



Guiding light

From the Sydney launch party for Virgin Atlantic to a deep-sea fishing expedition for 144 delegates, David Martin of Corporate Events Unlimited knows all about creating memorable events. But, as he told Cindy Dowling, event organisers should be favouring substance over style.

You spent nine years as a travel guide, not something many event planners could claim. What skills do you think that experience brings to your current role?

It gives you a tremendous insight into the dynamics of groups - a skill many event planners simply don't have. How people react in a group situation and how they react when on their own is completely different. In groups, you can always assume there will be the class clown, the class drunk, the natural leader. The key to managing groups is to recognise these roles and to develop strategies to deal with the problem-makers and use the strengths of the leaders. You observe the group and make sure you put those who are emerging as leaders in prominent, responsible positions. You make sure that those who are likely to cause problems are identified and then made to be responsible for their actions. How often, in a group situation, is there one person who is always late for the bus in the morning? As a group leader you have two options: the first is to let that person get away with it time after time so the group runs behind schedule; the second option is to make it clear to everyone that you must be at the bus on time. Then, when that person turns up late, they find the bus has gone without them. Of course, you have a taxi on hand to take them to join the others - but you have made your position clear. You've embarrassed them and made it obvious they will not hold up everyone else. Understanding how groups work is vital to any event, and it is why I always personally lead our groups.

You've described your approach to corporate incentives as "holistic". Please expand on that.

We're a small company and I want to keep it that way. Our approach is measured and very personal. We spend a lot of time getting to know the client, how their organisation works, who their customers are, what the client wants to achieve from an event. When we are approached by a corporate client, we ask them to provide us with as much information about their customers as possible. What are their interests? What engages them? We usually ask if we can interview some of those customers ourselves. Some clients simply want a generic quote for a couple of destinations; they prefer not to go to too much effort. That's fine, but that's not the way we work. Corporate incentives are all about getting sales staff and customers together, about getting them to interact and form relationships. We're currently organising an event in Singapore where we're having the delegates prepare chilli crab in groups. There will be one staff member and three clients at each table. It's not team building, it's an interactive experience.

What industry issues are of greatest concern to you?

There are three main issues. The first is that with the rise of the internet, more and more companies are marketing direct to the customer, completely changing the structure of the distribution channel. In doing this, they are devaluing the intermediate relationship with people who sell their products. If this trend continues, it will obviously have an impact on corporate incentives. Secondly, we need to hope that Asian currencies stay at their current status. Destinations like China, Vietnam and Singapore offer tremendously good value for the Australian market. But were those currencies to strengthen, the cost of travel would rise significantly. All travel has a price threshold. Once that threshold is crossed, people will look for alternatives. Lastly, it does concern me how little thought some planners give to how the event they are organising is actually going to help the client's sales figures. There is too much emphasis on the fluff and not enough on the substance. An incentive should ultimately be self-funding in terms of incremental sales. It's not just a feel-good exercise. Understanding the client's business and working out real ways on ensuring they profit from the incentive should be the main concern of the planner.

Your favourite event and why?

We organised a great event for Independent Distillers, a liquor company. They are the sort of client we love - they rely on relationship-building to sell their products rather than advertising. They were prepared to take risks and to give us some leeway. Because it was an all-male group, we realised that something like a fishing trip would be ideal. We chartered the Captain Cook Reef Endeavour as a mother ship then hired 28 deep-sea fishing boats to take the 144 delegates out to sea each morning to hunt for marlin. It was an enormous logistical challenge, but it worked beautifully. When people spend hours together reeling in marlins over three days, it forms a real bond. It then means that when they return to work and resume their usual client/salesman relationship, the client finds it much harder to say no. That event just worked so beautifully - we also had cane-toad racing, two-up, a showgirl night and a "State of Origin" event. It was a real blokey time. So successfully did relationships build up that the client had record sales for the following three months.

One thing you would never do again?

As a New Zealander, this is a true but rather embarrassing story. I took a group of Australians off to a farm in New Zealand. One of the events on the agenda was sheep shearing. Being a country boy, I decided to volunteer to demonstrate my abilities. Of course, I failed dismally. The sheep ended up straddling me and I had to ensure endless baa-ing noises from the group for the rest of the trip. So, shearing a sheep in front of a group of Aussies - that's definitely off my list.