

YOU, INC.

HOW TO START YOUR
OWN PLANNING
BUSINESS.

BY CAROLEE NOURY

If you're considering a career as an independent event planner, the time is right. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistic's Occupational Outlook Handbook [OOH], event planners are in high demand. In 2012, the OOH predicted the field would grow at a rate of 33 percent over the decade, "much faster than the average for all occupations." Here, industry experts—four event planners, a professor, and a financial advisor—offer up their tips, experience and wisdom for making your venture a success.

STEP ONE: A BUSINESS PLAN

If the idea of a business plan gives you hives, you're not alone. The secret behind clearing this hurdle is to focus on the time and trouble it will save you later. As Lorraine Mariella, CSEP, CMP, event and meeting planner and owner of Celebrations Event & Meeting Management, says, "You are an event planner, but you're also a business owner. Business owners need to be fluent in budgeting, marketing, branding, attracting clients, human resources and legal requirements, to name a few. There's a lot more that goes into becoming an event planner than making some business cards that say you're one."

The business plan functions as a map for your future. Kelly L. Trageser, MBA, CFP, principal for Sea Clear Financial Planning, urges small business owners to "set themselves up for success." Her top recommendations are: "First, complete all the neces-

sary training. Second, target the right customers by having a website that clearly explains your services and fees. Third, keep costs to a minimum by learning how to do expensive outsourced tasks yourself."

NETWORKING IS PRICELESS

People skills are an obvious requirement for planning and hosting events, but they're also important for running your business. Corrine Statia, president and meeting and event specialist for Absolute Events By Corrine and Event Makers, says to speak to other event planners: "We've all made mistakes and learned from them. Save yourself and cash in on our experiences. When you first start out, you won't have a strong sense of how much time and money you'll have to invest in an event. Until you do, rely on others' knowledge. It could help save you from accidentally undercutting yourself." Marni Gold, M.A.,

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independent event industry consultant and producer, agrees that getting to know fellow industry insiders is key. “Get to know the different professional organizations out there,” she says. “Join them and be active. Go to events, volunteer on committees and serve on the board if you can. It will give you the opportunity to meet your peers, including others you’ll be working closely with: caterers, florists, audio-visual experts and other event service providers. There is no better way to get referrals.”

“Networking doesn’t have to be intimidating,” says Anita Belle, event specialist and owner of AJB Events. “If you use social media, connect with someone that will be at the event you’re going to. Have a conversation that you can pick up when you meet face-to-face. Once you’ve warmed up, talking to the next person is easier. Remember that it’s really not about pitching yourself or your services; it’s about getting to know new people. Come prepared with a couple of questions to break the ice, such as, ‘What brought you out to this event?’ Be genuine and making connections will be more natural and much more fun.”

THINKING ON YOUR FEET

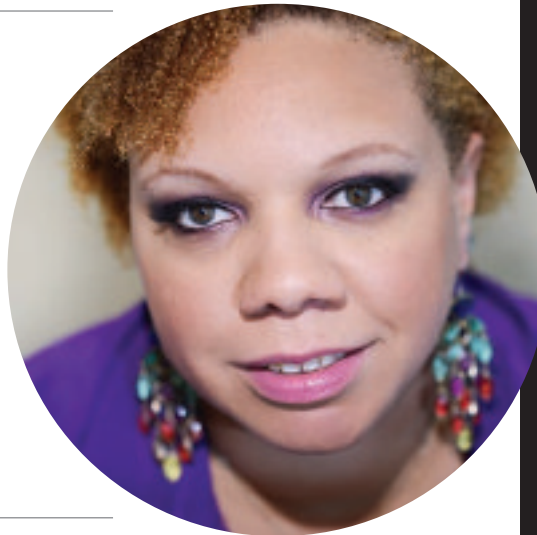
Professionals who are best suited for event planning embody some critical, and often overlooked, traits. Organizational and communication skills are crucial qualities, but there are many others that will set you apart from your competition. In Statia’s experience, “Resourcefulness can’t be overstated. When something unexpected happens, you have to be quick to find and apply the best possible solution.” It’s even better if you can deal with the madness while at least appearing calm and collected. “Cultivate a professional demeanor that includes unwavering confidence and calm,” adds Gold. “Sometimes that means acting more together than you feel, but as long as you look the part, you’ll survive it without losing face and possibly alienating a client.” Mariella cautions, “Learn how to adjust to less sleep; sometimes things get crazy leading up to an event and you’re stuck functioning with little to none.”

HIT THE BOOKS

With growing educational opportunities for event planners, it’s worth considering a degree or cer-

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tificate program. At Middlesex County College in Edison, students have the opportunity to earn an Event Planning Management Certificate. Professor Nancy Bailey, chair of the Accounting, Business and Legal Studies department, recommends that anyone interested in working as an event planner take at least one course, such as Introduction to Event Planning or Small Business Management, to experience the value firsthand. “Since our academic program focuses on all the aspects involved in an event planning business—legal, accounting, marketing, public speaking, field experience, and so on—our students emerge as well-rounded professionals,” she says. “Many of our professors work in their fields, and offer reality-based examples and insight to their students.”

VOLUNTEERING IS VALUABLE

If a formal internship isn’t in the cards for you, you might want to volunteer for established event planners. Keep in mind that the help needed usually won’t be on the creative side. However, the agreement should still provide benefits for both parties. “Our students intern in a large variety of settings—trade shows, conferences, weddings, galas, you name it—and we work to make sure the professionals aren’t using our students as a source of free labor,” Bailey says. “There has to be a fitting trade-off. Yes, the interns will help with a range of event duties, but they also must get the opportunity to learn useful information while they’re at it.”

BENEFITS OF THE BUSINESS

The benefits of managing your own business make all the extra effort worth it. “I feel incredibly fulfilled by my work,” says Statia. “I get to work from the beginning of the event all the way to the end. I get to give my whole self to making people’s visions come to life and helping them enjoy it. This job is not all glitz and glamour. It’s an extremely rewarding, magical profession, but it is a lot of work. It turns out hard work can be incredibly enjoyable when you’re doing it right.”

Mariella concurs, “This is the perfect career for me, I love what I do and I enjoy owning my own business.” Gold values her flexible hours: “I make my own schedule,” she says. “If I want time off, I work my events around it. This freedom is priceless, and even on the craziest days, reminds me of what an excellent fit my career is.”

Another aspect of the business that event planners find appealing is the relationships they’ve built with their clients. “I deeply enjoy the personal connection I make with people I might not have met otherwise,” says Gold. “It’s even easier to keep track of the cool stuff going on in my clients’ lives with social media these days. I love finding a picture from a past event and being able to tag the client, so we can enjoy the memory together.” When Belle is with her clients, she’s always listening, even during casual conversations: “Making the effort to get to know your clients often changes those business relationships into friendships.” 📞



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