



There and Back Again

DO YOU REMEMBER THE WILD JOB TITLES that began appearing on professionals' business cards during the heady dot-com days? Brand wrangler, chief growth officer, VP of cool. The sentiment may have been a bit too playful for some tastes, but the idea was right.

New technology, and the investment that came with it, generated a wave of creativity that hit the corporate world hard. The colloquial position titles reflected this energy, but more importantly they showed just how much corporations themselves were changing. No matter what industry you were in, org charts flattened; job responsibilities merged. Emerging software harnessed the Web and allowed professionals to identify new markets and to share data across the company, bridging many sacred corporate silos in the process.

A "minister of corporate progress" didn't exactly work in marketing, but neither was she employed in sales. What did it matter? The quirky titles identified those creative people who navigated the newfound terrain to build partnerships, find their own corporate niche and add a ton of value to the bottom line.

Stock market implosion, war and economic recession may have driven the so-called New Economy into the abyss, but not all of its ideas should have been discarded. A back-to-basics approach to business is valid during a cost-cutting economy waiting for storm clouds to pass. But now that the economic sun is shining on the hospitality industry once again, we may have forgotten dot-com's most important lesson: Departments must collaborate creatively if they are to prove their worth.

So what does your job title say about your role in the corporation? Is a "meeting planner" a strategic partner, or does its function simply come down to getting the best price? As one scholar put it, it's the difference between focusing on how money is taken out of the corporation rather than on how it's brought in.

Hospitality business is back. Room revenues and travel numbers are already surpassing all-time highs set in 2000. Yet much has changed; the parts have created something different now that the hospitality industry has been put back together. According to MPI's Future Watch 2005, the greatest concerns among meeting planners and vendors alike is that as technology allows more opportunity for automation, and standard policies take hold, meetings management is "reduced to a purchasing decision based on cost."

If that's a meeting planner's only relationship to the company, well then I hate to say it, but the job is destined

to be peripheral at best, outsourced at worst. Call it the Wal-Marting of meeting planning, but already large full-service meeting planning vendors offer huge economies of scale. As intermediaries, they are able to book great deals on rooms and other services, passing along their efficiencies and expertise to their long list of clients.

As a result, meeting planners are scrambling to establish ROI measures. That's a good thing, but it's not enough. The answers are not all to be found in a more accurate reading of the services meeting planners currently provide their companies or associations—no matter how detailed they are.

Just look at the top three tools used to measure ROI: post-event surveys, meeting budget and revenue reports, and client feedback, according to MPI data. All three are reports of meeting-planning department performance; they say nothing of how the events helped meet company or association goals. You can't make a permanent place for yourself in a corporation by simply paring the fat from a travel budget. It's about expanding a meeting planner's scope and becoming closer to each individual business unit.

More has to be added into the mix, and I am not the first one to say it. In June, MPI's Global Corporate Circle of Excellence released a much talked about report called "360 Degrees of Influence: Demonstrating Professional Value through the Development of a Strategic Meetings Management Program," taking this very issue head-on.

"Implementation of a strategic meetings management program has long been considered an important practice, but it's now seen as especially vital," the white paper says. "The role of a corporate meeting planner now comprises much more than logistics—it's strategic management."

The report calls on meeting planners to identify key professionals in procurement, legal, marketing, travel, human resources, compliance and corporate planning. The planner must become integrated into all operations of a company, "unifying departments and becoming connected to leaders in other divisions" to demonstrate individual worth.

"Integration and teamwork require a major shift in thinking," says MPI's report. "It's not about defending or protecting your position in relation to stakeholders; it's about demonstrating what you can do and fully articulating what you're delivering and how you are increasing your strategic value."

Sound familiar? If you think of yourself as more than someone who plans meetings, maybe you need a title worthy of the New New Economy. How about connector in chief or the VP of face to face? You've got a new job to do. Get to work. If only in your heart, lose the meeting planner title. ■■

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