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Patrick Glass, President of GEM Hospitality, a top facilitator of incentive programs to major sporting events.

Mitigating Meeting Disruptions

Prepare for the Worst, Expect the Best

By Maura Keller



In this day and age, it seems as though the prospect of a meeting disruption is more a matter of “when” than “if.” And because most disruptions are unpredictable and uncontrollable, it’s of paramount importance that planners evaluate risk for each and every offsite meeting or event.

According to a 2016 Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) study undertaken to determine what was disrupting events and how planners were coping,

found that in the previous 12 months nearly 60 percent of planners had experienced a disruption of at least one event that affected the event’s overall outcome or success.

According to IRF President Melissa Van Dyke, “The two most frequently occurring disruptions are weather-related events (38 percent) and vendor failures (28 percent).” These are also the top two categories of most concern for planners when organizing events.

From an attendee perspective, these disruptions can have a wide and varied impact.

Van Dyke says the biggest impact to a company is the damage it does to its brand in the eyes of the attendee.

“This is especially sensitive when you are bringing together top performers,” Van Dyke says. “In our study, we also found that 43 percent of planners or their companies have experienced one or more disruptions causing a fi-

nancial loss. The amount of the most frequent financial loss fell between \$10,000 and \$99,999.”

Weather and Whether

For Jeffrey P. Broudy, president, United Incentives in Philadelphia, weather and whether have become his organization’s top meeting disruptors for travel programs lately.

As Broudy explains, weather has been a universal disruptor requiring high levels of coordination and communication between United Incentives’ in-house transportation teams and managers to help guests get to their destination with a minimum of friction.

“This disruptor, like all others, requires both advanced planning, active event monitoring, clear client management guidelines and a two-way, multichannel guest communications protocol in place before every program,” Broudy says.

What does Broudy mean by “whether?” Thanks to ubiquitous breaking news alerts, attendees are typically well aware of what’s happening in their meeting destination well in advance — from strikes and civil disturbances, to viral outbreaks and weather events, to spikes in crime and terror attacks.

“The urgency of the breaking news cycle coupled with the perceived threat means guests begin questioning whether they should even attend the event long before the actual program departure dates,” Broudy says. “This can lead to attrition penalties for participa-

tion shortfalls, a decline in anticipatory enthusiasm prior to qualification completion of the incentive program, or (leads attendees to question) the wisdom of management’s selection of the destination.”

For example, two months into the qualification period to earn an incentive trip to Istanbul, the political situation in Turkey deteriorated and was a top story in the U.S. newsfeeds.

“This created uncertainty among the program participants leading to a drop in interest by more than 65 percent, which would cause a huge drop in contracted hotel space,” Broudy says. “Since anticipatory uncertainty is not considered a contractual force majeure event, we negotiated with the hotel’s global marketing arm to move the program location in Istanbul to a sister brand property in Monte Carlo for a modest penalty. The penalty was partially offset by the hotel’s global brand marketing support funds and far less than the expenses of attrition penalties and increased operating costs.”

In another situation, the news about an uptick of drug-related violence in Jamaica’s and Mexico’s resort areas alarmed many potential participants of a scheduled incentive program who then wished to cancel.

To mitigate guest fears, United Incentives’ operations team proactively explained the facts via phone calls and



Jeff Broudy
President
United Incentives
Philadelphia, PA

“We can’t plan what’s coming, but we can plan to be prepared with tools in place to safely handle our guests and staff when it arrives.”

written communication regarding the steps taken by the government, hotels and DMCs to address the situation. In addition, United Incentives informed participants that they would be contacted via their smartphones about real-time incidents, location and coordination in the event of a disruption during their program.

“This proactive communication strategy made the guests more confident, and we experienced less than 1 percent reduction due to the concerns that were alarming them,” Broudy says. “While disruptions from any area can seriously impact safety and have high costs, it can most likely be managed with a good consequence management plan.”

Safety and Security

Since 9/11, terrorism has become part of lives at home and abroad. That’s why for Jodi Brill, chief event officer at BRILLiant Events, the safety of her attendees is paramount and key to choosing a location for a meeting or event.

“Whether in another country or in the U.S., it is important to remind attendees of simple ways to be safe and remain aware of their surroundings,” Brill says. Some helpful tips include: Know where the local police station, hospital or hotel is located; have a cellphone charged at all times; and avoid high-risk areas.

“Health-related situations are always on my mind,” Brill says. “When I first started in the business, I was working a weekend meeting with 350 doctors plus guests, when one of the attendees had



“Onsite visits, pre-planning and research help to ensure things will go smoothly. Having an onsite meeting planner gives your attendees a point person to make them more comfortable.”



Jodi Brill
Chief Event Officer
BRILLiant
Purchase, NY

they required legal protection with vendors only ‘sometimes’ (3.5).”

Broudy says it’s standard practice to establish clear attrition policies, force majeure language, insurance coverages, data security and supplier responsibility, and to have sponsor management contact chains identified, contracted and incorporated as part of the program.

Contacts and Communications

And while there may be hundreds of situations that are disruptive, there are risk management basics that apply to all.

“Having a destination plan identifying the names and contacts of hospitals, clinics, emergency services, supplier emergency leadership and contacts is paramount,” Broudy says. Also he says the creation of a guest status check-in process during a disruption event creates the ability to take a census of status and location of each guest.

guests to reply to the communication with an “OK” or “need assistance.”

“Depending on the situation, instructions are filtered through our team with the support of local authorities to the guests needing help,” Broudy says. A management dashboard within the app is available on our management smartphones and onsite laptops and at our headquarters to quickly identify a library of potential alert scripts and the status of communications with our guests for further action. In this way we’re not starting from scratch, wasting valuable time.”

The United Incentives team also prefers the multichannel communication approach because each channel has its own benefits.

“Texts are perfect for quick, short advice and census messages, especially in the event of cell-tower crowding, which can happen during fast-moving incidents like power failures or catastrophe,” Broudy says. “The ability to email works once we’ve narrowed down the guests



United Incentives uses a guest contact app which allows for two-way communication.

To achieve this, United Incentives uses a guest contact app, which allows for two-way communication using multichannel contact choices: text, email, live one-push conference call or an Application Programming Interface (API) pushing through their event app to communicate a risk or disruption immediately. It also provides a function for

that need additional help; one-touch push conference calls for unique situations requiring dialogue; and an event app redundancy through API.”

Of course, to anticipate and plan for the combinations and permutations of possible disruptions that can be prevented and managed every single day is virtually impossible.

“Since we don’t have a crystal ball, we focus on having tools in place to handle the consequences of a possible event which include: an internal handbook of emergency resources and strategies; understanding of a client’s management hierarchy for decision-making for financial, operational and PR decisions so we know who to reach out to for what; and a communications tool to dialogue with guests for status and locations via their smartphones in real time,” Broudy says. “We can’t plan what’s coming, but we can plan to be prepared

with tools in place to safely handle our guests and staff when it arrives.”

Disruptions and Incentive Travel

Many companies motivate and recognize employee achievements with incentive travel rewards. Incentive trips center on desirable destinations and may include tours and leisure activities. Disruptions such as weather, political unrest or terrorism can ruin the entire program.

“That’s why it is important to review the seasonal changes in any location as

“Having a plan B ready for all major...elements...and knowing how to create VIP experiences out of delays or frustrations is the best way to turn around those pesky disruptions.”

Jennifer Lutz
Independent Event Manager
JLCRO
Decatur, GA

Disruptive Behavior

As a meeting and event planner with more than 25 years of professional industry experience, Greg Jenkins, partner at Bravo Events, has witnessed many meeting disruptions involving rude or inconsiderate attendees. One example he notes was an attendee who hijacked a seminar by talking extensively to the audience about his own experience — leaving the lecturer wondering why the attendee didn’t conduct his own workshop.

“There are other examples to include those individuals who dominate the Q&A, those who arrive extremely late and those who converse with a fellow attendee during the meeting,” Jenkins says. “While we want to believe everyone can demonstrate some degree of etiquette and appropriate behavior in meetings, that may not always be the case.”

Following are some techniques Jenkins has found effective in avoiding or minimizing behavior disruptions.

- Before starting the meeting, announce some ground rules, including silencing mobile devices, refraining from asking questions until all of the information has been presented and requesting that attendees be considerate of others attending the session by refraining from chatting or doing anything that would create a distraction.
- For those attendees inclined to dominate the Q&A, Jenkins suggests that they stay after the session for an extended conversation with the presenter. This allows more time for others to ask questions.
- Starting the session on time demonstrates respect for those attendees who arrive on time. Ask those who arrive late to quietly take a seat in the rear of the room to avoid disrupting the audience.
- For those who talk during the session, depending on the circumstances, Jenkins will politely ask them to take their conversation out of the room as a courtesy for the other attendees.



Greg Jenkins
Partner
Bravo Events
Long Beach, CA

— MK



“While we want to believe everyone can demonstrate some degree of etiquette and appropriate behavior in meetings, that may not always be the case.”

“We heard over two-thirds of our planner respondents say they had switched a destination at least once because of the perceived risk or disruption and over a quarter had switched properties for the same reason.”

Melissa Van Dyke
President
The Incentive Research Foundation
McLean, VA



well as the current political climate and incidence of crime,” Brill says. “Resort areas in Mexico have been hit hard this year with violent crimes, making some think twice before booking. In most cases, incentive travel budgets do not have a lot of wiggle room.”

Brill advises financial and insurance meeting professionals to always have a backup plan. If weather threatens to impact the program, bring attendees in a day early. If the hotel cannot accommodate, find nearby properties to house guests until meeting day.

“Having a good lay of the land for the local area is vital to ensure the success of any program,” Brill says. “Onsite visits, pre-planning and research help to ensure things will go smoothly. Having an onsite meeting planner gives your attendees a point person to make them more comfortable, answer questions, make recommendations and to run the show.”

Unfortunately, some companies looking to cut costs will eliminate the preplanning site inspection and onsite meeting planner. Though it may seem like a cost savings, it actually may end up costing them more.

“Planners can leverage relationships, negotiate for better pricing and terms, and expertly handle logistics,” Brill says. “A good planner will be prepared

for anything. Whether it’s a hotel issue, weather-related or anything else, be ready to think on your feet. Lean on hotel contacts, travel agents and the ground transportation company. They have all had situations in the past that they have learned from, too.”

Independent event manager, Jennifer Lutz, has a wealth of experience planning conferences in the financial services, technology and association sectors. As part of her event planning she puts together a risk management assessment for each event — detailing plans of action for high-risk scenarios related to safety and security, as well as preparing for disruptive scenarios such as speakers not showing up or overselling an event.

“These disruptions definitely impact incentive travel programs — while content preparation is not always a significant factor, weather onsite and impacting travel delays certainly becomes one,” Lutz says.



Plan for the Worst and Expect the Best

Lutz says that while planners cannot prepare for travel delays, they can ease delay frustration by keeping in contact with the arrivals.

“By maintaining a manifest of flight arrivals, for all guests of incentive trips, or VIP guests and speakers for conferences, and tracking their check-ins, a planner can be on top of who may need some extra white-glove service when they arrive,” Lutz says.

For instance, at a recent event, a VIP guest was delayed over 24 hours at an airport. As soon as they arrived onsite Lutz arranged for laundry service to be available to them, along with a complimentary meal and bottle of wine brought to their room. This extra touch made all the difference in smoothing over a delay they experienced in getting to the program.

“Weather is also out of the event planner’s hands, and making sure to have a plan B is key,” Lutz says. “Always, always ask your venue for the alternative plan if weather disrupts an outdoor activity. They should be ready and willing to work with you on one. If weather impacts a meal, be sure to let the hotel restaurant and bar know they can expect a high volume of patronage. They always appreciate a heads-up and can sometimes bring in extra staff to support the unplanned guests.”

Lutz adds that a great planner will always ask “what could go wrong and how can we prepare now?”

“Having a plan B ready for all major programmatic elements, working hand-in-hand with your hotel and venue to consider alternative options, and knowing how to create VIP experiences out of delays or frustrations is the best way to turn around those pesky disruptions,” Lutz says. “My planner motto is ‘Plan for the worst, expect the best.’” **I&FMM**



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