

JUDY ALLEN

Marketing Your
event
planning
Business

**A Creative Approach to
Gaining the Competitive Edge**

PRAISE FOR OTHER BOOKS BY JUDY ALLEN

EVENT PLANNING

*The Ultimate Guide to Successful Meetings,
Corporate Events, Fundraising Galas, Conferences,
Conventions, Incentives and Other Events*

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—*Corporate Meetings & Incentives Magazine*

“This book contains invaluable information for anyone who handles events for their organization. A host of real-world stories from the field—the good, the bad, and the ugly—serve as examples of codes of conduct (or lack thereof) as well as cautionary tales of what can happen when ethics and etiquette fall to the wayside. Allen thoroughly examines many scenarios and provides practical advice that any planner would be foolish not to heed.”

—*Charity Village*

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—*Deborah Breiter, Associate Professor, Rosen College of Hospitality, Orlando, Florida*

“Time is money, and organizing your time is the key to planning a successful event. Judy Allen’s new book gives event planners all the tools they need to manage their time most efficiently.”

—*Luis R. Rodriguez, Executive President (CEO), International Standardization, for the Meeting Industry Institute (ISMI), Isla Margarita, Venezuela*

“In this practical skills-based text, Judy Allen explores time management and provides techniques for event professionals to learn and apply to your work. From exploring your current use of time, through prioritising and action planning, to multi tasking, project management and balancing your personal and professional life, Judy provides hints and tips for making better, and the best, use of time, based on her years of experience in the events industry.”

—*Glenn A. J. Bowdin, Principal Lecturer, UK Centre for Events Management, Leeds Metropolitan University*

THE EXECUTIVE'S GUIDE TO CORPORATE EVENTS AND BUSINESS ENTERTAINING

***How to Choose and Use Company Functions to Increase
Brand Awareness, Develop New Business, Nurture
Customer Loyalty and Drive Growth***

(ISBN: 978-0-470-83848-8)

“A goldmine of insight and instruction. Anyone planning any type of business event, large or small, must have a copy of this book!”

—*Lisa K. Altizer, Marketing Director, Mercer Mall, West Virginia*

“As usual, Judy Allen has written a valuable book filled with important information. She adds depth and breadth to the body of practical knowledge about the nuts and bolts of event strategy and tactics. This volume should at all times be on the desk of every planner and every business executive charged with planning an event.”

—*David Sorin, Esq., CEO, Management Mpowerment Associates, and Author of The Special Events Advisor: A Business and Legal Guide for Event Professionals*

“Intelligent planning and thorough execution are the keys to success for any corporate function. Judy Allen outlines a succinct, practical methodology that will ensure your next event achieves its stated business objectives and creates a positive lasting impression.”

—*Zeke Adkins, Co-founder, Luggage Forward*

“In today's competitive business climate, a 'business as usual' approach to corporate events and functions simply does not work. Judy Allen has compiled in one comprehensive guide everything today's successful executive needs to know to take this strategic function to the next level.”

—*Evans Gebhardt, Executive Vice President, Eos Airlines, Inc.*

MARKETING YOUR
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Gaining the Competitive Edge

J U D Y A L L E N

 **WILEY**

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the millions of people whose job it is to sell themselves and their business everyday. Those who are top in their field know firsthand the value of doing visibility well and challenge themselves daily to master new marketing techniques, become more innovative in soliciting sales, develop areas of specialization, create niche markets and pursue new clients. They continually strive to find ways to create fresh opportunities for success, set themselves apart from their competition, capture their clients' attention and gain the competitive edge. One sale at a time, through their marketing efforts, they position themselves to transform not only the quality of their lives, but also the lives of those they work for and with.

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I would like to thank all of the reviewers, who took the time to read my books and bring their valuable insight to readers. I am very grateful for your endorsements. Your kind words were very much appreciated and I take your words to heart.

I have received hundreds of e-mails and telephone calls from readers and your words are very meaningful to me. I did not set out to write a series of books on event planning. I wrote the first book to act as a guide and provide a strong foundation in event planning. The comments, questions and thank you's I received from readers, enabled me to see what industry issues still needed to be addressed. There were common threads in the messages and I paid attention to what was being asked. The second book was written in direct response to the requests I received, and that book led to the third, which in turn produced the fourth. Thank you all for the very valuable part you played in bringing about this newest endeavor.

And as always, I would like to thank my family, my parents Walter and Ruth, my sister, Marilyn, my nieces Natasha and Jasmine, Hans, Blair, my extended family, and my friends for their love and support.

PREFACE

In the wake of September 11, and with the ongoing turmoil in world events and the economy, the event planning industry has been hit hard. In what was already a highly competitive industry, many planners and companies are struggling to survive. September 11, 2001 stopped travel and event planning in its tracks, as the terrorist attacks brought about an initial fear of flying, which resulted in corporations immediately calling off out-of-country and out-of-state events. These cancellations and the subsequent loss of revenue affected everyone in the hospitality industry. A number of meetings, conferences and special events were shifted to locations closer to home to lessen corporate and attendee anxiety. Venue requirements for events changed, towering buildings were ruled out—as were high-profile sites—and companies began to conduct more business meetings via conference call or Webcast as opposed to face to face.

Next to impact the event planning world was tumbling stock markets. This was followed by white-collar crime that had corporate CEOs and company executives making national headlines with their irresponsible spending and lack of ethical behavior. Companies were being brought down and often the consequence was massive

employee layoffs. Money for event planning became tight. Large corporations that had held large events in the past no longer could. After all, when employees are being laid off, it is difficult to justify any expense that could be deemed unnecessary. Company spending was held under a magnifying glass by remaining employees and stockholders. And this was only the beginning.

What came next were the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, ongoing terrorist attacks around the world, mysterious cruise line illnesses, sniper attacks in the U.S., airline bankruptcies, West Nile virus, mad cow disease, SARS and even monkeypox. Destinations once deemed safe from terrorism and illness became *verboden*, having an economic impact on not just the event planning and hospitality field but on seemingly unrelated businesses such as the farming and fishing industries. For example, if restaurants and hotel rooms were not being filled, those who earned their living supplying, manufacturing and delivering specialty food and beverage items that may have been flown, shipped or trucked in daily—such as lobsters from Maine, crab cakes from Maryland, potatoes from P.E.I., liquor and fruit drinks from exotic locales—were being financially hurt as well. Not only were hotels and restaurants sitting empty, theaters in major cities went dark with shows closing up when they could no longer fill seats. And to top it all off, major cities suffered legendary blackouts, such as the one in the summer of 2003 on the eastern seaboard of North America, and even countries such as Italy were shut down for up to a week. Then there were hurricanes, floods and major earthquakes that those planning events had to grapple with. *And all of this took place within the span of two years.*

Each one of these developments had an immediate domino effect on the hospitality industry that was felt around the world and forever changed the way event planning business would be conducted in the future. Trusted suppliers, seemingly far removed from what were deemed problem locations, were on the verge of going under, and layoffs were imminent as the financial impact of cancellations and loss of business rippled through the industry. Airlines took away commissions they had been paying planners. Hoteliers, suppliers and destination management companies began to go head-to-head, competing with event planners for business. Event planning companies had to re-group, re-organize and re-strategize. Organizations and individuals in the event planning and hospitality industry that had not prepared to weather a force majeure went under. The ones who remained found themselves looking at a

much smaller pie, still to be divided among many players. While some had disappeared, there was still a lot of competition as some suppliers sought to become their replacement. Their goal was to have clients deal with them direct, as opposed to working through the event planning company, and reduce or cut out the role the event planners played in order to increase their profit share. Past working partnerships and business alliances went by the wayside as each side hurried to stake out their claim on potential clients.

The question being asked today is how to thrive—as both an individual and a company—and not merely survive in this new era of free market conditions. The event planning industry as a whole has learned that it is no longer enough to just plan and prepare for the next series of events. Planners themselves must be ready for the unexpected if they want to be in a strong position to ride out any future economic slumps and still be in business tomorrow. For example, in December of 2003 another case of mad cow disease struck again and brought the beef industry in the U.S. and Canada to an immediate halt, with billions of import dollars at stake as countries around the world banned their beef from being brought in. Right on its heels came news of another suspected SARS case. Still unprepared for this re-occurrence, the cattle industry was thrown into a frenzy about how to recoup losses, how to get through this period of time and what they can do in future to avoid the same thing from happening again. Had laws in the U.S. been passed making it illegal to slaughter downer animals (those too sick to stand) after the first case appeared in Canada, the meat from this cow would not have gotten into the food system and caused a panic when it was discovered that beef from the infected cow had been sent to eight states and Guam. This finding also had an immediate effect on the event planning industry, as clients and their guests once again began to question food and destination safety. Businesses must become proactive, anticipating and preparing to circumvent the worst-case scenario from happening again, instead of sitting back and reacting, scrambling for solutions, when disaster strikes. The end result of this second occurrence with tainted meat resulted in tougher U.S. controls being brought in to match tighter Canadian laws to prevent downer cows from entering the food chain. Had this ruling taken place immediately after the first mad cow scare, the North American cattle industry and the world's beef consumers would not have been placed in financial jeopardy and at a perceived health risk.

Planners, suppliers and event planning companies know now that if they resist change, they could cease to exist. They know that those who are embracing the challenge now before the event planning industry are intent on moving forward quickly, focused on securing as big a piece of the business pie for themselves as they can, actively seeking solutions that will allow them to conduct and manage their current accounts better, and looking for new ways to move to the forefront in creating new business opportunities where seemingly none may have existed before.

This book shows event planners, event planning management companies, suppliers and their clients how to gain the competitive edge by setting themselves apart, pursuing new markets and soliciting new sales. Comprehensive coverage in this book includes how to diversify your client base; how to develop niche markets and areas of expertise; defining and customizing customer service; how to establish a business backup plan to defend against downturns in business; how to develop innovative ideas for soliciting sales; and how and when to set up your own event planning business.

Marketing Your Event Planning Business: A Creative Approach to Gaining the Competitive Edge discusses creative new ways for planners, suppliers and event planning companies to showcase their talents, build their business and bring added value to their clients. As an industry, event planning crosses many disciplines, and a successful planner must have, along with event design and management skills, an in-depth knowledge of accounting, business and law. One key area that has long been overlooked is marketing. Event planners know and understand event marketing, but they must learn how to market themselves and their companies to gain the competitive edge in the event planning business.

This book covers three key marketing areas: marketability, market development and marketing endeavors. Part One of this book examines ways of making yourself and your company marketable; the importance of acquiring areas of expertise; how to create your personal niche; and the value of niche marketing. For example, not every tenting company has expertise in converting a swimming pool into a dance floor or dining area. For some clients, this is becoming a “must do” for their next event, and it is not inexpensive, easily earning the tenting company more than US\$20,000. So, it is a worthwhile skill to develop. One tenting company that excels in this has an employee who is renowned for his success in this area and is booked nonstop. He acquired an area of expertise that

is needed and he developed it into his niche. There are few that can do what he does, and event planning companies know that if they book that particular company they do not have to worry about the pool being damaged in the covering process or that the guests will take an unexpected dip in the pool while dining or dancing. Acquiring this area of expertise was important; it helped the employee become known in his field and very marketable, and his knowledge enabled the tenting company he worked for to gain a competitive edge in a profitable market.

Part Two explores market development, which includes how to define your company objectives and identify exactly who your client is. How to target your talents is also reviewed. Targeting your talents means focusing your energies where they will be most successful and on clients that are most desirable. In the above example, the tenting company targeted its talents to clients who had the dollars, who were looking to create special effects and whose guests were likely to be able to afford its services. Its skills became well known in high society, by those attending events it had done. When a major fashion designer was looking for someone to tent its upcoming fashion show extravaganza, it turned to this company and brought it in from out of the country to handle its event. There was no one locally whose work it considered up to par. The tenting company had targeted its talents to the right customer profile, and in the time when money was tight it still had more business than it could handle.

Part Two also shows you how to understand and customize your customer service requirements. Not all customer services needs are the same. The days of schmoozing are past. People's priorities have changed. Customized customer service is what is being required. For instance, a team of successful lawyers (laid off due to recent company downsizing) came together to provide a service where the lawyer will come to your business or home at a time most convenient to you. They understood that for the clients they were seeking, cost was not a factor. Convenience was what their customers were looking for. They saw a need, filled it and business is booming. Ways to define and customize customer service are also discussed in this book. Lengthy business lunches no longer hold appeal—not if they're going to impact meeting a deadline or end up taking personal time away at the end of the day. People want to socialize with family and friends and pursue individual interests, as opposed to spending time with business acquaintances or those looking to solicit their business over lunch.

Part Three looks into marketing endeavors and ways to market to your audience, innovative ways on how to solicit sales, and the value of diversification. Event planning companies that have not learned the value of diversifying were greatly affected by recent events. North American companies that specialized only in exotic travel destinations had to scramble when businesses wanted to hold events closer to home. Those event planning companies did not have a business backup plan. They lost lead time trying to recover and to establish themselves as experts in North American facilities. Their focus was too narrow. They never diversified or prepared for the unexpected, and consequently many had to lay off staff. Hotels that catered only to the luxury individual traveler sat empty when the stock market and their clients' personal incomes fell. Hotels that had diversified were not hit as hard. Their creative marketing endeavors ensured that they still had bread-and-butter income coming in where others had nothing. Now more than ever, companies that learn to diversify will succeed in gaining the competitive edge. We will see some of the ways to do so in this book.

Part Three also covers when individuals should go out on their own. For many involved in event planning there comes a time when the prospect of setting up their own company becomes appealing. The costs and benefits of doing so will be made clear. Some individuals may be better off working for an employer as a sales representative or account executive, but others may want to explore other options. The pluses and minus of each will be detailed.

This book will be of value to the professional event planner, suppliers, clients who are hiring and working with professional planners and suppliers, as well as those in related industries.

PART 1

Marketability

The first three chapters of this book look at the importance of marketability—for individuals and for companies—in the event planning industry. Marketability is often defined as having marketable goods, services or skills that are in demand and that meet a specific need. Having marketability applies equally to individuals, companies, products or services. People who take steps to ensure that they have appeal increase their chances of a successful and financially rewarding career. They are the ones who stand out as stars in their industry, that are actively pursued on the job front and are continually being hired up. Companies want to hire individuals who will in turn enhance their firm's own marketability to its customers. Bringing marketable employees onboard becomes an investment to the employer and is viewed as a means of making the company more attractive to future clients, as well as giving it an advantage over its competition.

In today's market, an employee who has marketability is an important commodity to any employer. Companies are hiring not only the individual's knowledge, skills and experience, but their personality and reputation as well. They know the value that

acquiring a set of sought-after skills brings to their clients and how it can raise their company's profile and their profits. Companies that are never-ending in their pursuit of improving their marketability are ensuring their competitive edge in business at all times. People want to do business with those who are current, knowledgeable and growing in the right direction. Ways to make yourself and your company marketable are outlined in the first chapter.

Developing areas of expertise adds to the marketability of an individual and a business, so ways to do this are reviewed in Chapter 2. Many event planning industry leaders attribute their success to having acquired expertise in specialty fields, as well as having mastered other key business elements that worked to propel them forward professionally. Not being proficient in certain areas can leave you sitting on the sidelines. Knowing which will take you further fastest can make a big difference in your career.

To stand out from your competition, you need to find a special area of demand for a product or service that only you can fulfill. In an industry where everyone is now competing for the same bit of business, what will set you apart? It is the ability to offer something unique to potential employers or customers. You can tailor your niche to fit your consumer audience by determining what is new and would be compelling to them. Niche marketing is a simple concept that can help individuals or businesses gain an advantage over their competitors. Ways to create your niche in the event planning industry are discussed in Chapter 3.

1

MAKING YOURSELF MARKETABLE

The professional meeting, incentive and special event industry is growing and attracting more and more aspiring planners each day. Universities and colleges worldwide are now offering courses and accreditation, and many are fostering an entrepreneurial spirit, developing graduates set on opening and operating their own businesses immediately. The competition for jobs in the workforce and to contract new clients has never been more intense. Almost daily, new companies are opening their doors for business, and those applying new business practices are experiencing tremendous success. Enterprising independent meeting planners are winning accounts away from long-established meeting planning companies and incentive houses. Some of the industry's biggest players are laying off employees and even closing their doors, while smaller specialty boutique operations are thriving. How did this industry turnabout happen? Those who are moving forward placed their focus on increasing their marketability and investing in themselves and their companies, while those who are experiencing financial hardships are more likely the ones who have persisted in clinging to old ways of soliciting business.