

SMM

Special Markets Meetings

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SPRING 2012

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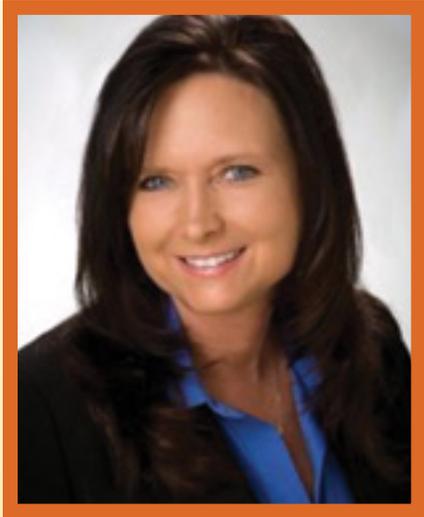
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Meet the Planner: Cindy Smith



NAME: Cindy Smith, CMP, CGMP, CGC

TITLE: President

ORGANIZATION: Meeting Services Inc.

YEARS AS A PLANNER: 23 years

DISTINCTIONS: CMP, CGMP and CGC certifications; named a Top 100 Meeting Professionals to Watch by ConventionSouth Magazine; served on the Board of Directors for the Society of Government Meeting Professionals National Capital Chapter for four years in various capacities, and she was program developer/instructor for the organization's pilot session for an industry certification for government meeting planners; named Contract Planner of the Year for the Society of Government Meeting Professionals National Capital Chapter in 2001 and 2003 and received the NATCPA President's Award for Excellence in 2002 and the SGMP National President's Award of Excellence in 2006; among numerous other awards and distinctions.

A MEETING PLACE ESSENTIAL: "Good climate control."

What type of meetings do you plan and for what audience?

I plan primarily for the association market and federal government. Agencies such as the FAA - Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). My events are typically 250-800 participants and the participants are both domestic and international. I pride myself on functioning as a part of the team with whom I am working. The highest compliment for me is for a participant to ask how long I have been in service when I plan a DOD meeting. I want my efforts to be seamless as a part of the team.

Has recent criticism of government spending impacted the way you do business?

Now more than ever, every dollar is scrutinized. While the agencies I work with and I are diligent to ensure regulations are followed, recent events in the news have a definite and substantial impact on our efforts.

What's the biggest challenge you face in negotiating contracts with venues, hoteliers and other vendors?

As I work primarily with the federal government and association markets, the challenge is always to do more with less.

What, if any, restrictions impact your negotiations?

My negotiations are regulated by the FAR. I must ensure my government meetings are in compliance at all times.

How do you prioritize your needs and wants while staying within budget?

Needs are those items critical to obtaining the objective (mission of the conference). The wants would fall within those items which will enhance the event, but are not mission critical. For example, effective audio/visual is critical as the presentations are the core of the event.

Having a shuttle service to the airport is less so as these costs may be covered in travel orders for attendees.

Are overinflated costs for such items as room blocks or food and beverage a challenge for you? If so, how do you bargain to get the best deal?

As the majority of our rooms are negotiated at federal per diem rates, food and beverage would have to be more of a challenge for us. The first hurdle is the approval of the ability to provide food and beverage based on regulations. Once approvals are received, I find it best to be very honest with the property on what our budgets are and what requirements we are trying to meet. I always try to point out to properties the "value added" revenues of having a group in house with their expenditures in their outlets.

Have you considered multi-year bookings at a property to gain a better deal? If so, in what ways did you save?

We do. When possible we try to "package meetings" for a better value. Unfortunately, we are finding the requirements for locations do not often allow us to do so.

What risks have you taken in contract negotiations? Tell me about a leap you took and how it paid off.

I worked for an association with a very limited budget. They had encountered issues within their organization and a restructure had resulted in their having a greatly reduced budget to provide their annual conference. As this was a group of professionals, I was able to trade services with the host hotel to allow us to save substantially on the meeting. We had graphic design, marketing assistance, printing, and computer training services traded for conference requirements. It took some selling on my part, but it was the only way this organization was going to be able to pull off their annual event which was required by their bylaws. Subsequently, the organization regained its fiscal strength and hosted several more conferences at the hotel. ■