

TRAINING:

The Key to Success in the Private Special Events Market

People who book your property for a wedding, a family reunion, an anniversary, or other private special event expect a truly memorable experience. To ensure that they will be delighted by all that you provide, offer special events training to every member of your staff. Then wait for the accolades from your clients and the referrals that are sure to follow. **BY NELSON CLARK**

Let's start with an actual scenario: It is 10 a.m. on Saturday and, as general manager of the property, you're in your office when you get a call from the front desk manager. The catering director has not yet arrived, there is no one else in catering, and there's a nearly hysterical bride whose wedding is scheduled for 4 o'clock, in the lobby wearing jeans and a wedding veil. She cannot understand why she and her attendants can't check in early to her honeymoon suite. And to make matters worse, the banquet captain told them that they couldn't access the ballroom until much later to place the favors on the tables. And not only did he not know where to place the chuppah for her ceremony, he didn't even seem to know what a chuppah is.

This scenario is more common than you may think. In many properties, where there are a number of departments making up the whole, the potential for things to fall through the cracks is enormous. Almost all of the unfortunate scenes like the one above can be avoided with one

simple thing: effective training.

Effective training of your staff cannot only help you avoid crises; it can also make the difference between a successful property and an unsuccessful one. Why? Because with proper training comes better service. And with better service comes happier clients and more revenue. This is especially true in the wedding and special events segment of your market.

New definition of group business

The hospitality industry no longer can look at group business as only meetings, convention, and corporate events that provide multiple nights/days revenue for sleeping and meeting rooms as well as income from additional amenities. Group business now includes every kind of special event there is: weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, memorial services, Quinceaneras (a celebration of a young Latina coming into society as an adult), reunions, and more. All of these private events have one thing in common: they are emotionally based because they

are one-time landmark occasions. People spare no expense to make emotional events truly memorable. These events bring guests to sleep in your beds, eat in your restaurant, book your banquet and catering facilities, utilize your spa and golf amenities, and spend money freely. But dealing with emotion-driven events requires specialized staff training that needs to be incorporated when planning your overall master action plan.

Why focus on this new group business model? Because weddings and private special events are a multi-billion dollar industry. Establishing a strategic training plan for your staff will ensure that you capture your portion of this lucrative niche market. As Doug Fiedler, retired senior director of catering for Marriott International and now vice president of Marketing for Avendra says, "Customers expect a great deal for the money they pay for special events. Having a trained, articulate selling staff in the areas of food and beverage, wine pairing, room layouts, and agenda management is paramount to total cus-



tomers satisfaction. A facility that invests in training is always more successful.”

Training for new special events group business

You never have a second chance to make a first impression. Therefore, proper training to make a winning first impression should be paramount. People buy people. Rebecca Grinnals, founder of Engaging Concepts, and co-founder Disney’s Fairy Tale Weddings and Honeymoons, says, “In the private special events market, good people make all the difference. Great advertising, terrific public relations campaigns, a fantastic Web site are a waste of money if your staff is not trained and prepared to deal with the clients.”

■ **Every department needs to be in sales.** From your front desk staff to the restaurant hostess to banquet staff to housekeeping and maintenance, every single member of staff must recognize the value of the customer. Every contact with a client or prospective client is a presentation. This could range from a company

policy of greeting everyone who passes by to everyone checking in being introduced to the bell captain by name. Tricia Thomas, founder of the Wedding Careers Institute, Inc. and co-developer of the Beverly Clark Hospitality Training Program, points out, “Whether it’s a wedding, an anniversary, a Bat Mitzvah or another special event, clients believe they are spending a lot of money and expect special treatment. From the minute they walk in the door, every member of your staff should be courteous, considerate, and eager to make them feel special.”

One historic property in California implemented a mini-training program for key front line departments such as the front desk, concierge, restaurant hostess and banquet staff. The objective was for them to become familiar with the menus catering offered, the previous successful events done at the inn, and trained in the vocabulary of various niche special event markets such as Quinceaneras, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, etc. They made sure that there were sales brochures, wedding packets, and

business cards at every public station (concierge, front desk, hostess desk, etc.). When the DOC was not in or available to walk-in customers, the concierge or a member of the front desk staff would offer to give the walk-in a tour of the inn so that the prospective client’s interest was not lost. The other departments were not expected to book events, but the fact that they were prepared to “sell” the client and equipped to give out information packets meant a greater chance they would capture the potential client’s interest immediately, which could translate into revenue.

■ **Hold a brainstorming session with your staff.** Include different departments, not just sales staff. Include housekeeping, maintenance, restaurant, banquet, front desk staff, etc. Ask each person what they hear most from guests, and talk about past experiences where things have gone wrong and how they could have been handled better. Get their suggestions on how best to make sure every department is prepared for contingencies. “What happens, for example, if the wedding cake delivered by an outside



RESOURCES For Special Events Training Programs

Several well-known companies and organizations offer wedding and special events training and certification programs:

- **International Special Events Society (ISES)** www.ises.com
- **National Association of Catering Executives (NACE)** www.nace.net
- **The Beverly Clark Hospitality Training Program** www.beverlyclarktraining.com

BOOKS

Create a library of resources for all types of events for future reference for both you and your staff. Here are some resources to get you started:

- ***The Best Practices in Modern Event Management*** Third Edition, 2002 by Joe Goldblatt, CSEP. John Wiley & Sons
- ***The Complete Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planner*** by Linda Seifer. Sage Publications
- ***Quinceanera!*** by Michele Salcedo. Henry Holt
- ***Planning a Wedding to Remember*** by Beverly Clark. Wilshire Publications
- ***Happy Anniversary!*** By Robin A. Kring. Meadowbrook
- ***Family Reunion*** by Jennifer Crichton. Workman Publishing Co.
- ***Weddings: A Family Affair*** by Marjorie Engel. Wilshire Publications

vendor splits in two pieces an hour before the reception and no one knows who the vendor is? A well-trained staff will have a backup plan in place to solve the problem even though they aren't responsible," says Thomas. "Because in the client's eyes, you are responsible." She also recommends having regular mid-weekly staff meetings including all departments to go over what special things are needed for all events coming up over the next weekend.

■ **Make training personally rewarding.**

Create training programs in-house to support the continued growth of your staff. The more training your staff receives, the better it is for everyone. "Several years ago we started an internal program we call STAR, which stands for Smart Training Achieves Results," says Kevin Brant, CPCE, corporate private event director for ClubCorp. "STAR is designed to assist our employee-partners in their continued development. It not only adds value to our members and guests, but it also builds loyalty. We have found that having our training programs in place has helped us with the retention of our employee-partners because they realize we value them and are willing to devote resources to them."

■ **Empower all staff to make key decisions in your absence with clear communication.** Re-evaluate your banquet event orders/catering contracts to create one sheet of paper that can be recognized and understood by all: kitchen and banquet staff as well as concierge, front desk, and sales staff. Having a contract, which is viewed and agreed to by everyone, including the client, will enable the most important thing: the client will receive stellar customer service. This same piece of paper can include hotel booking information, any special check-in requirements, comps, upgrades, menu for banquet, banquet room set up, etc. Since the client will have seen it and signed it, any member of the hotel staff could look at it and see what the client agreed to and then deliver the service that was promised...and hopefully go a little beyond it.

■ **Make your staff more marketable by becoming "certified" in weddings and special events.** Use this special certifica-

tion on all business cards, promotional materials, and prominently display them in your catering consulting area. Potential clients entrusting their most precious lifetime events want the best, people who knows what they are doing. Hire a leading consulting firm that specializes in wedding and special events training for the hospitality industry to come to your hotel and train your staff on the basics of these events. If time is a consideration, ask if the firm offers an on-line training program that your staff can complete from home. Grinnals firmly believes in specialized training. "When I was setting up Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings and Honeymoons, we had specific wedding training for all sales and service personnel, which is one of the reasons the program became so successful." Several organizations offering specialized training and certification programs are in the Resources for Special Events sidebar.

■ **Don't forget to "train" your clients!**

The only way to ensure success for all is to have an informed client. It is your job to set up the client for success by making sure there are no surprises. Offering private special events is all about creating dream experiences for clients and making them look good to their guests. Explain everything to them up front. Educate them in person, on the phone, in writing about your deposit policies, bringing in their own wine to their event, fee structures, service charges, taxes, and more to be certain that they understand as much as possible before the event.

Be careful not to use hospitality industry jargon and acronyms such as "F&B", "BEO," or "IHO." When a client is set up for success by being educated and informed up front, everyone profits.

Today, the wedding and special events market is one of the few growing segments of the hospitality industry. By approaching that market with trained staff that understands it, you will give your property a major boost in increasing your share of this profitable and expanding market. Wedding and private special events are all about making dreams come true. And the best advertising in the world is a satisfied client. ■