit my clients, my employer and myself. I was right.

Second, people ask about the differences between the two positions. After all, I'm on "the other side now," right? What I realized from day one of my new position as a sales manager was that you are a talented meeting professional no matter what position you hold in the meetings industry — association planner, government planner, independent planner, hotelier or convention and visitors bureau sales manager. You will succeed by focusing on two common areas — relationships and communication.

### Relationships

The meeting industry is built on relationships. As a planner, I relied on relationships with hotel representatives to find space, book space and plan a successful meeting. I trusted convention services managers to logistically put my plans into action to ensure a successful convention. I knew my industry colleagues would assist me with competitive guest room rates, room rental, and food and beverage pricing.

As a supplier, my clients look to me to block the correct space for an event, offer competitive rates, quote a meeting to stay within budgetary constraints, and make educated recommendations on booking their meeting with my facility. They appreciate my planner-perspective and candor. Clients look to me to explain unclear portions of the meeting contract to ensure mutual understanding of both parties' expectations. A solid relationship is the key.

### Communication

Communication is another key to succeeding in the meeting industry. Without clearly communicating about the meeting at hand, neither side can appreciate the event's success. My experiences with attrition are a good example of how communication is essential no matter what "side" you work on.

## Planner and Supplier... One in the Same

As a planner, I experienced attrition with my group when their annual off-shore convention fell apart just one year after Sept. 11. Feeling the effects of a suffering economy and attendee fears of flying, my group's attendance dramatically decreased. I hesitantly called the hotel to alert them to the potential problem. After all, I didn't want to discuss the dreaded topic of attrition. Working with the hotel sales manager and convention services manager, we were able to proactively trouble-shoot this problem in advance so that both my group and the hotel came out of the meeting satisfied with the end resolution. Without this communication, the group and the hotel would have both suffered from this downfall in attendance.

As a supplier, I have experienced attrition issues with a few groups. However, by proactively discussing the topic with the group prior to the cut-off date, the client and hotel are able to take positive steps to address the attrition issue at hand. Even though an attrition phone call is difficult to make, the client appreciates the proactive communication because it shows the hotel that the group genuinely cares about the outcome of the meeting. The hotel benefits by building a strong relationship with the client because of this newfound trust and understanding.

### The result

At the end of the day, the common goal of both planner and supplier is a successful meeting. Nowadays, I don't identify my job as an ex-planner or a hotel sales manager. I describe myself as a meeting professional. I am a professional that still worries about attrition. I am a professional that keeps a close eye on the industry hot-topic of booking outside the block. I am a professional that still attends many continuing education classes and luncheons in hopes of bettering myself as a meeting professional and thereby assisting my clients in producing a successful event at the properties I represent. I'm a meeting professional that realizes that the planner vs. supplier analogy is a stereotypical myth that simply doesn't exist. In the end, our industry successfully exists and grows because of the relationships and communication among meeting professionals. ○



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