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Taking Control

Doing planning work in the public sector taught one planner lessons that every corporate event pro should know

By Kathy Metts

We've all been there: the client who demands a champagne event on a kegger budget.

This holds true even more when that client hails from the public sector, where doing more with less is practically standard operating procedure. But, as they say, necessity is the mother of invention, and government work does more than make you more budget-conscious. It makes you more creative, more aware of potential risks, logistically sharper and better prepared to deal with the unknown — all skills that handily carry over to, and can greatly benefit, your corporate event work.

Going for Impact

Whether you're on the corporate side or the government side, it's critical to constantly challenge yourself to do more than what's expected, and seek vendors

who will roll up their sleeves with you. Leverage your best, longstanding supplier relationships when your budget is tight; the best ones will take the long view and be flexible with you. Remember that no matter how small a client's dollars, if you've agreed to work with those dollars, guests are guests, who expect — and deserve — great treatment.

For example, we were selected to run a big meeting for the Department of Defense in pre-Katrina New Orleans, where zero cost overrun was a contractual mandate. One thousand guests would attend, mostly from out of town. The client wanted to deliver a genuine Bourbon Street experience, but with a tight budget.

The solution? We made good, and fast, friends with the hotel's caterer. We made him feel the heat we were feeling.

And did he ever rise to the challenge. To make a big impression, but not a big line item, he dug up a copper kettle the size of a crater, which became the vessel for enough bananas Foster to feed an army.

Come showtime (aka, dessert), lights dimmed, flames ignited and down the aisle came a bananas Foster for the ages. The sheer spectacle meshed with the concoction's pure decadence to exceed everyone's wildest expectations — even our own!

When Less (Access) Is More

What's one of the first things you typically seek in a venue? Ease of access and traffic flow. Well, throw that out the window when you're planning a VIP-level, highly sensitive government event. We quickly learned that multiple entrances and exits, wide open halls and even curbside access to a venue aren't pluses at all, because of

the security threats they pose. We had to rethink basics like trafficking guests to and from restrooms, and even standard refreshment breaks.

You have to plan for certain high-level personnel entering and exiting one way, with zero leeway. In these situations, we assign extra staff to typically mundane matters like directing people from point A to point C, when point B is exclusively reserved for a high-ranking official. We collaborate extra closely with the facility's management and staff to help design and manage flow; they know the place best.

Despite all the right rules and regs, you'd be surprised to know how many things you *can't* know when planning a high-level event. One of the most common: when a high-ranking official will arrive (if at all) and how — it's classified. So we develop and commit to paper multiple scenarios, and coordinate each closely with government and facility security teams.

The carryover to corporate event work? Take nothing for granted. It's made us sharper in everything from seating charts to taking into account special dietary needs.

We've also learned to view space flexibly. Instead of pigeon-holing an event or session into a space that meets budget but not our standards for comfort, we'll work ahead of time to sublet a portion of a larger, more accommodating space to a third party to use at times we don't need to. We've also worked with foodservice to join up with other, simultaneous events and coordinate menus to enjoy better, bulk pricing.

Venue planning for sensitive events has also made our event briefing books immeasurably better — tighter, clearer, no-questions-gone-unanswered guides that anticipate most anything that may go awry, and that a client can follow with little to no interpretation.

Mickey Mouse Security

When it comes to planning security for government personnel, nothing should be taken for granted — a good lesson for planners of all stripes.

A friend of mine was in the Secret Service when President Reagan visited Disney World in Orlando. Venue security did all the usual, mandated, rigorous ▶

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► preparation to ensure the president's safety. No stone was left unturned — or so they thought.

As the president strolled along Main Street, the Mickey Mouse character in costume strode up and started walking beside the president. In an instant, the Secret Service realized that they'd checked everything... except Mickey! In a flash, an agent discretely sidled up to the mouse and told it to get lost.

Being entrusted with potentially life-or-death information has trained us to go "code red" for any proprietary data we get, from any client we work for. It serves as a powerful reminder of the sanctity of any client's confidential information (no matter how mundane some of it may seem) and the trust placed in us as its guardians.

Take Nothing for Granted

Bottom line, our public sector work continually reminds us to take nothing for granted, and to work overtime to control the things we have the power, foresight and information to manage. Our military work has helped us learn to live with the

fact that everything can't ever be fully known or nailed down — even in an environment where

anything less than perfection may be deemed failure.

It's been invaluable in keeping us at the top of our game. The open bidding process that accompanies every public sector opportunity reminds us that past good work — even great work — is no guarantee of future assignments.

Approaching private sector work in that spirit, and with the creative and logistical edges government work has honed, makes us better, more resourceful competitors and planners. Today's tightening economy makes it all the more salient. **ES**

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What If?

Life sure is different in the public sector. Here's a glimpse of what your work would be like if you did planning for the Department of Defense:

- Your client information isn't just confidential; it's a matter of national security.
- Your federal government contract doesn't allow you to exceed the budget. If you do so without prior, written approval, you may not be paid for the overage.
- Forget access and traffic flow. Multiple entrances and exits, wide open halls and even curbside access to a venue pose security threats to your guests, so you need to rethink everything from trafficking guests to the restrooms to refreshment breaks.
- You're not allowed to know when, if or how your VIP, a high-ranking official, will arrive. That's classified information you're not cleared to have.

If you plan it just right, your attendees will never notice all the high-security work that goes on behind the scenes.



Photo: D. Myles Cullen / Courtesy: U.S. Department of Defense