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Strategic Meetings Trend Reflects a New Reality

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Meetings and incentives are coming back but things are a little different now than how they once were. So said Tracy Norum, CMP, vice president and general manager of Fox Premier Meetings and Incentives. Formed in 1988 as a division of Fox World Travel in Oshkosh, WI, Fox Premier employs a staff of 14, with over 200 years of combined industry experience, and generates approximately 10% of the agency's \$150 million annual revenue. Programs range from 15 to 2,500 attendees.

Strategic Meetings Management

"Meeting planning is no longer about just fulfillment. Strategic meeting management isn't a trend, it's a reality, it's here," said Norum, whose parent company has the size and resources to provide Fox Premier with top technology, such as Clickbook Meetings and other sourcing, registration and attendee management tools. "Planners have to embrace it, first tracking spend and then leveraging that information to develop new programs that help clients achieve their goals and objectives. We need to make programs unique while staying within the more structured decision-making process," she said.

Unique experiences. The "unique" part is nothing new to Fox, whose incentives have included taking over the village of Gruyere in Switzerland for a program, to arranging for dinners prepared by celebrity chefs in private homes of local residents in Ireland. The idea, says Norum, is to give participants a taste of the region in a way they could never duplicate on their own.

Think local. Doing that within stringent financial guidelines is a challenge, however. Some of the more creative ways that Fox Premier preserves their client's budget are to use local craftspeople when purchasing amenities such as client gifts and even use local companies when purchasing meeting supplies "since it saves on shipping and drayage and supporting local economies is very important," said Norum. "We also work with the chef to create appropriate menus based on seasonality—that's huge. We plan back-to-back overlapping programs so executives don't have to travel back and forth, and the volume creates better buying power. With meetings, we also see if we can work with another group at the hotel to combine menus or use the a/v setup of a meeting held concurrently."

Go green. Another savings method plays on the trend toward green. Fox Premier uses electronic marketing for its meetings, transmitting as much information as possible digitally as opposed to printing it. "It saves huge amount of money," she said. In fact, by "tweaking" programs using the above-listed cost-savings methods, Norum estimates that Fox sliced 13% off the budget of a recently held 200+

person meeting.

Business Is Up, and Changing

Norum said that they're starting to see "a little loosening up" in program budgets and design, after the more severe cutbacks experienced over the past few years. "When the economy is bad, meetings and incentives are cut back, but that's the time they're needed the most," she pointed out. "Companies are starting to realize that they still need to take care of their employees — their most invaluable asset — by keeping them trained and educated, and that they still need to send out their corporate message to distributors, clients and employees. Of course, the second tier [of impact from those meetings] is what you learn from each other. Companies grow by bringing people together. While clients are still cost-conscious, meetings and incentives are coming back and we're delighted with that," she said.

More Spend Under Management. The difference now, she said, is that the decision makers have changed, and as companies take a more strategic approach to the entire meeting, many more C-level people are becoming involved, which is different than in the past. "They're particularly conscious of the unmanaged meeting spend. We help them identify that spend; we bring it into the forefront. They're also looking at program content. We welcome that, as does the entire industry," she said.

(Learning how to better negotiate with C-level executives is the focus of an upcoming article in Travel Market Report.)

Price integrity returning. What's also changing, said Norum, is vendor pricing. "Price integrity is returning; properties are less likely to undercut their prices to the point where they're not making money. There's less flexibility in concessions. After all, this is business. However, because of the true partnership we have with [our preferred vendors], we're working together to identify what's most important to each client. That's what's going to help clients make the decision of selecting one destination over another."

Soliciting and Retaining Clients

Of course, you have to first secure and retain clients to be able to put a strategic meetings management program in place. Fox solicits its new accounts in a bevy of ways, from e-mail blasts and Web-site promotion to sales blitzes in metropolitan areas to supporting industry events outside of travel. "We engage in sponsorships and working with companies locally like the Rotary. Incentives are very relationship-driven and we look for unique opportunities for people to experience us. You always find that someone knows someone who knows someone," said Norum.

Getting a foot in the door is the first step and often that's enough, she said. "We look to become an extension of their current meeting planning team and enhance what's already in place, whether it's sourcing, program planning, travel management or on-site assistance. Then when they see what we can do, we find that we begin to get more and more business, expanding in all service areas for them. We become a partner for life, all stemming from a philosophy that 'Our job is to make you look good and have a positive impact on your bottom line.' Do it right and you end up being partners for life!" she said.

Client retention is important to Fox, who periodically runs fam trips for up to 20 of their top accounts at a time. Past trips, which run three to four nights, have visited Banff, Quebec City and Costa Rica. Return on investment is phenomenal, said Norum, who estimates that the Banff trip resulted in 50%-60% of the participants booking programs there.