

Grand Plans

Parties, events rife with promo opportunities

BY DEBRAH ROSEN

Everyone loves a great party — but perhaps no one loves them more than an event planner. A worldwide \$500 billion-a-year industry according to Entrepreneur magazine, event planning could be a promotional gold mine. From awards, sponsor gifts and goodie bags to table favors, invitations and banners, event planners love to brand their affairs. We spoke to five planners to get the scoop on what they buy for their clients and what it would take for you to win a piece of this business.

Dollars and Sense

Wouldn't it be great if everyone "got it" the way Gail Cayetano does? "I'm a student of the idea that promotional products are key because a good product will never be thrown away," she explains. "Therefore, every time that product is used after the event, it means more face time with the brand. So, I try hard to work that into my clients' budgets as best I can."

Unfortunately, Cayetano, managing partner and event manager at Starfish Creative Events, says it can be hard to convince clients to spend much on promotional products. "They assume that any type of product should cost less than \$1 a piece," she shares.

Fortunately, not all the feedback from event planners is so grim. In the experience of Nicole T. Samolis, CSEP (certified special events professional), of The Events Co., clients will often reallocate dollars or find new dollars to incorporate an idea they really like. "The biggest mistake you can make is assume a client has no budget and not pitch all the possibilities," she warns. "Each time we create a concept for a client, we offer them the whole shebang and then work with them to eliminate items until we are back down to a number they are comfortable with. I can't tell you the number of times the client has spent more than we expected."



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Kathy Laframboise-Goodman, owner of rehearsal-dinner planning firm Well Rehearsed, tries hard to meet her clients' budget expectations — large or small — and says she takes "a holistic approach" to budgeting events. While food and beverage generally eat up the largest portion, Laframboise-Goodman tries to plan an event that appeals to multiple senses, using promotional products to create an experience and an atmosphere. "I find that after the event, guests may not remember all the details, but they will remember how the event made them feel."

Product Suggestions

In this industry, buyers are purchasing for someone else, so product preferences may change from event to event — and client to client. Still, each planner generally has specific product favorites and promotional goals.

Green is king for Joella Hopkins, CSEP, CMP (certified meeting professional). "We are moving to green anything — for all events. ... All of my vendors have been told to find me green products or I will look elsewhere," says the president of Simply Mumtaz Events Inc. "The second criterion is that the item is something people will use and not throw away when they get back to their offices or homes. Why waste your money?"

Cayetano stays away from gum or mints because she feels the message gets tossed in the garbage with the packaging. Bobbleheads are her promo of choice. "One can never go wrong with bobbleheads," Cayetano says. "They are universally liked by all ages, and they will remain on desks forever — stretching the brand's awareness further. That should always be the goal of a promotional product: to constantly generate awareness."

Laframboise-Goodman shares that view for corporate events but has a different philosophy when it comes to social gatherings. "The promotional merchandise becomes more of a piece that enhances the overall look and feel of the event," she says. For rehearsal dinners, Laframboise-Goodman looks for promos that accentuate the theme. She loves thick, paper coasters that are coordinated with other paper goods, such as menus, napkins and stationery. Beyond serving as a décor element, Laframboise-Goodman also likes to package them in sets as "economical and timeless favors."



Samolis also goes for novelty items whenever she can. "We do a number of employee-appreciation events that have fun themes, so we tend to use a lot of branded light-up barware," she says.

How to Win This Business

Planning a massive get-together is a complicated task. There are countless details and vendors to keep straight, and the planner is responsible when something goes wrong. That's why many of them turn to promotional consultants to handle their branded merchandise.

"In the high-adrenaline, ever-changing events world, there are many times when a premium is needed in a very short amount of time," Cayetano says. In the trend-setting Los Angeles market, Cayetano's events need to be cutting edge. To this end, she occasionally relies on a distributor to source custom creations.

"Having a promotional products vendor who has the manufacturing resources to make a promotional product which first starts out in my head ... is key," she says.

Success Stories



Cindy Mardenfeld is president of Infinity Relations Inc., which plans events for U.S. and Canadian clients and specializes in marketing and strategic planning. Time as an event planner: more than 10 years. Orders promotional products from: advertising, marketing and PR firms.

Planning a product launch, we gave out several promotional items during and after the events, including apparel, hats, pens, portfolios and door hangers. All items had the client's logo, Web site and/or phone number. During the event, attendees were taught how to grow their businesses. Giving away logoed door hangers with space for attendees to place business cards accomplished two things: helped attendees market their companies and co-brand them with the client's company; and reduced attendees' potential cost for marketing materials.

Kathy Laframboise-Goodman plans rehearsal dinners as the owner of Well Rehearsed in San Francisco. Previously, she was a promotional products distributor for four years. Time as an event planner: eight years. Orders promotional products from: Katharine Gerrish of Canary Marketing.



A couple getting married in Yosemite, Calif., invited all their guests to a welcome campfire. In preparation, guests were greeted at the hotel with welcome bags that included headlamps for the dark journey to the campfire imprinted with the couple's monogram. Instead of a traditional flashlight, we thought headlamps would be fun, and the guests loved them. There was a stream of light trekking back and forth from the event, and a few headlamps made their way to the wedding dance floor. They became one of the most talked about elements of the weekend.



Gail Cayetano is managing partner and event manager with Starfish Creative in Los Angeles, catering to corporate and entertainment clients. Time as an event planner: seven years. Orders promotional products from: Jibe Promotional Marketing and Spartan Direct.

Video-game publisher Konami Digital Entertainment hired us to help with a pre-awareness campaign for upcoming game launches. The games were aligned with music group Linkin Park on the band's summer tour. We lined the perimeter of each concert with 8-foot-high signs, and set up plasma televisions with the video games for attendees to try. We had a photo station where guests posed for pictures in front of game scenes and could share them via e-mail and social-networking sites. Last, we gave away branded water bottles, which everyone wanted because it was the dead of summer. Because of their durability, guests took the bottles home to reuse, and consumers were left with a positive image of the brand fostered by the relief these water bottles provided.

Time is the No. 1 factor in using a promotional professional for Samolis. "Quality and service beat out price," she says. "As an event planner, I provide solutions for my clients. I expect my vendor partners to provide me with solutions, as well."

Laframboise-Goodman looks to her distributor as a creative resource. "I know she is sourcing the most chic merchandise available and shopping for the products that my clients and I find exciting," she says. "We often come up with ideas for décor that extend beyond the products."

Using a distributor also saves valuable production time. "By allowing their team to manage the vendors and schedules, I instantly add trusted members to my team and allow myself to focus on other parts of my business," Laframboise-Goodman adds.

Want In?

So, want a piece of the \$500 billion pie? These women have some advice for you. As busy professionals themselves, working with a promotional products consultant is a way for event planners to outsource workload. "They also make the experience more pleasant," Hopkins says. "They do the hard leg work. It's one less item on my plate."

Be flexible and bring new ideas to the table, Hopkins suggests. "I hate flipping through catalogs that are 300 pages. Give me ideas that you think might suit my event based on my budget and attendees," she says. "Think for me."

Samolis agrees. "The distributors who win my business are those whom I can call and tell about my event and my needs, and they in turn provide me with ideas that could meet the needs," she says. "The distributors who suggest I go to their Web sites and see if there is anything I like are those with whom I don't do business."

Laframboise-Goodman says social-event planners are also looking for different items than those who plan business events. "I would encourage [distributors] to share more 'retail' merchandise," she says. "Distributors are selling to a savvy audience that often wants to see name-brand merchandise that would be considered a personal gift versus a corporate gift."

In a fairly social business — even when it's corporate — relationships are the foundation of many deals. Cayetano says event planners are usually very loyal, so personal touches are important. Instead of a generic prospecting e-mail, head to the phone first, then try to set up in-person visits. "You should bring a ton of samples to show them products that you carry. Further, bring some products that they can keep. ...And most important, make sure that every product you give them is labeled with your full contact information." ■

Success Stories



Joella Hopkins, CSEP, CMP, is the president of Simply Mumtaz Events Inc. in Burbank, Calif., which plans more than 75 events each year. Time as an event planner: 10 years.

We purchased 1,500 pens for an association's annual fundraiser event. Every year the table favors range from chocolate to candy apples, but this year we decided to do something more long-lasting. We decided on a very nice pen with the association's logo. It was a big hit, and people were running around when the event was over to take any leftovers. It was successful because it was a lasting favor that continued to sell the organization.

Nicole T. Samolis, CSEP, is with The Events Co. in Syracuse, N.Y., an event-planning and destination-management company that produces about 50 events annually. Time as an event planner: 12 years.



We plan an annual sales meeting for a technology company. Recently, an international conglomerate bought the company and changed its name, and we took every opportunity to showcase the new brand. Attendees received branded six-pack coolers for down time on the beach, and we served margaritas in light-up logoed glasses during the closing-night beach party. During the awards ceremony, they recognized the corporate planner for her years of dedication. We made T-shirts with her photo for everyone to wear as undershirts, and they all stripped down to the tee when she was presented with the award. It made a huge impact on the overall presentation.

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