



Risk Management

By Mark Rowh

December Issue 2015

A flawless meeting is every planner's dream. But dreams don't always come true. Sometimes, they even become nightmares. Nowadays, hotels and organizations are paying greater attention to the unlikely but possible threat of an active shooter incident. The unprecedented number of active shooters is prompting companies to teach employees how to protect themselves using such tactics as run, hide and fight.

What happens if your well-orchestrated meeting is suddenly interrupted by a major emergency? Or maybe a troublesome development, even if not a huge emergency, disrupts the normal flow of things. Do you have a risk management plan in place to respond to such challenges?

Certainly every meeting planner should consider these kinds of questions. After all, the potential damage from any given crisis can be significant.

"The mere threat of a crisis or unexpected incident can have a profound impact on our industry," says Melissa Hahn, CMP, HMCC, account lead, global meeting services for Meetings & Incentives Worldwide Inc. in Caledonia, Wisconsin. Her company implemented a mandatory emergency preparedness plan several years ago to help ensure that staff members are prepared for a crisis. This included identifying common threats to help prepare for worse-case scenarios.

"While organizations can't prepare for everything, by having a rigorous process and toolkit in place we have been able to have our team prepared for an emergency," she says. Risk management plans have been developed to cover steps in the case of an earthquake, power outage, tornado, chemical emergency, death, fire, flood, tsunami or food poisoning. For each type of incident, the plans present an easy-to-follow guideline of what to do in different circumstances, from taking roll call, who to call, security breaches and filling out an incident report afterwards to learn from the experience.

Hahn recalls a memorable day when a tornado was spotted in Nashville during a large event at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel. Fortunately, hotel staff were prepared for the possibility of a natural disaster. "They met with our team, explained where all of the shelter areas were and how their team would direct all of our guests to shelter," Hahn says. "I have to say, I was amazed how 6,000 people could follow directions and get to the basement in record time."

Sometimes, a crisis has nothing to do with the potential of a natural disaster but still poses huge challenges, says Nan Dupuy, president of RDS Productions in New Orleans

That was the case when her firm had been preparing for a corporate party for 5,000 guests over a six-month period with a local venue. They had three tastings, at least five site visits, a signed contract and had already submitted a deposit. A week before the event she delivered the check for the remaining balance.

“We dropped it off with smiles and the usual chit-chat associated with such a large program,” she recalls. “On the way back to the office I received a phone call from the venue telling me that they were going to have to cancel, due to an oversight on their part.”

As it turned out, the venue staff had booked a party for 300 people the year before with a signed contract and deposit, but it hadn’t made it onto their calendar. That put Dupuy at “second hold” and they were suddenly out.

“Obviously, a venue for the number of people we anticipated is not that easy to come by that late in the game,” Dupuy says. “But we got on the telephone as a team and located a venue that the client hadn’t even considered.”

That venue was the Mercedes-Benz Superdome in New Orleans. It would meet their needs, but there was a complicating factor. The New Orleans Saints had made it to the NFL playoffs. If they won the upcoming game, they would host another game and the facility would not be available.

“We all wanted a win, but at the same time, in order to save our hides, we needed the Dome,” Dupuy says. It was a tough week for all concerned, but the team did lose, giving Dupuy’s firm access to the venue. “It turned out to be the most incredible event our client had ever had, but not without a lot of teamwork, re-planning and revamping the style of the event.”

Two major lessons learned in the process prompts Dupuy to advise planners to always make sure that there are no other events on the books, while planning for the possibility of mistakes. “Make sure you have, in writing, an agreement for how the venue can be held responsible financially for anything that happens like this. We didn’t have that and ended up incurring a lot of excessive, unaccounted costs because of the differences in the venues, both size-wise and style-wise.”

The event also highlighted the need for risk management backup plans.

“Always have a backup plan,” Dupuy says. “The venue could flood or burn down, making it unavailable or rendering it useless. Make sure you have a second go-to-venue, just in case.”

Pam Krebs, director, global communications for Oakwood Worldwide, a global provider of housing solutions, points out that unanticipated events are inevitable.

“It’s typically not a question of if, but rather when, a crisis or unexpected incident will happen,” she says. “By taking the time to prepare and think through possible scenarios before anything happens, an organization can more effectively deal with any situations that occur and help to minimize disruption to daily business activities.”

She notes that as a global organization doing business in 85 countries, Oakwood Worldwide has established a comprehensive duty of care program designed to quickly identify when an issue arises and escalate as appropriate to effectively manage the event. While her perspective focuses on managing problems from the property owner’s point of view, it can hold relevance for meeting planners as well.

“We have procedures in place to help our associates deal with issues before, during and after they have occurred,” Krebs says. “They apply whether they are faced with severe weather, a natural disaster, an act of terrorism or an environmental issue, among others.”

Oakwood's staff walk through scenarios on what to do if a natural disaster affects one of the company's properties. A dedicated crisis hotline, manned 24/7 by an in-house team trained in crisis response, provides a means for associates to notify the crisis team that something has happened. Guests staying in the affected area are notified via text, voicemail and email. Clients also are notified of the status of their employees, as are associates in any number of locations who may be called upon to help.

"A crisis or significant, unexpected event can happen at any time," Kreb says. She notes, however, that rarely are they so significant that all other business operations cease while working through the crisis and the aftermath. "Therefore, preparation is the key to not only helping to ensure the best-case outcome of the crisis happens, but also in ensuring business continuity for the parts of the business that are not directly affected."

Smart Strategies

Dupuy says that a flexible approach is the key to risk or crisis management.

"Meeting planners are always ready for the unexpected, but sometimes the unexpected can't be planned for," she says. "Always be on your guard and ready to do battle."

In avoiding or dealing with crisis situations, consider measures such as these:

Plan for the worst. In schools and many other organizations, emergency planning drills have become routine. Such activities may not be practical when it comes to preparing for meetings, but any time spent anticipating possible problems will be worthwhile. If several staff members are involved in planning an event, consider a table-top drill where your team works through an on-paper scenario and discusses each step that might be taken in response to the situation presented. "Conducting crisis simulation training to create muscle memory and identify any gaps will help any company effectively deal with a crisis," Hahn says.

Develop a who-does-what checklist. Then, share it with all concerned. Ideally, developing the list should be a group effort rather than a top-down process. While overall approaches may vary, a commitment to planning is the key. "When you fail to plan, you plan to fail," Hahn says. "Without the right preparation, meeting attendees are at risk for injury, and the organizations holding meetings are also at risk for bad press, financial obligations and liability."

Communicate clearly. Obviously, any contingency plans that have been developed should be shared with key players. But communicating other information also is important. At a minimum, this might include preparing a list of everyone connected with the event (including those at the event location as well as your own staff) with full contact info. Be sure to list more than one point of contact for the venue and any third-party service providers, and take pains to keep everyone in the loop who might have any reasonable need for the information.

Should an incident occur, clear communication is essential. "Once a crisis is occurring, there may be obvious, immediate steps that should be followed, such as evacuating a building, but what is really key is collaboration and clear communication," Krebs says. On a local level, this might mean using radios to confirm that everyone is accounted for and safe. On a broader level, it might include making others outside the immediate area aware of what has happened so assistance can be provided.

Participate in walk-throughs. “A great meeting planner will make sure to walk through the emergency plans with the hotel and all the onsite staff,” Hahn says. “This emergency preparedness plan should be available in the command center or your staff office and available at your team’s fingertips.”

Know who you are dealing with. Dupuy urges learning as much as possible about a potential venue before making a commitment. “Some venues are order-takers and are only interested in filling their calendar and sales projections in any way possible,” she says. “Others want to work with you and build a relationship. Make sure you know which type you are working with and make certain you have covered all your bases in the initial planning, just in case something goes wrong.”

Go the extra mile. In addition to basic planning, give consideration to extra measures that might take your emergency preparedness to the next level. For example, Hahn’s company has an in-house air department that allows offering onsite air agents at meetings. “Having in-house air agents greatly benefits our attendees and planners when there is weather delay, airport or natural disasters,” Hahn says. “Our agents are available to find a solution to get attendees home in a safe and timely manner.” Another possibility: Have all onsite staff undergo CPR training, which sooner or later may be needed. And select venues that have equipment such as automated external defibrillators, which can be operated by anyone with minimal training.

Put things in writing. Being prepared with written risk management policies and procedures in place is vital. “This should include identifying who should be notified, knowing when and how to reach those people, and ensuring the necessary tools and support are in place,” Krebs says.

The same goes for documenting incidents. Once an incident occurs, be sure to document it. And don’t just file the information; use it to inform future planning.

“At the conclusion of the event, always have an emergency incident report to include the description of the incident that occurred, date and time of the event, meeting name and the name of the client,” Hahn advises.

A ROADMAP FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Jim Hutton, chief security officer at Salem, New Hampshire-based On Call International, a travel risk management company with substantial experience in keeping business travelers safe and secure, offers this advice for dealing with situations that qualify as true crises.

When a meeting is interrupted by a crisis such as a political crisis or natural disaster, clear thinking is critical in executing a response aligned with the best interests of your attendees and your organization. Panic is likely to set in, especially in unfamiliar venues, unless there are clear guidelines in place to deal with emergencies.

Every meeting planner — and meeting attendee — should be trained on a simple near/far exercise, which provides a safety roadmap during any type of crisis as follows:

NEAR

When a crisis strikes, planners should perform an immediate, 360-degree intake of their surroundings and situation: Is anyone injured? If so, is it safe to leave your current surroundings? Is your location

secure? Do you have access to immediate necessities such as food, water and medication? When planners find themselves in a crisis situation, the first priority should always be to ensure the immediate safety and health of their charges.

FAR

After taking stock of immediate surroundings, planners should focus on the “far” concerns that await. Where is the closest secure location?

Assess the lines of communication — is the power out, and are phone lines down? If there is still access to phones lines or an Internet connection, can attendees reach their employers to update them on their safety and location? One of a planner’s first calls should be to their travel risk management provider, who can offer on-the-ground help and resources.

In addition to “near and far” considerations, meeting planners have a responsibility to proactively build in broader contingency planning to their event protocols. This may involve coordination with the venue, key suppliers and even local authorities. A good risk management plan that accounts for the overall safety needs of all participants is an essential component of a complete meeting strategy.