

[The Art of Developing Client Relationships](#)



By [Eric Blanc](#), President, ACOM

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Whether personal or professional, the meetings industry is primarily based on relationships. Meeting planners are often influenced by their colleagues and the relationships built with the service personnel they work with to help produce successful meetings. Often times, the decision for a meeting planner to return to a venue or destination (or not) rests solely on the ability of convention services managers (CSMs) to develop thriving client relationships.

To do this successfully, CSMs at hotels, convention centers and convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) need to take personal ownership of their client's events and work diligently to fulfill their needs, all while making suggestions to them for improvement and efficiency. Building solid client relationships will ultimately help CSMs achieve customer satisfaction and customer loyalty to their venue or destination.

Why Develop Client Relationships?

"I believe developing and maintaining client relationships are the keys to successful business," said Felicia Davis, Convention Services Manager at the Atlantic City CVA. "It is our responsibility as service providers to build productive partnerships based on respect, knowledge and shared experiences."

Devon Sloan, CMP, Director of Events at the Hilton Tucson El Conquistador agreed and added, "Developing client relationships is very important, critical even," she said. "We need to become a member of the client's team so we can better help each other, trust each other, support each other and brainstorm with each other. If we can develop that kind of relationship with clients, the event logistics and planning will go so much easier for both parties."

According to David Raymond, CMP, Senior Convention Services Manager at The Westin Charlotte, the success of a program could come down to the relationship CSMs have with their clients. "It does not always need to be 'buddy/buddy,' but a true understanding of your client's moods and 'hot buttons' is important," he said. "You will also know the best way to approach your client (i.e. head on or casually)."

In addition to client relationships helping with the overall success of an event, these partnerships also play a crucial role when either party is faced with a challenge or difficult situation. "By developing these types of relationships, we know we can be honest with each

other and even if the news isn't good, we know we can work together to come to a solution. We also know we can count on each other to resolve a reservation mishap, or if a high maintenance Board member has a special request. Sometimes we can even laugh at these situations together," said Sloan. "We ultimately know we can depend on each other to be proactive, honest and have each other's back."

Getting to Know Clients Personally and Professionally

After the initial take-over process, many CSMs immediately begin the process of getting to know their clients, both personally and professionally. "An introduction phone call is a great way to begin with any new client and then as you begin the planning process, continue on that fact-finding-mission to learn what the client likes, dislikes or is passionate about," said Raymond.

According to Sloan, after the initial call, sending clients a confirmation letter and a "client profile" and asking them to complete it and send it back, is a great way to learn more about them. "The client profile asks them to share personal items—birthday, anniversary, significant other's name, kids, pets, hobbies, likes and dislikes, allergies, etc.," she said. "It also asks them to share their likes and dislikes about meetings—what was good, what was bad, etc. This can be very helpful with establishing commonalities, providing information about significant dates and providing a "heads up" in the likes and dislikes department."

Davis indicated she communicates with her clients regularly starting with an in-person meeting at the beginning of the sales process. "I also make myself easily accessible and follow up periodically with phone calls and emails to check on their progress and well-being," she said.

It also doesn't hurt for CSMs to go that extra mile to get to know their clients, as it will ultimately help strengthen the relationship between both parties for the long term. "I have called the CSM at a prior property to find out what the client is like and how they appreciate their communication," said Raymond.

Davis added, "I invest my time in getting to know my clients individually so I am able to communicate and assist them accordingly," she said. "I consider all of my clients new friends—we must remember that our clients are people with personal lives too. With social media, we now have the perfect tool for our society and industry to connect even more authentically."

Venue or Destination Involvement

In addition to having their own methods for developing client relationships, it also aids CSMs to work for venues and destinations that have their own specialized processes in place to help cultivate these relationships.

According to Davis, the Atlantic City CVA hosts and participates in various networking opportunities. "We hold client forums, site visits and meet and greet events," she said.

Sloan added, "The Hilton has a program called HOST which invites clients to the hotel for a day or an overnight stay and educates them on how to plan meetings. Attendees meet with various department heads and learn how their meetings affect that department and vice versa," she

said. “They are able to experience the facility, meet with appropriate people and they even get to prepare a meal (or part of it) and participate in team building exercises. Overall, it is a great way to get to know everyone in a different situation rather than just over a desk, while planning their particular meeting.” Sloan revealed that this experience is often an eye opener for meeting planners as well.

“The hotel allows us to make a difference in any way we can (within reason), but on occasion, we have been known to step outside the box with that surprise and delight,” said Raymond.

“Ultimately, client relationships are like any other relationship,” said Davis. “Your individual investment is essential in creating beneficial partnerships.”

Developing client relationships is truly an art and requires CSMs that are dedicated and skilled to master. Despite the challenges faced when building these partnerships, the end result of securing customer loyalty to their venue or destination is worth it.

Eric Blanc, CMP

Eric Blanc, CMP, is the President of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM) and is a tenured professional with over 18 years of experience in the hospitality industry. He is the Director of Sales and Marketing for the Tampa Convention Center in Tampa, Florida after serving as a National Sales Manager with the Freeman Companies, based in Orlando, Florida. Prior to his time at the Freeman Companies, Eric served as Senior Convention Services Manager at the Tampa Convention Center and Tropicana Field (formerly known as the Florida Suncoast Dome) in St. Petersburg, Florida. Eric is actively involved in the hospitality industry and is a member of NCBMP (National Coalition of Black Meeting Planners) and PCMA (Professional Convention Management Association). For more information on ACOM, call (609) 799-3712, email info@acomonline.org, or visit the ACOM website at www.acomonline.org.

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