PARTNERING:

Your Strategy for Keeping Meeting Costs Down and Quality Up

Low-cost meetings are only the beginning.

BY ED RIGSBEE

The cost of meetings is steadily increasing. A new model has become absolutely necessary for non-profits. This model is partnering—working with suppliers to create solutions that would be impossible alone.Once you begin partnering, you'll think of hundreds of ways this strategy can help fulfill your mission. But getting started takes time, and you can get off on the wrong foot if you're not careful.

Let's say, for example, that you call a hotel and say, "I need a deal." The hotel knows nothing about your organization, doesn't know whether you're offering a worthy piece of business, and thus quotes a high price. You think, "They're not willing to partner with me!"

Partnering doesn't mean asking a supplier to roll over and give you what you want. Rather, partnering is two or more entities discovering a way to do business in which synergy is created and both get close to (but rarely all of) what they want. There are two key elements in partnering for successful meetings:

1. Understand what your supplier needs.

A recent survey of meeting suppliers found that the most important way for an organization to save money is to be flexible. For example:

• **To partner with airlines, have your meeting** in a city where an airline is trying to build business. A meeting there can mean discounts on tickets and vouchers for restaurants and movies. In addition to the customary, 1-free-with-40

Five Steps to Partnering

The partnering philosophy goes well beyond meetings. Partner with all your suppliers to gain lower costs and higher quality. Here are the steps to take:

1. Monitor. Observe your organization, and identify areas for improvement. Take inventory of core strengths that might be valuable to a partner.

2. Educate. Learn about companies you might consider for partnering arrangements. Ask yourself: What are their strengths and weaknesses? What effect would they have on our organization? What effect would we have on their business?

3. Select. This step is critical, because all your future efforts are built on this foundation. Search for the strongest materials for your partnering foundation. Select with knowledge and commitment.

4. Organize. Now you're to the point of identifying and putting together the possibilities for an alliance. This will be not only your partnering structure but also your road map. Plan it well.

5. Charter. Put your agreement on paper. Each party's written commitment will smooth a path through the bumpy road of partnering. Your charter should explain conflict resolution, as Murphy's Law is sure to emerge. Be ready for it and the conflict will be resolved amiably.

The Nine Critical Qualities in Selecting an Alliance Partner

Good partners have the following qualities:

1. They want to win. There's no reason to partner with a loser. You and your partner must both want to improve yourselves continually.

2. They understand the value of synergy. They know when partnering is and isn't the best choice for success.

3. They are active listeners. To truly keep in touch with the heartbeat of an alliance, active listening is critical. It helps both partners know if problems are developing or if people are falling behind in their commitment. Alertness from both sides equals mutual success.

4. They understand and care about what drives their partner. Both partners must consistently give added-value to the relationship. Regular "relationship-bank" deposits are required before withdrawals are possible. Good partners add value by knowing what their allies consider valuable.

5. They respond well to feedback and act on it. The only possibility for forward movement occurs when leaders are willing to accept counsel. None of us is smart enough to know it all! If so, there wouldn't be a need for partnering.

6. They are flexible, especially when things don't go as expected.

7. They trust and respect others.

8. They seek win-win arrangements and solutions.

9. They understand that partnering is a relationship of interdependence, not dependence or independence. Visualize your partner and yourself as partially overlapping circles. The overlapping parts of the circles are your areas of mutual value. The greater the overlap, the greater the value. This overlapping area is your area of interdependence. Working together for mutual improvement is the great benefit received from partnering.

The Five Magic Values

At the foundation of every successful partnership are five core values. Integrate these values into your relationships and you have created magic!

1. Trust is the glue that binds a relationship. When you trust, you're putting yourself at risk. Taking risks is necessary to build relationships and move from inertia to action.

2. Tolerance is the ability to accept an idea without caring who conceived it. For partnering to work, this core value must be cherished by everyone involved.

3. Cooperation allows participants to accomplish far more than each could alone. Cooperation leads to growth.

4. Commitment to the partnership is what smooths the potholes on the road to success. It's this element that allows both partners to voice their opinions and remain safe from criticism.

5. Synergy allows two dissimilar organisms, such as a nonprofit and for-profit, to create a close association that's advantageous to both. This belief in mutual good is what makes marriage succeed. As in marriages, synergy doesn't just happen; it takes work. But the rewards can be immense.

policy, airlines often have special zone fares. They may also offer free site-inspection tickets.

- **Book your meeting** during low season (Palm Springs in August) and save plenty. Having your meeting just before or after regional holidays can also save you money because the hotel might be empty during that time.
- **End your daytime meetings** at 3:00 or 4:00 rather than 5:00 p.m. and the hotel can sell the room for an evening event, again saving you money.
- **Call other service providers** to see how to partner with them to save costs. For instance, few companies pay retail for their audio-visual equipment. The industry works on retail discounts similar to the office furniture industry.
- **Consider what you might offer speakers** instead of money. If the speaker has written a book, for example, you might require all meeting attendees to buy a copy.
- **Be willing to give** a multi-year commitment. Give partners something they can take to their bankers to obtain the capital necessary to gear up for your needs.

Ten Tips to Outrageously Successful Alliances

1. **Behave toward alliance partners** as you'd like them to behave toward you.
2. **Remember, it's more important** to be a good partner and get things done than to obsess on being right.
3. **Make relationship-bank deposits** before you try to make withdrawals.
4. **Share value updates** with your partner.
5. **Know** what your partner needs.
6. **Be clear about what you want** from your alliance relationship and what you're willing to give to it.
7. **Be committed,** and show your passion for your alliance.
8. **Do more** for your partner than you promised.
9. **Resolve conflict** immediately.
10. **Keep in mind that you can't partner** with someone who doesn't want to be a good partner.

2. Build your organization's reputation and performance history.

If you don't have a track record, how can you expect suppliers to partner with you? They are in business to make money, and most have already been burned. Relationships take time to build and no time to burn. Choose suppliers that are partnerable (some are not capable of partnering), take time to build relationships with them, and accept that partnering isn't instant gratification. Help your meeting suppliers get what they need, and they'll help you get what you need. Do this and your meetings will be cost effective and of the highest quality. ■

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