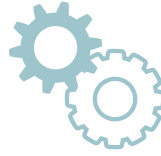


IN BUSINESS

by HOWARD GIVNER



Howard Givner will speak on Growing Your Business Through Stronger Client Relationships at the Idea Factory Sunday, March 10.

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The Hollywood Staffing Model The pros and cons of hiring freelancers

Whenever and wherever a movie is made, nobody who works on the film is a permanent employee. Everyone is brought in, often as independent contractors, for a fixed amount of time until the movie is finished. Then they all go their own ways.

The beauty of this model is that executive producers can pull together a customized team with the exact skills they need, with no long-term obligations. If they're making a comedy, they get a comedy scriptwriter. If they're making a thriller, they get a director who's good at thrillers.

This model makes a lot of sense for the events industry too. Like movies, event planning is not a year-round activity; it runs its course over a period of months and then it's over. Also like movies, events come in different styles. The person you staff on a conservative shareholder meeting likely is not the same as the person you assign to a sexy product launch.

Look for 2013 to be the year this business model becomes solidified in the events industry. Event agencies and in-house planning departments all slashed their payrolls when the economy started to tank in 2008. This had the consequence of putting some very qualified people into the marketplace who became available for freelance work.

As the economy has recovered, the volume of events has dramatically picked up, yet there are still armies of freelancers out there. In many cases the freelancers make more money than they did in-house, often doing the same event work for their former employer, who now is a client.

Why This Works

SCALE UP/SCALE DOWN. I owned an event agency for 20 years, and trying to match the staffing with the workflow was always an adventure, particularly since our events never spread out evenly over the year. We'd always be slammed in the fall and spring, and light in the summer. Having access to good freelancers, however, enabled us to ramp up during those busy seasons, and ramp back down when it was slower.

LOW MAINTENANCE. The freelance planners I hired always had a rock-solid work ethic. They didn't chitchat much, never took long lunches and were extremely focused. They didn't need benefits, and didn't care about career development within our company.

TRADING UP. Perhaps one of the best things about using freelance planners is that you can get a far more qualified person than you might be able to afford if hired on a full time basis. While you may not have the budget to add that \$100k a year stud to your team full time, you might be able to bring them in for a six-week engagement.

SPECIALIZATION. This model gives you the ability to tap planners with specialized experience in the type of event, location, client or service you need.

VARIETY. From the freelancer's perspective, they get to experience a much broader variety of projects and clients than they would if working in-house.

And the Challenges

AVAILABILITY. The biggest drawback, however, is there's no guarantee that person will be available when you need them on your next project. And if that freelancer did a great job on an event and the client asks for them the following year, what happens if they're not available? The events industry does have its fair share of repeat events, which makes it a bit more challenging for us.

COMMITMENT. Sometimes you get a "faux" freelancer, someone who'll take on temporary projects until a full time job comes along. I know a number of employers who were left flat-footed when their freelancer walked out in the middle of a project to start a full time job.

CONSTANT ON-BOARDING. It's not easy continually bringing on new people, getting them acclimated to your internal systems and procedures and learning the politics. Companies that thrive in this environment are those that have developed culture and training systems that can ramp up a new worker at warp speed.

The freelance model offers benefits to both the freelancer and the employer. It definitely has its challenges, but if done correctly it offers an opportunity for an organization to product their events more cost-effectively, and with more specialized personnel. **es**