

DON'T LET A FEAR OF COMMITMENT

now pronounce you

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MEETING PLANNERS AND SUPPLIERS SOMETIMES COMPARE THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO MARRIAGE. A long-lasting bond relies on communication, flexibility, respect, common goals and a sense of humor. When all these characteristics align, the connection turns into a productive partnership, just like a good marriage.

¶ Sometimes the relationship starts out in a frantic atmosphere, much like speed dating, with rapid-fire questions and little time to develop a rapport. Other times the planner and supplier are introduced by a mutual friend who knows they share the same interests, goals and values. And sometimes the happy couple just hears good things about one another and gets together to see if there's good chemistry. ¶ The courtship phase is usually brief. After all, meeting planners and suppliers know what they want and don't dilly-dally about popping the question. And what about the honeymoon? Superfluous. Meeting planners and suppliers set up house immediately. If all goes well, the union will be a long and happy one with many events to share along the way. ¶ The outcome of your meetings and events—not to mention how much you enjoy your job—often depends on the strength of this symbiotic relationship.

KEEP YOU FROM A LASTING PARTNERSHIP WITH YOUR SUPPLIER

Nolan has seen set-up crews leap into action when extra diners show up, seamlessly adding tables, chairs and utensils so quickly that most attendees aren't even aware of the shortage.

Just as newlyweds learn to mesh their living styles, meeting industry professionals need to approach the partnership with a spirit of compromise and flexibility. Each side of the planner/supplier partnership has its own set of expectations, budgets to meet, clients to satisfy and reputations to maintain. If all partners face negotiations with a spirit of cooperation and flexibility, satisfaction will reign.

RODNEY DANGERFIELD NOT ALLOWED

"I think mutual respect goes a long way in making events run smoothly," says Sue Stanwood, director of conventions for the Professional Insurance Agents Western Alliance, based in Vancouver, Wash. "I choose hotels that have great service and know how to do their job. They do not need me telling them what to do and how to do it."

Stanwood adds that she makes a special effort to treat the banquet captains, set-up crews and servers well, and they respond in kind. Everyone needs to know their service is valued, and most people proudly rise to expectations. Stanwood goes one step further to smooth the relationship: She's been known to roll up her sleeves, change into tennis shoes and pitch in to help with set-up or tear-down.

Sheri Nolan adds that once she is on site, personal contact is important to her. "The little extra effort it takes for the facility manager to come by and say hi, check how things are going and ask if they can get anything for us is huge for me." Respect, apparently, is good for the goose and the gander.

VIVA LA DIFFERENCE

His ideal vacation is a hunting lodge in the middle of nowhere. She prefers a beachside resort with a luxurious spa. Give him a cold beer, in the can, and she'll take a mimosa. He says potatoes and she says poh-tah-toes - let's call the whole thing off. Not so fast. Even though both seem to be going in different directions, they really do share common goals. The same is true in the meetings industry. Everyone wants to do a superb job, stick to budget, satisfy the attendees and walk away with their reputations intact.

Susan Troy remembers the time she arrived at a meeting hall just two hours ahead of vendors expecting to set up their trade show booths. To her dismay, the 80,000-

square-foot exhibit hall was set with enough banquet rounds to seat 800 people. When the facility manager was informed of the error, tables were removed in record time and the trade show went on without a hitch.

Corine Cooper sits on both sides of the planner-supplier fence as dining manager at El Gaucho restaurant in Seattle, where she coordinates dozens of weddings and receptions a year.

"A wedding or a large event can involve transportation, a band and disc jockeys, audio-visual, catering, staffing and hotel rooms, as well as multiple décor elements like florists and rentals," Sue says. "Details can get crazy."

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Imagine the mounting chaos when the florist wants to set up flowers at noon, but the rental tables that will hold the arrangements aren't coming in until 2 p.m., the venue staff is planning to set the room at 4 p.m., and the cake that the florist must put flowers on will arrive at 5 p.m. If the suppliers are in the dark as to what activities will be swirling around their particular piece of the equation, they have no way of knowing they might need to adjust their schedules. Communication, as always, is the key to a happy partnership.

"Planning leading up to and the day of the event can be hectic and chaotic," says Sara Sexton-Johnson, director of the office of continuing education and professional advancement at Eastern Washington University. "It's important to maintain a sense of humor. Things can always be worked out if you have created open lines of communication and an established relationship."

Once the last trade show booth has been dismantled or the flow charts and dry eraser boards are packed, it's time to debrief. Hopefully you have collected end-of-event surveys from delegates; use them to help you determine what you did well and what you can improve on next time. And don't forget to get feedback from your suppliers.

Above all, celebrate the end of the project with your team, including your suppliers, and they'll be eager to get hitched up with you next time. 🍷