

A Call for Professional Standards and Ethics in the Event Staff Management Industry

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Introduction

Event staff management is relatively new in the event planning industry. Prior to the early 1990's, it simply didn't exist. If you were planning a meeting or convention, you hired a staffing agency or worked through the Convention and Visitors' Bureau to get temporary workers to staff the event.

The results were predictably lackluster, because there was a critical element missing: management. Yes, there were usually "supervisors" who checked people in and maybe coordinated lunch breaks (or maybe not). But there was nobody to mold this group of random individuals into a team, train them, set standards, develop esprit de corps, resolve issues, or instill principles of client service.

The purpose of this white paper is to raise awareness among members of the event planning community that management standards and ethics are just as important in event staffing as they are in any other business. Your temporary staffers may be together for only a few days, but during that time, the customer (you) deserves exemplary service, attendees deserve to be treated like visiting royalty, and the staff deserves to be properly supported and treated with respect.

Setting Standards for Recruiting

Recruiting is where it all begins. As the old adage from the computer industry goes, "Garbage in, garbage out." If recruiting standards are not high, the quality of the staff will be poor.

Think carefully about the kind of person that makes a good event staffer. Start by thinking through how you want your visitors and exhibitors to feel. You want them to feel welcome, you want them to feel that their needs are important, and you don't want them to be confused, frustrated, or angry. It follows that the ideal event staffer must be friendly, helpful, organized, informed, understand the concept of service, and stay cool under pressure. It is also important that the staffers be reliable, professional and well groomed (making them more approachable).

Clearly, the ideal event staffer is a specific kind of person. Accepting a random group of people from the pool of available temporary workers will not fit the bill. Create a template of the ideal staffer and develop a recruiting process to assure that each person has not only the specific skills required, but also the personality traits required of a professional event staffer.



Setting Standards for Performance

Even if you have recruited a team of outgoing, friendly, service-oriented individuals, you cannot expect them to intuitively know how to behave on-site at an event. You must have clear standards for performance, and every member of the team must know what these standards are.

For instance, staffers must understand what to do when there's a problem. Give them clear procedures to follow (first ask these questions, and if you can't help, then consult your supervisor), and instruct them in how to respond if someone is angry or rude (always be sympathetic, never lose your temper, try to help them solve the problem). Once people understand what your standards are, most will try hard to meet them.

And staffers need to know logistics, such as when to be on-site, how to check in, and what the consequences will be for not following procedure. Does every little detail have to be spelled out? Yes. It is unfair to expect temporary workers to understand how to operate in your environment unless it is all laid out for them. Which brings us to the topic of training.

Training

Training is one of the most critical factors in successful event staff management. It assures that everybody on the team understands your standards, expectations and procedures. It also is your best assurance that the staff will deliver excellent performance in support of your event.

Even if there are staff members on the team who have worked for you before on the same event in the same city, it is imperative that all staff members undergo training prior to an event — every time. All events are different, and the same event can be different from year to year.

There are four elements involved in event staff training:

- **Orientation.** This gives the staff an overview of the event. A written orientation package should ideally be provided to each staff member prior to coming on-site so that they have a chance to review policies and procedures, but these should also be covered in training.
- **Performance standards.** This educates the staff about what is expected in customer service, how to head off problems, problem solving, and standards of apparel and grooming. They also need to understand clearly what will happen when standards or procedures are not followed. Perhaps more importantly, tell them how they will be rewarded if they go above and beyond in their performance.
- **Logistics.** This involves educating staff about the venue, the program, and the particulars of the physical layout of the event (location of the press room, bookstore, meeting rooms, etc.) Touring the venue is essential to give people a physical understanding of the set up.
- **Task training.** This is where people are trained on specifics of their job, such as operating the registration computers, or monitoring session rooms.

Training has another, more subtle purpose. It is an opportunity to build enthusiasm, create bonding among individuals in the group, and motivate the staff to do their absolute best to make the event a positive experience for attendees and exhibitors. It helps for them to know that to the attendees, they are the organization sponsoring the show, not just “temps”. This esprit de corps has a very real, if intangible, effect on performance, helping the staffers to create an overall positive environment onsite.

Management

Although event staffers may only be a team for a few days or a week, they are like any other group of people; they need management. They need more than just someone scheduling breaks and replacements — they need support and oversight.

One reason is to build-in accountability. It's human nature. Someone needs to notice if they are on time or not. Someone needs to tell them if they are not performing to standard, and someone needs to praise them if they're doing a great job.

Another reason is support. If a staffer encounters a problem they can't solve on the spot, they need to be able to turn to someone who can. If a staffer is struggling in his or her position, someone needs to notice and take the appropriate action.

And the third reason is to keep the event rolling smoothly. A hands-on, on-site manager can spot trouble areas and fix them, bring on additional staffers if needed, and in many cases, solve issues before they become problems. Staffers don't have the global view of the situation nor the authority to do any of this.

Incentives

Temporary staffers respond just as enthusiastically to job incentives as full time employees. Yet it is rare that anyone thinks to apply this well-understood management tool to temporary workers. If you want to drive higher performance from your event staff, you need to give them a reason to strive for excellence beyond just feeling virtuous. Incentives such as recognition (certificates, service pins, etc.) and cash bonuses are highly effective incentives.

Of course, you have to let staffers know about incentives, and this can be done very effectively during the training process. This goes a long way toward building that esprit de corps (especially if you reward effective teamwork), and it reinforces desired behavior.

Continuity

It is well known that there is a value in institutional knowledge. People who know the ropes make fewer mistakes, require less training and supervision, and are able to help others who have less experience. That's great, you may say, but how does that apply to event staff management, where the team is different every year?

The point is that the team doesn't have to be different every year. If you hold your event annually in the same venue, take note of the staffers who do an exceptional job, and invite them back every year. If your event goes to a different venue every year, do the same — when you come back again to Dallas or Orlando, make sure you know who the best people are in those cities, and recruit them first. These veterans of your event are pure gold, so make sure they enjoy working for you!

The Bottom Line

When all is said and done, the same management techniques and precepts apply to temporary workers as to permanent, full time workers. The problem seems to be that in general, temporary event staffers are not treated like other types of employees. Recruiting tends to be haphazard, they are trained little if at all, and there is no professional management on site in most cases. In consequence, the results tend to be disappointing.

So this is a call to the event planning industry for a professional approach to the management of event staffers. It's common sense. Standards must be set and communicated, there must be a clear set of ethics in play, and temporary staff must be managed using the same techniques that work well in other settings. It is in the best interest of the event planner, the organization sponsoring the event, the staffers — and ultimately, of the entire events industry — to set a higher standard.