

## Today's Meeting Planner: New Generation of Hospitality Sales Professionals Lesson #8

*(eighth in a series)*

*By David M. Brudney, ISHC, October 2007*

This new generation of hospitality Sales professionals must deal with a much more sophisticated, knowledgeable and demanding meeting planner. Never has it been more critical for Sales directors and managers to know their "stuff" and share their knowledge; to master the art of people connecting and to respond quickly and accurately at all times.

Today's planners represent a \$120-plus billion meeting planning industry - - that's larger than the medical manufacturing and pharmaceutical industry. There are now more than a million off-site meetings a year in the U.S.; less than 10 percent are for groups using 500 rooms or more; 70 percent of those meetings are for groups of 30-35 people or less.

These new planners are multi-taskers, many of whom have been forced into the meeting planning business due to corporate mergers, acquisitions, downsizing and outsourcing. Some former procurement managers now find themselves booking meetings.

Hospitality Sales pros should keep in mind that procurement specialists are schooled in booking volume business travel contract rooms, where price is always king. These procurement specialists are making decisions now in a new - - for them - - paradigm: booking meetings based on value and not necessarily by price.

### ***Time: the planners new currency***

Time is now the meeting planners most critical and most protected possession. Their new currency is no longer dollars and cents, it's now hours and minutes.

Hence, there is no longer time in the interaction between meeting planner and hospitality Sales pros. No "forgiving" of phones not answered or calls not returned. No patience with rookies that have not done their homework; that have no knowledge to share and do not listen. Meeting planners need to be shown that they are valued - - who they are and what they do - - by Sales directors and managers. And that needs to be done right away.

A Meeting News survey indicates that 6-out-of-10 meeting planners' venue decisions are based solely on information, photos and specs found on the Internet.

### *Meeting planners new resource: a social media network*

These planners have some exciting new resources. Web 2.0 - - and what Cindy Estes Green calls the “social media Tsunami” - - enables planners to find valuable information, trusted testimonials and recommendations. Blogs, Wikis and Folksonomies have created new “knowledge sharing” opportunities for meeting planners never available before on such a wide, global scale.

One such social media is meeting planner guru Joan Eisenstodt’s MiForum with more than 8,000 participants. I was invited to participate on MiForum earlier this year and was blown away by the content, the knowledge sharing, the level of dialogue between participating planners, hospitality Sales pros and convention/conference service managers. Discussions ranged from tips for negotiating total meeting costs to which venue would work best, to finding the right speaker.

Blogs such as Eisenstodt’s help demonstrate that planners rely much more today on social media knowledge sharing amongst peers before making decisions and less and less on hospitality industry websites, PDF files and advertising/P.R. - - much the same as today’s consumers rely on new user generated content sites such as Trip Advisor (24 million travelers access; 10 million consumer generated reviews monthly) and Facebook (37 million users most popular for its “Where I’ve Been” feature).

### *Meeting planners using new “meeting success” measurement sticks*

Sophisticated planners are using new measurement sticks today. No longer are successful meetings measured merely by attendance, evaluation surveys and general feedback. Today there’s a whole new performance metric of “R’s”: R.O.O.: return on objective, R.O.C.: return on content, R.O.E.: return on experience, according to exhibit and event management services consultant Candy Adams, the “Booth Mom”.

It would behoove all Sales directors and managers today to think in terms of how their respective hotel, resort or conference center might enhance a prospective meeting’s objective, content and experience.

### *Tips for interacting with Planners*

Referencing meeting planner interviews I have conducted along with recent surveys produced by Meeting News and PKF/Convention South, here are a few tips for when Sales directors and managers interact with meeting planners:

**Planners will continue to work exclusively with third parties**, e.g., HelmsBriscoe and Conference Direct, rather than deal with inexperienced, slow to respond hospitality Sales directors and managers - - all the more reason to establish your credibility quickly.

**Answer your own phone** (quickly).

**Return phone calls & e-mails** (quickly) - - if not within the hour, forget it. You've probably lost the business already!

**Demonstrate a sincere appreciation** of planners' value and time restraints.

**Listen carefully** - - avoid planner having to repeat information.

**Focus on planners' needs** along with planners' wants.

**Remember, planners seek out decision makers** - - if you aren't one or if you can't be, assure the planner that you have access to one and can get back to them quickly.

Sure, there will be "amateurs" and "first time" meeting planners with whom to interact. They will need more patience, guidance and good bedside manners. Knowledge sharing will be even more valued by these inexperienced planners.

But the meetings most likely *not* to cancel, most likely *not* to be underfunded - - most likely to book the most room nights at the highest possible rates - - are now being done by this new breed of sophisticated, knowledgeable and demanding meeting planners.

Those hospitality Sales pros that recognize and accept this fact - - and gear up for it - - will be the ones that come away with the most quality business booked. If done correctly, these planners should become loyal and book time and time again. And they will tell other meeting planners about you and your property, and they will do that through Blogs, on the phone and in person.

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