

Logistics of Special Event Planning in a Lean Economy

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Introduction

Putting together and running a special event is always a challenge, but it is especially challenging in light of the new economic reality facing us. With companies tightening their collective belts and scrutinizing every dollar spent by their management teams, how do you put together an event that is relevant and cost effective – providing a major ‘bang for your buck’. What will the company get out of sending an employee to this event; how do you encourage companies to provide sponsorship dollars?

Using examples of events facilitated by the Transport Institute including Fields on Wheels and the Supply Chain Connections Conference, this paper will explore the challenges faced by special event coordinators including site research and selection; speaker recruitment; sponsorship recruitment; developing registration processes including participant recruitment; managing registration data; hotel negotiations; managing onsite logistical and audio visual requirements; catering; and all other aspects of running a successful special event on a limited budget.

What is Event Logistics?

According to DHL Logistics, Event Logistics is considered “logistics related to major public events like concerts, sporting contests and trade fairs. The work of logisticians begins long before the checkered flag is waved and ends long afterward”¹.

It takes a specialized team to successfully put together and run an event – it does not matter whether it is a small twenty person meeting or a major event with eight thousand participants – if your team has not planned properly, the event will not be a success.

What are the major issues facing event planners in this economy?

According to Michael Ng of Meeting News magazine, “budget pressures and rising costs remained most critical for nearly 80 percent of planners, far ahead of the transportation and weather woes threatening meetings travel. Meetings professionals cited the economy (81%) and the need to negotiate even better deals with suppliers (78%) as chief concerns. Further, 58.3 percent noted increasing pressure to develop fresh and creative approaches to meetings.”ⁱⁱ See chart 1 on page 3.

As per the survey conducted by Meeting Planner magazine, “planners were relatively bullish about their meetings volumes, though association planners expressed much more confidence than corporate and independent planners. Corporate, association, and other planners were in line with each other in terms of attendance forecasts, with roughly half of each respondent segment anticipating a small dip.”ⁱⁱⁱ See Chart 2 on page 4

The Institute has found this to be true in our case. Numbers for our events have remained consistent over the past six months. Surprisingly, numbers increased dramatically for the February Supply Chain Connections Conference – nearly doubling. This may be due to the following reasons – topic, timing, location, etc. This may not necessarily hold true for events in other centres.

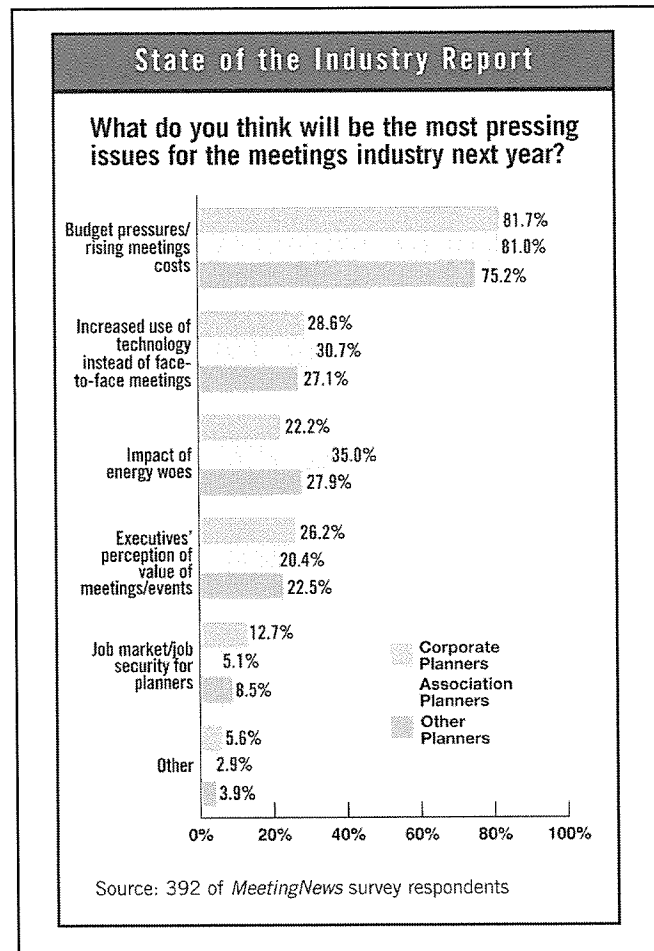


Chart 1: courtesy of Meeting News Magazine

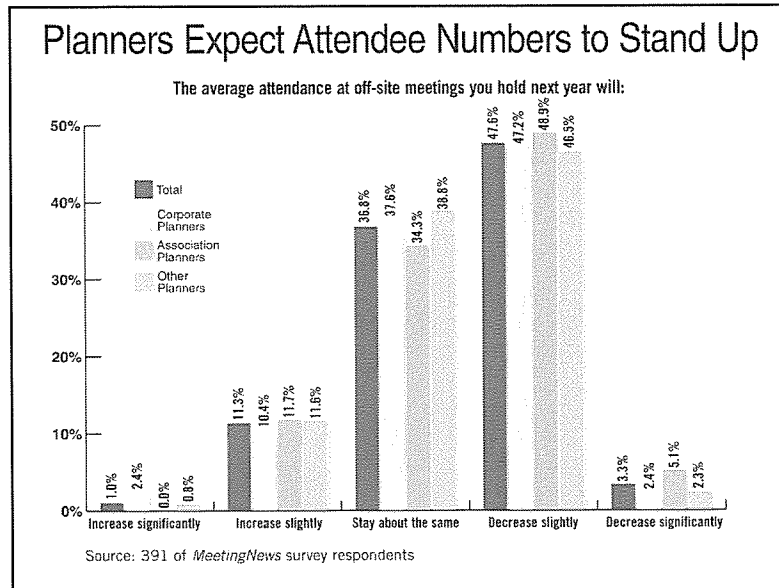


Chart 2: Courtesy of Meeting News Magazine

Planning

When putting together an event, one needs to ask – what is the theme, and is it **RELEVANT** to my target audience? This is probably the most important decision a convener/event organizer can make – even more important than the venue. In real estate it may be the three L's – Location, Location, Location – but in event planning it is the three R's – Relevance, Relevance, Relevance.

In today's challenging economic climate, your event must give attendees something that they can take away and use. With

companies are facing cutbacks, in many cases conference funding is the first thing to go.

Another decision to be made is will the event be a 'live on-site event' or will you be taking advantage of the latest technology to set up a video conference? There are positives and negatives to both. Budget may determine which is most beneficial and cost effective to your organization.

Site Location

Choose your location carefully. For conferences held by the Transport Institute, we have visited potential facilities throughout the City of Winnipeg and assessed them as follows: Will the facility accommodate the estimated number of participants? Is the facility located in a convenient location for the attendees to get to?

For example; if your target group all work in the downtown business area, it does not make sense to host your event in a facility on the outer edges of the city. Unless you are expecting a large percentage of out of town guests, a location near an airport is not necessarily the best choice.

There is huge competition these days for event dollars – it pays to visit comparable facilities in the general location you are interested in holding your event. You can even do much of your research online – including viewing facilities and menus – which will allow you to formulate your list of priorities and questions for the actual site visit.



Disneyland Resort

The question in today's economy is do you locate your event at an exotic conference location and pay the premium price hoping that the location will attract more participants? There will be a premium price to pay for a premium location.

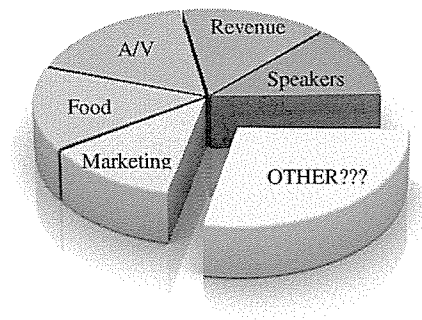
Or do you select a less exciting locale and have the program and speakers as your main draw? The Transport Institute has found that a strong program will draw participants from across North America to the Winnipeg location. Events such as the Fields on Wheels Agribusiness Conference and the Supply Chain Connections Conference are generally at or near capacity when they are run. The Institute has scouted many venues in Winnipeg and is constantly reassessing the venues to ascertain where we can cut costs without cutting quality of customer service.

When a venue has been selected, then it is time to negotiate with the catering/sales manager for rates for everything from space costs to parking. With the economy tight, the time has never been better for event planners to negotiate deals in their favour with venues. Be aggressive and ask for the best rates on the rooms for your guests – that could end up being a huge factor in their decision to attend. Some venues are offering larger discounts if you offer a larger prepayment amount.

One place you can save money is by asking the conference venue to provide pens and paper for the participants. Most venues have promotional items like this available, so be sure to ask.

Some organizations are choosing to go the route of video-conferencing. Initially the financial cost may be prohibitive due to the technical requirements involved, and some people do prefer 'being there'. The technical and logistical requirements involved are extremely detailed and complex, prohibiting their discussion here.

Set Your Budget



It is critical that a budget is developed and adhered to – especially in today’s economic climate. Every little thing adds up – from the coffee breaks to the speaker gifts to the pens you put on the tables for the participants – wherever you can save will put money in your pocket for other expenses. Once you have negotiated your costs with the venue, then you will be able to more accurately calculate potential expenses in your budget.

If you are requesting sponsorships from companies, note that they may not have cash to give but they may be able to provide things like lanyards or small promotional items to give to the participants.

The key when looking for items or money from potential sponsors is to stress the marketing value they will receive for their investment.

Choosing the Event Topic/Theme

It is important that an organizing committee choose a topic that the target audience will want to pay to see and hear.

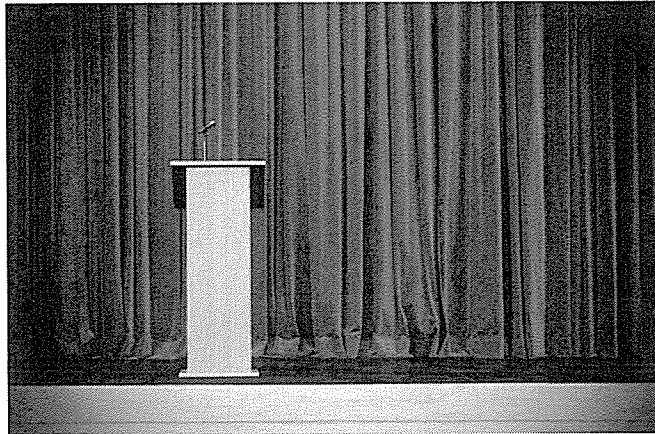
What are the relevant issues in the industry at this particular time? Is there a hot topic or are there some cutting edge ideas that need to be addressed? Once a theme has been established, the committee can begin to research and select the appropriate speakers for the event.

For the 2009 Supply Chain Connections Conference, our committee spent considerable time researching the issues of concern to our target group. The theme that was chosen was 'Inland Ports'. Once we had our theme, we were then able to assess what kind of speakers the conference would demand.

Your Target Market

The theme is set, you have a great venue – now you need to get people in the room. It is critical to market your product effectively. Competition for conference dollars is fierce, and the faster you get your product to the potential consumer, the better chance you have of achieving the numbers required to break even or even post a profit off your event.

Choosing the Right Speakers



Do you need to have a Federal Cabinet Minister at your event? If so, a written invitation is required at least a year in advance of your event. Having politicians speak at an event is beneficial because it generally means that you do not need to cover any of their expenses. If you are inviting someone like Al Gore, you would have to pay an honorarium plus cover the expense of their travel, accommodations, meals etc.

Keep in mind that there are many very qualified people who are experts on various subjects in the academic world and the business world who are more than willing to speak at events with your only cost being to cover their travel and expenses. They may not have the Big Name draw that an Al Gore may have, but you could well be cutting \$50,000 U.S. from your budgeted expenses by going with a less 'famous' speaker.

According to one planner, "Speakers...have been calling to say they can't speak at our conferences now unless we cover all their expenses. We even had a vice president at Merck tell us he couldn't speak unless we paid for everything, from the moment he left his house until he arrived at our door."^{iv}

For our Inland Ports Conference, we were able to draw from a wide field of experts, ranging from people at the local level to academic experts from the United States. Because the topic was one of great interest to people, the speakers were willing to come to Winnipeg simply for the cost of us reimbursing their travel expenses.

Putting It All Together

So you have your venue, your theme and your speakers – you’re all set, right? Wrong. Now the real work begins. The success of the conference depends on getting your target market to register for the event.

How are you going to market your event? There are companies that will do all of this for you – for a price. If you are running an event where you are expecting one thousand attendees, it would make sense to invest the money to hire a professional agency to do this for you. The costs involved start at roughly Ten Thousand Dollars and go up from there, based on what you need the company to do.

What do you get for your investment? These companies specialize in promoting major events in a slick way. Glossy brochures, mass mailouts, magazine ads – you are only limited by your budget.

In the Transport Institute’s case, events such as Fields on Wheels and Supply Chain Connections are run entirely by the staff. There are many logistics and supply chain magazines and websites in which you can list your event for little or no charge. The marketing of Institute events takes place over many months to our target audiences.

In the interest of being ‘green’ and reducing our carbon footprint, the Institute relies on email lists targeted to specific groups as the main method of ‘getting the word out’. This involves almost no financial outlay for us other than staff time to build the database.

On Site Management and Liaison



The actual day(s) of an event are just as critical as all the previous days leading up to it. It is always the goal that the participants perceive that the event flowed smoothly and seamlessly, but event planners know that behind the scenes, this is usually not the case.

Technical problems generally are guaranteed. Problems with presentation files, last minute requirements by speakers and participants, this is part and parcel of the planner's day.

Having great customer service at the venue can make a planner's job much easier. Conversely, if the service at the venue is sub-par, it can leave your participants feeling that the event was not run well. This has been something that the Institute has learned first-hand. It is often true that 'you get what you pay for'.

By meeting with the venue management ahead of time and making your expectations clear, you can avoid any misunderstandings. The venue staff needs to know exactly down to the minute what you need and where you need it.

Looking Forward

Even though your event has been a success, it is critical to get feedback on it from your participants. This can be done by either enclosing a brief questionnaire in the conference package and asking people to return it to you by fax or email, or alternatively, you can send an email to the participants after the event. Some of the questions you should ask of the participants are: potential topics for future events; duration of conferences – do they prefer full or half day events; length of networking breaks – these events are prime networking opportunities for business people; and what would they expect to pay for a similar event in the future.

It is important as event planners to take advantage of these networking opportunities to plan for the future.

Conclusion

Based on the examples given in this paper, it is evident that proper planning and thought are required to run a successful special event. It requires a professional logistics manager and a great team to pull off a great event. However, no matter how much planning you do, experience has proven to our team that technical problems are often unavoidable.

Even though the economy is currently in a recession, it is evident that event planners can still stage a relevant event by utilizing effective logistics management.

References

ⁱ www.DHL-discoverlogistics.com/cms/en/course/services/special/special_event.jsp

ⁱⁱ Ng, Michael, 2009 Industry Outlook, Meeting News Magazine, October 6, 2008

ⁱⁱⁱ Ng, Michael, 2009 Industry Outlook, Meeting News Magazine, October 6, 2008

^{iv} 2009 Industry Outlook, Meeting Planner Magazine, October 6, 2008