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IMPLEMENTING TIME-SAVING SYSTEMS AND PROCEDURES

Anticipating, devising and implementing time-saving systems and procedures, both personally and as an office, prevents everyone involved from becoming blindsided by interruptions and unable to get to what matters most, when it matters most. It is an important time management tool that is worth the time and effort, yet often overlooked. What is going on around you and how professionally it is being handled has a direct impact on how well you will be able to manage your day.

Being continually pulled away from what you need to be focused on to deal with coworkers', suppliers' and clients' bad business behavior and poor time strategies at work or on-site can eat up hours of your day and leave you working hard to play catch up. And not knowing what to do in times of crisis can cause havoc not just to an individual but to the office as a whole, and can create strained relationships with suppliers and clients and put the success of events in jeopardy. In times of crisis, big or small, every moment matters, and knowing what to do in advance can be your

saving grace. Establishing professional codes of conduct and creating crisis management systems will aid your ability to wisely manage your time, your events and your on-site staff.

Missing a critical deadline is not an option in the event planning field. It can end up being a costly mistake to the employee, the company and their client if guarantees, attrition dates and contracts are not handled in a timely manner. A simple dropped option, for example, can create ripple effects and leave planners scrambling for alternate space and having to work with less than preferred suppliers, and leave them not only spending time duplicating their work but wasting countless hours in the process undoing what they originally did. For example, if you are required to find a new location or date, you also have to contact all of your contracted suppliers to see how this could affect your costs. If you need to change dates, you must see if the suppliers will still be available. Time management errors can cost a company a potential sale, lose them an existing customer and damage their professional reputation and standing in the industry.

But there are ways to avoid these negative outcomes, and they involve implementing time-saving systems and procedures, including, outlining expectations; setting up acceptable codes of conduct for in and out of the office, so that you can structure your day for maximum efficiency and effectiveness and will not have to deal with distracting, less-than-professional behavior; creating an action plan for emergency situations where time is of the essence; becoming trained in technology in order to expedite various aspects of your work; and deciding when it's best to delegate or outsource expertise.

GAINING VALUE BY OUTLINING EXPECTATIONS

In the past, some companies were lax on training, cautious about investing time and money in employees in case they left. In many cases, staff were thrown into situations to sink or swim. Some followed bad work habits of fellow employees simply because no one

taught them the office rules of what was and was not permissible. Breaches in codes of conduct occurred, sometimes unknowingly, and other times with full knowledge that lines were being crossed but with no concern because there would be no personal or professional repercussions. Today that is no longer acceptable, and more and more companies have discovered the value of clearly outlining their expectations and setting company standards to move their companies forward. For all, it has proven to be a valuable time-saving measure.

In order to make a significant change and have lasting benefit, codes of conduct and company expectations must be established and must include input from employees, be clearly outlined and be reviewed. It is important to set the codes in writing, with staff critiquing them and signing off on them. If staff play a major part in developing acceptable codes of conduct, there will be a greater sense of ownership for making sure they are adhered to.

Expectations should be clear and concise as to how employees are expected to represent your company and conduct themselves in and out of the office with their colleagues, suppliers and clients. *Event Planning: Ethics & Etiquette* was reviewed and deemed a “must-read” by one of the world’s most respected business schools for event planning and business professionals. This book discusses in great detail expected conduct in and out of the office and how to establish work ethics.

In today’s economic climate, event planning companies, suppliers and clients are all looking closely at who they choose to do business with, because they know it could reflect directly back on them and their business and put their professionalism in jeopardy. You are judged by the company you keep and the quality of your work. Knowing that a company has behavioral expectations and that employees are well-versed in proper decorum is vitally important today.

When things go spiraling out of control, event planning companies, suppliers, clients and their guests want to be secure in the knowledge that the people around them are skilled in keeping it together under pressure, that rude and discourteous behavior is not

permitted and that the companies they partner with are being proactive in making sure that employees are well-trained and know what is expected of them in any circumstance so that valuable time is never lost.

ESTABLISHING COMPANY CODES OF CONDUCT IN KEY AREAS

Event planning is an industry where your professionalism and conduct is always visible, and as a result there is a very small margin of error to play with. Emotions and stress must always be kept under control in public, whether in the office or on-site, and it is important that your behavior and the way in which you deal with issues reflect wisdom and maturity. This is just one reason why many businesses have a code of conduct; another is the time saved by not having to repair your personal or company's damaged image.

Codes of conduct are not limited to the essential elements of how to behave in public, what to wear, and what can and cannot be said to a supplier, client or guest. Rather, they can encompass many things and play an important part in your business. Three key code-of-conduct areas that are important to establish company ground rules in are client communications, on-site policies for internal staff and contractors, and internal staff policies regarding in-office behavior.

Setting standards saves time, as everyone knows up front what is expected of them, what is acceptable and what behavior will not be condoned. One planning company attributes establishing codes of conduct to playing a vital role in the company's impressive growth in record time. The company's staff are in a position to focus their time and energy—as individuals and as a company—on growth because they have the basics in place and have set the standards everyone is expected to adhere to. As a result they do not waste time trying to find their way around someone else's working style. They have consistency in all that they do, so no time is wasted wondering, for example, how to word or lay out a request for a

quote to a supplier, because they know how outgoing correspondence should look visually, what they will require back and the professional language they need to use, and they keep samples of all their forms for quick reference.

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As a time-saving measure for standard forms, create your own templates to work from if your company does not have ones in place.

When an office faux pas happens, it can take a long, long time to make amends. “Balloon Boss Blows His #@ç*Ing Top” was the title of a prominent *New York Post* article on July 30, 2004, which went on to say, “It was planned with the precision of a military operation—but the drop of 100,000 red, white and blue balloons for John Kerry went so horribly wrong that the convention producer screamed out the F-word over national TV. ‘Balloons. What’s happening, balloons? There’s not enough coming down. All balloons. Where the hell—there’s nothing falling. What the f_ _ are you guys doing up there?’ shrieked the producer, Don Mischer. The live feed was carried over CNN, and Internet maven Matt Drudge quickly posted a request for anyone who’d taped the expletive undeleted to send him an audio file—within minutes he had it posted on his site. CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer apologized to any viewers who were offended by the crude language that went out over the air at a time when the Federal Communications Commission is cracking down on trash talk.”

While not all events that event planning companies orchestrate are televised, with an employee’s bad behavior flashed around the world in a matter of minutes, inappropriate company comportment can still become industry news whether it takes place in the office or in a public arena in front of colleagues, suppliers, clients and guests, and it can have a profound effect on your business and your personal and professional reputation. As you conduct day-to-day business, others will be watching for examples of acts of grace under fire and appraising how any breach of conduct was handled, if it was done in a timely manner and whether or not it put them

or their company at business risk. Event planning companies, suppliers and clients alike are looking to see whether or not the company they are considering doing business with has codes of conduct safeguards in place or if their staff exhibit a lack of company standards with unacceptable codes of conduct and professional lines being crossed. If so, the line they draw may be deciding whether or not to do business with you. You also may end up spending time you don't have—as an individual and as a group—doing damage control.

SETTING TIME-SAVING CODES OF CONDUCT

Structuring your day for maximum efficiency is possible if you know what is expected of you and your company. Knowing what you have to do and in what manner it needs to be delivered can streamline how you structure your time and process your work.

Topics that should be covered in your code of conduct include:

- Basic office procedures
- How to answer the telephone/efficient telephone etiquette
- Acceptable format/style for company communication (letters, e-mails, proposals, etc.)
- Dress codes—in-office, client meetings, supplier meetings, on-site (on duty and off duty)
- Hospitality desk on-site management
- Site inspection accepted behavior
- On-site client/guest interaction
- Supplier presentation comportment (in office and at events)
- Company expectations
- Colleague expectations
- Client expectations
- Supplier expectations
- Company confidentiality

- Colleague confidentiality
- Client confidentiality
- Supplier confidentiality
- Appropriate language
- Appropriate comportment
- Appropriate timely delivery of work

CREATING AN ACTION PLAN FOR EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

Today, planners and their suppliers need to operate at high alert and with heightened awareness. They must be prepared to switch gears at a moment's notice when negative headlines flash around the world, threatening upcoming events and placing companies and individuals into crisis management mode and financial jeopardy.

The event planning industry has been hit hard by the events of September 11, 2001, consumer and corporate fear of flying, terrorist attacks, war with Afghanistan and Iraq, airline bankruptcies, cruise lines plagued with unexplained illnesses, deadly hurricanes, corporate event and entertaining budgets on the chopping block, West Nile virus, and the threat of SARS. SARS alone had some event planners, hotels and industry suppliers reeling from the financial impact of mass cancellations that cost them millions of dollars in lost business. Reportedly, one top hotel was forced to lay off all staff who had not worked there 7 1/2 years or longer for 90 days, and staff who had worked that long were only guaranteed one day of work per week during that 90-day period. Then the fear of mad cow disease struck and the event planning industry ground to another halt. This was followed by major blackouts and devastating hurricanes in the Caribbean and Florida, one after the other.

No longer can planners or their suppliers simply sit back and be reactive to arising situations. Savvy planners know they must be proactive, acting in a timely manner to deal with expected difficulties. They have witnessed the importance of knowing that an event

planning crisis can happen at any moment and know that we no longer can predict what industry challenges may lie around the corner. Threats such as SARS, mad cow disease, West Nile virus, monkeypox, bird flu, E. coli, and bacteria-contaminated food and water (even found on aircraft) and the devastating Tsunami (that affected Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India's south coast, India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Thailand, Maldives, Malaysia, Burma, Bangladesh, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and Seychelle) seemingly came out of nowhere and hit fast with major impact on all aspects of the event planning and hospitality industry.

As an industry, we cannot afford to be caught unaware and unprepared. Nor can we become complacent because a perceived threat to our business and personal well-being and livelihood is not on our doorstep. There can be long-reaching consequences. For example, SARS affected not only areas directly hit with the disease, but also concern for travel to all parts of the world, with visitors arriving with masks and supplies of antibacterial wipes or boycotting flying on aircraft connecting through various cities. One spin-off was the financial effect on food suppliers who were suddenly faced with loss of seafood and produce business from affected hotels and restaurants. Another was the concern of planners from infected regions doing business outside their country during this time period. One client insisted that all staff coming on-site be quarantined for 10 days prior to arrival. Would your company be prepared from a staffing, financial and timing aspect to handle such a request at a moment's notice, or would you need to forfeit the business revenue? Both options could have dire financial repercussions for a business and an individual.

Investing time and effort in crisis management mode is no longer an option. Safety and security issues in the world today have made it a necessity. For one planning company, security concerns may have required the area in which they were holding their event to be sealed off in order to guarantee the safety of all participants. Fortunately, contingency plans for each separate segment of the event were in place, each with its own backup plan, so that if the area was sealed off, the event could go on without incident. For example, there had to be enough food and water on-site in case access to the location by outside service providers was denied for

security reasons. This meant that added refrigeration needed to be brought in to supplement the existing units in order to store excess product. Backup power supplies and an entire operations center were set up on-site to deal with any emergency. The planning company held dry runs and rehearsals, briefings and information sessions. Time was made so that plans could be formulated and reviewed in advance so that everyone knew their role in case the contingency plan had to be implemented.

In the event planning field, what people remember is not that you had a crisis, but how you and your organization managed it in a professional and effective manner. Pre-planning is a must, and a basic crisis plan can be adapted to many situations. For example, once one planning company knew that a war was going to break out, it put proactive measures in place to prepare its business and its clients. SARS and the Tsunami, however, were totally reactive situations that no one could have anticipated, but the same crisis plan and techniques were used. The difference was that in the case of SARS and the Tsunami, planning companies had to turn on a dime and swing into crisis management mode overnight.

Many different strategies are being used both by suppliers and planners in difficult times, with suppliers having to be more flexible with their contracts and attrition clauses and planners having to deal with postponements and cancellations. Lead-in time is changing as well, which is putting stress on all parties and needs to be factored in. Event planning crisis management and risk assessment is now part of the event planning process and must be anticipated and prepared for. It is not only about dealing with the emergency at hand but how best to address and answer client/guest concerns. Planners must have a comprehensive crisis plan in place and companies must make time to train their employees and select a company spokesperson prior to a crisis. Assigning a point person to handle all communication during the crisis, one who will constantly review information from credible sources on the issue and spread information to key internal staff, can save time in an emergency. Speculation and misinformation are kept to a minimum and everyone knows who to get information from and distribute information to.

One way to manage crises is to stay current, and even anticipate problems. It is imperative that planners today keep a close watch on the trends emerging from the industry and stay knowledgeable on issues. You need to be aware of the unpredictability that exists in our industry at this time and plan accordingly. You can never take for granted what is taking place on the other side of the world and you must schedule time in to stay informed. We live in a global community and what impacts one area can quickly affect another in a matter of minutes. For example, experts are concerned that the bird flu could become pandemic and be capable of transiting the globe within months, with the expectation of a third or more of the world's population falling ill. The Hong Kong flu of 1968 was the last pandemic. The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918–19 killed an estimated 20 million to 50 million people worldwide in 18 months. Today, planners need to make the time to monitor World Health Organization reports as well as news reports in order to prepare in a timely manner for what tomorrow could bring. Event planning must be conducted with heightened awareness and with planners and suppliers remaining on event planning crisis management high alert.

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Action plans must be formulated in advance. Delays limit damage control options. One event planning company was well-prepared for possible disruption to its group's return home due to a possible major airline strike. In less than 24 hours after the strike was announced, it had seats home for everyone on alternate carriers, with buses chartered and trains booked to take guests to home cities once they returned to the major gateway. Not only were guests looked after, they felt catered to, and were shocked at having options to choose from while the rest of the country was scrambling for solutions. By operating with heightened awareness and having an emergency action plan, the event planning company got a timely jump on the competition and offered clients solutions. This was an event that planners knew could possibly take place, but the company's staff were fully trained and prepared to be proactive in any unforeseen event planning crisis.

SUCCEEDING IN EVENT PLANNING CRISIS MANAGEMENT

- Keep informed on world events, not just on local and industry news. For a quick check of world news, access www.cnn.com, where you can sign up to receive breaking news e-mail updates, and www.news.google.com, to read top news stories from around the world.
- Monitor event-threatening situations. Be on top of current developments so that you can address client concerns and attendee fears with up-to-date information.
- Review contract cancellation clauses with a fine-tooth comb. Make sure clients are aware of all charges that could apply should an event be canceled at the last moment due to unforeseen circumstances, such as an outbreak of an infectious disease, hurricane, earthquake or Tsunami devastation. Be very aware of cancellation charges, anticipate the financial risks these unexpected occurrences represent and prepare a thorough risk assessment plan with an appropriate course of action. Planners and suppliers may need to be flexible with their contracts and attrition dates. Investigate cancellation insurance options.
- Practice the ABC principles of event planning: anticipation, backup and crisis management. Always have a comprehensive crisis plan in place and conduct employee training. Formulate a plan in advance and review it with staff so that everyone knows the role they are to play should the plan need to be implemented.
- Assign a point person to handle all communication during a crisis. This will keep speculation and misinformation to a minimum.
- Be prepared financially—from a business and personal standpoint—to deal with event postponements, cancellations and even quarantine requirements. Explore diversification and creating multiple money streams by finding new business ventures. Don't be caught short financially or staff-wise.
- Be proactive, not reactive. Be on top of your game. Do not wait for your client to call you in a crisis. Let them know that you are

aware of the situation and are preparing a list of viable options for their consideration.

- Check with company lawyers regarding business and personal legal rights and ramifications of a course of action. We live in a litigious society today. It is imperative to document and request all changes in writing.

SAVING TIME THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

It has been said that time and technology wait for no man and this is especially true in the event planning industry. Technology is changing how planners do business and on how and what they spend their time. It is essential to stay on top of cutting-edge technology that will benefit you personally and professionally in the office and out and about in the world. Not only that, but clients and their guests are expecting time-saving and cost-saving ideas from their planners, and technology plays a big role in the ability to do that today. Savvy planners know they have to stay on top of technology to be leaders in their field and you cannot afford to be left behind.

Some technologies you might want to take advantage of include:

- Personal Computers
- Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs)
- Communication Technology
- Online Event Registration
- Virtual Site Visits

PERSONAL COMPUTERS

You'll want to keep your computer skills up to par. Contracts today are edited electronically with changes tracked, comments inserted, etc., which is efficient and effortless for all parties. Sending contracts back and forth manually is time-consuming and can label you outdated. You also need to know how to do the basics, such as sending attachments and adapting Excel to Word, as well as know how to do simple but important functions, such as blind copy on e-mails. One company, sending out an eBlast to its clients, did not use the blind copy feature and displayed every client on its personal e-mail address list. It was inundated with e-mails and telephone calls from irate customers, upset that their confidential e-mail addresses had been posted. The company then had to spend time placating its clients and sending out a personal e-mail apology to those affected.

Technology can save planners time in the office by greatly reducing the amount of brochures that need to be reviewed and kept on file. Instead of having to deal with bulging cabinets filled to the brim with outdated material and having to struggle to keep up with incoming promotional mailings from hotels and resorts, planners are turning to their computers (as opposed to their filing cabinets) to conduct initial venue and facility research, and only ordering and keeping material that fits their criteria. This also serves to reduce clutter in the office and the time spent opening mail. Hotels can also e-mail full banquet menus, floor plans and more as attachments, which allows the planner to print and review only what is necessary and saving them time and piles of paper.

PERSONAL DIGITAL ASSISTANTS (PDAs)

PDAs such as the Blackberry are also a popular time lifeline for planners, allowing them to have their office at their fingertips. They eliminate the need to carry around a laptop and enable planners to answer their e-mails from anywhere in real time, which has great timing value.

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Communication technology is also changing how event planners operate on-site. In some cases where security is of major importance to a client, security staff and on-site program directors are now being equipped with tiny video cameras to give those overseeing the event an accurate view of how the event is unfolding. Lead program directors watching from a central command post can assess the event and advise staff at various location sites on how to handle specific situations as they arise. Response time is faster on-site—especially important in matters where security can be breached or in the handling of guests gone wild—and those involved in making decisions as to how best to handle a potential problem have a visual overview of the situation and are not just relying on radio communication and depending on someone else's interpretation of what is transpiring. An additional time-saving benefit is that staff do not have to be all over the place looking for one another; they can be easily directed where to find support staff. At one event, a sales executive could not be located when a crisis situation was unfolding that required his input. Staff was pulled away from their duties to search for him, as he was not responding to his walkie-talkie, cell phone or hotel paging. He was ultimately found lounging by the pool and talking to guests of his client. Had he been wired with a video camera, his actions would have been tracked, one staff member dispatched and he could have been on top of the dispute in mere minutes, saving both time and energy.

ONLINE EVENT REGISTRATION

In one fell swoop, online event registration cut down on the time required to plan, prepare and proof custom promotional literature. Many companies are now opting to set up custom Web pages for registration and post relevant information there, such as hotel information, activities, and seminar selection. Time is no longer required to collate printed promotional material, stuff envelopes, print and attach labels, affix postage and send out bulky packages.

Participants can register around the world from their home or office. The planner and office save time by not having to field incoming calls, return messages, open and process registration forms, and check the correct spelling of names (because attendees input their own data, the margin for error is lessened). As an added time benefit, planners can schedule a time that suits them best to pull and review updated reports, and their clients can access the same information if they need to reference it without requiring the planner to stop what they are doing and follow up on their request.

Online registration tracks attendee registration; evaluates responses; sends out follow-up reminders; compiles rooming lists, transportation lists and special meal requests; creates seating plans; prints name badges; and sets up golf tournaments with guests registering their food preference, type of clubs, handicap and preferred foursomes, etc., saving planners hours of labor. As the demand for online registration grows, the websites are becoming more refined and offer new applications to meet changing needs such as security. On-site identification can now be scanned and bar coded for extra delegate protection. Online registration has become mainstream and many event planning companies are bringing in their own in-house staff to build and customize their clients' online registration websites. The demand is there from both clients and guests. Tech-savvy planning and operations staff are in demand for the time-saving solutions they bring to a company and to their work.

VIRTUAL SITE VISITS

Hotels and resorts around the world are using Virtual Visit Presentation Inc. (www.virtualvisit.ca) to enable planners to conduct time-saving virtual site inspections with their sales staff over the telephone and at their leisure. Using 360-degree digital photography, planners are free to move virtually around the property, limiting their actual site inspections to those hotels and resorts that

will meet their clients' needs. Sales staff will direct planners to www.remotevisit.com and they will be given a login number to begin their tour.

DECIDING WHEN TO DELEGATE OR OUTSOURCE EXPERTISE

Situations may arise when time is of the essence and deadlines are rapidly approaching, or you have landed an account where you are out of your depth. Either way, it may be time to call in the experts and bring them in as consultants or to work with you on the project. You don't have the luxury of time to learn at your client's expense. The time to build your expertise is when time is on your side, not in times of emergency. Invest in training, personally or as a company, so that when it matters most, you can get to what matters most without costly timing delays. No matter what, if you are facing more than you can handle, do not rule out bringing the experts in to guide you through it.

Bringing in assistance can help companies through time crunches and accelerate learning curves, but the key is knowing when, where and what caliber of help is required to move you ahead fast. For example, assume that you have handled only groups of 200 or less. If an event for 2,000 participants ends up in your lap, not many companies are going to turn away the business. To attempt to manage it on your own, however, without expertise in planning and coordinating an event of this size, could cost you future business and your professional reputation if anything goes awry, especially if you misrepresented yourself or your company to your client and suppliers. Bringing in a master of planning, experienced in the care and handling of large-scale groups, is a time-saving, money-saving and office sanity solution, because otherwise you might be placing immense stress on your staff and existing clients while you struggle to cope with a big learning curve on your own with no assistance. The cost to bring in expertise is minimal compared to what you could lose if you don't. Bring assistance in at the very beginning—don't wait until your program is contracted and sold.

One company learned that lesson the hard way. They contracted a product launch that was well beyond their realm of ability. The audiovisual requirements were intricate, the special effects complex and they sold the program to take place at a hotel that would only have been opened less than six weeks before they moved in. It was a timing disaster waiting to happen. The client loved their creative concept, but unfortunately it was not sound. In fact, certain aspects could not be done logistically and legally. They had not researched fire permits, insurance requirements and simple physics, and in addition the pricing was hundreds of thousands of dollars off and the client had already signed the contract. But all that was not discovered until they brought in an expert six weeks before the event to review and take over event operations. In less than eight hours he had uncovered the costing errors riddled throughout the proposal and the logistical nightmare they were about to have on their hands. Had he been brought in earlier to act as a consultant to guide them through structural requirements for a program such as this, they would not have had to go back to their client to advise them of their mistakes, shaking their client's confidence in them. It was only through the skill of the expert planner that the event was able to be turned around and go off without a hitch, but it cost the company their new client. It was very apparent how over their head the company was in taking on this program, but with only six weeks between finding out what mistakes they had made and the event taking place, there was not enough time for the client to react and research new options.

Expertise is often a telephone call away and those who consult do so with the utmost of discretion and client confidentiality. Don't turn away a lucrative piece of business just because you don't have the experience to handle it at the moment or the time to develop it, when there are qualified people out there who can help you grow your level of expertise and your company. Use the time they are with you to learn from them.

