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MAKING YOURSELF MARKETABLE

The professional meeting, incentive and special event industry is growing and attracting more and more aspiring planners each day. Universities and colleges worldwide are now offering courses and accreditation, and many are fostering an entrepreneurial spirit, developing graduates set on opening and operating their own businesses immediately. The competition for jobs in the workforce and to contract new clients has never been more intense. Almost daily, new companies are opening their doors for business, and those applying new business practices are experiencing tremendous success. Enterprising independent meeting planners are winning accounts away from long-established meeting planning companies and incentive houses. Some of the industry's biggest players are laying off employees and even closing their doors, while smaller specialty boutique operations are thriving. How did this industry turnabout happen? Those who are moving forward placed their focus on increasing their marketability and investing in themselves and their companies, while those who are experiencing financial hardships are more likely the ones who have persisted in clinging to old ways of soliciting business.

The question that planners and event planning companies are asking themselves is how they can stand out from the crowd, maintain old clients and attract new business opportunities. Doing all you can to make yourself extremely marketable is one of the most effective ways. In business, your knowledge, personality and reputation are what makes you marketable, both as an individual and as a company.

There are three key steps to making you and your company marketable:

1. Target Your Talents: Never stop investing in yourself.
2. Distinguish Yourself and Your Company: Showcase your expertise by becoming visible. Learn how to build public awareness by using industry network and media effectively so that you can position yourself for success.
3. Manage Your Reputation: Watch out for your personal and professional reputation and be protective of your good name.

TARGET YOUR TALENTS

In the past, event planning was a field that many just fell into. There was little offered in the way of formal education and training and most of what was available was through industry associations. There were very few books on the subject and people were not very open about sharing information. It was an industry where you learned by trial and error, from being on familiarization trips, taking part in site inspections, and handling an event on site. In the late 1980s many of today's leading event planning companies were still receiving supplier quotes on telex machines, and preparing cost summaries manually, using adding machines and typewriters. Fax machines were embraced when they were first introduced, but in some offices the single, shared computers sat gathering dust as people clung to the old comfortable way of doing business.

Immersed in the day-to-day drama of event planning, deadlines and intense work demands, many planners left continuing education up to their employers. Owners faced a dilemma when it came to deciding whether or not to invest in employee education. The fear of time and money spent had to be weighed against the possibility of employees leaving, taking with them their newly acquired skills

and having someone else be the benefactor. Some owners were so paranoid that they would not let their employees out of the office for familiarization trips or presentations for fear that they would meet someone who would lure them away. Many owners chose to do nothing. And they discovered what happens when you don't invest in growing your company and your employees. They became stagnant, lost their momentum, and in the process suffered loss of business and standing in the event planning community.

Today, planners are taking responsibility for ongoing education and investing in themselves. Planners know that enlightened companies are now hiring with an eye on industry experience, knowledge, areas of expertise and accreditation. Some would-be planners start out to set themselves apart from their job-seeking peers by successfully completing industry courses that will allow them to receive certification once they have been hired and have completed the certificate's work hour requirements.

They know investing in education can give you:

- Professional credibility
- Expertise
- Special recognition
- Prestige and industry reputation
- Competitive advantage in securing a position or soliciting business
- Marketability
- Promotions
- Increased earning potential

Those dedicated to investing in themselves and increasing their marketability are making the time to better their skills and are committing to being leaders in their industry by taking every available opportunity to upgrade their learning. The meeting, incentive and special event planning industry offers an abundance of educational resources, including:

- Formal Education
- Industry Certification
- Associations
- Professional Resources (Books/Magazines/Online Publications)

- Industry Conferences, Congresses, Trade Shows and Award Shows

FORMAL EDUCATION

Formal education can pay dividends for the rest of your life. Studies show that graduates of colleges, universities and technical institutes can earn hundreds of thousands of dollars more over their career than can non-graduates. Planners already in the industry who know the difference a degree can make are going back to school as mature students and signing up for courses that have opened up in the event planning field. Others are embracing distance learning as the perfect solution, preferring to learn online at their own pace. For those who are wondering how they can fit further education development into their busy schedule—when there is not enough time in their day for personal, family and professional demands *and* a commute to classes—this is a viable option. There are a variety of opportunities out there for distance education in the event planning field. For example, one North American planner just completed her master's degree in tourism management from a university in Australia without setting foot on the campus.

INDUSTRY CERTIFICATION

Industry certification also increases earning potential. Those with industry certification, such as Certified Meeting Professionals (CMPs), can earn up to US\$10,000 more annually than non-CMPs. The more knowledge and skills you can accumulate in the event planning industry, the more valuable you become. Industry standards have been set, and those who meet them are in demand. In this challenging industry, you continue to grow and expand your understanding through experience and professional development. With proper training, event planning can be developed into an art form.

Samples of internationally recognized event planning industry certification include:

- Certified in Exhibition Management (CEM)
- Certified Incentive Travel Executive (CITE)
- Certified Manager of Exhibits (CME)
- Global Certification in Meeting Management (CMM)
- Certified Meeting Professional (CMP)

- Certified Special Events Professional (CSEP)

Certification eligibility, the qualification process and contact information to become certifiable for each of the industry designations listed above can be found in Appendix A of this book.

ASSOCIATIONS

When you are starting out in the event planning field, joining an association is a good first step. Membership in an association serves as a means to introduce you to the industry, meet your peers and learn more about your chosen profession. It is also a way to become actively involved and to start making a name for yourself in the event planning community. You can begin by attending meetings, and progress by volunteering and serving on various committees and even running for a seat on the board of directors. Each step helps you move forward in becoming known in the industry and being involved keeps you on top of changes that are taking place. You may even end up being instrumental in setting new standards.

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Although it may be tempting to sit with those you know at industry events, there is more value in moving outside your comfort zone and introducing yourself to those you have not met. Too often, planners don't practice what they teach their clients—get your guests circulating—and remain in their select clusters, losing a valuable marketing opportunity in the process by not moving outside their immediate circle of business acquaintances. You never know who else may be in the room, who knows who, who can introduce you to someone that you have been wanting to meet or who may be in a position to sing your praises to an important business contact—unless you take steps to expand your business network.

Being part of an association enables planners to network with local and international peers; be apprised of breaking industry news; take part in educational conferences, seminars, certification and leadership programs; and stay on top of latest trends and issues affecting the industry.

Important industry associations and councils, many of which have worldwide chapters, include:

- CIC—Convention Industry Council
- CSES—Canadian Special Events Society
- HSMAI—Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International
- IAAP—International Association of Administrative Professionals
- IACC—International Association of Conference Centers
- IAEM—International Association for Exhibition Management
- IMPAC—Independent Meeting Planners Association of Canada, Inc.
- ISES—International Special Events Society
- MPI—Meeting Professionals International
- NACE—National Association of Catering Executives
- PCMA—Professional Convention Management Association
- SCMP—Society of Corporate Meeting Professionals
- SITE—The Society of Incentive & Travel Executives

Contact and general information for each of the associations listed above can be found in Appendix B of this book.

PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES (BOOKS/MAGAZINES/ONLINE PUBLICATIONS)

It is essential in the fast-paced, ever-changing world of event planning to keep yourself current. One way of doing this is by subscribing to industry magazines, and purchasing event planning books and best-selling books on business, current affairs, marketing, public relations, party planning and entertaining. Online publications such as *BiZBash*, *Chief Marketer* and *MIMlist* are other excellent resources (MIMlist Meeting Matters is the meetings industry's leading e-mail-based discussion group, where you can participate in conversations with more than 2,000 of your industry peers).

Magazines, books and online publications offer ideas, tips and information on coming trends and successful techniques that can be adapted to meet your individual event planning needs. Use them as teaching tools and sources of information, innovation and inspiration. Seeing or reading about a new product or idea may be

just the trigger you need to come up with a fabulous new party theme or introduce an exciting new element to your event.

A wealth of industry information can be found at your fingertips online (online publications), in your e-blasts (marketing e-mails) and through your e-newsletters (industry/association newsletters), as well as through regular mail (magazine subscriptions) and through association bookstores. You can find relevant books through Amazon, Barnes and Noble and Chapters.Indigo, and have them delivered right to your home or office.

Meeting planning, incentives and event planning are always in transition. Planners must be skilled at reading upcoming trends, keeping on top of industry rules and regulations and predicting the next hot destination venue or theme. Industry knowledge and continuing education is of paramount importance. It is what will set you and the company you work with apart from the herd.

A sample listing of professional industry resources can be found in Appendix C of this book.

INDUSTRY CONFERENCES, CONGRESSES, TRADE SHOWS AND AWARD SHOWS

You can further your education by attending local, national and world conferences, congresses, trade shows and award shows. Be sure to take advantage of the wealth of information that is made available to you by the event planning industry. When you attend seminars given by industry leaders, you can come away with information that you can immediately put to use, because they know the issues that are facing you back in the office. Attending educational symposiums can also teach you how to run an event. You will see firsthand the different operating styles and get immediate feedback of what to do and what not to do at your next event. If those planning the event miss a step, they will no doubt hear about it and get to witness in person the crowd's reaction. At one premier event planning award show, the company doing the centerpieces made a major mistake and had displays set up at each table that, while impressive, no one could see over, around or through once seated. The audience—seasoned event planning pros—immediately removed theirs from the table.

At another event, mashed potatoes served in a martini glass as a trendy appetizer remained untouched, with guests unwilling to consume so many carbs on what to them were merely basic potatoes and too heavy considering a full dinner was following. One seminar

onboard a boat had guests longing to be rescued when the electricity died. That affected many of the evening's components, from food preparation and air conditioning to music and even the operation of the toilets. Seeing what can go wrong and how teams of industry experts implement crisis management is perhaps even a greater learning experience than taking part in a perfectly executed event.

You also get to observe how different venues operate. This is especially useful if you are attending an event at a property that you may have considered in the past but not had the opportunity to use as yet. You may also get to see cutting-edge technology at work, as the newest ideas are often on display at industry events. For example, different online and on-site registration systems may be being tested.

Some of the industry's well-known conferences, congresses, trade shows and award shows, along with contact information, can be found in Appendix D of this book.

DISTINGUISH YOURSELF AND YOUR COMPANY

Event planning companies looking to make themselves marketable to employees—in order to attract the best in the business to work for them—know the value of showcasing what they have to offer. They understand that this is not just a marketing application designed to bring in potential customers. When employers have the best minds in the business working for them, they know they are giving themselves the competitive edge of added marketability, and they do this by distinguishing themselves from their competition. They play up their differences publicly.

In the past, event planning owners seemed to look for employees who worked ceaselessly to meet the demands of their business. Their employees would work past exhaustion to meet deadlines, sometimes even crashing on the company floor to sleep for a couple of hours before beginning again. Employers are no longer looking for that. They know that having an employee who is out of balance will eventually lead to poor productivity and burnout. Managing business wants without jeopardizing personal and professional needs is becoming very important to employers, employees and customers. Flexible hours and working from home are now viable options some employers will consider if it means they can secure a talented employee.

Many companies are adding well-being centers to their office areas, where employees can go to meditate, catch a power nap, or take a shower. Some companies are even installing gyms and hiring personal trainers to lead their staff in yoga classes and provide personal fitness training, all in an effort to help employees relieve some of the stress of their day, and ultimately to increase effectual productivity and to attract highly marketable employees to work for them. Others provide complimentary bottled water and wholesome snacks, or go so far as to set up juice bars, to make sure their employees are never running on empty or trying to sustaining themselves on caffeine and junk food, especially in crunch periods. One company turned its boardroom into a screening room and brought in movies to help stimulate innovative ideas and creative discussion. Another installed a personal spa so employees could get haircuts, massages, manicures and other pampering during their lunch hours. It provided an oasis of calm, and made personal self-care easy so that employees could fully focus on the job at hand, make better decisions and improve their performance and customer service.

These employers are fully behind their employees meeting deadlines while meeting their personal and professional needs, going home on time to be with family and friends or being able to attend industry functions and classes. Living a life in balance, and being given the tools to do so are moving to the forefront and working with a business to create new energy and creativity. Employers know that if their employees are not given time to acquire areas of expertise and to target their talents, they and the company grow stagnant. A revolving door is the end result—and time and money is spent on retraining as opposed to building an unbeatable team to take the company forward. Companies looking to give themselves the competitive edge want the brightest minds working for them, not their competition.

Some media-savvy companies make sure to plant stories in industry publications and local newspapers that highlight how well their employees and customers are cared for. They submit story ideas; invite the media into their offices to see them at work, cover an event or take part in a charity event such as a golf tournament; and make sure that areas of appeal are photographed and talked about in the article. They know the old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words has merit. If their purpose is creating an

opportunity to entice people to work for them and potential clients to do business with them, then great care is taken with the photo op setup. What they are selling is their brand, and it is important that it is projected in all they do. They are presenting to the public the image they want seen and nothing is left to chance. For example, at the charity event, they will make sure that their donation is presented on an oversized check with their company name clearly visible, and that a photographer is there to capture the moment, even if they have to supply their own professional photographer in order to get the exact pictures they want to convey their message. That way they are in control of the prints and can send out copies to magazines and newspapers that may be interested in running the story and photographs, showing their company giving back to the community and supporting local charities.

They know that a photo is a marketing tool that can be used to convey a message. It can effectively be used to put forth a feeling. For example, a company wishing to convey a casual, relaxed working atmosphere may wish to have the individuals in a picture appear less formal—without ties, with collars left unbuttoned and shirt sleeves rolled up or perhaps a sport jackets rather than suits and more formal business attire. And this applies not only to those whose picture is being taken but anyone who could be conceivably captured in the background. If you see a photograph in the newspaper of a company executive leaning back in his chair, on the telephone with his feet up on the desk, it is done by design; it is not an off-guard moment in the life of a busy VIP. Even the shoes propped up on the desk will have been orchestrated. If you look closely you will probably see that the soles are unmarked, and the shoes, most likely designer brands to discreetly convey affluence, that his company is doing well and that the employees are well paid, were most probably brought in for the occasion.

Final picture and story content approval is often asked for as well, with the company citing that this is being done at the request of its company lawyers, as it is important to maintain control of what is being put out to the public. And it wants the picture and the story to convey as much as possible of the image it wants to showcase. Names and titles of individuals appearing in the picture are also supplied so there is no room for error, and the company name is provided exactly as the company wishes it to be listed. It wants to capitalize on self-promotion and have potential clients, employees and suppliers recognize it and be able to find it. It uses these same techniques in its advertising

and company promotions. And many are starting to turn to the pros, hiring public relations companies to help them achieve their goals.

Along with public relations companies, executives in the public eye are now hiring speechwriters in order to give more polished presentations, even for what could be perceived to be informal gatherings. They don't want to miss an opportunity to enhance their professional image no matter how insignificant an event may seem to be. It is a tactic long used by those whose intention is to shine in the limelight and maximize their exposure. U.S. presidents who have needed to impart a touch of humor in their speeches to the public have taken it one step further, hiring professional joke writers in addition to having their personal staff writers. Heads of companies use this same method when preparing for their speaking engagements. If they want to come across as warm and caring with amusing anecdotes to share, when they are in fact uncomfortable speaking in public, they bring in the experts to work with them and to put them at ease. This is often done on the advice of their event planning company. Event planners are now taking their own advice. They know if they want a competitive edge in business they have to move from backstage to centerstage at times, and when they do so they need to radiate confidence.

Individuals in all industries who wish to put themselves forward and distinguish themselves from their peers have used the same strategies to market their expertise and their talents. They know that becoming "visible" in the industry can boost their career opportunities. They care about how they present themselves in and out of the office, whether on familiarization trips or site inspections, at industry functions or attending their clients' programs. They don't ever want their name associated with being a "guest gone wild" at a professional get-together. That is not a desirable way of becoming part of the industry buzz. They keep their professional demeanor in check and their personal life private, and they manage to do it without being stuffy.

People who are looking to make a name for themselves in the industry will take the time to pose for pictures at industry functions; they'll be available to be quoted as an industry source for newspaper and magazine articles; they'll join associations and volunteer to sit on boards; they'll head up committees or help out at the next get-together; and they'll work the registration desk at educational seminars, getting to meet people face to face and put names to faces. Then when their duties are over they are free to mix and mingle with key individuals

they know firsthand are in the room. If there are speakers of note attending, keen individuals will volunteer to look after them, taking the opportunity to find out before the event if they have any special needs and chat with them. They will make it a point to work in some one-on-one time with them. They will volunteer to facilitate meetings and do onstage introductions. If they have specific talents they make sure they are known and step in where their expertise is needed, and if they can work in a thank you credit in promotional material they can add that to their portfolio.

Today, along with a good resume, you also need good marketing. You need to play up your credentials and use the media and your marketability effectively. The goal is to expand your demand and to build your personal brand.

Consider an up-and-coming sports figure who wanted to become a household name. Though just starting out he knew the value of good PR and hired a public relations company to help him get media attention. Cheering “fans,” dressed in a manner that would attract television and newspaper cameras, as well as signs showcasing the player’s name, were planted in the stands. The money was well spent, as the hired fans made the six o’clock news and the front page of the sports section. Although the player had bought his own hype, people bought into it as well. He had accomplished what he had set out to do—become visible.

Many event planners have hired the equivalent of cheering fans when doing theme parties such as Oscar night parties or events for corporate clients, but they would not think about how to use the same techniques to make themselves stand out. One employee in search of a job decided to use his creativity to market himself. He delivered a teaser mailing to prospective employers. This consisted of a glass container filled with gold flakes with a message attached that said this individual was worth his weight in gold. He received a number of callbacks for interviews and several job offers. What he was selling was not only himself but also his creativity. The cost was minimal but the gimmick maximized the possibility that someone would notice his resume. Another employee on a job hunt took visibility and making herself distinctive a step further. She took out a billboard posting her picture, qualifications and expected salary, which was in the six figures. She received over 120 responses. She got both the dream job she was seeking and the expected salary, which more than paid for the cost of the billboard.

Use the creativity you bring to event planning to look for ways to market yourself. Don't shy away from publicity. Look for chances to demonstrate your talents and create them if need be. Distinguish yourself from your peers by marketing yourself in a positive light and making sure that you do "visibility" as well as you do event planning.

Companies and individuals have the opportunity to display their professional image, expertise and talents at:

- Supplier presentations
- Educational seminars
- Association meetings
- Conferences
- Trade shows
- Industry functions (e.g., charity golf tournaments)
- Client presentation meetings
- Supplier meetings
- Familiarization trips
- Site inspections
- On-site event orchestration
- In the office
- On an airplane
- In a hotel
- Everyday out and about

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Never lose sight of the fact that you don't know who may be sitting beside you when you are going about your day-to-day activities, and opportunities to put yourself forward could happen when least expected. One planner, on an aircraft that was experiencing mechanical problems and landing at the nearest airport, called the office while she was still airborne to re-route and book an alternate flight. She knew there would be a crush at the airport when they arrived, with passengers scrambling to find other flights to their final destination. She offered to assist the person seated beside her with his plans, not knowing that he was

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the CEO of a major corporation that most event planning companies would love to call their client. This passenger was so impressed that he asked for her card, called her when he returned from business and invited her company to come in and present personally to him at his next executive meeting. They were awarded the business. An accidental meeting, when someone was given a chance to showcase her talents, turned into a profitable and lasting business relationship.

MANAGE YOUR REPUTATION

Your reputation is your industry credibility, and yes, there are such things as good publicity and bad publicity. What happens when an individual or a company does something wrong and attracts negative press?

People are distrustful of doing business with those they think are trying to put a spin on the facts and they feel are trying to cover up those facts. The situation is often immediately diffused if there is a sense of ownership, a mea culpa followed by immediate action taken to right a wrong. When it was reported in the media that an airline had violated its own privacy regulations and divulged confidential customer information to a third party, the company head immediately took responsibility, explained why and how this had occurred and described the steps that were in place to make sure that it never happened again. It turned out that an official request had been made for disclosure of confidential passenger information, such as customers' names, addresses, telephone numbers, credit card numbers, flights they had booked, and who they were traveling with, to see how this type of information could be compiled and used to aid national security. The third party in this case was not going to use the actual information it received. The furor died down after a couple of days. The airline that made headlines had an outstanding record of customer service, and while confidence had been shaken, customers valued hearing the truth.

There are always going to be petty people who will bring up incidents or bad behavior years after the fact in an attempt to demean and belittle others or sway business their way. People make mistakes. Events sometimes spiral out of control. It is how these situations are handled that should be looked at. Were they dealt with with truth and transparency, or was the idea of damage control to sweep everything under the carpet? What should be called into question is the behavior of the people making the disparaging remarks and their lack of professional ethics.

Employers and clients are looking for those who can set trends, not just follow them. Those who are on top of their game and professional in their behavior will be in demand. Clients and employers will seek out those who know what has been done in the industry and what can be done, and those who have the imagination and skills to create something that has never been done before. By making yourself marketable by acquiring knowledge, being visible in the industry and maintaining an outstanding personal and professional reputation, you will be setting out on a proven strategy for success.

Questions to ask yourself to help you evaluate your level of marketability include:

- How aware am I of world affairs?
- Am I on top of consumer trends for the year ahead?
- When did I last invest in furthering my industry knowledge?
- Have I acquired any new areas of expertise?
- What steps am I taking to build my professional reputation?
- Is there special event planning recognition that would add value to my portfolio?
- What am I doing to keep myself current and apprised of industry changes?
- What courses have I attended?
- Who am I associating with?
- What books have I read over the course of the past year that will benefit me personally and professionally?



- What magazines do I subscribe to and actually take the time to review?
- What professional organizations do I belong to?
- When did I last research other associations that may hold value?
- What steps am I taking to increase my marketability and earning potential?

