

BACK TO BASICS



HIRING THIRD-PARTY HELP

Shorthanded and harried?
When and how to turn to
outside assistance

By Louise M. Felsher, CMP, CMM

We all need help sometimes — and it's out there, in the form of third-party planners offering expertise in every area of the business.

Yet, many of us are reluctant to take that step, perhaps out of concern that hiring an independent might threaten our job or blow our budget.

Following are some simple ways to answer these concerns and benefit from third-party expertise.

FULL-SERVICE HELP

Independent planning companies ready to handle every aspect of the meeting, from concept to post-con, can vary in size and services and often specialize in a specific industry. The size of the firm does not matter — but credentials and references are essential.

One advantage to hiring an independent is the volume discounts they offer, as many have favorable contracts with national chains.

When to use them. Independent planners are very flexible and suitable for one-off programs that are too large to handle in-house. Try to ensure their style and culture is comparable or complementary to your own.

How they are paid. Independents are paid a fee based on the service level — either a percentage of the program

budget or an hourly rate. Fee plus commission is considered “double dipping” and is unethical. While some might argue otherwise, any sleeping-room commissions from the hotel should go back to the event's bottom line.

INTERNATIONAL HELP

For overseas events, call a professional congress organizer, or PCO, for help with cultural distinctions, customs questions, site selection and A/V requirements.

When to use them. Use PCOs for all your international programs. Many PCOs are bilingual (often multilingual) and have encyclopedic knowledge of their destinations and local regulations. PCOs are unique entities — nothing similar exists in the United States. The closest would be a combined international dip-

lomat/independent meeting planner/destination management company.

How they are paid. PCOs can be paid on commission, but usually they negotiate a flat fee — never both.

FINDING THE VENUE

Site-selection companies track down venues, offer destination comparisons and negotiate contracts and room rates.

When to use them. These firms are ideal when a planner does not have the time or resources to compare or select venues. Your group should need a large room block, otherwise site selectors won't work with you.

Site-selection firms also are perfect for multiple-venue

events, such as road shows. “Clients who run their own programs but are constrained by time or staffing are ideal candidates for our services,” says Brian DiMartino, president of 21st Century Group in Maui, Hawaii.

How they are paid. These firms are paid a commission — generally 10 percent of the hotel sleeping rooms.

LOCATION EXPERTISE

Destination management companies are the pros to call for local help, planning pre- and post-event tours, providing cultural knowledge, as well as logistics and suggestions for off-site locations. They have Rolodexes full of entertainers, transportation providers and more.

When to use them. Always use a DMC when you are unfamiliar with your destination. DMCs often offer meeting planning services as well, just as some independent planners offer destination services. Unsure which to use? Rely on references to help make your choice.

How they are paid. DMCs receive commissions from vendors or a straight fee from the event organization, but never both. ■

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