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**ONLY
IN
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FRANK SINATRA said it in his classic tune, *New York, New York*. “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere.” Big Apple event planners know just what old blue eyes means. There may be no place in the world with a more challenging and demanding—yet rewarding and exhilarating—special events and meetings industry. Indeed, it takes a unique set of skills to “make it there” so in this month’s roundtable, we ask four local industry vets to weigh in on how to survive and thrive as a professional planner in the city that doesn’t sleep. Here, the low-down on the organizations, skills, contacts, tools and strategies they lean on to keep pace with the vibrant scene that is... New York, New York.

How do you keep up with all of the city’s latest and greatest trends and best practices?

Debra Donhert: I attend industry events such as the Events Solutions Conference & Tradeshow in partnership with Catersource, which attracts over 5,000 attendees and 800 exhibitors and shares industry news, event tips and strategies and trends. I also frequent 7 W New York, a home accents building featuring products from a variety of categories, including home décor, tabletop, giftware, textiles and decorative accessories. These top showrooms set the trends, raise the bar and attract top-notch retailers who are making the buying decisions for the finest specialty shops and largest department stores in the nation. I also go to classes held there on a variety of subjects taught by industry greats. I belong to NCA (National Caterers Association) to keep abreast of the latest in culinary design and food presentation and I have a

membership at the James Beard Foundation.

Kimberly Marenus: I subscribe to mailing lists for publications and sign up for newsletters and alerts for various websites. I also try to get up to speed on business, global events and trends. Information can become outdated within months, so networking becomes important during periods of rapid change. Insight from colleagues on what worked and did not work is invaluable.

Where is the best place to network?

Dohnert: I am fortunate to be a member and vice president of an organization called The Council of Protocol Executives (COPE). COPE membership provides access to premier vendors, unique venues and special event networking opportunities. It’s a professional, nonprofit organization comprised of me and women throughout the world who coordinate special events and high-level meetings for corporation governments and major nonprofit institutions. Its purpose is to set a standard of excellence for the industry. COPE also serves as a valuable resource for information ranging from facilities and suppliers to issues and trends as they evolve in this demanding profession.

Lauren Pinsker Kushner: I have attended the Financial and Insurance Meeting Planning Conference, which I found extremely helpful for networking. I also get invited to receptions at different venues around the city. Not only is this helpful for seeing new spaces, but usually the guests are event planners. It’s a great place to network in a casual atmosphere.

This is a business where your reputation precedes everything else. Clients hire only those they think they can trust to deliver their vision and make the meeting a success.

Kimberly Marenus

Marenus: Event planning is a business where networking counts. It allows you to meet and know people who may refer business to you or use your service themselves. Networking with hotels, caterers and other venues will give you a chance to meet people whose services you may need as time goes on. Participation in industry meetings, professional organizations and community and social gatherings can expose you to potential customers who may need assistance in the planning of social events or corporate meetings. I recommend LinkedIn, joining associations and social networking.

How important is continued professional development, through conferences, expos and other educational outlets, to a New York City event planner?

Dohner: Extremely important, as you can see from all the memberships and training I do continually. We must constantly reinvent ourselves and become invaluable to our organizations. I work for the Office of the President so being knowledgeable on a variety of subjects and ahead of the curve is mandatory.

Kushner: I think it is very important to continue professional development. I have met many contacts at meeting planner conferences. By attending different industry events and receptions at restaurants it helps to build and maintain relationships in New York City, as well as the rest of the country.

Marenus: Participating in conferences and networking events can help you keep up in the ever-changing world of corporate meetings and events. Seminars and webcasts are a great way to keep up with social trends. Time is at a premium, so you should focus on events that deliver instructional value. New York tradeshows, such as Best Events and BizBash, are wonderful resources. It's important to keep up with new ideas and be exposed to new developments as things change in the industry.

For those planners just starting to navigate the New York event scene, how do you suggest they find the resources they need and connect to their peers?

Kate Edmonds: Depending on which part of the event industry they are in, attending expos and salons are a great way to obtain resources and meet people in the industry. I have not found a professional organization that totally suits me yet, however.

Marenus: Join LinkedIn and Facebook. Do online research and get involved with charitable organizations. Charity fundraisers are a wonderful way to see all aspects of event planning so you may want to join an organization and become involved with their philanthropic endeavors.

How do you find your clients? Any tips on maintaining strong relationships with them?

Dohner: I have maintained relationships with vendors

for the last 15 years. A mix of professionalism, personality, kindness, honesty and loyalty is important. I follow the old adage: treat people the way you want to be treated.

Edmonds: My clients are my friends and my friends are my clients. Word of mouth is everything.

Kushner: I have found my clients through friends and by networking. I am always resourceful and reaching out to people I know, whether it's personally or through business. I maintain my client relationships by keeping in touch with them throughout the year, even if their event has already happened. I think it is important to stay in constant contact with past and current clients. You never know if they are going to have a future project where they need an event planner.

Marenus: This is a business where your reputation precedes everything else. Clients hire only those they think they can trust to deliver their vision and make the meeting a success. Send referrals: there's no reason why you can't refer others to your clients' businesses—good karma always comes back. If you encounter someone who could benefit from a client's product or service, make the introduction.

Preserving relationships is good for future business as well as making the project more enjoyable. Learn the clients' interests and send updates to key clients from time to time to help keep the relationships alive. If you come across an article or interesting item that a client would benefit from, send it along with a note. Make connections and stay in touch through social networks. Relationship building is another facet of the job and will enhance your chance for future work.

What are the greatest challenges you face planning events in New York?

Edmonds: Planning events in New York used to be such creative fun for me as a top planner. However, in recent years caterers and spaces have made financial arrangements with different vendors, which negated a lot of the fun of choosing your own vendors in order to create the story that you want for your client.

Kushner: The greatest challenge I face when planning events in New York City is staying within a budget; New York is one of the most expensive cities in the country. My clients prefer the most popular and best restaurants, which usually are the most expensive. Over the years, I have made and maintained many contacts within the industry. Once you have a good relationship with an event planner at a venue, it makes it easier to negotiate rates.

Marenus: Here are a few challenges: shorter and shorter lead times; missing information provided by companies at the time the request is made—such as basic things like timing, group size, preferred dates and budget; and “urgent” unrealistic turnaround times and delays from decision makers. Also, there is a lack of large venue spaces here in New York, and there is a

“perception” factor of holding meetings in certain venues.

There's no shortage of event spaces here in the city. How do you go about finding new and unique venues to hold your events? Any recent examples you can detail for us?

Edmonds: As you walk the streets of New York, keep your eyes and ears open. Read everything. Be aware of new openings and closings; the perfect space is indeed a difficult thing to find. **Kushner:** I subscribe to different emails and blogs about restaurants and venues around the city such as Daily Candy, Thrillist, Urban Daddy and Restaurant Girl. I also read the *New York Times* and *New York Magazine* restaurant reviews each week. Many of these resources offer information before new spaces or venues are open. I try to do a site visit as soon as a new space opens.

Marenius: It's all about research. Search databases and trade magazines and tour new spaces; though you may not have an immediate need, it's always good to keep it on your radar. Think beyond the ballroom—think more quirky, unusual properties, such as concert halls, football stadiums and universities. There are also

lots of new hotels. The W hotel and The Standard Hotel have opened skating rinks on their rooftops. New hotels such as the Eventi and the Setai are changing neighborhoods by making an old area trendy. Trump SoHo created the tallest building in SoHo and has fantastic views.

What would you say are the most indispensable skills that a New York event planner must possess and master in order to be successful?

Dohner: Trust your intuition, remain calm under pressure and don't be afraid to ask for assistance.

Edmonds: The single skill that you must have besides good ears and eyes is tenacity.

Kushner: I think any event planner should be organized and detail-oriented. I follow up on each of my projects at the end of every day to make sure I am on top of everything for the start of the next day. Since New York has so many different restaurants, hotels and venue spaces, it's very important to be on top of any new openings around the city.

Marenius: Event planners work long and non-traditional hours to plan and execute all details related to a wide variety of meetings. Successful planners need to be proficient in organization, multi-tasking and time management. Planners should be calm and personable under pressure. Strong negotiation skills and budget management is a true asset. Most importantly, a corporate planner is efficient, creative, driven and detail-oriented.

As far as technology goes, what could you not live without?

Dohner: My BlackBerry 4G and, for longer trips, my computer.

Edmonds: Of course I have the iPhone and iPad, but hands down we at Kate Edmonds Events all agree: our favorite gizmo is the label maker.

Kushner: My BlackBerry, since that's how I am constantly in touch with my clients, even when I am on-site at an event. It is very important to be accessible at all times for your clients.

Marenius: A smartphone and laptop. I'm constantly checking email and using Google for research on-the-go.

When you're being asked to monitor budgets, what are some of your best cost-saving tips for planning events in New York?

Dohner: You must communicate effectively and honestly. Share your budget; don't be afraid to ask for more, but you need to be realistic.

Lighting has been a cost-saver for me for some events—ask what they own, so you don't have to rent.

Kushner: It is helpful to get all-inclusive packages when booking an event, whether for a small dinner or for a large group. If you can get the alcohol included, this is especially helpful. Also, if you can negotiate with the venue to get the room fee waived or the food and beverage minimum lowered, this will cut costs as well.

Marenius: Almost everything is negotiable. Ask the venue if they can reduce costs. This seems like an obvious tip, but it never hurts to try. Even a small savings of one or two percent can add up to be noteworthy. A great way to save on costs is to be flexible about the dates for your event—it can score major savings. Do your homework and know what competitor rates are before negotiating. Use lighting to create atmosphere. Limit alcoholic beverages; fully hosted bars with top shelf liquor are out—the smarter alternative is to include a signature drink or to limit options to beer and wine.

Rather than ordering bottles of water, have water pitchers placed throughout the room. Instead of a sit-down dinner, make it a lunch; or, hold a reception with heavy appetizers. Look for speakers who don't have to travel far to get to your event, or “piggy back” on speakers doing other events nearby at the same time.

Are you excited about any recent developments in the Big Apple event world?

Dohner: The City of New York has launched nygo.com, an uber-mashup information hub to help tourists and New Yorker's locate attractions, hotels, events and restaurants. The site is accessible via iPhone, smartphones and other mobile devices. There is also venuesonline.com; pogby.com, blogby.net and dineprivate.com

Edmonds: I think the Big Apple continues to provide some of the world's best food and beverage. I enjoy every moment of traveling around the island and tweeting and posting photos about all of my discoveries.

Marenius: There are Wii games, iPads and numerous mobile meeting apps that allow space layouts, menus, charts and more. Apps contain everything from maps, to schedules to registration forms to local city guides. Event planning apps can save links to websites containing information, making everything concise and easily obtainable. It's also exciting to see new properties and renovations that are introducing chic, brandable spaces, like Andaz hotels' communal kitchen and lounge and the Lambs Club New York in the theatre district. 🍷



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