

INSURANCE & FINANCIAL MEETINGS MANAGEMENT

THE EXECUTIVE SOURCE FOR PLANNING MEETINGS & INCENTIVES

Nov./Dec. 2008 Issue

Feature - November/December 2008



Keeping It Personal — The Recognition Is The Real Reward

By John Buchanan

There is a peculiar irony in the fact that although every meeting planner understands that the purpose of an incentive travel program is to deliver a reward and recognition for exceptional performance, they often neglect what is arguably the most important element of a program — the awards banquet. Usually pressed for time, and as creatures of refined habit like most other professionals, planners focus more emphasis on the destination, the hotel and an overall roster of trip highlights than they do on the one event that will determine, more than any other, how and why the trip is remembered.

“The recognition experience and the award are very important, because it’s great to be in Hawaii and your qualifiers will remember Hawaii for a long time,” said Paula Godar, director, brand strategies, at Maritz Travel in Fenton, MO. “But they will remember much more how the award was presented, and their memory of the actual recognition might actually be the thing that allows the company to retain them as an employee or independent agent, or makes them more loyal to the company. So for that reason, the actual presentation of the award, not just what the award is, is very important. So, planners should make the extra effort to make the awards banquet a big and exciting event that is not just handing out awards on a stage. You want some fanfare and public recognition so other people in the company will say, ‘I want that to be me next time.’ So if you’re only giving out the award, without the proper fanfare, you’re kind of missing a big piece of that.”

The Presentation

Why don’t more planners get more creative? “I think it’s just taken for granted, to some extent,” said Godar, who has worked with some of the country’s most prestigious insurance and financial services companies. “It’s also really about what people think is important. I think company leaders naturally get a lot of recognition, so they don’t always understand why it’s important for everyday people to get it, so to speak. They need to become more aware that the event and the presentation is every bit as important as where they’re going and what they’re receiving, because that is really the part that is the once-in-a-lifetime part of the experience.”

“You want some fanfare and

Home / Breaking News
Other Publications
This Issue
On The Cover
Industry News
Meeting Value Line
Events Calendar
Columns
Features
Destinations
Corporate Ladder
Archives

Advertising

2008 Rate Card
2009 Rate Card
2008 Web Ad Rate Card
2009 Web Ad Rate Card
2008 Editorial Calendar
2009 Editorial Calendar
Sales Offices & Reps
About Our Advertisers

Services

About Us
Contact Us
Subscribe

About This Site

Privacy Policy
Terms Of Service

Another important point that planners and top executives need to understand, Godar said, is that top producers at insurance and financial services companies are typically high earners who can easily afford their own trip to a luxury resort, their own Rolex watch, or any other material reward the company may award them as part of an incentive program. What they are actually motivated by is the recognition, not the award itself.

Anthony Napoli, an industry veteran and president of leading New York City destination management company (DMC) Briggs Inc., agreed with Godar that more planners need to comprehend what's at stake for them. The real prize for planners, he said, is that "doing the awards portion of the program properly, including the actual awards banquet, makes winners say to themselves, 'I must be very important if the company is going to this kind of length to do this for me.'" The critical benefit to the planner and the company, he said, is that properly executed recognition "also very cleverly sets up and kicks off the program for the following year, because winners think, 'If they're doing this much for me this year, what do I have to look forward to next year?'" That helps build the performance momentum of the entire program — and the company."

Nevertheless, said Napoli, in his observation only about one out of every four planners really pays enough attention to making the awards portion of the program truly special. How does he explain that? "I think that most planners think the destination is enough, and for some of them, it probably is," he said. "But when you get to the real high rollers that are the top-tier producers at insurance and financial services companies, you really do need that additional 'wow' factor. And that's where the awards ceremony itself should become more of a focus, and not just the trip itself."

Roy Podell, president and creative director at Atlas Meetings & Motivation in Milford, MA, also has noted the gap between planners who execute awards events well and those who don't. "There are some planners and companies that understand that when it comes to a really good awards event, it's 80 percent preparation and 20 percent execution," he said. "The effectiveness of that recognition event is determined by how much work you put into it. You get out of it what you put into it. It's as simple as that."

For example, Podell said, too many companies — and especially the top executives who make appearances at the event — don't spend enough time learning about who the qualifiers really are as individuals. "The important thing is to make the genuine effort to make the event very personal," he said. "That's different from the companies who just get up there and read the names of qualifiers off a list and give them their moment of individual recognition, or some award."

Doing It Right

"On the other hand, there are those companies that take it to the Nth degree, and when that individual qualifier is onstage, the company will make sure he or she feels like this is the most important moment of their life. That's really the thing that sets a company that really does it well apart from a company that just sort of does it. But if you want to do it well, you have to commit the time, the budget and the resources to do it that well and set yourself apart by doing it right," Podell explained.

Like Napoli, Podell has noted over the years that too many planners and companies simply fall short on his scorecard. "Some people need to be educated," he said. "They don't really get what it's all about. Other people get it and do it very well. And they are the ones who have a history of the most successful programs."

Add Some Spice

Fortunately, said Napoli, it's usually fairly easy to upgrade a program. "Although most companies still seem to want to do the usual awards banquet in the hotel ballroom, we find that more and more companies want the event to be spiced up a little bit," he said. "And there are ways to spice them up that are not outrageously expensive."

"For example, if you're in a place like New York, where you can tap into vast resources, you can have a local fire department band come in and kick things off, or a children's chorus from Harlem can come and sing, or the bagpipers from the police department can come in and play. Those are just some of the kinds of things you can do, rather than just hand someone their award and say 'thank you.'"



"When you get to...the top-tier producers...you really do need that additional 'wow' factor. And that's where the awards ceremony itself should become more of a focus, and not just the trip itself."

Anthony Napoli, President, Briggs Inc., New York, NY

But then, Napoli added, there are also the planners who aspire to something truly spectacular. "For example," he said, "we had one client who had a history of wining and dining their high rollers. These people had been all the over the world, to places like Monaco. So, when we had them in New York, we wanted a real 'wow' factor."

We used the ice skating rink at Rockefeller Center and the Top of the Rock. Winners were invited to Top of the Rock for cocktails in the fall. In the ice rink, we set out a big red carpet and put in nice white wooden chairs and big screens and we did the actual awards ceremony on the ice. That was pretty spectacular. Then after the awards, people went to Rockefeller Center Café and had dinner. Meanwhile, we had the Ice Theater of New York come and do an ice dancing performance on the ice that qualifiers could watch from the windows of the café.”

That is just one simple example from an almost endless list of what’s possible in a major destination if a planner spends the time to discover the most creative options available, Napoli said.

Personalization

Podell noted that doing that is important because of the underlying and often underestimated value of the recognition portion of the program. “The recognition is why the program exists in the first place,” he said. “The real objective of any good incentive program is to provide an experience that people cannot duplicate on their own. The nature of the experience, to a very large extent, is determined by the destination where you are. Whether you’re in a resort destination or a big-city destination, from a programming point of view, everything centers on the idea of making people feel special. And the best way to do that, I think, is through the concept that I call ‘personalization.’ That means that people feel that the award they are receiving had some real thought go into it, so they feel a level of genuine thoughtfulness. And typically in a good program, that is done on an individual basis.”

Yet another way that a growing number of programs execute superior recognition is by segmenting a group of winners into subsegments, based on relative degrees of performance and reward. “For example, within any typical program, you might have a generic ‘President’s Club’ that is the distinction that sets that individual group apart,” he said. “But not all ‘President’s Club’ winners are created equal. Some of them probably deserve special recognition, over and above the rest of the group and over and above the recognition they have already received by being a member of the ‘President’s Club.’ For the relative handful of top-top achievers, you might consider doing something additional, like a special private reception, or a private dinner at a spectacular restaurant.”

Unfortunately, Podell said, too many companies and planners reach what they think is an acceptable benchmark standard for their programs and as a result stop looking for the extra increment of ‘wow’ factor when it comes to awards presentations. “When a company does their program for the very first year, they establish a precedent,” he said. “But then from that, they will learn and make adjustments. By the time they have what I call a mature program, they are pretty set in their ways, and they are not coming up with creative new things to do. And that is particularly true in the insurance industry, which is pretty conservative. They’re usually not looking for new ideas for recognition. They just do what they always do.”

Deliver The Goods

Planners who want to improve the awards element of their programs need to seek out the services of a good DMC or other knowledgeable consultant in the destination they will be using, Napoli said. “You need someone who really knows what is possible in that particular destination and has the capability to help deliver something really special and different,” he said. “For example, a lot of planners might say, ‘Well, I really know New York.’ But the fact is planners have looked at that ice rink at Rockefeller Center 20 million times without ever thinking of staging their awards banquet there. And there are plenty of unique spots in New York, and other major cities, that you can use as a spectacular venue for an awards banquet, whether it’s a loft in SoHo or an art gallery. Or you can do something backstage at Lincoln Center or in an off-Broadway theater that is dark that night. And if you do that, you’re adding a Broadway cachet to your event. Or you can do it at a film studio in Los Angeles and treat people like movie stars. You can hire paparazzi and make people feel like stars when they walk in.”

Celebrate The Individual

In fact, that’s exactly what Podell did for a client not long ago. But the important point to understand, he said, is that by doing an “Academy Awards Night” complete with red carpet and paparazzi, you are focusing on the individual qualifiers and not a grandiose event that actually overshadows them with its stunning — but unrelated — production values. “We do not like to create some kind of overpowering theme that takes away from the fact that we’re celebrating the individuals and not the event,” Podell said. “Now clearly, you’re going to be in a ballroom setting, you have beautiful linens and the room is set up so it’s gorgeous. You have high production values and there is good music playing. But everything you do has to be designed not to take away from the achievement of the people sitting in the audience. It’s about those people, it’s not about the event.”

Another smart way to mimic an entertainment industry awards show is to make videos or take



professional photographs of every qualifier and have them projected onto large-screen TVs in the venue, Podell said.

Godar has seen that kind of thing done extraordinarily well. "For example, we had a group that was taken to Pleasantdale Chateau & Conference Resort in West Orange, NJ," she said. "And what the company did before the event was videotape each of their qualifiers as they talked about their accomplishments. And those videos were shown during the event. An artist did original oil paintings of each qualifier and those became part of the décor at the event and then each qualifier was allowed to keep his or her portrait. So, that whole experience that was created, having a video and then an oil painting that the qualifier and their family could have forever, was every bit as powerful as going to this really wonderful dinner and being recognized by top executives."

Another example Godar cited was a Maritz Travel client that awarded a Rolex watch to each qualifier. "This was an ongoing program in which they gave out Rolexes," she said. "But rather than just giving the watches out again, they turned it into a real event, built around a dinner. The watches were actually put on formal display at the dinner and the company announced each winner and talked about each qualifier's actual accomplishments in front of their spouses and peers. And then the watches were handed out very ceremoniously." Too many planners, Godar said, simply think the watch is enough. In fact, the presentation is actually more important than the prize.

Involve The CEO

Finally, she said, another way awards events can be improved is by making better use of top executives — and especially the CEO. For many incentive winners, getting a chance to hobnob with the CEO and have a photograph taken is a highlight of the trip. But too often, the CEO is ill-prepared and mispronounces a qualifier's name, or clearly knows next to nothing about him or her as an individual, beyond perhaps a percentage increase in sales, or the amount he or she went over quota to earn the trip. "So, one of the elements you see in a really good program is how top executives such as the CEO show up and actually participate," she said. "Having those people know something personal about each qualifier and get their names right is very, very important. Basic preparation can make a big difference. It's always about doing something right, as opposed to just doing it."

Most important, said Napoli, trying to do a better job at making an awards night sizzle does not necessarily cost much money. "You can do a lot of very creative things on a budget," he said. "It's not always about how much money you have to spend. It's about getting the right ideas for what's possible in a particular destination, and then executing." **I&FMM**