



EVENT INTELLIGENCE 08.27.07 12:37 PM

From "Planner" to "Strategist"

As companies raise their appreciation for events—and their financial expectations—they're stressing a new set of skills when hiring people to carry out their event marketing efforts. These days, strategy is just as important as execution. Here's a look at the changing nature of event jobs.

When Joyce Parente looked for a new director of special events for *Men's Health* this spring, she didn't want another version of the planner who had just left the job. That employee focused primarily on executing an event, finding out about it only after the magazine had signed a deal with an advertiser to cohost and pay for it. "That person was hired for a different world," Parente says.

Throughout the past two years, the magazine's event marketing efforts have grown significantly, changing the job description of the special events position. So Parente, the magazine's associate publisher, needed to find someone who could attend sales calls and help close deals, conceive an original concept for each event (as opposed to simply executing someone else's orders) and emerge as an asset to advertisers looking for the next big, never-been-done-before idea.

Relationships with vendors were equally important. With all eyes on the bottom line, Parente wanted someone with the confidence to approach new vendors and negotiate contracts that maximized the budget allotted to each event. "She can't just be the person in the office making everything look pretty," Parente says.

She ultimately hired Jennifer Feeney, who won over Parente with her broad experience—she had been a senior event manager with *Entertainment Weekly* and a freelance event producer for the Hudson Hotel—and her desire to become entrenched in the strategy side of the business and play a part in the sales process.

The *Men's Health* position isn't the only event job that's changing. The entire nature of corporate event jobs is evolving. With a focus on return on investment and a growing appreciation of events as effective business tools, companies are demanding much more than the ability to plan a menu. The need is higher than ever for well-rounded executives versed in the various marketing disciplines that maximize an event's payoff. This new breed of executives are brand representatives, masters of technology, relationship-builders, idea generators, and subject-matter experts. They're intricately involved from an event's inception, analyzing feasibility, scouting and managing sponsorships, and discussing business objectives in meetings that once excluded them.

As these executives distance themselves from the "party planner" misnomer, *strategy* and *strategist* are the new buzzwords of the industry. But what do those words really mean? According to Allison Saget, an event marketing consultant and author of *The Event Marketing Handbook: Beyond Logistics and Planning*, events affect three things: brand recognition, lead generation, and thought leadership. The best event strategists, she says, tie their work to the company's goals and objectives in each of those three areas, and then drill down deeper to measure the impact in sales. "I don't care what the food tastes like or what fluff you put around the event—that's just the dessert part of it," she says. "The real guts come from the strategy behind it."

Event planners, you could say, are growing up. And executives in other parts of the company are taking notice. "The candidates I feel are exceptional have relationships with business-unit heads where they can talk about moving the ball strategically with key accounts," says Allison Hemming, founder of the Hired Guns, a Manhattan-based agency that places freelance and full-time event planners. A knack for developing those relationships has become a highly valued facet of an event planner's intellect.

That said, the basics still apply. Designing a ballroom, managing registration, scouting new venues, orchestrating massive projects under pressure—these skills will always be part of in-house event

planning. But the ability to craft and execute a successful strategy is elevating the position's status.

While the job demands are higher than ever, it's a good time to be an event specialist. Events are increasingly viewed as powerful marketing tools with bottom-line payoff, figuring prominently into a company's overall strategy. That raises both the visibility and the stakes of the people hired to create and execute them.

Take the event coordinator Matt Pollock just hired. As director of multibrand conferences for Nielsen Business Media, Pollock oversees the group that brings together the brand's business magazines on events that charge as much as \$2,000 to attend. The new hire, Becky Teagno, joins a team that has beefed up the planning stage of its events. Now, in order to get a green light, the group's event coordinators must help prepare an extensive internal launch document for the C.F.O. that includes input from three groups: past attendees of similar events, potential sponsors, and possible keynote speakers. Repeat events deemed successful are also scrutinized. "Even if the event is still making good money, if there's a decline, we'll get to the bottom of that," Pollock says.

Once the group begins marketing an event, coordinators receive weekly registration grids that track progress against each of the past three years. If the numbers show a potential red flag, everyone on the team is expected to brainstorm ideas for orchestrating a turn-around. Pollock has high hopes that Teagno can contribute in those meetings. In past events for her former job, "she was given the keys," he says, making important calls about everything from content to sponsorship deals.

What's required of an event planner will vary from company to company, but Melissa Stevens has as good a read as anyone on what some of the most desirable employers want. The corporate event specialist has spent the past 12 years planning events and meetings in in-house positions at such companies as Hearst Corporation, Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, and Estée Lauder Companies. More recently, she spent a few months consulting and, in June, accepted her current post as director of special events for the Condé Nast Media Group. Stevens will be responsible for the creation and execution of corporate special events, which include client entertaining and sales meetings, as well as programs like Fashion Rocks and Movie Rocks.

Stevens says the skill that defines her value to a company is her ability to illustrate the lifestyle of a brand. Often that means delivering components of an event that are new and fresh. Whether it's the technology used to convey a message or the entertainment used at a product launch, "companies want to change it up," Stevens says. Their objective, she says, is twofold: reach and retain new customers, while linking the brand with the element of exclusivity.

Those demands have turned Stevens on to interesting projects that have further expanded her résumé. She has helped companies reach out to an attractive, technologically savvy demographic by producing at-counter interactive videos that were distributed globally and could be used by customers to learn more about a product. She has worked with DJ Coleman in New York to set marketing campaigns to music, allowing executives worldwide to purchase his tunes for product launches in their stores. And she's aligned companies with new philanthropic causes, developing relationships that give nonprofits cost-efficient exposure while adding another eye-catching dimension to her clients' own events or hooking them into high-profile benefits.

The last of those entails much more than simply sticking a brand's name on a sponsorship. "Now many times you take the entire benefit inhouse and work with [the nonprofit to plan and produce it]," she says. Whatever the event, her clients want answers to important questions about return on investment at each step of the planning process: How much are customers spending at events? How do post-event sales compare with the marketing activity carried out last year in that same week in the same market? How is she following up with attendees, further maximizing payoff?

Executives like Stevens are in high demand. Employers and recruiters say mid- to high-level event planners who can book an inexpensive venue on two weeks' notice, then walk into a meeting with a vice president of sales to discuss how the company's event strategy can shorten the sales cycle are a well-respected, coveted breed. "If you're an A player or even a B player these days, you're able to almost write your own ticket," says Brandon Gutman, director of marketing and business development for Stephen-Bradford Search in New York. He adds that there are more jobs available than candidates who can fill them.

A few years ago, a planner working for an event marketing firm had a tough time transitioning to the client side. Not so anymore. Corporations are giving these candidates a fresh look and finding that they have cultivated a range of skills while working with many different companies and events. "Because of that, they're sometimes more nimble than those working as internal planners," Gutman says.

That agility is necessary for a job that relies on a multitude of marketing levers, including sponsorships, direct mail, email, and Web marketing. “Event planners are expected to cross all disciplines, unless they want to be, basically, a glorified secretary,” says Nancy L. Bach, a freelancer in New York. Bach credits her successful consulting business to a well-rounded marketing background. Prior to freelancing, Bach planned conferences for a Fortune 500 financial-services player, handled media outreach at a PR firm for events linked to the “Got Milk?” campaign, orchestrated marketing partnerships at Chase that tied the brand’s name to events at various art institutions, and was part of the team that gave birth to the Arts & Leisure Weekend in the event marketing department of The New York Times. It was at The Times, she says, that she made an impact in a way that truly got upper management’s attention. “The more successful [the event marketing team was], the more we were called upon to help increase revenues,” she says.

As a freelancer, Bach has worked on jobs that entail both strategy and execution. But even those that boil down to a simple task require someone who can think strategically. For example, an intern could man a hospitality booth—but only a seasoned executive could turn a casual conversation with a client or business partner into a marketing opportunity. “The expectation is always made clear that the reason I’m being hired is to provide more [than the specified assignment],” she says.

While the evolution of the event planning role is good news for executives with the right skills, it complicates matters for employers trying to hire them. Here are the numbers that tell the story of Annie Yuzzi’s last candidate search: 75 résumés reviewed, 25 people interviewed, three offers extended, and two candidates who turned down the job before the third accepted it. The entire process took nearly a year.

“I was working ungodly hours trying to cover for the shortfall,” recalls Yuzzi, senior manager of global event marketing for Business Objects, a business intelligence software firm in San Jose, California. “But I’d rather work the extra hours than hire the wrong person.” After all, Yuzzi says, the former person in the position had “snowed” her strategic experience, and it became clear that she had only handled the elementary operations of an event. “It’s very easy to talk the buzzwords, but to actually do the job from a corporate level in the right way is something different,” Yuzzi says. What’s more, once hired, the former employee didn’t take the time to learn the needs of the company’s users.

Yuzzi’s new hire, Paulina Nervet, came from an event planning agency and stood out with broad experience that transcended setting up the audiovisual presentation. In her interview with Yuzzi, for example, Nervet cited specific examples of coordinating content for clients, winnowing down hundreds of submissions to a call for speakers by separating the credible proposals from those that amounted to sales pitches.

As event planners have taken on additional responsibility, they’ve gained visibility, adding yet another requirement to the job: building relationships with executives who work down the hall. Sheryl Sookman, founder of the Meeting-Connection, an executive recruiting firm and placing service in Novato, California, says more of her clients are asking about a potential hire’s personality. Can the candidate hold her own in brainstorming meetings? Will he play nice with others at the top? One planner, whom Sookman had placed on a freelance assignment for a software firm, sent an angry email to a senior executive after someone decided to make last-minute changes to what she considered her agenda. “She didn’t last too much longer,” Sookman says.

Kimberly Marenus, a freelancer in New York, has also observed more clients inquiring about her people skills. This past spring she interviewed for positions with four companies, all of which stressed the importance of working well with others. A common interview question: “Do you work better by yourself or in a group?” Marenus says the focus on partnership with others in the company is a new wrinkle to the job description. “Before, I would just handle events. Now, you’re [expected to] get a better sense of who the company is—not just your small focus, but the whole picture and how you can contribute to it.”

That means that the best candidate for the job may already be in the building. About a year ago, Julie Lindsey, the director of corporate events at Gap Inc. in San Francisco, was looking to fill a mid-level event planner position. She ended up plucking an internal candidate who lacked direct event management experience. Lindsey chose the woman for her sharp communication skills and her strong internal relationships at every level, built throughout her 10 years with the company. “We can ask her how the [employees] would react to [a particular] communication,” Lindsey says. “She has such an incredible perspective.”

Lindsey says that in order for her team’s in-house event planners to excel on the job, they must understand the company’s goals and marketing message, become proficient in procurement, and shine in meetings with other executives—communicating effectively while being both strategic and creative. Two of those requirements are based on knowledge; one hinges on behavior. You can teach someone how to

negotiate a hotel contract, she says, but you can't teach them how to sell a point to a vice president of marketing. "It's being able to be part of the brainstorming process before your logistics filter goes off and says, 'You can't do that.'"

Lindsey stresses that the need for someone who knows the ins and outs of event planning hasn't disappeared—it's just that it's no longer enough. "If you're more logistically focused and don't develop the capability to be more strategic, you may end up better-suited [to a position] at a third party [planning company]," she says. "Both [skills] are critical." —*Michele Marchetti*



Julie Lindsey recently tapped an internal candidate for a Gap Inc. event position who had little event experience but had a strong understanding of the company's employees.

Photo: Anthony Lindsey Photography



Melissa Stevens won her new job as director of special events for the Condé Nast Media Group after years of diverse experiences with everything from sales meetings to philanthropic causes and interactive videos.

Photo: Dan Hallman for BizBash



Matt Pollock recently hired a job candidate who he felt could contribute to the extensive strategy sessions involved in Nielsen Business Media's conferences.

Photo: JJ Jennifer Ignatz for BizBash

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