OCTOBER 2008
VOLUME 25 · NUMBER 3

ConventionSouth

EXCELLENCE. ANSWERS. INSIGHT.

OUR 25TH YEAR

The South Revamped

A State-By-State Report Of Renovated, New & Meeting Sites On The Way

PUBLISHED BY:
COVEY COMMUNICATIONS CORP.
P. O. BOX 2267
GULF SHORES, AL 36547

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Presorted Standard
U.S. Postage
PAID
Lebanon Junction, KY
Permit #413

Inside:

"I SURVIVED!" Disaster Stories & How To Fight Back

University Venues

SPECIAL REPORT

'What I Learned From Diversifying My Experience'

A Q&A With Meeting Pro Kathy Metts

By Marlane Bundock

Kathleen Metts, CMM, president and co-founder of Tennessee-based Impact Associates, spent 22 years at the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) working in visitor, community and media relations. While planning TVA events, she gained frontline experience dealing with high-profile attendees such as foreign dignitaries and safeguarding confidential information. "Our events dealt with the likes of Communist Bloc officials, senior U.S. officials, military personnel, press secretaries, corporate leaders and other VIPs. I learned what 'zero margin for error' really means—really fast."

Ten years ago, she co-founded Impact Associates to provide "high-level organizational development" services to both government and corporate entities like the U.S. Department of Defense and Turner Broadcasting System Inc. Her company, she said, applies "cutting-edge research to assess and elevate executives and team performance."

Metts said it has been her experience planning events for government agencies that has especially helped her when planning corporate events. "I've developed and executed more than 650 VIP-level itineraries and special events for U.S. officials and ministerial-level officials from countries such as China and Brazil. These events are often in coordination with the U.S. Department of State, FBI, CIA, Secret Service Agency and others. Because of this, I've learned there's more than one way to meet your objective and to find solutions to tough problems."

> "Specializing can be great down the road, but the learning you get from different sectors is invaluable."

Metts

Metts said she's drawn on those experiences to advance her career and feels that having a "diversified" professional background is one of the top ways that planners can get ahead in the meetings industry. "Work in a range of industries and in both the public and private sectors. Specializing can be great down the road, but the learning you get from—and bring to—different sectors is invaluable."

For example, she said her background in planning government-based meetings has taught her a great deal about planning meetings in the private sector. "You learn to get more creative with sponsorships and other funding mechanisms. You learn how to be flexible and to solve problems on the fly. And you remember how important it is to work with vendors you really trust and to solidify relationships with spectacular ones that carry into your private sector work."

To further understand the differences between planning government and corporate meetings and the challenges she's faced, we asked Metts to share her thoughts on the following questions:

How is planning events different for the public versus private sector?

Generally speaking, the regimentation in private events comes from adhering to tight branding guidelines, while for the public sector, you are guided by meeting certain protocols. There's a widely held misconception that planning public sector events can be less demanding than corporate events and that clients expect less, since it's not "company money" on the line. Some may think that delivering on budget alone defines success, which couldn't be farther from reality.

Working for the public sector means understanding and knowing how to follow rules—lots of rules—spanning ADA (American Disabilities Act) regulations to newer, eco-friendly requirements. Stipulations can span from how a room needs to be cleaned to how senior officials are to be addressed, if at all. Sometimes, things change on a dime due to circumstances beyond your control, like government travel freezes and even specific military operations.

What are some of the challenges of planning high-level government meetings?

As you'd imagine, security is big, around both people and information. It all starts with the site selection process. It's easier to use a secured facility that is federally owned and monitored, but that is not always feasible. In secure locations, security sweeps are performed at regular intervals leading up to events, and protocols are strictly maintained to prevent security breaches.

At times, we need to seal off public and back-of-house exits and other passages when certain people are in attendance, which affects everything from attendee movement to food service and restrooms. You may need to check credentials numerous times, and sometimes only people with high-level clearances themselves can do the checking. You may find yourself not privy to when and how a high-ranking official may arrive, though you're still responsible for getting him on stage on time. Sometimes we add discrete codes to badges to signify private sector attendees that are approved to interact with public sector guests. And, presentations are typically pre-screened.

What have you learned about keeping budgets in check?

Managing budgets in a mandated zero-overrun environment doesn't mean you need to skimp on the things you know makes an event successful. Last time I checked, a government official did not enjoy rainbow-tinged lunchmeat any more than a corporate executive. You do need to seek great value and work some of your best vendor relationships hard. You learn when certain hotels have downtimes that sync with your needs and get the best pricing. You might even work with other groups simultaneously holding events at your venue to get better food pricing.

You also get creative with approved, alternate financing vehicles like sponsorships. The right ones can make all the difference between a memorable event and one that merely did its job. People are frequently surprised to learn some government events are sponsor supported. These sponsorships bridge the gap between a public and a private sector event, creating a kind of hybrid. ■