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## Illinois Industry Pros Speak Out



Get a diverse group of meetings professionals in a room and there is plenty to talk about. While budgets are still tight, things are definitely looking up, thanks to increased efforts from all areas of the industry to improve service quality and provide better experiences for clients.

Members of IME's editorial advisory board met in the spring to share stories, talk shop and connect on a variety of issues facing the industry today. Included in the stellar group were: Mollie Cole (Hodge Schindler Communications); Donna Collins (Total Event Resources); Heidi Edinger (at that time with the Talbott Hotel, now with the Fort Worth Convention & Visitors Bureau); Victoria Johnson (Underwriters Laboratories); Randy Pluta (Hotel Orrington); Lise Puckorius (SmithBucklin); and Maureen Riedy (Lake County CVB). Here are some highlights of the discussion:

### Making it Personal

**BELINDA CLARKE:** Let's talk a little about personalization and how making an effort can aid in relationship building

with clients and customers.

**DONNA COLLINS:** I feel it's very important that you not only recognize the importance of electronic communication, but that we recognize the importance of personal communication as well. Even though you're e-mailing back and forth, it's important to pick up the phone and to hear the inflections and the tone of the voice of the people you're talking to so you can start to develop that relationship, that rapport.

**RANDY PLUTA:** We all say the personal touch in relationships is important, but saying it and doing it are two different things, and I come from Donna's school. When there's an event, I write thank-you notes. I've always done that. "Thank you for choosing us. It was great working with you." Maybe a little old-fashioned—and my handwriting is very sloppy!—but I still do it that way.

**DONNA COLLINS:** I take the time after programs to write a note, a handwritten note to our clients and to all the suppliers. We work in a lot of hotels and special events and in the corporate communications business. The people behind the scenes that nobody ever sees, those are the people that I try to write a letter to, the waitstaff and the housemen and the bellmen, because a lot of people don't take the time to say thank you. If you don't make a difference to the people that you're encountering on a day-to-day basis, then why do it? You know, sure, we all have tasks and we all have meetings and we all have events and we have absolutely everything that we need to accomplish, but it's important to write that note.

**MAUREEN RIEDY:** I think that a lot of the younger people feel like they're interrupting if they make a phone call versus an e-mail where the person can respond in the time they want. And I think is that especially true with meeting planners, because some planners don't want to take the phone call because it is disruptive. So not that I'm defending that action all the time, because I agree with the personal touch. Then again, if you make a phone call, you know, there's no record of it.

### What do Planners Want?

**BELINDA CLARKE:** What is it that meeting planners are asking for these days? It's always fun to hear.

**RANDY PLUTA:** For me the goal is to keep it simple and easy. For example, we have "the complete meeting package" where you don't have to pick your lunch, you don't have to pick your breaks, it's all there. And it changes seven days a week, you're not having the same brownies every day. So you sign the contract, we take care of everything, simple, and that's what more and more people like. However, when we first opened our hotel with the complete meeting package no one really knew what that was and

they were like, "What do you mean I can't pick out my lunch?" Now they're like, "Well, you're taking care of this for me, right?" "Oh, yeah." So I think that's what I find.

MOLLIE COLE: Well, it's always about the service, I think. Because it's so competitive right now, more than ever it's about delivering what the customer really wants, and in some cases that's customized services, it's upscale amenities, and in other cases it's just down and dirty, keep it simple. So I guess the bottom line is really being flexible and transparent in terms of what the client wants.

DONNA COLLINS: Well, we try to make it seamless when we work with clients so that if they have asked us to work with their A/V and their staging and their production, we have one person that's designated to work just with the client for the whole thing from soup to nuts. If we have a lot of people behind the scenes working, we just make it seamless to the client. And it is about service.

### **Hotel Rates Up, Meeting Lead Times Down**

BELINDA CLARKE: I have heard a lot of you say today that money and budgeting is still very much an issue.

HEIDI EDINGER: Last year we finally had the correction after 2001—9/11, that day—that we've been waiting for for five years, and the market just came back and the rooms started happening again. And because that was going on, the hotels subsequently started raising rates—raised them and raised them and raised them! We averaged an increase of \$60 to \$80 on room rates in 2006 alone. And it's continued to go up this year, and so I think what we're finding is that planners are having to do more and more meetings, and their budgets haven't increased but the rooms rates have gone up so exponentially across the board that we're still having that kind of—you know, people are killing each other to try and get these meetings into the hotels, and planners are having to pay the dollars and they're having to find it somewhere, so they're still cutting back on extra food and beverage.

DONNA COLLINS: We find that the lead time to the projects that we're doing is less and less, and I don't know if it's because people are so overwhelmed with projects that they're doing that they are back to back to back, that you don't have the luxury of taking the time to think ahead. So that really has changed how we work in our office, because we have to think much faster, the research has to be done much quicker and turned around quicker. And that creates pressure on people and on the quality of work that we're used to giving to our clients. You know, if you don't give your people enough time to do quality work, then they're turning around something really quickly and it's not what we're used to turning around. So we have to balance the speed with the quality, and that's a challenge.

VICTORIA JOHNSON: I took a session from ConferenceDirect that talked about how the room rates are up and the demand is up because after 9/11 no hotels were on the books to be built, and there's about a five-year turnaround from inception to actually having it built. So as a result, the inventory is down right now, but then our economy is doing well, so then, you know, the demand is up. So that's why, from my perspective as a planner, it's the worst time for me to be helping out ad hoc planners to say, "I'm giving you a good deal." And I also run into the time thing too, and from my perspective it is because they aren't thinking about it, it's just their boss says, "Let's have a meeting," and it's next week. And not only do they want me to do it quickly, but they want me to do it cheaply.

LISE PUCKORIUS: A number of hotels today are being built by getting residential lending, so they're not going through commercial lending, which takes longer. That's because they have a mixed use in the hotel, so it's a condo and a hotel, so that they can get the revenues [from both]. So they can secure those rates, they don't have to negotiate with the hotel room rates. They can lock in a solid higher rate because their base revenue is really with the condos. And that you're seeing in other major cities, and now it's just moving into major metropolitan suburban areas. So you're finding out how quick from a buying perspective, with an added expectation from us—meaning we're getting requests to be quick on the dime, and those partners who respond, because some say, "I can't make the turn, I can't respond to you quickly."

RANDY PLUTA: I've found this past year it's not so much the high rates, they don't balk at that, but, "What do I get for that?" The added value, "What are you going to throw in for the rate? What are you going to throw in for the meeting?" Like free parking. They're very educated, especially from—I think it all started with 9/11, the whole haggling and everyone just was sort of begging for business. And it's totally our fault, I think. And nobody was coming into the city, nobody was traveling. So I think we did it to ourselves, looking back at it. Everyone was dropping their rate. Maybe should have just left the rate, ride the storm out—because now I think the room rates are so high to make up for the last two years that we were down.

LISE PUCKORIUS: And to your point, it is our fault. The airline industry has done a phenomenal job teaching "Joe Flyer" that no matter who's sitting next to him, he might have better rates. We have not done that. But the hotels, specifically the hotel market, have done a terrible job. But in the airline industry, customers are used to somebody flying free at the same time the person in the next seat is paying \$1,500 ticket.

### **Now for the Good Stuff**

BELINDA CLARKE: What are some of the little secrets to how you all are so successful in meeting the needs of your clients?

RANDY PLUTA: It's the little details, evidenced by tons of compliments on our front desk staff also. But you know what the big thing is? A smile. When we opened the hotel, we had one or two people that actually worked in hotels, and the rest were all non-hotel people but they just had the energy, they had the personality.

LISE PUCKORIUS: It's the experience. I mean, you don't go to Starbucks for coffee, right?