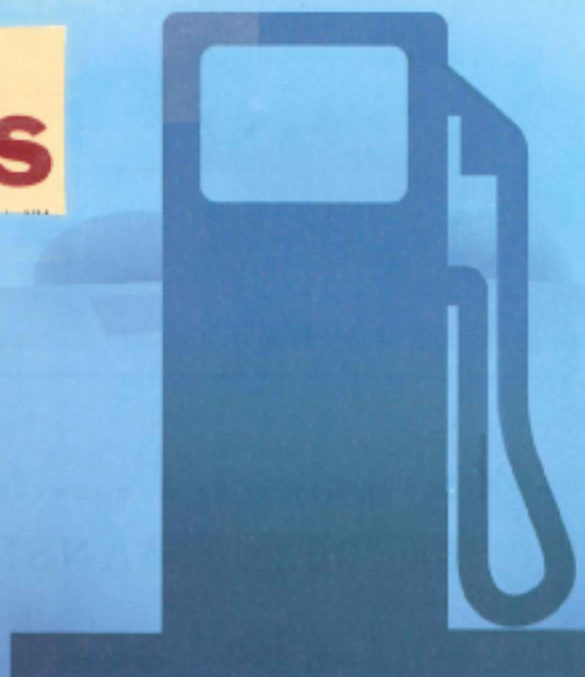


successful meetings



> Pre-Event

Is Your Meeting Running Out of Gas?

By Linda Hamburger

Growth in the meetings industry could be headed for a severe slowdown as record-high fuel prices and other factors curb demand, some insiders warn. "That slowdown just might affect your next meeting or corporate function," adds Jim Etkin, president of South Florida's largest event company, ME Productions.

"Take into account the added pressure of airline passenger security-screening delays and capacity constraints at airports, and meeting planners might soon be feeling a greater pinch, too," says Etkin. As airlines look to pass on increased fuel costs and companies cut back on business travel due to weaker economic conditions, passenger demand is expected to suffer.

The solution, says Etkin, is to start aggressively looking in one's own backyard for both clients and venues of choice. "We're fortunate in that Miami is an international destination. As the American dollar is affected by recession, conversely, the buying power is up for international travelers. In my book, the expectations are that Miami will remain an active destination and become even more attractive to Latin American businesses."

However, for markets that rely more on the U.S. traveler, Etkin offers some advice:

FOCUS ON REGIONAL MEETINGS. It might be more cost-effective to use third-tier destinations and boutique locations for events, and break that national meeting for 500 people into regional events of 100 each. And use local vendors. Preferably find a destination management company that offers more "under one roof," as opposed to shopping around for independent vendors. A company like ME Productions is actually more cost-effective in that clients don't spend time and energy shopping for vendors of flowers, entertainment, sound, lighting, et cetera. In addition, vendors are pre-screened so quality is maintained. This is more often available through larger DMCs, but smaller companies might also have a preferred vendor list, saving clients costs, energy, and effort.

DON'T SKIMP ON QUALITY. This is one area where being overly cost-conscious could backfire. "You still need to deliver all the content in a meaningful and entertaining way, or risk losing your message entirely."

PROMOTE USING EVENTS. Etkin suggests that the ad budget, while necessary, could be replaced by other media approaches that include direct messaging and public relations.

"Go green" when it make sense. "Going green can be affordable when done right," says Etkin. "For example, when our team went to Jamaica for one client, they made certain to ship less material and use local products. Even the centerpieces were made from local vegetation and by island artists. This saved having to ship enormous amounts of material and ornaments, and resulted in a considerable cost savings."

PROVIDE A "GAS ALLOWANCE" FOR POTENTIAL CLIENTS. Why not consider an incentive of a tank of gas to clients who come on site for a visit? Auto dealerships have been doing this for years, along with other promotions. Those ad dollars might be better used as an incentive for face-to-face client meetings than for blind pitches to a mass audience.

Linda Hamburger manages public relations for ME Productions (www.meproductions.com), an award-winning meetings, event production, and destination management company based in Pembroke Park, FL. She is also the founder and moderator of the South Florida Public Relations Network (SFPRN) and the PR Daily Digest. She can be reached at enallpr@aol.com.

SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS ■ JULY 2008 ■ mimegasite.com