

IN BUSINESS

by HOWARD GIVNER



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The Demise of the Uninformed Client: An Advance Obituary

And its effects on the value of event design

“You see these pictures? That’s what I want at my event. I want the lounge furniture from this product launch that Jes Gordon did in Los Angeles, the menu Mark Addison did when he was on the Today Show, and light it like this wedding Sasha Souza did at a winery in Napa. Can you do all this? How much?”

Client directives such as this are apt to completely drain an event professional’s creative juices. You’re no longer a brilliant event designer; you’re a commodity, like a sack of soybeans or a truckload of lumber.

Just when you’d finally started getting comfortable charging a fee for your design ideas (instead of marking up the “stuff” you install), your clients start coming to you with their *own* ideas! Well, ok, they’re not the client’s ideas, they’re from other designers, but they sure aren’t yours. Now how are you supposed to make money?

In December the Event Leadership Institute convened a closed-door roundtable on event design at the Pink Powered by Moss studios in New York City. We invited 15 top creative executives from event companies to discuss the challenges facing the industry today. They ranged from solo designers to the creative director at Jack Morton, one of the largest event agencies in the world. The roundtable was off the record, which induced everyone to be open with their comments. Really open.

One of the most important trends everyone acknowledged was that clients are more informed. Thanks to the confluence of social media, where bright ideas are shared by designers instantly on Twitter and Facebook, and the do-it-yourself craze seen in numerous reality TV shows, clients are coming to their event partners with lots of pictures of what they like.

This development has created quite a stir in the events industry, and made for some very lively debate at the roundtable. Event designers like it when clients give them direction, but *they* want to be the ones with the creative ideas.

And if the client is supplying the ideas now, just where is the value the designer brings to the table? If designers revert back to marking up the “stuff,” then they risk becoming a commodity, a rental operation, and clients will just look for the lowest priced vendor.

Is there another option?

There is. The solution is to add a new category for providing value: design and vision development. The exact title will have various iterations until the industry collectively agrees on a term they like; however, the concept is that an event designer or agency can, and does, add value to a client separate from providing their own ideas and/or producing them.

The first phase is to help the client define and articulate their vision for the event, which is not to be understated. An accomplished event agency or designer, after helping develop the event objectives, has the skills to show the client the various nuances and permutations of their event vision, and guide them to settle on one that works.

The second phase is to effectively become the guardian of design, the gatekeeper of good taste for the event, and guide the client on which, if any, of the ideas he or she brings to the table will achieve the desired goal of the event, with the look and feel that client is after. In an age where clients are increasingly bringing various ideas and concepts culled from elsewhere to their chosen vendor, this is something the client absolutely needs.

They need someone with a keen eye to say, in effect, “this idea works, this one doesn’t, this third one would work but only in a different incarnation.” The result may contain a combination of client suggestions, properly filtered, and concepts added by the designer.

In this capacity the agency or designer brings significant value in providing the client the assurance that they hold the event goals sacred, and nothing will make it into the event that in any way detracts from the desired goal and style. They’re responsible for delivering an integrated look and feel and ensuring nothing is hodge podge.

For this to work, however, designers need to divorce themselves from the thinking that they must provide their own ideas in order to prove value. Many have already gotten comfortable making money from ideas they create that are implemented by other suppliers. This is merely the next step in the profession’s evolution. **es**

This column contains excerpts from Business Trends in Event Design, a white paper that addresses this issue along with a number of other business trends driving event design. You can download the full white paper at www.EventLeadershipInstitute.com