It’s Easier Than You Think

For over a decade, Strategic Meetings Management (SMM) has been discussed as a defined process by which companies can standardise their approach to meetings and events. Many have saved millions of dollars, reduced the risk of unmanaged spend, and increased revenue through effectively managing meetings. Still most organisations have not put a programme in place. Why?

Stakeholders have shared a number of explanations over the years such as confusion around the goals of an SMM programme, what constitutes Strategic Meetings Management, and the difficulties in implementation. As a result, many companies get lost, stalled in deployment, or remain in a perpetual holding pattern waiting for conditions to improve on their own. As crisis hits the meetings and events industry, waiting is no longer an option. Companies must have processes in place to manage meeting and event contracts, control costs, and maintain centralised reporting for quick access and decision-making.

The decision is simple. Ask yourself if it is worth the risks to NOT have a meetings management programme in place.

In order to take that first step (revamping an existing programme), companies should first identify their company goals and how their meetings and events help achieve those goals.

Reasons to Implement a Strategic Meetings Management Programme:

1. Your company is concerned with compliance – internal, government regulations, or other
2. Your company seeks to control the costs of meetings
3. Your company wants to provide a consistent and high level of service for meetings to drive internal and external customer engagement
4. Your company is concerned about employee safety and security while traveling or attending meetings
What are the Primary Goals of an SMM Programme?

⚠️ Reduce Risks / Increase Compliance

Potential risk associated with meetings and events, includes regulatory risks, contracting and procurement risks, and the safety and security of attendees.

An SMM programme can help mitigate risk by ensuring compliance with corporate policies and procedures. For example, directing events to appropriate venues, ensuring high-value contracts are reviewed and signed by an authorised signatory, or having the ability to easily report on the location of the meetings and their attendees in case of an emergency.

Many established programmes were originally driven by federal regulations such as the Sunshine Act or Sarbanes Oxley regulations for publicly held companies. This led to the belief that SMM programmes are only for the largest, most complex organisations.

Since then, and especially recently, we’ve recognised that event contracts and the health and safety of attendees pose just as much threat to organisations as federal regulations.

Regulatory Risk to Evaluate:

1. Anti-bribery regulations, such as the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and the UK Bribery Act
2. Industry specific regulations, such as the Physician Payment Sunshine Act, and the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority guidelines / National Association of Securities Dealers Rules
3. Personally Identifiable Information (PII) regulations such as GDPR and CCPA.

$1 Billion in corporate revenue
$10 Million in meeting spend

Frost & Sullivan, A Survey of Meeting and Event Planning Professionals and Hotel Operators – 2013 Corporate Meetings Summit
Reduce Costs / Spend More Efficiently

Meeting spend represents just over 1% of overall revenue for most corporations. These costs are often hidden in financial systems, leading to a largely unmanaged category of spend. A meeting request process will provide greater control over meeting spend by identifying meetings before they happen. By knowing which meetings are being planned, there are opportunities to consolidate or overlap meetings, package multiple meetings in vendor negotiations, and incorporate virtual meeting components to reduce travel expenses. Additionally, standard budgeting processes provide data to leverage negotiations with suppliers and analyse expense patterns to identify opportunities to optimize spend.

Increase Revenue / Drive Customer Experience

The standardised processes and procedures of an SMM programme ensure high quality meetings and events that result in employee loyalty or, in the case of external meetings, drive revenue and develop company loyalty. By integrating event management technology with marketing technology such as CRM systems and marketing automation tools, you can attribute event attendance to revenue. This, combined with the focus on cost savings and spend management helps to prove the ROI of your meeting and event programme.
Four Easy Steps to Building an SMM Programme:

Achieving Your Programme Goals

**STEP ONE  Solicit / Gain Management Buy-In**

Senior management often has a short attention span. Of primary importance to them is understanding how your request aligns with their goals. In order to succeed in obtaining high level support for your initiative you must do three things:

1. **Focus on the Right Senior Managers and Stakeholders** – The ‘right’ stakeholders are those that have the most interest in the success of meetings and events, or the ones who hold the purse strings. This could be a number of C-levels, meeting, finance, and procurement managers, the VP of marketing, etc.

   Successful programmes also call for buy-in from the people planning meetings, so understand their concerns and how the program will specifically benefit them. Given today’s pressures to do more with less, Planners are looking for efficiency gains while still delivering high quality events to their clients.

2. **Answer the Question – What Do They Care About?** – Tailor your messaging to each stakeholder group’s specific concerns, which generally include:

   3. Increased profitability for the organisation
   4. Improved return for their investment
   5. Reduced risk and air-tight compliance
   6. Enhanced operational efficiencies to improve employee and customer satisfaction and to reduce costs

3. **Show Them Evidence That the Programme Addresses Their Concerns** – Include some specific examples of how the programme will support their interests in making it a sound investment:

4. Increased Profitability – demonstrate how an SMM programme will generate more customer leads, and improve customer and employee satisfaction and loyalty

5. Improved ROI – outline how an SMM programme contributes to managing both sides of the ROI ratio by increasing profitability and reducing costs

6. Reduced Risk – educate senior leaders on the risks associated with corporate meetings and events, and show how an SMM programme can help mitigate those risks

7. Enhanced Operational Efficiencies – illustrate the current state processes and their impact on profitability and expense, and show how an SMM programme can introduce operational efficiencies to address those problems
STEP TWO Write a Meetings Policy

A meetings policy is a set of rules developed by an organisation for the procurement and operation of meetings. The most important component of a meeting policy is defining what constitutes a meeting by outlining a formal meeting definition. Many organisations use criteria such as a minimum number of attendees, whether the event is held on or off company premises, and/or a minimum estimated budget.

Through policy, companies can impact spend by including guidelines around how meetings are registered, which suppliers to use, who can sign supplier contracts, appropriate levels of services offered to attendees, and suggested spending caps. A well implemented policy can result in incremental savings of between 10-15% for most organisations, and can also help prevent compliance issues by providing guidance on interactions with government officials or health care professionals (depending on your industry) as well as spending limits for food and beverage and gifts.

A meetings policy, like an SMM programme overall, can be simple or complex based on the needs of your organisation. The table shows eighteen possible topics to include, but only the first nine are essential to achieve the fundamental goals of an SMM programme.

Every well-written policy includes a clearly defined scope which dictates who is required to comply, what types of meetings are included, where and when the policy applies (geographically and/or organisationally). It is also important to clearly state any policy exceptions or what is considered out-of-scope.

Developing senior management buy-in requires targeting the right stakeholders:

• Chief Financial Officer
• Chief Compliance Officer
• Chief Procurement Officer
• Your organisation’s Legal and Finance departments

And showing them how an SMM programme:

• Reduces Risk
• Increases Profitability
• Improves ROI
• Enhances Operational Efficiency
STEP THREE  Design a Sourcing Strategy

Sourcing processes and procedures are the steps needed to identify and select venues, negotiate and execute contracts. A good sourcing strategy includes leveraging preferred supplier relationships by directing planners to preferred vendors and negotiated rates. Use of key National or Global Sales Office resources should be encouraged to ensure the best position when negotiating with properties within their respective chains. Developing standard terms and conditions for hotel contracting in a Hotel Addendum or standardised contract template and ensuring that this information is conveyed to bidding suppliers is another key to ensuring consistency in the procurement process. Identifying authorised reviewers, approvers and designating signatory authority to specific resources will prevent risk associated with contract execution.

This is crucial in the unfortunate event that you have to cancel or postpone an event. When event contracts are signed by unauthorised employees, the company may be out millions of dollars.

It is also a good idea to outline the process to be followed when a meeting is canceled. This includes how to leverage cancellation credits by posting them for others in the company to take advantage of, and how those credits should be applied when the space is re-used. When your sourcing professionals and meeting stakeholders follow standardised sourcing processes the potential savings achieved is in the 10-15% range.
STEP 4  Implement a Meetings Platform

A meetings technology platform by itself is not enough to achieve the goals of an SMM programme, but it does support SMM processes such as meeting registration, sourcing, budget management, reporting, attendee registration, on-site experience, and integrations with other corporate systems. At the core of these systems is (1) the ability to document all meetings data including event demographic information, suppliers used, and spend and savings information at any organizational hierarchy level, and (2) to enforce processes and procedures that were developed as part of the corporate meetings policy.

The right meetings technology system will allow for configuration based on your unique business and process requirements and allow for development and growth over time.

The accurate collection of key data points results in comprehensive analysis, including:

• **Supplier level reporting**, which can be used to leverage negotiations and generate improved savings levels

• **Regulatory reporting**, to document spend per attendee and overall compliance to spending caps for travel, hotel, food & beverage, and gifts

• **Crisis management reporting**, to determine the location of meeting attendees based on air and hotel reservations
To achieve your SMM goals with meetings technology, all you need are three basic implementation steps:

**Capture Meeting Activity**

With the correct technology provider, meeting request forms are completely customisable to collect desired information about meeting requester, meeting type, and logistics (such as services requested, budget, etc.). Many technology tools will also automatically populate a master calendar to centrally locate registered meetings and events. With just this first step, organisations will have the visibility of what meetings are being held across the organisation and the tools to easily report on this data.

**Automate Sourcing and Budgeting**

The second step to implementing simple meetings technology is to automate the sourcing and budgeting processes. This step can be done immediately, or in the months/years to come as your programme gains adoption. It will automate many of the processes outlined in your sourcing strategy and will provide additional insight into spend and savings numbers on meetings and events.

**Increase Compliance and Efficiency**

The last step of implementing a simple meetings management technology allows you to add additional automation and accountability tracking. Now is the time to get more complex and automate key aspects of your meeting policy. Monitor the stages of your meeting life cycle, reflecting not only how many total meetings occurred, but identifying peak planning times and understanding how long a meeting spends in various stages along the way. Further the sourcing strategy by sending eRFP's to preferred hotels or National Sales Office's (NSO's), while also maintaining and utilising canceled space inventory. Improve insight into the budget through further customisation, including savings formulas to deepen the level of data analysis. Attendee management components such as online registration, onsite check-in, and event mobile apps to both manage attendees while enhancing their experience.

**Summary**

In summary we see that an SMM programme does not have to be complex. Simple steps and basic technology tools are all that's needed to accomplish the core goals of strategic meetings management. A simple and straightforward SMM programme consisting of policy, sourcing and planning processes and procedures, and a meetings technology system, can easily be rolled out. These three components are easy to implement, and can be accomplished in as short as three months.

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