

## Creating An Extension of Yourself: WORKING WITH DMCs

PCMA Convene by Ginny Phillips – March 2005

# WORKING WITH DMCs

**It's just another day in the Land of Perpetual Planning.** You could still really use another person in the department, but there's no sign of that happening anytime soon. And the meetings keep coming — board meetings, chapter retreats, the looming annual conference. There aren't enough hours in the day. Without the sudden appearance of a few helpful elves, you won't be able to get to all of the must-do research ... and phone calls and e-mails and follow-ups.

A magic wand doesn't come for free, but a destination management company could be your meeting's fairy godmother.

For planners short on resources or time (and not short on a budget), a destination management company (DMC) can bring a broad, up-to-the-minute understanding of a destination, and the partnership will give your own staff exponentially more hands ... and heads.

"DMCs save clients an awful lot of time," said Linda Simon, DMCP, executive vice president of The Best of Boston Ltd. "Planners don't have to research vendors as they should if they were determining the appropriate choice in a city they're not familiar with. The only research they need is what the DMC uses."

Janine Pesci, managing director of programs for the Urban Land Institute, has used DMCs in the past to handle elements of annual meetings of 3,000 and up.

"It makes it a lot easier to go with an entity that's very familiar with the location and who has relationships with all those venues," Pesci said. "If you were coming in on your own, you'd have to do all that research yourself."

## DMC Best Practices

**All DMCs are not created equal: If you're considering partnering with a DMC for parts or all of your next meeting, be sure to follow a few tips from the experts.**

**Ask around.** Ask for referrals and recommendations. Check with hotels, the local convention bureau, other meeting planners, and DMCs you've worked with in other cities. "Two or three companies should keep popping up," said Susan Henderson, president of Atlanta Arrangements and president of DMC Network.

As you narrow down your list, ask the DMC candidates for a list of clients similar to your group in size. "Don't only ask for references — be sure you actually check them," Henderson said. "And ask for supplier references to see if they're good to work with, well-organized, and professional."

**Check on industry involvement.** "Make sure you're finding a DMC that's actively involved in an association marketplace like PCMA, so that they understand what the current issues are," said Laura Rednour, president of PRA Destination Management Inc. "The association market is very different than the corporate or incentive market, and they need to understand that."

Also check for membership in a DMC Consortium, such as the DMC Network or Global Events Partners. A founding member of the Association of Destination Marketing Executives (ADME), Linda Simon, DMCP, executive vice president of The Best of Boston Ltd, suggests at the very least a DMC should be an ADME member. You also might check if one of the leaders of the DMC has a DMCP designation, a relatively new designation with an exam requirement.

**Request insurance.** It's a good idea to get a certificate of insurance. Adequate insurance coverage is increasingly important.

**Do your homework.** Check how long the company has been in business, the size of its staff, and its cancellation policy. Are you able to supplement its staff with your own? Depending on your meeting, you might want to check on whether the company does background checks on their employees in case they're working around children.

**Do a test drive.** "If I'm going to a city with a convention committee or other type of group who'll decide on the destination, I'll use different DMCs for different elements of the stay," said Janine Pesci, managing director of programs for the Urban Land Institute. "That lets me see their creativity ... and how creative they are for billing."

**Do the paperwork.** "You should conduct the same practice as you do with all of your vendors," said Johnnie White, CMP, director of meetings and CME Services for the Endocrine Society. "Develop an RFP that gives all the detail information about the services you are seeking, check the company's references and conduct an interview. We send the RFP to about five companies, and from their responses we usually narrow the list down to three. We request the DMC to take us to some of the venues they suggested."

When all is said and done, don't ignore your gut reaction. "There's a lot to be said for finding the right fit," Henderson said. "Sometimes it comes down to rapport. Look for responsiveness in getting back to you. They should be asking the right questions and helping you express your needs and preferences." — G.P.

### **Doing More with Less**

today time is often at a premium as meetings departments — that may have been downsized — are asked to manage increasing numbers of events.

"We're all limited in our resources, and today generally you have fewer planners and more programs," said Laura Rednour, president of PRA Destination Management Inc., a company operating in 16 cities across the country. "With a DMC, you're extending your team and resources."

PRA's own research showed that a small, three-day program with basic elements of airport transportation and a social function involved a minimum of 1,400 separate communications by phone or e-mail to research options, plan the details, and follow up with vendors.

"Do you want to focus on those details or do you want to focus on the core elements of your convention, which may be the content of the meeting itself or the trade show?" Rednour asked.

"Almost all meeting planners have more meetings than they've ever had before, often with shorter lead times and less staff," said Susan Henderson, president of Atlanta Arrangements and president of DMC Network. "The devil is in the details. Working with a DMC will ensure that the vehicle is being loaded, while the restaurant is being advanced — simultaneously. This frees the planner up to deal with the last-minute crises that are always popping up."

## **Growing in Stature**

the last decade has seen DMCs become not only more visible, but gain wider acceptance. With two major competency-based associations, DMC Network and Global Events Partners, known throughout the industry, planners have easy access to proven companies. Created in 1995, the Association of Destination Management Executives (ADME) has drawn together experienced leaders of DMCs to set standards and increase education.

DMCs have become more visible players in the industry just as many cities began placing a new level of importance on drawing convention business.

As the lines between first- and second-tier cities blur and the array of site options grows, there's the question of just how well you know a destination. Chances are a DMC's local knowledge far exceeds that of a planner who may live hundreds of miles away.

"It's tough to keep up with changes in a destination now and more critical to have local resources than it was in the '70s or '80s. At the time you're making a choice," Rednour said, "you may be working on information that's already outdated."

For example, you need to ask yourself whether the venue or transportation you're looking at is still the same operation it once was. "A restaurant might open up and everything's great ... then six months later it's like a completely different place," Rednour pointed out. "For transportation, are the coaches still being maintained like they were last year; are the drivers still being trained the same?"

"As experts in our destination," Simon said, "over time we're able to identify the best vendors within the city — the best service, the best process, the best consistency of product."

"These days people think you can get anything you need off the Internet," Henderson pointed out, "but the question is, can you trust everything on the Internet?"

## **It's all About Relationships**

relationships distinguish DMCs as much as knowledge base. "There's no comparison when it comes to a meeting planner making a one-time deal with caterers or suppliers versus us working with suppliers week in and week out," Henderson said.

The Endocrine Society has used a DMC for its last 10 citywide annual meetings, according to Johnnie White, CMP, director of meetings and CME Services. White has had DMCs coordinate special events from 100 to 2,000 people.

"I probably could not find or have access to a number of venues we have used over the years without the DMC," White said.

"DMCs can open doors, where a planner can't ... private homes and mansions, private clubs, private golf resorts," said Karen Gordon, DMCP, president of Activity Planners Inc. in Las Vegas.

"If there are certain things that need to be negotiated, venues or vendors would more likely negotiate with the DMC which is a known entity than a one-shot contact they'll never see again," Simon said. "You're more likely to have a negotiating relationship with a customer who's back regularly."

The combination of knowledge and relationships can create an enviably smooth meeting experience. Transportation, for instance, can be a major factor in any large city.

“Being a resident of the city we’re very aware of what kind of construction projects are going on because of our connections with the traffic department and police department,” Simon said. “We’ve established relationships within the city police department so if we run into a problem, we know who to call. If you come into a city and have a problem, there’s no way you can call someone and expect an immediate response.”

### **Making the Decision**

for all they offer, obviously you won’t call in a DMC for every meeting. Deciding when one is most appropriate largely comes down to your own knowledge base and time constraints. If it’s a destination you visit frequently or a fairly no-frills event, you might not need any local expertise.

“If it’s something simple and you know the destination, have relationships with suppliers, and can be there to supervise, you can do it yourself,” Henderson said.

The decision also comes down to money. “Our budget dictates when will use a DMC and when we will not,” White said. “For example, we plan a staff dinner of 70 at the conclusion of our annual meeting. Due to the budget for this event, we plan it ourselves, but I do request suggestions from the DMC for the venues.”

“In the 15 years I have been planning, I used a full-service DMC one time because I simply could not handle all the details myself,” said Melinda Remlein, CMP, travel coordinator for Legg Mason. “It was someone I trusted, and I was too new and too busy to take care of everything. Since that time, I have been able to handle all of the details ... and honestly did not have a choice since the companies I worked for did not want to spend the extra money. It is definitely not economical to hire full service DMCs unless the budget is there.”

Careful shopping can help with budget concerns. “Although the costs associated with some of the DMCs is the only disadvantage I can think of,” White said, “you can shop around to choose one that fits your budget ... and you can always negotiate some of their costs.”

### **Communication is Key**

even with a budget in place, since you’ll be using what amounts to a new partner with your event, clear communication becomes essential. Without it, you run the risk of being caught off guard.

“They are working directly with the vendors and or venues that you are promoting to your attendees,” said Jessica Ward, CMP, senior meeting planner for the American Academy of Family Physicians.

“Occasionally, some information may slip through the cracks or not be clear enough to you to convey the promotion to your attendees.”

And since you’re the one who knows your members, do everything you can to communicate their preferences to the DMC.

“Using DMCs works well if they are very creative and really take the time to hear the message about who they’re going to serve,” Pesci said. “If I describe my membership well and the kinds of activities they like, and they’re very creative and have access to unique venues, then they’re good.”

## **A Little or a Lot of Help**

once you've decided you do need help, you can decide just how much you want off your plate. Most DMC services are priced on an a la carte basis ... though, of course, DMCs prefer to arrange an entire experience.

"A major advantage of allowing your DMC to coordinate multiple services is the 'domino effect,'" Henderson said. "Even a slight change in requirements or timing creates a chain reaction which affects numerous aspects of your program. The more the DMC is handling, the faster the various vendors can be contacted and informed of the changes."

"Planners may make a lot of decisions in their initial planning process and then will come to a DMC at a later stage," Rednour said. "But there may be more elements we can give direction on that may help them in that planning stage, anything from promotion to local speakers who might be helpful or program elements for an opening. We'd like to see them come to us earlier — if nothing else, just for input." Ultimately, your decision comes down to how much you can handle ... and how much you can't.

"We allow planners to create an extension of themselves," Henderson said. "Good DMCs will be advocates for their clients and make the meeting planner look like a hero."

## **Changing Times**

**As destinations themselves have noticed for several years, lead times for meetings have shortened. DMCs feel the trend throughout the planning process.**

"It may not be a short lead time when making original plans as much as in the decision-making process," said Laura Rednour, president of PRA Destination Management Inc., a company operating in 16 cities across the country. "We may have clients book two years in advance, but we're not hearing about specifics until 30 or 90 days out."

The Best of Boston Ltd. was involved in last year's Democratic Convention, and six weeks out, a meeting planning company contacted Executive Vice President Linda Simon, DMCP, with a rather comprehensive request.

"Within those six weeks we had to create five different major events in five different locations with transportation throughout the city," recalled Simon. "It was unbelievable because of the security in the city, and these were complicated events. Those last-minute kinds of large requests are challenging ... but exciting as well. Technology has allowed us to turn things around so quickly that if someone is asking for a rather complex proposal with a long program, we can still turn it around in 48 hours."

Technology has played an increasing role as DMCs adapt to client needs. And from registration to proposals to Web conference calling, clients expect technology to make the entire process easier.

"It might be something as simple as when it's difficult to get committees together to make committee decisions," Rednour said. "We maintain two online sites, so when you're trying to make a decision on something you need to see, we can have everyone view it online and not have to pass it around for two weeks."

"DMCs are more respected for their knowledge and for what they bring to the table ... as a result, their services have expanded," said Karen Gordon, DMCP, president of Activity Planners Inc. in Las Vegas. "They have become even more specialized and most DMCs have found their niche market. Planners have more choices than ever before." — G.P.

Contributing Editor **Ginny Phillips** is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.