

By Nina Lemke

Budget cuts, recession, lay-offs, restructuring, downsizing, bailouts; the business world is once again tasked with finding new ways to work smarter to produce the same product ... with fewer resources.

Cloud Cover



The economic crystal ball may be cloudy but those clouds give savvy travel departments the opportunity to review, revise and redefine their meeting planning practices. Small meetings, large conventions and everything in between can be served well by managers who use this time to integrate the tools and technology already available to advance strategic meeting management and its promise to save corporations money by streamlining their processes and providing new negotiating power.

For corporations that have been planning meetings the same way for years, the thought of rolling new technology into an established process might seem daunting and distasteful. In addition, automating the meeting planning process suggests taking away the human element of what has always been a person-to-person, relationship-based activity.

But remember the introduction of the corporate online booking tool and never fear. There is a way to preserve human interaction while still taking advantage of all the cost-saving benefits that technology has to offer. There's a lot out there; you're bound to find the right match for your circumstances. And if you're lucky — since so far no single meeting technology does everything — you'll find technologies that work well together.

Get A Clear View Of Costs

In the current business landscape, there is a scarcity of two critical elements; money

and manpower. Begin with the money. Before you can reasonably cut the meeting budget or reallocate meeting funds, you first have to know where the money is going and why.

“Just understanding your meeting budget alone can yield significant savings by identifying meetings that may not need to happen or different ways to aggregate meeting spend to get a better deal from suppliers,” offers Nick Romano, co-founder and president of SignUp4.

There's a huge cost saving potential in identifying where the meeting money goes, agrees Joan Rothman, chief marketing officer for Worktopia Inc. “The majority of simple off-site meeting spend is not measured, monitored or controlled by companies today.”

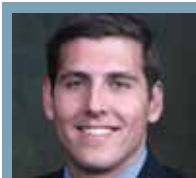
“Corporations have examined and dissected every single area of their company, even business travel. For most corporations, however, meeting spend is still a black hole,” adds John Broaddus, vice president of sales for

SignUp4. “Strategic meeting management is the final frontier. The overall objective of the tools SignUp4 provides is to give meeting planners and corporate procurement the visibility and data they need to understand what constitutes their meeting spend and where these costs come from; giving them the ability to dramatically improve their meeting management function.”

That was the goal of Marla Shaw, supervisor of meeting services for ConocoPhillips. She and four colleagues plan approximately 850 meetings per year ranging in size from 20 people to 1,500 people. Rapid growth in the meeting department necessitated a search for ways to improve efficiency and customer service. After soliciting feedback from their internal customers, needed improvements were identified in several areas including meetings approval, meeting registration, sourcing and negotiations, planning, purchasing, data analysis and reporting.

Similar to traditional software companies, SignUp4 charges its customers based on a user license or multiple-user license fees. “There are no hidden fees, no additional fees, it's all flat pricing. You know exactly what you are going to spend before you sign the contract and the more you use SignUp4, the less expensive it is in terms of cost-per-transaction,” adds Broaddus.

The size of the corporation does not necessarily dictate the number of licenses.



Nick Romano
President
SignUp4



John Broaddus
Vice President
of Sales
SignUp4

A corporation that outsources its meeting planning operations to a third party may only need one or two licenses to meet its needs. “What we’ve seen on the license side, especially when we see customers come to us from other providers, is that we’re saving them 40 percent to 50 percent versus what their annual expense was before — purely from a technology cost perspective,” says Broaddus.

It’s what ConocoPhillips needed. “SignUP4 offers pricing and fee structures that fit our business model by charging a per-license fee rather than a per-registration fee, allowing unlimited registrations and sign-ups for a flat, controlled cost,” says Shaw. “This unlimited usage model encourages use and easy policy adaption enterprise-wide since we do not pass along costs to our internal customers.”

After reviewing available options from a variety of competing vendors, ConocoPhillips chose SignUP4. “The three SignUP4 components, Event Management System, Travel Management System, and Spend Management System, offer complete meetings management and are enabling our business unit to move toward a strategic meetings management policy in the coming year,” she says.

In addition to extensive expertise in the architectural design, scalability and performance optimization of large enterprise systems and software applications, Romano and his team have leveraged extensive hands-on experience in building user-friendly products and a customer-oriented business operations environment.

According to Broaddus, SignUP4 offers its customers a tool-set that can be integrated seamlessly into a corporation’s meeting planning function — whether it’s one on-site department; spread across multiple business units within the corporation; or channeled through a third party meeting planning operation — and provide accurate and detailed spend data. “We go directly to the GDS to pull data,” he says. “We do that because some people are going to call a travel agent, some are going to call the hotel or airline directly; some are going to get online and use their corporation booking tool.

“We aggregate all of that information into our spend engines so the corporation can tell exactly how much they spent on travel for a specific event.” Transient spend can be viewed separately but when combined with the meeting spend data, it offers corporations the opportunity to

leverage their total travel dollars.

SignUP4 technology is similar to a lead capture form you would find on a web site except it’s built around a meeting request tailored to meet the corporation’s needs, policies, restrictions and the specific data they want collected. Unlike online group booking tools, SignUP4 is not a meeting space broker so there are no commissions or per transaction fees. “By integrating the SignUP4 toolset, we don’t ask that the operation change, it just fits into the existing meeting planning function. The thing we hear time-in and time-out is ‘wow, I didn’t know I was doing that many meetings,’” offers Romano.

“SignUP4 customers can work with anyone they want to work with to book meetings,” he continues. “They can use the rates they negotiate and consolidate all of their data to find cost savings, eliminate duplication and waste and leverage better deals.”

Then Conserve Manpower

After you figure out where the money is going and where the savings are, there is still the issue of the other shrinking resource; the human resource. Tools such as Worktopia can help to minimize the labor involved in planning simple meetings; preserving valuable “manpower” for planning bigger, more complicated events and still help realize departmental savings.

In October 2008, Worktopia conducted a brief survey of its customers and prospective customers. Consistent with other studies, they found that almost 83 percent of offsite meetings held in the United States have fewer than 100 attendees. But however small the meeting, the booking process takes time and, if your company has been through layoffs and restructuring, finding someone with time to spare can be a challenge.

That’s where technology companies like Worktopia come in. Its Universal Meeting Solution (UMS) completely automates the process for meeting planners to search, compare and book space for simple meetings, arrange catering, AV equipment, overnight accommodations and other amenities in one, single online session, outlines Rothman. Gone are the days of endless phone tag with hotel sales departments, multiple contract revisions and chasing down details for dozens of small meetings.

Unlike some of the other RFP-based “virtual” third party planners, Worktopia

targets the simple meetings market, groups with fewer than 100 attendees, and enables real-time booking of meeting space and hotel accommodations. Rates and fees have been preset by the suppliers so the booking process is quick and easy. For corporations that have pre-negotiated contracts with hotels and business centers, Worktopia offers a corporate edition of their product that allows the loading of company specific rates, properties and other travel-related corporate guidelines.

Tools such as Worktopia help a corporation reduce costs, both direct and indirect, in several ways; by applying and comparing all meeting spend, large and small, against existing property agreements; by seeing which simple meetings have been cancelled and where, allowing companies to go back to the property and recover or reuse cancellation fees; by having Worktopia’s standard negotiated contract mitigate risks such as insurance and liability, often overlooked when small, off-site meetings are planned; and by knowing what meetings are planned, giving procurement some measure of control over what is being spent.

Worktopia’s UMS is offered as either a web-hosted service or can be branded on white label forms via corporate booking tools such as TripManager and GetThere, through global distribution systems including Sabre, TravelPort and on agency desktops. Worktopia also delivers attendee management services in partnership with SignUP4.

The cost to use Worktopia’s UMS or UMS-CE technology is essentially transactional with a one-time set-up fee to get started. Hotels and meeting venues are charged a start-up fee and industry standard commissions for meeting rooms and hotel guestrooms.

Maintaining optimum productivity with fewer resources is a challenge facing almost every corporation these days but, at the end of this latest economic downturn, the winners will be the proactive companies that emerge leaner, more efficient and more profitable. Tools that offer the opportunity to gain visibility into the heart of the meeting operation so that unnecessary expenses can be excised with a scalpel rather than rough-cut with a hatchet — tools like Worktopia and SignUP4 — will give corporations the ability to truly drive supplier negotiations ... without losing that essential human touch. **BTE**