There is so much experience that can be brought to the table by the agents.

Maureen Santoro, Atlas Meetings and Incentives

MEETING PLANNER THRIVES IN AGENCY SETTING

by Harvey Chipkin September 22, 2011

While the jobs of meeting planner and travel manager have their differences, combining the two adds up to business success.

That, at least, has been the experience for Maureen Santoro, CMP, manager of group operations for Atlas Meetings and Incentives in Milford, Mass., who finds many advantages to working within an agency environment. While enjoying autonomy, her division finds the agency support an invaluable asset.

Maureen Santoro

Santoro was a meeting planner at "pure" meeting planning companies, as well as a planner at a smaller agency before launching a meeting and incentive division at Atlas Travel almost 10 years ago.

"Atlas had a lot of corporate clients and Elaine Osgood (president) thought 'why not be a one-stop shop for corporate, leisure, and meetings and incentives?'" Santoro told Travel Market Report.

Atlas bought Santoro's former agency, where she handled meetings, and she became part of Atlas's operation.

Separate identity

Heading up a meetings department at a large agency ($179 million in sales in 2010) has not been much of an adjustment because "we run autonomously," Santoro said.

"We are our own department and I am the manager. We don't work on Sabre computers like the rest of the staff. Even our name is separate and positions us as being a planner of meetings and incentives—rather than a travel company."

In fact, nobody in Santoro's department—six full-timers and two part-timers—has ever been a travel agent. She and one other colleague have earned the Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) designation, while a third are "on that road."

In her early planning days there was a perception that travel agencies could not plan meetings because they "did not have the same tool chest and expertise," Santoro noted. "Now that other agencies have done what Elaine has done, that is no longer true."

Her department may be independent but there is extensive interaction with other Atlas departments. "It's a great fit because we have all these agents under one roof," Santoro said.

"For instance, we have a group air department. If I have 100 people going to a meeting, I will handle the hotel and ground arrangements. Then I work one-on-one with somebody from group air and they'll do the air portion. I do have instant access to the air itineraries and can continually update my own records on that. They have negotiated rates and that makes my meetings more affordable."

According to Santoro, one difference between the travel and meeting divisions is that "consortiums don't really work for meetings, so there's no crossover in that area. The preferred supplier concept does not apply when you're doing 100 rooms."

Agency advantage

"There is so much experience that can be brought to the table by the agents," Santoro said. "Atlas has an international desk so that if I have a client who asks about a meeting in Monrovia, all I need to do is ask if anybody has traveled there and invariably I will find someone.

"It's critical for us to know a location and have firsthand knowledge of it from somebody I trust," she continued. "I don't feel comfortable sending a client to a place if I haven't been there—or don't work with somebody who has."

Another advantage of the agency connection is that "corporate travel clients have the benefit of trusting our company; they know our quality and that our president is always in the background if there are any issues," she said.

With that support, Santoro is able to operate meetings that vary tremendously in size and purpose.

"In October, I have a meeting of 250 people in Boston and during the same week an incentive with 50 people going to Phoenix. We have done meetings that range from 12 people to a 30,000-delegate dental association conference," she said.

While Santoro does handle association business, corporate remains 90% of her portfolio, primarily because of the Atlas connection.

"A lot of times, though, I deal with different people from the clients our agents work with," Santoro said. "Especially when I'm doing incentives, I might be working with a vice president of sales or marketing."

Wobbling like a Weeble

"This is a great place to work because every day is different and you never know from one day to the next what you'll find in your email inbox," Santoro said.

"Still, meetings and incentives have been so up and down. Sometimes I sit back and ask myself why I am in a business that's so dependent on events that I can't control. It's like those Weeble toys that wobble but don't fall down. It might be the weather or SARS or a volcano; there are so many different factors that affect our ability to operate."

Those uncertainties, combined with a "wobbly" economy, make her job challenging, with persistent short-term booking windows another issue to deal with. "I recently had three clients contact me in the same week looking for space immediately or in the next month or so," she said.

While Santoro gets most of her business from the travel agency side, it's not a one-way street by any means. "Just recently, an association president for whom I had done a couple of meetings signed with Atlas as a corporate client. It feels good that I can bring that over to their side."