The Greenest Meetings

How five companies have raised the bar for eco-friendly gatherings

“Intel has a sustainable events program to improve the triple bottom line: environmental, social and economic.”

– Lou Cozzo, Event Services Manager
She wakes up at 6 a.m., her inbox filled with 27 new e-mails from the night before. The caterer has been booked but needs a list of preferences, the florist is providing estimates, the host wants to know about upgrading hotel linens. There’s a meeting with a photographer that afternoon, and the venue staff need a workable day-of timetable.

Sound familiar?

But this isn’t necessarily describing the typical day of a meeting planner. It’s also the daily grind of a wedding planner. And while the purposes of the events are very different, the fundamental goals are the same: to meet or exceed the expectations of the hosts and attendees.

“Weddings and corporate events are so different — but they’re also so similar,” affirms Cindy Shanholtz, owner of Chicago-based Effortless Events. Brides want to have a meaningful gathering that, in effect, marks the beginning of an exciting new phase in their lives — and so do corporations, she says.

On the following pages, wedding planners offer their tips on creating remarkable, creative, one-of-a-kind events — all while dealing with demanding or jittery clients and limited budgets.

Define expectations

Before a wedding planner can start getting creative, he or she first must sit down with the couple and find out who they are, what they’re thinking and what their priorities are for the big day. After all, creativity needs a defined framework within which to thrive.

“I ask them a lot of questions about what they want their event to look, smell and taste like, how they want their guests to feel, what’s important to them. I’ll get a sense of the client,” says Michael Radolinski, owner and principal event planner at New York City-based Michael Henry Events Creative LLC.

The same approach, of course, applies to corporate events. The corporate planner must fully understand the company’s culture and envision clear goals for the gathering — whether it’s boosting team morale or increasing sales.

This is also key for budgeting purposes. Wedding planners agree the best way to satisfy their customers financially is to allocate money according to their
priorities. David Stone, director of catering and conference services at La Posada de Santa Fe (N.M.), a Rock Resort, says he starts out by jotting down absolutely every idea and desire the couple has, along with the potential cost. Then he scale backs from there according to the couple’s priorities. So if the couple indicates that music is the element that’s most important to them, he will allot more money to the music budget. That way it’s all out in the open, there are no surprises and the couple is getting the most bang for their bucks.

Seek inspiration
Once priorities have been established and budgets have been appropriately allocated, wedding planners can begin getting creative. Where do they start? While traditional bridal magazines, books and websites are a given for getting ideas related to F&B, interior design, floral arrangements and the like, many of the best and brightest seek inspiration from less conventional sources.

“I tend to look outside the traditional bridal context. I’m looking at art magazines, I’m looking at creative people in general. Fashion and interior design are a big inspiration,” says Radolinski.

Shanholtz advises her brides to peruse magazines related to entertaining but without any wedding-specific angles, such as Food & Wine, Bon Appetit, Architectural Digest and InStyle. These sources offer ideas for F&B, design, color schemes, room setup and other creative touches.

Looking for inspiration outside the norm frees up both the planner’s and the host’s minds and allows for events that are less “same old, same old” and more unique.

“I think it’s important to always think outside the box,” explains Stone. “We know what a typical wedding is going to consist of. But if we can throw in a couple elements that are going to be a surprise to guests, then that’s what we need to focus on.”

Stone says that “personalizing the event — either to the hosts or to the locale — is one great way to add unexpected touches.”

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— DAVID STONE, LA POSADA DE SANTA FE, A ROCK RESORT

To develop fresh ideas, it’s important to let go of the “this is how we always do it” mentality. – SUSAN SMITH, SIMPLY ELEGANT WEDDINGS
and come up with three different options. Sooner or later, you’ll just be able to naturally think like that,” Smith says.

This skill came in particularly handy when Smith was faced with transforming a bride’s chosen venue — the ballroom of the local Ritz-Carlton, which was stunning but which many of her friends and family were already familiar with — into something special and distinctive that didn’t break the bank.

“The bride wanted to do something with branches or trees or a forest — something completely different than the elegant ballroom that it was,” Smith recalls. “So we worked in tandem with a lighting company to project trees onto the walls, and the floral arrangements included branches that mirrored the woodland effect. We totally transformed the room.”

Create an experience
Many wedding planners stress that while the goals and vision of the bride and groom are the guiding elements in creating the event, the guests play a crucial role in shaping its execution.

“Whether you are arranging a wedding or a corporate event, it’s all about the guest experience,” Shanholtz says. “People want to go to an event and feel like their presence means something. They really do want to feel invited…and like they’re not just another person, not just a number on a seating chart.”

To ensure the experience is both unforgettable and the one intended by the hosts, Shanholtz recommends that planners put themselves in the attendees’ shoes. “What I’ve actually done before is that I’ll go to the venue, and from the time I exit the cab I’ll walk through everything that the guests will see. Is someone meeting them at the door? Will someone need to direct them? Is there good signage?”

Shanholtz also recommends paying close attention to details such as the client’s favorite drinks, foods or music. These are all things that a company’s salespeople know and are usually happy to share, she says. “For instance, for a wedding, I know what my bride and groom and both sets of parents are drinking. For my corporate events, guess what — I will know what my clients are drinking. And I will send my bar staff over with a drink for them before they have to turn around and ask,” she says. “I once did an event where the people were from St. Louis, so I had a certain type of local beer. It’s the attention to detail, the little extra step that meeting planners will take that set their events apart.”

These are all small and inexpensive touches that nevertheless make a big impact on attendees.

Understand the stress
Who doesn’t have a story of a family fight based on wedding plans? “Weddings bring out the worst in people,” Shanholtz says. “There’s not much I haven’t seen.”

When it comes to dealing with tense, jittery or demanding clients, Radolinski has one simple mantra: It’s not about the [blank]. “What I mean by that is, usually your client is not stressed out about the thing that they are telling you they are stressed out about,” he says. “It’s usually not about the napkins; it’s usually not about the floral arrangements or the particular silverware. It’s usually that they’re stressed about the way their mom has been acting or what their maid of honor has been doing. And when I realize it’s not personal, it becomes much easier to deal with the client.”

He adds that taking a deep breath and gently asking the client what it is about that particular napkin or place setting that is bothering them, or whether there is something larger that he or she is worried about, “usually the answer will be, ‘I’m concerned about X, Y and Z,’ and then you can address the real problem.”

Shanholtz and Smith emphasize that coming across as confident, planning out as much as possible beforehand (“People don’t like surprises!” Shanholtz says), and demonstrating great vendor relationships also are key when dealing with difficult clients.

“Working together is really, really important,” Smith says.

Adds Shanholtz: “It truly does take a village to put on a wedding — or any kind of event.”