

## Guest Speaker: Build effective safety nets

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As people in the marketing field, we know how to communicate... most of the time. We're the great multi-task artists responding to RFPs, submitting awards, and writing press releases—all at once. So we're organized. And still things fall through the cracks and systems and plans fail or fracture.

We all like to hear about what works. Rehashing negatives or pointing fingers doesn't forward conversations. However, hearing how to prevent mishaps or near-misses contributes a vital component to why we all read this newsletter.

Everything we do has an element of surprise—and, frankly, that's what makes life interesting. Each segment of marketing has an Achilles' heel. Marketing obstacles tend to attach themselves to specific categories and, that said, the more complicated the effort, the more likely all preventative measures must be brought to bear.

For RFPs, it's grammar, spelling, and punctuation. I insist on an objective proofreader outside of the marketing department. In the case of branding, consistency tops the list. I locate one person in the firm who will be vigilant and oversee the collateral materials as a whole. Consistency of branding must be applied to RFPs along with consistency of format where all subconsultants' submissions adhere to the same size and type of font, and the same template.

For mailings, it's controlling the schedule. Here, master charts, planned months in advance, help to manage the roadblocks of holiday closures for print shops and fulfillment houses, or ordering stamps before the stamp design runs out (or increases in price), and aids in allowing enough time to review mailing lists by key players.

Major events that call for a cross section of teams outside of the marketing department's direct control offer the greatest challenges and possible avenues for communication breakdowns and catastrophes. The keys to success: total transparency and lessons learned along with all of the safety measures already mentioned.

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When running events, two major items contribute to failures: lack of leadership and corporate churn. For events to go smoothly there must be one individual in charge, someone who coordinates every detail. That leader must have the last word on staffing, graphics, mailings, catering, and so on. The person chosen must also have longevity within the firm or be a recognized event coordinator. (Someone with a doomsday attitude could be a plus if they always plan for the worst-case scenario.) An event's success hinges on lessons learned and corporate knowledge. A major event cannot be relegated to administrative support.

Events have patterns and tipping points that require an expert's instincts—for instance, being able to judge the capacity or ratio of guests to a space, when to switch from china and glassware to plastic, and at what point to hire bodyguards. Positioning a bar is not a design issue. It is a flow issue and an event coordinator can save major traffic jams by adding another bar or moving the location.

Churn due to new or inexperienced staff or last-minute departing staff will cause major havoc to any event. The team leader must be informed of existing staff that might leave the firm. An informed leader can plan accordingly and have additional personnel at the ready, emergency

numbers, and a Plan B in place in case a departing employee blows off things like staying until the end of an event for clean-up or stays home the following day when a multitude of details like rental and liquor returns must be overseen. This experienced leader will review lessons learned with new staff, making all responsibilities clear and delegating tasks according to experience and talent.

Without an experienced eye reviewing things like the invitations, the party's time can go missing or the mailing list can go out to people with no addresses. A well-informed and talented planner can steer a firm into themes and partnerships that help gain beneficial public relations and media coverage. An expert understands the advantages to business etiquette and will maneuver the principals through guests, stage photographs of the "right" people together, and will guide the firm through event follow-up activities like thank-you notes and press releases.

Ignoring or deciding that even one facet of the event can be managed outside of the expert's realm will guarantee a less-than-optimal experience. The winners in today's marketing world apply proofreading to everything and consistency to every aspect of a company's image. They utilize charts and schedules for planning, budgets, and accountability, and hire experts or delegate all complicated events-related responsibilities to a detail-oriented, sophisticated, long-term manager. ■

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