

# Stage an Event—and Profit

BY ALAN RIDER

## Most Large Companies Hire Outside Contractors To Plan and Manage Marketing Events

They might be setting up gala product introductions or orchestrating theme-oriented extravaganzas in wildlife parks. Whatever their surroundings, professional event planners are busy helping a wide array of clients cut through the clutter of traditional advertising.

"It's another opportunity for my clients to sell in a nonthreatening way," says Layne Kaplan, a San Francisco-based event planner for high-tech companies. "You can target a group of people, bring them together, and give them the full message. Instead of selling, it's more like bringing them into your fold."

Planning and pulling off an event, however, can be an overwhelming ordeal for the inexperienced. That fact, combined with the increasing recognition of the effectiveness of events-oriented marketing, means a potentially lucrative opportunity for creative entrepreneurs with a good mind for detail. Successful, full-time planners make more than \$100,000 a year.

The field of event-oriented marketing has grown tremendously in the last decade, according to Lisa Vested, publisher of *Special Events* magazine. Though the recent downturn in the economy has hurt some smaller event planners, the magazine estimates that roughly \$35 billion is spent on corporate marketing events in the United States each year.

The event planner's job is to create something that will capture the imagination, then coordinate the endless array of details involved in making it happen. For



According to *Special Events* magazine, roughly \$35 billion a year is spent on corporate marketing events, such as this one hosted by the Buffalo Zoo.

pulling off an event, planners earn anywhere from \$1,800 to \$30,000 in fees, according to Kaplan. The client pays expenses on top of that. For simple projects, many event planners charge an hourly rate (usually from \$75 to \$100), whereas they bill a flat fee or a percentage of the overall cost (from 10 to 20 percent) for larger, more complicated events, such as a housing contractor.

In fact, most event planners act as general contractors, riding herd on a dozen or more subcontractors. Services include the creation of a theme, selection of a site, decorations, giveaways or other premiums, and coordination of transportation, guest registration, food, and entertainment or speakers. Outside specialists are often brought in to help with a variety of services, including graphic design, media placement, audiovisual equipment, and presentation materials.

### RIGHT BRAIN, LEFT BRAIN

Some event planners specialize in a particular field, but all share a few key

personal characteristics. The two most important are creativity and organization. That means people thinking about entering the field need to cultivate a somewhat uncommon right brain-left brain balance.

"All the creativity in the world means absolutely nothing if you can't pull off the event," says Joan Boughton, who started her San Diego-based event-management business seven years ago, after doing special events as a staff member of a large retailer and a nonprofit organization. "In our business, there's no margin for error. You may have to bring together 20 vendors, and they all have to work together the first time—there are no replays."

Boughton's abilities were put to the test when she was hired to put on a 12-week-long, 15th-anniversary celebration for the San Diego Wild Animal Park. The event's theme, Around the World in 80 Days, required her to coordinate the activities of more than 1,000 individuals with a dizzying array of specialties that ran the gamut from exotic animals and

ALAN RIDER, who wrote "The Mobile Stockbroker" in the January 1993 issue, spent 10 years producing a wide variety of special events in cities throughout the country and has taught several courses on the subject of promotion and special events. He is now a San Diego-based freelance writer and photographer.

19th-century cavalry units to caterers and laser show technicians.

"We created a series of international festivals that took park visitors to a different part of the world every weekend," says Boughton. "We had to do everything, from building and wiring new structures to bringing in musicians and craftspeople from all over the world. It's a very detail-oriented business; Murphy's Law just loves special events."

#### **MARKETING BACKGROUND**

Since many events aim to achieve clearly defined marketing goals, some marketing background is important. "If a client really knows what he wants to accomplish, anyone can execute the plan. But taking a marketing approach to events and being able to add to the decision-making process, I believe is what gives me a competitive edge," says Kaplan, whose background is in high-technology marketing.

An event planner's role varies from client to client. Some require a comprehensive approach, whereas others need little more than simple execution of an

existing plan. "Some clients haven't got a clue, so we'll go in and evaluate what their needs are, what they want to accomplish, and then develop a concept that is realistic within their budget," says Boughton. "Others may have done several events themselves, know what they want, and just need an outside person to make it happen."

Since event planners ultimately are paid to take on the stress and headaches involved with putting on an event, physical strength, mental stamina, and the ability to remain calm under pressure are additional personal qualities vital to any long-term success in the field.

#### **GETTING BUSINESS**

Both Kaplan and Boughton rely on direct mail, referrals, and personal contacts for the majority of their new business. Most of Kaplan's clients are high-tech companies; Boughton's list is more diverse, including advertising and public relations agencies, banks, theme parks, retailers, and real estate companies.

Since the field of event-oriented marketing is still relatively new, helping

prospective clients understand the value of special events is often a big part of drumming up business. "There are a lot of businesses that can definitely benefit from special events, but they need to be educated," says Boughton. "Part of the challenge is showing businesspeople what special events can do for them and all the different ways that they can be used."

Both Boughton and Kaplan advise anyone considering event planning as a profession to start part-time while holding down a job that pays the bills. "It starts slow, and it takes a while to build a client base," says Kaplan. "I recommend being conservative." Planning events for nonprofit organizations, where both of these women cut their teeth in event planning, is a good way to learn the ropes and build a track record before taking on your own clients.

"I think the 1990s are going to be good for special events because people are seeing their value as a sales and marketing tool," says Boughton. "We've seen the value of TV and radio, we've seen the value of print, but it's only in the last decade that the power of events has been recognized—because they produce results." ■