



Four
Ways
to Add
Panache
to Your
Corporate
Confab

It's a busy life these days for the typical corporate meeting planner.

As the number of off-site gatherings—and the budgets to pay for them—grow, the task of organizing and running these get-togethers has become more complex than ever.

Luckily, industry experts have succeeded in creating systematic methods for staging everything from executive retreats to sales planning events. Recently, in fact, the Convention Industry Council's Accepted Practices Exchange (APEX) put the final touches on a ten-year initiative to create best-practice standards for such areas as registration, amount of money spent on hotel rooms, and requests for proposals. (One last section, on selecting meeting sites, is expected to be approved this fall.)

How else can you ensure that your meeting will be a success? Here are four tips to follow:



1 Pinpoint your objective.

While it may sound like a no-brainer, the first and most important step is figuring out what you're trying to accomplish. "Be sure to dig down deeper," says Terri Brein-

ing, president of Concepts Worldwide, a Carlsbad, Calif. meeting management firm. It's not enough to know you're planning an executive retreat. You also have to understand the purpose. Is it to create a team spirit? Or to do strategic planning? Depending on the answer, you'll create a specialized event. A gathering to help people get to know each other better might call for bucolic accommodations

with lots of recreational activities. On the other hand, says Breining, "If you're focusing on strategy, a nice resort might be a waste if they're going to be locked in a room for three days."



2 Learn to go global.

Business has become increasingly international. As a result, "Whether

you're planning a meeting overseas or you're hosting attendees from other countries, you have to be aware of global planning issues," says Vicki Hawarden, vice president of knowledge and events at Meeting Professionals International (MPI), a Dallas trade association. That means paying attention to such diverse issues as taxes and cultural differences—such as acceptable garb for women—and making sure that attendees get all the important information they need for a pleasant stay.

When orchestrating the event, consider whether it's best to include everyone from all parts of the world in one get-together, or to have smaller confabs, says Bill Silvermintz, regional director of the Americas for the Hong Kong Tourism Board. "A big meeting can get unwieldy." In addition, because the issues people face in each market might differ dramatically from one area to the next, "a better idea may be to plan regional gatherings where sales or operational staff can get more specific."



3 Use smart technology.

New high-tech tools can help you, as well as attendees, both before and during a meeting. For example, you can post an itinerary planner on a



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website, enabling attendees to schedule appointments ahead of time. You can also encourage participants to communicate with each other through blogs or videoconferences. One particularly handy device, according to Hawarden: a Palm Pilot-style handset, which you can use to instantly e-mail attendees or your staff during the meeting. It can also be used to store the conference schedule, or to take notes.

Another smart strategy is to select a location that has Wi-Fi—wireless high-speed Internet access. This gives attendees another way to stay in touch with each other during the meeting, as well as with clients or other impor-

tant contacts who aren't there. Wi-Fi is offered by an increasing number of destinations. The Greenbrier, for one, a 6,500-acre resort in White Sulphur Springs, W. Va., started providing wireless capability in 2000.

4 
Make the meeting noticeably stand out from the crowd.

Most attendees are likely to be both short on time and suffering from information overload. As a result, planning a meeting can't be business as usual. "You need to have a wow factor," says

Hawarden. That means hosting an event that goes beyond whatever people have ever experienced before.

The Greenbrier is one place that can make it happen. Established in 1778, the resort provides a unique mix of state-of-the-art accommodations and recreational facilities with a storied past. Case in point: the bunker. Built during the Cold War and kept top secret for 30 years, it was meant to house members of Congress and support staff in case of a nuclear attack. Now Greenbrier guests can tour the facility or use it for special events, from breakfasts to gala dinners.

The resort offers more

than 50 activities, from golf, tennis, and white-water rafting to culinary demonstrations, plus the opportunity to arrange those pursuits in unique combinations. For example, a group of corporate executives recently played a round of golf, ate a family-style dinner at a rustic lodge, and watched a falconry demonstration, ending the day with s'mores and port. The bottom line: While planning a meeting requires a systematic approach, a touch of inspiration helps. ■

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