

WORKING WITH DMCsⁱ

It's just another day in the Land of Perpetual Planning. You could still really use another person in the department, but there's no sign of that happening anytime soon. And the meetings keep coming — board meetings, chapter retreats, the looming annual conference. There aren't enough hours in the day. Without the sudden appearance of a few helpful elves, you won't be able to get to all of the must-do research ... and phone calls and e-mails and follow-ups.

A magic wand doesn't come for free, but a destination management company could be your meeting's fairy godmother.

For planners short on resources or time (and not short on a budget), a destination management company (DMC) can bring a broad, up-to-the-minute understanding of a destination, and the partnership will give your own staff exponentially more hands ... and heads.

"DMCs save clients an awful lot of time," said Linda Simon, DMCP, executive vice president of The Best of Boston Ltd. "Planners don't have to research vendors as they should if they were determining the appropriate choice in a city they're not familiar with. The only research they need is what the DMC uses."

Janine Pesci, managing director of programs for the Urban Land Institute, has used DMCs in the past to handle elements of annual meetings of 3,000 and up.

"It makes it a lot easier to go with an entity that's very familiar with the location and who has relationships with all those venues," Pesci said. "If you were coming in on your own, you'd have to do all that research yourself."

Doing More with Less today time is often at a premium as meetings departments — that may have been downsized — are asked to manage increasing numbers of events. We're all limited in our resources, and today generally you have fewer planners and more programs. With a DMC, you're extending your team and resources.

"Almost all meeting planners have more meetings than they've ever had before, often with shorter lead times and less staff," said Susan Henderson, president of Atlanta Arrangements and president of DMC Network. "The devil is in the details. Working with a DMC will ensure that the vehicle is being loaded, while the restaurant is being advanced — simultaneously. This frees the planner up to deal with the last-minute crises that are always popping up."

Growing in Stature

As the lines between first- and second-tier cities blur and the array of site options grows, there's the question of just how well you know a destination. Chances are a DMC's local knowledge far exceeds that of a planner who may live hundreds of miles away.

It's tough to keep up with changes in a destination now and more critical to have local resources than it was in the '70s or '80s. At the time you're making a choice, you may be working on information that's already outdated.

For example, you need to ask yourself whether the venue or transportation you're looking at is still the same operation it once was. A restaurant might open up and everything's great ... then six months later it's like a completely different place. For transportation, are the coaches still being maintained like they were last year; are the drivers still being trained the same?"

As experts in their destinations, DMCs identify the best vendors within the city — the best service, the best process, the best consistency of product.

These days people think you can get anything you need off the Internet, but the question is, can you trust everything on the Internet?

It's all About Relationships

Relationships distinguish DMCs as much as knowledge base. There's no comparison when it comes to a meeting planner making a one-time deal with caterers or suppliers versus DMCs who work with suppliers week in and week out.

The Endocrine Society has used a DMC for its last 10 citywide annual meetings, according to Johnnie White, CMP, director of meetings and CME Services. White has had DMCs coordinate special events from 100 to 2,000 people.

"I probably could not find or have access to a number of venues we have used over the years without the DMC," White said.

"DMCs can open doors, where a planner can't ... private homes and mansions, private clubs, private golf resorts," said Karen Gordon, DMCP, president of Activity Planners Inc. in Las Vegas.

"If there are certain things that need to be negotiated, venues or vendors would more likely negotiate with the DMC which is a known entity than a one-shot contact they'll never see again. You're more likely to have a negotiating relationship with a customer who's back regularly."

The combination of knowledge and relationships can create an enviably smooth meeting experience.

Making the Decision

For all they offer, you may not call in a DMC for every meeting. Deciding when one is most appropriate largely comes down to your own knowledge base and time constraints. If it's a destination you visit frequently or a fairly no-frills event, you might not need any local expertise. "In the 15 years I have been planning, I used a full-service DMC one time because I simply could not handle all the details myself," said Melinda Remlein, CMP, travel coordinator for Legg Mason. "It was someone I trusted, and I was too new and too busy to take care of everything."

Communication is Key even with a budget in place, since you'll be using what amounts to a new partner with your event, clear communication becomes essential. Without it, you run the risk of being caught off guard. "They are working directly with the vendors and or venues that you are promoting to your attendees," said Jessica Ward, CMP, senior meeting planner for the American Academy of Family Physicians.

"Occasionally, some information may slip through the cracks or not be clear enough to you to convey the promotion to your attendees."

And since you're the one who knows your members, do everything you can to communicate their preferences to the DMC.

"Using DMCs works well if they are very creative and really take the time to hear the message about who they're going to serve," Pesci said. "If I describe my membership well and the kinds of activities they like, and they're very creative and have access to unique venues, then they're good."

A Little or a Lot of Help once you've decided you do need help, you can decide just how much you want off your plate. Most DMC services are priced on an a la carte basis ... though, of course, DMCs prefer to arrange an entire experience. Ultimately, your decision comes down to how much you can handle ... and how much you can't. Good DMCs will be advocates for their clients and make the meeting planner look like a hero."

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