

Avoiding Convention Planning Nightmares

Happy franchisees are your best advocates for future growth... a dream come true.

BY MELISSA MIHELICH AND KIM REYNOLDS, CMP, CMM

... You're lost in the void of a desolate, forgotten hotel ballroom. Someone...no, something is chasing you! You try to run, but your feet move in slow motion against a swirling mass of worn neon carpet. Over your head, dusty chandeliers sway in a chorus of clanks and creaks that drown any desperate cries for help. In a snap, you're swarmed by a flock of giant, man-eating dollar signs and vampire-like calendars. As they nip at your neck and pocketbook, your eye catches an even scarier sight. Thousands of trucks filled with melting event materials. All backed up in a mile-long line at a single, empty truck dock.

... Suddenly, the scene transforms. The ballroom is filled to capacity plus one. Angry attendees demand food and entertainment. Then a loud BOOM! Sparks fly as pricey video screens go dark and the floor buckles, spilling you and hundreds of meeting guests into a bottomless pit of despair.

Wake up! It's all just a bad dream. Was it the extra peppers at dinner or perhaps, just maybe, the stress of convention planning is finally catching up with you. Relax. You're not alone. Being responsible for the myriad of details that go into a successful convention is enough to bring on nightmares that make Little Bo Peep look like the bogeyman.

The purpose for any marketing plan is to allow your franchisees to succeed and your business to grow. Your convention is an important strategic tool. Not only does it reinforce your company's mission, a winning convention also builds excitement for new products, provides training, and communicates operational, sales, and marketing initiatives. It's also an opportunity to inspire and motivate franchisees by recognizing outstanding performance in the field.

The goal is a successful event that creates ROI, but even if your team or committee is skilled and resourceful, there's no guarantee you will meet 100 percent of your objectives. Mistakes do happen and sometimes, they threaten to damage your image and negatively impact your bottom line. Here are a few examples of hidden pitfalls and how you can turn potential nightmares into a dream come true.



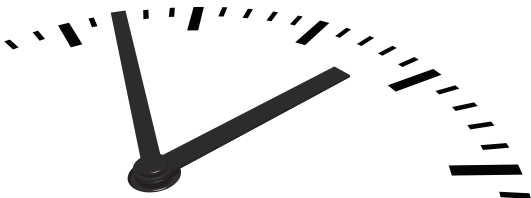
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You've Exceeded Your Budget

The value of face-to-face meetings is not to be taken lightly. This is an opportunity to build stronger, more meaningful relationships with franchisees and evaluate their reaction to new initiatives. But how do you put a price on something so valuable, yet so intangible? What is a realistic budget for your convention and even more important, how do you avoid exceeding that budget?

Careful planning and development of realistic expectations will save a lot of heartache and frustration. First, it's important to determine your objectives: engagement, leadership, training, inspiration and or recognition.

Next, estimate costs associated with planning and execution. Determine how many attendees you expect, then research venue costs, catering, décor, production, printing, gifts, transportation, and more. Knowing what is negotiable with vendors is key to successful budget management. An experienced meeting professional and production company can leverage buying power and often save you lots of time and money. Additionally, practice effective fiscal management early and often. Inform vendors of your budget at the top. It's much easier to keep things on track when everyone knows the numbers before the project kicks in versus trying to correct them later.



Tick Tock... You're Running Out of Time

Be sure to start off on the right foot and allow your team to succeed. Never underestimate the power of a timeline and effective project management. An

annual convention is a major undertaking. Allowing sufficient time to thoughtfully develop and execute a plan could mean the difference between a well-rehearsed keynote presentation and an embarrassed executive. Six to nine months is not uncommon.

Give yourself ample time to determine meaningful takeaways and supplemental materials, outline program agendas, write scripts, implement an online convention landing page and registration system, and to work with a stage design team to create a set that reinforces your theme and brand.

As you plan, always keep your audience front of mind. Knowing what your audience values will determine direction. Often, requesting input from franchisees helps drive your agenda and provides opportunities for buy-in and valuable feedback before you spend thousands on the wrong key elements.

Making changes to the direction of the program after the fact will tack on overtime and will run your budget ragged in no time. Often, vendors charge a premium to rush production of creative materials and onsite vendors may bill an hourly rate. If your plan includes a lot of script revisions, presentation development and unnecessary rehearsals onsite, expect overtime.

You Have More People Than Space

Attendees are complaining they can't see or hear from behind a column, or they simply can't find a seat. These are not the kind of fond memories you want them to take away from the event. Think about the convention from your attendee's point of view. Does the venue provide a positive experience? Is it appropriate for your event and your brand? Will it provide the optimal setting to communicate your message?

Often, the preferred hotel brand is not the best fit for a group. Involve your production company in the site decision process and conduct thorough site inspections. Base your decision on facts, not brand loyalty. It's always a good idea to contact the local convention and visitor's bureau where your meeting will take place. They're a trusted source of information on meeting sites, preferred vendors, restaurants and fun things to do in the city during downtime.

Your Staff is Forced to Pay a Drayage Penalty

You're fined because your video vendor disconnected a cable. Work stops on your general session setup due to a dispute between two unions about who has the right to assemble the stage chase lights. And the list goes on.

Before you sign a contract with the selected venue, ask if it has labor union contracts and in which areas they work. Union labor contracts can be very complicated, and will vary from venue to venue. Here is where a skilled third-party negotiator will work to your advantage by saving you time and money. They know how to address labor issues, how to interpret the rules and avoid fines and penalties.

Ask about labor union contracts before you sign a contract.

Developing and maintaining a schedule to avoid overtime is critical. Expect increased fees when labor works for more than eight hours, or weekends and holidays. Plan ahead. Think about labor unions prior to setting your event date.

You Don't Have Trusted Partners or Support

Outsource vendors provide expertise, experience, budget control, creative ideas and in some cases, cost-reducing solutions. Finding experienced vendors who best meet your needs and collaborate effectively will ensure your event goes off without a hitch. From production to catering, choose vendors who will work with you, help you strategize and problem solve while meeting your budget parameters.

Vendor management problems are often the result of poorly defined parameters. Set clear-cut expectations up front. Ask the right questions. What have you done that is similar to our project? What projects are you currently working on? Write the proper RFP, communicate your budget, and request proof of insurance for those vendors working onsite.

Know when to outsource and keep in mind that your vendors are a reflection of your organization.

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A Few Final Thoughts

Understand the message your annual convention sends to attendees. Thoughtful, meticulous and careful planning, from venue selection to setting the stage for executive presentations, will leave a lasting, positive impression. Your audience may not remember every word spoken, but they will remember how you made them feel. Happy franchisees are your best advocates for future growth ... a dream come true. ■

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Expect the Unexpected

Emergency plans provide reasonable assurance that adequate measures will be taken if something should go seriously wrong onsite. While uncommon, injuries, hurricanes, fires, tornados or flooding are not impossible. Have an emergency management plan in place should your audience need to evacuate the venue.

Devise a company-designated policy and know how to implement it when you don't have access to normal resources. Your plan should include, but not be limited to reporting emergencies, emergency contacts, first aide, evacuation procedures, venue and company contacts, attendee information, and a clear chain of command.

Additionally, your plan should include mitigation for health and public safety. Identify potential hazards upfront. You want to ensure that no one falls and nothing falls on anyone. This applies to electrical cables, décor, staging, and more.

It's time to expect more.

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