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THE LAST WORD: JIM ETKIN OF M.E. PRODUCTIONS

By *Natasha Garber*

Special Events, Jan 1, 2003



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According to Jim Etkin, it was a call for backup that created the boom in his event business. "In the early '80s, we were involved with doing name entertainment like '50s acts, or providing local calypso bands," says the president of Pembroke Park, Fla.-based production company ME Productions. "People started saying, 'Since you're providing the entertainment, how can we really create the whole environment to match that?'" Etkin says sourcing such basic background decor as soda shop signage eventually led to the establishment of his company's 35,000-square-foot headquarters, which includes 18,000 square feet devoted to props and production equipment, plus offices for sales, entertainment, business theater, floral and DMC departments.

Today, the family-owned company, which claims annual revenue of \$12 million to \$15 million, operates a second location in Orlando and invoices about 600 events a year. These include multi-day programs in the incentive-heavy South Florida region, and corporate-meeting-related events in central Florida, the state's convention hub. According to Etkin, a social events division added four years ago has seen a surge in success recently — "We're booked up many weekends through 2003," he says.

When it comes to sales for the corporate and social markets, Etkin espouses separation of staff. "We have two totally separate sales teams that understand each of those separate products," he explains. "Talking to 'Mr. IBM' is a totally different conversation than talking to 'Mr. and Mrs. Wedding.' One is ego, one is efficiency and budget."

But, Etkin maintains, it's ME's one-stop-shop approach to event design and production that is a draw for both client groups. "Clients don't have to deal with three, four, five different vendors," he says. On the corporate side, he continues, "We can sit with clients in a room, bring together the department heads, go through the entire process, and make it happen in one shot."

Being able to provide everything from airport transportation to great guest giveaways has landed ME such high-profile events as a recent multi-day program the company produced for a major telecommunications company at the luxurious Manele Bay hotel in Lanai, Hawaii, Etkin says. For the event, ME built an entire stadium on the property's golf course, coordinated a general session and awards presentation, and booked rock superstar Sheryl Crow for a gala.

Etkin insists clients aren't the only ones who benefit from the company's all-under-one-roof model. "Every one of our departments operates independently, as well as in a team," he says, citing the 60 permanent staff members ME

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employs year-round. "The best part of my job is dealing with the team — making every program better than what the client ever expected."

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National Association of Catering Executives

ME Productions 2000 S.W. 30th Ave., Pembroke Park, FL 33009; 800/544-0033; www.meproductions.com

ON TRACK

"The most difficult part of the job is dealing with a client who has a dream, but the dream is this train coming at 100 miles an hour, and you need to explain what the result is going to be — if this train hits — for the passengers on board as well as for us. The client may be saying one thing, but they want something else. We have to twist it, change it, so they get the result they're looking for, and it can happen properly."

GOT NERVE?

"I don't think anyone can be in this industry who doesn't enjoy the stomach grind before the program, but also walks away with that rewarding feeling. Nobody has to tell you whether you did a good job — you know you did a good job."

MAKE A MOVE

"I think that the corporate event market is going to lean more and more toward consulting, and event companies will travel much more. If you're based in Florida and you really understand what the client in New York is trying to do for a meeting based in Chicago, they'll bring you to Chicago. It will be based on competencies from a standpoint of fulfillment — making the event happen — as well as the methodology and corporate culture of the client."

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