

By Hal Elkin

High fuel prices and other economic pressures are challenging corporate planners now more than ever to come up with ways to ease the squeeze on their meetings and events budgets.

Meeting planners, who are already burdened with doing more with less, are aggressively looking for short- and long-term answers. One solution is to plan meetings closer to your home base. Look in your own backyard for venues. In Detroit, MI, the Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau recently announced "Let's Meet in 'The D,'" a two-year promotional effort to encourage local associations and businesses to hold their meetings in the region.

Whether you are an in-house corporate meet-

also have a preferred vendor list, which saves money and effort.

- **Go green when it makes sense.**

Using local products, especially when meeting in exotic or offsite destinations, cuts shipping costs and reduces the event's carbon footprint. Centerpieces can be made from local vegetation utilizing area artists.

- **Use local talent.**

Name acts are wonderful, but local talent can be more affordable and, if produced correctly, can have as much or more impact. For example, a client celebrating their 40th anniversary gala opted for a local band that played hit songs covering four decades. For years, the organization featured name talent for its shows, so this was a definite change in direction. Great costuming, lighting and sound systems backed up the performers, and the audience became very involved in the show.

- **Use off-the-shelf props.**

For commonly used props or those hard-to-find items, maintaining an in-house stock of quality props avoids

expensive rental fees. And, it helps to bolster that ability to deliver last-minute needs for client events. The savings will offset the minimal storage costs.

- **Shop your venue.**

Attendees enjoy and appreciate a fresh, new setting, which can help enliven a group. Examples of unusual venues to consider include airplane hangars, private museums, national parks and beaches. These choices can often be far more cost-effective and closer to home.

A recent study conducted by the Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, found that planners for only three of the 10 conferences they documented made cost comparisons for both alternate cities and venues. Therefore, what seems like common sense (shopping for affordable venues) appears not to be the stan-

Meetings Out Of Gas? Look In Your Own Backyard



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ing planner, an independent planner or stage meetings for a DMC, here are a number of diverse ideas to help you in these trying times:

- **Focus on regional meetings.**

It might be more cost-effective to use second- and third-tier destinations and boutique locations for events. Then divide the 500-attendee meeting into regional events of 100 or 250 each. Use local vendors. Preferably find a DMC company that offers more "under one roof" instead of shopping around for independent vendors. A company that offers more services can be more cost-effective because clients don't spend time and energy shopping for vendors in florals, entertainment, sound, lighting, etc. In addition, vendors are prescreened so quality is maintained. While this is more often available through larger DMCs, smaller companies may

dard for many government meetings. Thus, one could assume that this lack of venue-shopping can be the case in other sectors as well.

The study also found that site comparisons for different cities may be conducted, but not for venues within the city selected for their respective events.

In two notable instances, the report found that the event planning contractor for the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) National Symposium compared per diem rates and airfare costs for Atlanta, Dallas, Houston and Memphis, but made no mention of second- or third-tier destinations. Furthermore, the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) officials reported they chose Atlanta based on its convenience and lower travel cost as a major airline hub. However, OJP only contacted large hotel chains to negotiate favorable rates, and then these discussions were not documented in the conference file.

Certainly, venue costs, if favorable enough, can more than offset the expenditures that may be incurred from travel costs. That might even affect costs associated with providing food and beverage, speakers, print media, subcontractors, labor and overhead, audio-visual equipment and other related services. Rental fees for some of these items can be considerable when provided by the venue. A full-service event DMC or area-based planner could considerably lower many of these associated costs simply by eliminating a need to shop around and by providing a price-value package.

• **Plan events as far in advance as possible.**

Nowadays the trend is to wait, wait, wait. But, giving the event planner time to make sure all things are in order can save costs on all aspects of the event, including entertainment, venue-booking, travel and even lighting rentals. You may ask the planner for a clause that allows for cancellation or delay due to unexpected circumstances. For clients who plan six months or more in advance, there is often a considerable discount on bookings of rooms, entertainment and event as-

pects, such as décor and signage. Advance buyers get to pick and choose locations, not select what might be left over.

And non-peak seasons offer great cost-saving opportunities as well. For example, many locations in Florida offer reduced rates from May to August when there is less traffic at the resort so groups can enjoy the resort's amenities. Compared to the average temperatures in a destination such as Las Vegas during summer months, temperatures in Florida are surprisingly lower. By staying indoors during the day you'll avoid the humidity, and evenings are often balmy and enjoyable in this southern summer destination.

• **Don't rent, buy.**

If you have meetings and events regularly enough, consider that each event often requires microphones, projectors, screens, computers, lights, stages and sound systems. Audio-visual equipment and services comprise the third largest category of conference expenditures. If you own them, you can then consider renting them out so that the items will pay for themselves over the long haul.

At the Projects Safe Neighborhood (PSN) National Conference, which included a total of 46 breakout sessions during the four-day conference, each of the breakout session rooms used a projector, stand, screen, laptop, four microphones, sound mixer, a laser-pointer and a remote control. The daily rate for the audio-visual equipment in each breakout session room was \$605, for a total cost of \$27,910 for the conference. The purchase of the mics and laptop alone would have resulted in extensive cost savings.

Besides doing your best to shop around for deals, values and packages, planners are cautioned never to skimp on quality. That is one area where being cost-effective could backfire. Planners still need to deliver all the content in a meaningful and entertaining way, or risk losing the organization's message entirely. **C&IT**

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