

## **A Synergy for Successful Meetings: Meeting Planners and Convention Services Managers**

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By Lyan Tassler

Changing trends in meeting technology, client meeting objectives, and the increasing emphasis on return on investment and measurable meeting results demand that meetings and conventions be planned and managed smarter, faster and more efficiently than ever before. Meeting planning professionals and convention services managers (CSMs), the meeting planners' counterparts at hotels, convention centers and convention and visitors bureaus, place a high priority on working synergistically so the planner's corporate or association client meets with success.

A generation ago, CSMs filled an on-site logistical function to the more pervasive role of the venue sales manager who worked with the meeting planner to secure the booking for a meeting. However, today's CSM has evolved into a far more proactive and key player, working exclusively with the meeting planner once the booking is signed to optimize every aspect of the meeting experience and enhance the opportunity for repeat business.

"Upper management in hospitality and tourism need to comprehend the important role that CSMs have in new business development but, more importantly, in creating happy meeting planners which translates into repeat bookings," says Larry Wilson, General Manager, SMG/John Paul Jones Arena in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Typically it is the hotel or convention venue sales manager who is granted the budget to attend events where meeting planners and sales opportunities may be present, according to Wilson. But polls of meeting planners have shown that, once the sale is complete, it is the CSM that is the planner's primary venue contact to whom they most closely tie their meeting experience.

"If a capable and professional CSM effectively partners with a planner resulting in a successful event, the chance of rebooking business through that planner go up tremendously," Wilson says.

### Timely and Consistent Communications

"CSMs act as meeting and convention services liaisons with meeting planners." says Lynn McCullough, a certified meeting planner (CMP) and Executive Director of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM), the professional association for CSMs. "They orchestrate meetings from the supply side, presenting

facility options, suggesting and coordinating meeting services based on the planner's budget, and otherwise helping planners create and implement effective meetings and conventions in their facilities,"

Planners need, and good CSMs provide, proactive involvement to help the meeting planner be more efficient, save time and energy as well as create opportunities to reduce the cost of conducting an event or meeting. CSMs have special insight and knowledge of their property or city that the meeting planner may not be aware of during the initial planning cycle. The CSM becomes a valuable resource and asset to for ideas and guidance on attaining meeting objectives and getting things done.

"One of the first conversations I have with a new meeting planner client is to try to find out his preferences for phone, e-mail or fax as the best method to communicate with him," says Denise Suttle, CMP and Assistant Director of Convention Services, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Convention & Visitors Bureau.

McCullough agrees. "Learn up front how and when your planner likes to communicate," she says. "It's the CSM's role to take the lead in establishing ongoing communications through regularly scheduled calls and emails."

Suttle also tries to establish the best timeline for regular contact. "Based on experience, I'll suggest contact at times that will keep the process on schedule," she says, "and if the planner agrees, then it's up to me to stay on top of getting all the tasks done on time."

Responsiveness is Key

"Flexibility is crucial to getting everything accomplished, especially when circumstances keep the planner from meeting some deadlines on choices of vendors, menus, tours and other items." Suttle observes. "As a partner with the meeting planner, we have to understand that it's often out of the planner's hands. He may be waiting on final decisions by a board committee or an executive director."

"Planners travel a lot," says McCullough. "By staying current with their schedule and when they'll be out of the office, you'll know when it's reasonable to reach out to them on details and decisions. By the same token, let them know in advance when you will be unavailable."

"Quick turnaround is also essential," McCullough continues. "Nothing drives a planner crazy faster than when they need an answer and don't get it for three days. A CSM's time management is important. Even groups that may not be coming to a property for a year or more can still have immediate needs in the planning process."

"One of the best tools is the ability to travel to a client's convention a year or two out and see it like an attendee would experience it," notes Lyan Tassler, Associate Vice President, Convention Services, Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau. "Later, when that same customer comes to your city, and is asking for venues for this event or a lunch for that event, you have an idea about the flow of their program and can anticipate what might work for them in your city. Also, getting a chance to see how and where events are done in other destinations can help you make creative suggestions when it's your turn to host the meeting and help select venues."

## Creative and Proactive Solutions

“In the not too distant past, the CSM’s role was relegated to a behind-the-scenes function, more often acting in a reactive than a proactive fashion,” notes Bob Desautels of the Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Association. “The CSM was seen as being responsive to the needs of a planner and her client more so than functioning as a creative agent.”

“Today, however, the CSM is both responsive and creative, serving as a resource for ideas and suggestions, event themes, entertainment options and an impresario of specialty venues and vendors. In short, the CSM has become the meeting planner’s in-house event planner.” Desautels says.

Given the changing needs of meeting planners and their corporate or association clients in today’s market, a CSM’s creative solutions may take the form of customized events or tours that encourage participation and enhance the attendees’ experience. It may be helping the planner develop “green meetings” or incorporate opportunities for voluntourism by providing both information and resources that will help him achieve success with these burgeoning trends in meeting planning. Or it may involve developing online search tools to assist the planner with information about available off-site venues and local city resources.

“Every meeting typically has some unique challenge that needs to be resolved and CSMs can be a great asset to a meeting planner for coming up with creative solutions,” says McCullough. “Find out what the client is seeking and then, within the limits of the budget, be creative. Don’t be afraid to go ‘out there.’ Keep ahead of your planner, anticipating needs and giving her time to react.”

In the end, an efficient, consistent and thorough CSM becomes the best source for a meeting planner to consider when rebooking in the future. The planning process, which in some cases lasts two years or more, allows the conscientious CSM to establish a solid relationship with the planner. Done successfully, friendships arise, objectives are understood and achieved, the desired results are attained and the satisfied meeting planner returns for another meeting.

### *About Lyan Tassler*

*Lyan Tassler is the President of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM) and the Associate Vice President of Convention Services at the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau. She has played an integral role in many successful local events, including the 1999 & 2007 Super Bowls, TIA’s International POW WOW in 1994 & 1999, and several meetings industry events, including PCMA in 2001, MPI’s World Education Congress in 2005, and IAEE in December 2008. She previously served on ACOM’s Board of Directors and as the ACOM liaison to the PCMA Annual Meeting Program Committee (AMPC). Lyan has been in the industry over 25 years including stints at Norwegian Cruise Lines and Eastern Air Lines. For more information on ACOM, call (609) 799-3712, email [info@acomonline.org](mailto:info@acomonline.org), or visit the ACOM website at [www.acomonline.org](http://www.acomonline.org).*