



## **Outlook 2012: For Planners, Strategy Will Trump Logistics**

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*This is Part One in a two-part series.*

Viewing yourself as a strategic partner and business professional, rather than as a meetings professional, could make 2012 your most successful year ever.

Staying on top of technology, especially mobile, is another essential ingredient for success in the year ahead. Today's meeting attendees rightfully expect tech tools and connectivity at a meeting to be at least on par with what they have at the office or in their homes.

These are among insights from meetings industry leaders asked by *Travel Market Report* for their take on the major opportunities for planners in the year ahead.

### **Opportunity: Focus on business objectives**

“The big opportunity for planners is to think of themselves as business professionals as opposed to meeting professionals. The economy will get a little better, and planners have to evolve their positions with their organizations or with their clients – becoming focused on business objectives.

“Also important is understanding and managing mobile connectivity. You will be able to engage with attendees and suppliers. You had better have enough Wi-Fi connectivity at your event for audience response and marketing. I like to point out that there are 5.2 billion mobile devices in the world and just 4.2 billion toothbrushes. You'll soon be more likely to be using your phone for Internet access than your computer.” – *Bruce MacMillan, president and CEO, MPI*

### **Opportunity: a seat at the table**

“The real opportunity is for meeting professionals to take a seat at the strategic table. They have to demonstrate measurable results both from meetings and impact on businesses. This goes beyond spend management and cost savings.

“When the economy fell off, the immediate reaction among planners was to justify their existence. That was good in putting emphasis on measurement. But that measurement was mainly around cost and ROI. There is a big opportunity to put the focus on the R in ROI.” – *Eric Olson, general manager - small and medium-sized businesses, Active Network (technology provider)*

### **Opportunity: Strive for sustainability and CSR**

“Planners have the opportunity to look at ROI not just in terms of the bottom line, but in the sense of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) and value they bring. When looking at organizations like Wal-Mart that have spent so much money on greening, it behooves the planner to follow that in how they conduct their meetings.

“There are ways for them to do that without creating a lot of work for themselves or attendees. So many venues are operating in a green way that planners can go to the property and have a green meeting in an efficient manner. Meetings are a reflection of the organization’s values.” – *Kristin Kurie, president, The Wilderman Group (venue operator)*

**Opportunity: Go local**

“I think local food is an opportunity, not a fad. The more young people I talk to, the more that is the lifestyle they are seeking. It’s tough for suppliers to achieve a balance between large purchases while still getting local products, but there are ways to do it. One DMO (destination management organization) has hosted farm-to-table group outings.” – *Eric Whitson, director of sales and marketing, The National Conference Center*

**Opportunity: Look for value dates and locations**

“Pressure to get back to 2008 revenue levels will be very high for hotels and conference centers. Planners who can be flexible in meeting dates will have a distinct advantage in their negotiating position. Avoid midweek patterns and target valley periods for booking business. Understand the market conditions of the area under review for site selection. For example, peak season in Florida are the winter months; that’s the time to look at secondary markets in the north.” – *Neil Pompan, global president, International Association of Conference Centers*

**Opportunity: Effective use of digital technology**

“The opportunity lies in being able to use the digital technologies now available. They can be used to shake up the way people have been producing meetings and events, from the standpoint of getting more interaction and changing the way they provide learning and networking opportunities. They can do that not just during the event, but before and after. And we are looking at mobile to explode with many tools that planners can tap into.” – *Michael Doyle, president, The Virtual Edge Institute*

*Next time: A look at the challenges facing meeting planners in 2012.*

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