

| HOW TO: CHOOSE AN EVENT PLANNER |

Event planners should provide ideas and inspiration

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Anyone tasked with organizing even a small-scale event knows that the list of details to be managed is seemingly never-ending. It's little wonder then that when it comes to business events — large-scale meetings, holiday parties, conferences and the like — businesses often turn to professional event planners for help.

"A large portion of what a planner brings is to be able to take that stress level off the client," said Mary Coch, a partner with Corinthian Events LLC in Boston, which gets 80 percent of its business from area corporations.

Event planners also know through experience that even subtle changes can dramatically change the look and feel of an event. For instance, simply changing the seating from round tables to high tables with stools, or bringing soft seating into a room or opting for table service instead of buffet can alter an event significantly.

"Planners are the conductor for your symphony," said Johannah Galgovitch, a professional planner and co-founder of Portland, Maine-based Eventective Inc., which helps planners select locations for their events.

The best planners, she added, bring a host of skills and qualities, including "dependability, reliability, poise and calm under pressure," as well as "excellent organizational skills." In short, "someone who can charm a snake and hold a firm line," she said.

The best planners are also idea people, said Bryan Rafanelli, the CEO of Boston-

FAST FACTS

An even planner should be poised and perform well under pressure.

With today's uncertain economy, many businesses are delaying their decisions on events longer.

Be sure to leverage your planner's relationships with hotels, caterers and other vendors.

based Rafanelli Events Management Inc., which organizes special events up and down the East Coast for clients such as the Institute of Contemporary Art and wealthy individuals.

"They should be inspirational," said Rafanelli.

While there are myriad details to consider — from how the flower arrangements look to how people are greeted when they arrive — events boil down to basics such as food, location, lighting and technology.

"A planner should be able to drill into every category and try to look at what the next step is," he said.

Even something as simple as a tent for an outdoor event can be transformed from the mundane, as in the case of a recent event for the Harvard Art Museums held in a glass-walled tent that enabled visitors to look across Harvard Yard at the Fogg Museum.

Event planners prefer to work with a two to six month window to plan events well, but most are able to pull together programs on short notice.

The current economic uncertainty has caused some businesses to delay decisions

on events longer, Coch said. "The stronger the economy is, the further out the planning starts."

Businesses are also more mindful now of the messages an event sends, and may be more inclined to choose a less showy, flashy approach. "Perception is a big thing. Sometimes you're in a budget-cut year and you don't want to appear like an event's been overdone, but still want a lovely event to reward employees," Coch said.

Trends also play a role in the way events come together, she said. "It seems like people have been getting tired of stuffy black-tie and want things a little fresher and more casual," she said.

Working with a planner also means leveraging their relationships with hotels, caterers and other vendors, said **Jennessa Durrani**, the president of Andover-based event-planning firm **Celebrate**. "An experienced planner is working on numerous events at any given time and that can be an asset to their clients," **Durrani** said.

While attention to detail is important, **Durrani** said many events end up being somewhat vanilla because the "flair" is left out of the equation, she said.

"A planner can bring the value-adds and fresh ideas to an annual event to keep the sizzle," she said.

Different clients want different levels of involvement in the event-planning process, so finding a planner who agrees with whatever approach is chosen is a key factor.

"Some people want to be involved in how an event looks and feels, but most of them are looking for someone to take on most of the headaches and legwork that comes with the territory," said Coch.