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ME PRODUCTIONS BRINGS THE THEATER TO THE CONFERENCE ROOM

Jim Etkins once pleased a corporate client by arranging for a dozen Elvis Presley look-alikes to parachute out of a circus tent. Etkins, who owns ME Productions in Pembroke Park with his father, Hal, recalls the flying Elvis spectacle as one of the most memorable of the events his company has planned since its beginnings in the mid-1980s.

The skydiving crooners were part of a meeting presentation that the corporate planners wanted to be memorable for their sales force. ME offers full-service planning for corporate meetings and private special events such as weddings and bar mitzvahs. The company has 50 full-time employees, from script writers and sound technicians to floral designers and video producers, in music, entertainment, production, business theater, floral, premiums and giveaway and destination management. Etkins says the most interesting aspect of ME is what makes it unusual.

Rather than outsource different components of a meeting or other event, the company has its own in-house talent to provide all the services it needs. During the summer, when the number of conventions and other special events in South Florida falls off, the company has more talent than it needs, but Etkins says there's an advantage: Keeping people on year-round helps retain talented employees, even in a marketplace of nearly full employment. "New people coming in see that, too," he said.

EVOLUTION ME Productions has evolved slowly from a company that provided music and entertainment for parties to a full-service event planner, with 90 percent of its business coming from the corporate sector. A former accountant moved from New York to South Florida in 1985 to work with his father. As demand for more complex events grew, so did ME. "We started building props and sets because we needed to create environments for the events," Etkins said. "We got into business theater because we were already doing everything else." Etkins defines business theater as the element that makes an event unique.

"It changes the general session from a boring presentation into an entertaining, theatrical program. "The main presentation at a meeting is the general session, and companies are looking for memories their people can take back with them. We create those memories," Etkins said. Lewis Hudson of Living Large Productions, a special events consulting company in Atlanta, said companies like ME have a visual impact when they plan meetings. "People in their late 20s and 30s grew up with MTV. They're used to things that are colorful with lots of color," he said.

"They get bored easily, so companies have to relate to them on their level." Hundreds of props are stored in ME's 35,000-sq-ft warehouse, but they are usually just the beginning of creating a project. "We start with a base, and then add accents and color," Etkins said. Companies are always looking for something unusual," Etkins said. Ellen Blum, a senior manager at Lucent Technologies in New Jersey, has used ME for several meetings. The most recent was an event for top sales staff. It took place on a remote tropical island. "We set up staging and bleacher seating for us on a golf green, and then did something similar to a Super Bowl half-time show," Blum said.

OFFICE THEATER Theatrical trappings make a meeting memorable, Blum said. "It makes the attendees feel so special. "Anyone can get on a plane and go anywhere, but we're trying to share an experience with these people. (ME) is very creative and does a terrific job." In 1987, ME Productions had gross revenue of about \$1 million. Last year, revenue was about \$8 million. Etkins says revenue is up about 25 percent more this year, in part because the company recently opened an office in Orlando and entered into a joint venture with Destinations by Paragon in the Bahamas, creating a venue for ME to offer its services in the islands. The company's clients include Clairol, Coca-Cola, Roche Pharmaceuticals and Xerox Corp. ME books about 500 programs annually, with an average of 100 participants. A typical theme party might cost about \$25,000, while a business theater presentation for the general session might run \$250,000. Often, ME will come up with the theme around which the meeting is built.

Having repeat clients makes the job easier. "We're able to suggest things based on knowing the people involved and the objectives of the meeting," Etkins said. The company does some direct-mail marketing, but most of its bookings come from word of mouth and referrals.