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December 1 2003

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Masterplanner: The event master calendar

BREAKTHROUGHS THAT MEAN BUSINESS

Special Events, Nov 1, 2003

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Shrinking budgets and shrinking lead time – all event professionals are facing these challenges. The answer? Many are turning to breakthroughs – new technologies and new services – that save time, save money and get the event done right.

THE BARRIER: Managing the complicated donor database for a major fund-raiser.

THE BREAKTHROUGH: Use contact-management software. "I use a Microsoft Access database specially tailored to the sponsorship levels, donation levels and canvassers for this gala. Reports can be generated at the click of a button, showing all companies written to, comparing results by canvasser, by year, etc. It is also networked, so everyone in the office can see and change the latest version. There is a mail-merge function built in that can select certain companies, select a letter to send them and select a destination folder. All these letters are then generated for the signature of the appropriate canvassers. At the same time, labels are generated for the envelopes. New lists of prospective donors can be imported in seconds. All this saves untold hours of work, much of which had to be done by laboriously cutting and pasting. The software cost me less than the labor costs I will save in one year alone."

– Alison Silcoff, Alison Silcoff Events, Montreal

THE BARRIER: Shorter lead times on events, making it too easy to miss important details.

THE BREAKTHROUGH: Establish systems. "We have set up an internal event management system that helps us look after all of the details and make sure nothing is overlooked. Our computer inventory system makes sure all items are

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available, in proper condition and charged at the proper rate. Also, we have established a shared resource file via the computer system, which allows all of our staff to have access to photos and the resources files of venues, entertainers and suppliers. We have a company Intranet with complete how-to manuals and links to valued resources and updated company information. Less time is spent on administrative details, allowing more time for client interaction and planning of their projects."

— *Margarita Heinzl, CSEP, The Meetinghouse Companies, Elmhurst, Ill.*

THE BARRIER: Offering high-quality audiovisual services in the face of tighter budgets.

THE BREAKTHROUGH: Educate account executives. "AV Concepts' account executives received training in new innovations in order to provide our clients with the best equipment within their budget. For example, projection is consistently one of the highest ticket items for audiovisual services at corporate and special events. In the past, DLP projectors were the standard in projection quality. Recent advances in LCD technology have created high-brightness projectors with acceptable quality for typical presentations. Knowledge of this new technology has allowed us to offer these high-bright projectors at a lower cost compared with the DLP projectors used previously. Another innovation, Montage by Vista Systems, allows a scenic background image to be projected and changed as often as desired, while windows display speaker support such as PowerPoint and IMAG."

— *Alison Weidner, AV Concepts, Tempe, Ariz.*

THE BARRIER: Developing good schematics is costly and time-consuming.

THE BREAKTHROUGH: Use 3-D CAD software. "Using our newly acquired CAD software, Vectorworks, we keep a growing database of detailed floor plans for every venue we work in. Details and obstacles missing from traditional venue schematics are all visible in these customized versions. The software also enables us to produce an event plan in just minutes by dragging and dropping chairs, tables, staging and equipment. Proposals are turned around quickly and accurately because initial site visits are all but eliminated. Follow-up vendor walk-throughs are then faster and more efficient when all parties have a preliminary layout to reference."

— *John Fox, Active Production and Design, Atlanta*

THE BARRIER: Offering a wide range of products to a diverse client base, yet maintaining competitive pricing.

THE BREAKTHROUGH: Create the one-stop solution. "One of our strongest tools is offering a variety of product selections to meet any type of budget. From a ballroom-style chiavari chair to a standard folding chair, we can service

customers that demand the highest quality products, while also offering comparable items that cater to a lesser budget. We also offer alternatives that can create a new look at a better value. For example, instead of renting a cloth and a skirt for a banquet table, we offer a 'skirtless' cloth that reaches the floor all the way around the table at a lower price. By providing one source for the entire event, we are able to save our clients time and money by charging only one delivery fee for everything, as well as offering an upgrade of products based on volume."

— Douglas Crowe, *Chicago Party Rental/Braun Event and Tent, McCook, Ill.*

THE BARRIER: Losing critical computer data.

THE BREAKTHROUGH: Implement a data-recovery program. "Fail-Safe' offers rental owners ways to archive system data in real-time or near-instantaneously, depending on the option they choose. Fail-Safe 1 networks a standby system to the store's main system and sends a copy of every transaction and database change to instantly merge with the standby database archive in real time. Fail-Safe 2 is a software solution that logs all transactions and database changes at specified intervals — every 30 minutes, for example — and archives them to backup media in the server. Fail-Safe 3 positions the standby system at Solutions by Computer's headquarters, and data logs are transmitted over the Internet. A rental business can choose to resume operations in as little as one hour."

— Jack Shea, *Solutions by Computer, Springfield, Mass.*

RESOURCES

Active Production and Design, 877/206-1168; Alison Silcoff Events, 514/932-7517; AV Concepts, 480/557-6000; Chicago Party Rental/Braun Event and Tent, 708/352-7007; Rose Brand, 212/242-7554; Solutions by Computer, 413/737-0499 or 800/950-2221; The Meetinghouse Companies, 630/941-0600

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