



Go Big or Go Home

By Erika Lloyd

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Mega Meetings: Do You Have What it Takes?

It takes the strength to stay calm and act fast when you realize that the meeting you've been planning for more than a year needs to be rearranged three days before it starts or the President of the United States won't show. It takes a competent, communicative team when you're staring down 50,000 attendees and exhibits that require 500,000 sq. ft. of space, including concrete walls that need to be built specifically to later be smashed to bits in front of the attendees. This is just the beginning of what it takes to plan a mega meeting.

A mega meeting doesn't necessarily consist of a bewildering number of people, although it can. Maybe it's a rather small event that happens to be incredibly complex because of the number of VIPs attending or because of the eccentricities of the particular show. Maybe the VIPs want to ride into the event on elephants but you're not sure they'll fit through the door to the event space. In any case, you have to find a way to make it work. When asked for their opinion on the most important part of planning a mega meeting, the experts have consistent answers: location, preparation, communication and teamwork.



The Place is the Thing

One of the first parts of planning a mega meeting is finding a location with the resources to support it. Of course, Las Vegas is known as a stellar destination for meetings and conventions. It offers the resources and meeting space—10.6 million sq. ft.—for any type of event.

Scott Wilson, director of convention center sales for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA), has seen it all. For the most part, Wilson says Vegas poses few planning challenges when it comes to mega meetings because the city was made to host events. The challenges he's faced have more to do with bizarre special requests, like the one he received from the CEO of a company that has an elephant as a logo.

"The CEO wanted to bring his executives into the convention room by having them ride in on elephants. We had weight-load issues, door-size issues, and being that it was at one of our hotels, we had health-code issues. It was a real challenge to pull off—but we did. That was probably one of the funniest requests that I can talk about."

The Team



Super Bowl XLVI in Indianapolis, courtesy of Visit Indy

Some locations have to make major changes to welcome a mega meeting, and that alone requires many skilled teams. This year marked Indianapolis' first time hosting the Super Bowl, to which more than 200,000 people show up, but it's not the first time Indianapolis has hosted a major sporting event. It puts on the Indianapolis 500 every year, which draws around 300,000 people. However, the Indy 500 is held outside of

town, so the downtown area isn't impacted nearly as much as it was for the Super Bowl. The 7,100 rooms downtown were sold out long before the game and the 32,000 hotel rooms in all of Indianapolis weren't nearly enough for the number of visitors. Many had to stay in nearby areas.

Before structural changes could be implemented, personnel and strategies had to be set. Teamwork and communication became the driving forces behind planning Super Bowl XLVI. The 2012 Super Bowl Host Committee was formed in 2008 with 32 paid staff members to centralize the planning and execution of the event. The host committee serves as an extension of the National Football League in the community to manage local resources, including city services, event venues, accommodations and the 13,000 volunteers who helped out. Sixty committees were formed and supported by 150 volunteer co-chairs. They spent four years planning and prepping the city for the big game—and remaking its downtown to meet the needs of thousands of fans, players, media, vendors and others.

Among the major changes were a new stadium, an expansion added to the convention center to double its size, a new JW Marriott—the nation's largest—built within walking distance of the stadium, and a major revitalization of Georgia Street downtown, transforming it into a three-block pedestrian promenade serving as Super Bowl Village.

Cultural challenges can also arise, and for mega meetings they can be, well, mega. The annual IMEX exhibition for incentive travel, meetings and events has been held in Frankfurt, Germany, for the past nine years. When IMEX CEO Carina Bauer's team and industry partners decided to hold an exhibition in the U.S. for the first time in 2011, they thought it would be a similar endeavor. Although the show was half the size of those held in Frankfurt, they met challenges that they'd never faced before.

"The way you organize a trade show is entirely different in America than Europe," explains Bauer. "Our whole team would probably say it was a tough but enjoyable experience. It led us to make changes in Frankfurt as well. It forced us to reconsider the way we'd been doing things."

It took two years of diligent planning to organize IMEX America in Las Vegas. During that time, the LVCVA provided contacts at hotel properties, offered insights on the city and helped with the overall organization. Bauer's team chose Las Vegas as the host destination because the city has the capability to host long term, which is a key ingredient for an IMEX exhibition.

So what does it take to put on an event like IMEX? "In one sentence, I would say it takes time, organization, patience, perseverance and a good team," says Amy Riley, senior director of convention sales at the LVCVA.



IMEX America, Las Vegas

When it comes to teamwork, few events beat the group put together for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, Canada. The goal was to have a group of people who could count on each other, trust each other and, of course, communicate with each other, and that's exactly what Andrea Shaw, vice president of sponsorship sales and marketing of the 2010 Games, looked for when she was building up her marketing team of approximately 75 people.

Shaw explains that one of the most important parts of the process was "maintaining a positive culture within the organization," especially since people would be working closely and diligently for long hours to deliver an enormous event that would be critiqued on a global scale. Completing the complex, monumental task of organizing a 17-day Winter Olympics has been likened to putting on three Super Bowls a day for 17 days.

"We were very, very particular about whom we hired. We needed the best; we needed people who had like-minded values," says Shaw. "Your people are your product. If you've got the right people to deliver at a level of excellence, then you're fine. That's one of the reasons we were so successful."

Successful is putting it mildly. Shaw's team raised \$760 million in sponsorships to support the Games, an amount that's unprecedented worldwide for the Winter Olympics. They raised the money by thinking innovatively. Instead of promoting it as a local event, they engaged the entire country of Canada, making all Canadians feel like a welcome part of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games and encouraging companies all over Canada to be sponsors.

Tourism Vancouver also contributed greatly. Dave Gazley, its vice president of meeting and convention sales, chaired the Accommodations Work Group during the bid process. Tourism Vancouver was responsible for working with the media—developing a message and providing information and resources—and organizing the visiting services that would be available to Olympics attendees.

Gazley's team made a decision to put extra effort into relations with unaccredited media and not merely focus on the larger media organizations. "We made a strategic decision early on to really treat those folks well and show them the best of what we could show them, to make sure they felt like part of it all," he says. "The unaccredited media are often the ones who will be doing more human-interest type stories as opposed to focusing on the sports."

The strategy paid off. Vancouver received an immense amount of positive media attention. In 2011, the year after the Olympics, Vancouver experienced its best year for major conventions.

Plan on Complex Communications



APEC 2011, Hawaii, photo by Luci Pemoni

Dealing with last-minute changes is an expected part of planning a large meeting or event. Nathalie Whitton, president and CEO of Site Solutions Worldwide, has years of experience with this aspect. Whitton's team provided logistical support for the APEC 2011 CEO Summit, Asia-Pacific's premier business event, drawing more than a thousand business leaders to engage in dialogue with global leaders and ministers of foreign affairs and trade. A meeting of just over a thousand people may not *sound* like it deserves mega-meeting status, but as Whitton put it, "It's not so much the numbers of people; it's the complexity of it."

The 2011 summit was held at the Sheraton Waikiki in Hawaii. Site Solutions began planning for the summit a year in advance, although as Whitton explained, "After you get onsite, it feels like you plan the entire thing in three days" because of all the changes.

The biggest late game changer at the summit was made to accommodate President Barack Obama. Whitton traveled to Hawaii every three weeks for a year for preparation and meetings and worked with White House staff and Secret Service to ensure that the organization and security was set up correctly. But three days before the event, when all the plans were set in stone, the Secret Service walked the space again and decided to shut down a number of rooms to ensure the president's security. These rooms had been reserved for meetings as well as the summit's media center and the hotel didn't have any more meeting space. When Whitton said that this closure wasn't going to be easy she was told, "Well, you can have President Obama come—or not." Naturally, Whitton's team promised to work it out, accelerating into rush mode, moving all the meetings and contacting all the companies involved.

The Secret Service also decided to enhance the security perimeter from a two-block radius around the hotel to a 10-block radius. Whitton's team had to notify all the attendees that they could only get transported to within 10 blocks of their hotel and arranged for shuttles, minibuses and even golf carts to take people to their hotel rooms. Fortunately, everyone was very understanding.

"The thought, as a planner, that you would have to go up to the CEO of major companies including FedEx, Google and Microsoft and say, 'Um, excuse me, Mr. CEO, you have to take a golf cart to your hotel' is not exactly how you envision that going."

In spite of last-minute changes, many attendees called the 2011 CEO Summit the best one they'd ever attended. A big part of this success was due to consistent communication between all the planning parties, a common theme when it comes to planning successful large-scale meetings.

Hawaii's tourism and hospitality community and government officials went into high gear, gathering 250 locals to volunteer during the summit; plus the group offered support in the security department. Local restaurants and chefs joined in to make cuisines available from countries all over the world.

Monica Whaley, president of the National Center for APEC, the association that managed the overall event, says "we had a lot of people [involved]. It was not perfect communication, but it was something we really focused on. We had a great coordinating group that sometimes had twice daily meetings. Certain people were in charge of sponsors, certain people were in charge of the speakers and leaders, some people were responsible for communicating with the hotel, and we tried as much as possible to keep all those lines of communication straight."

Whaley also emphasized the importance of designating tasks or roles to specific groups or individuals so that each person knew what he/she was responsible for as well as what everyone else was responsible for. Whaley's team members started working on APEC two years out. They figured out when they would need to have various tasks finished, from the hotel registration to the production facilities to the events.

"We basically mapped out a timeline, working backward from the meeting day," says Whaley.

Politics in Play

Major political events, such as the Democratic and Republican national conventions, have their own unique set of challenges. Each destination—Charlotte, N.C., for the 2012 Democratic National Convention and Tampa Bay, Fla., for the 2012 Republican National Convention—typically expects around 50,000 total visitors.

Tampa Bay & Company's primary role as a DMO was first to be selected as host for the convention and then to provide support to the Tampa Bay Host Committee and the Committee on Arrangements (COA), connecting them to various partners and local businesses. The teams interact on a daily basis during the planning.

As with all mega events, recruiting a strong planning team and ensuring all parties can communicate effectively are critical. "There are a lot of logistics and a lot of moving pieces," says James Davis, communications director of the COA for the 2012 Republican National Convention. "Pulling together a good, experienced team that has done convention work before is helpful in that process because they know what to look out for while putting together a detailed plan."

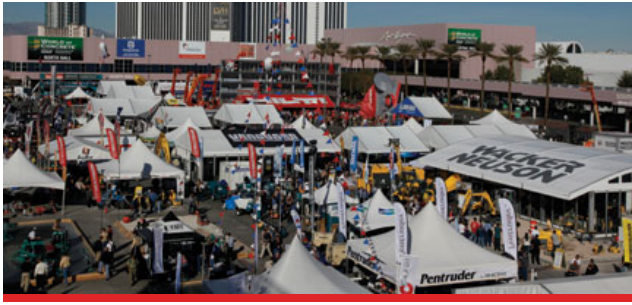
As Charlotte gears up for the 2012 Democratic National Convention in September, Mike Butts, executive director of Visit Charlotte, spends a lot of time communicating with the Democratic National Committee, hotels, venues and nearby CVBs on what's expected during the convention.

"It requires a lot of communication and understanding what people are expecting, and managing those

expectations,” explains Butts.

As the organizing committee in Vancouver found out, handling the media is also a huge part of organizing a mega meeting, especially for those in the spotlight like major political conventions. Journalists from across the nation show up for these political mega meetings. With up to 15,000 credentialed members of the media expected at each one, political conventions are the largest media events outside the Olympics.

Same Details, Different Scope



World of Concrete, Las Vegas

For 11 years, Tom Cindric, group director of Hanley Wood Exhibitions, has been planning the annual World of Concrete—the only international event dedicated to the commercial concrete and masonry construction industries. When he started working on it, the show changed locations every year. Cindric decided he had to find a permanent home for the show and chose Las Vegas because it has the resources to handle an event of that magnitude—plus, the city seems to draw record attendance. The group's 2012 show attracted more than 50,000 attendees and covered 552,500 sq. ft. of exhibit space. That wasn't the largest—in 2007, World of Concrete attracted 90,000 attendees to 900,000 sq. ft.

Each mega meeting has its own special needs that make it different from the others. The World of Concrete requires an outdoor area that's prepped a week in advance with concrete walls, slabs and props for companies to grind up, smash up and polish while demonstrating their latest equipment. There's also a bricklaying contest during which masons compete to see who can lay the most bricks in an hour; the winner goes home with a new Ford F250. All that and the John Deere Operator Challenge require a lot of outdoor space. Fortunately, Vegas has plenty of outdoor parking lots to offer.

Even though every mega meeting has individual needs, all also have similar pieces that need to be put together for organizing the event. As Cindric points out, "You really have to break it down into smaller pieces and allow people to manage those parts. I run a smaller show that's a 30,000-square-foot one, and it's the same production. You're doing the same things to produce the big events; it's just on a bigger scale. You still have to serve coffee, you still have to take breaks and you still have to get handouts. Instead of doing 20 handouts in a room, in some cases it's 300 or 400."

This brings us full circle back to the very first element experienced planners started with: the people. Cindric's primary piece of advice is to hire a competent team. "Make sure you have quality staff. There's not one person that can plan an event of that magnitude. It takes a lot of people and a lot of planning."

Eight Things Every Mega Meeting Planner Should Know

1. It all starts with a great team. Hire hardworking, trustworthy people with communication skills and experience working together.
2. Delegate effectively. Give individuals specific responsibilities that they can own so that each person knows what is expected and has motivation to do his or her best.
3. Budget. Understand how much it takes realistically to put together a mega meeting and anticipate unexpected expenses.
4. Plan ahead. Figure out how much time you need to organize your mega meeting and set goals to meet along the way.
5. Be prepared for last-minute changes. There could be big changes or small changes, but either way there will be changes. Most important is how you handle them.
6. Pick the right location. If you have a say in where the meeting will take place, make sure it has the resources to support your attendees. Look at the number of hotel rooms available, public transportation options, and the capabilities to host a large number of people.
7. Embrace the location. Work with the local visitors' bureau to utilize the location's best assets. Organize or suggest local tours or activities for attendees; provide a list of great restaurants in the area; and inform attendees about any public transportation systems available.
8. Show the locals some love. Invite local people to feel a part of the event or meeting by offering them volunteer positions or hiring them for support.

Main illustration by Peter Zwolak
