



MEETING PROFESSIONALS INTERNATIONAL

**Defining a Strategic Meetings Management Program:
How Meetings Drive Business in Partnership-Focused Companies**

A Position Paper from Meeting Professionals International's
Global Corporate Circle of Excellence

Today's corporate business practices continue to evolve, with issues such as accountability, consolidation, cost consciousness and technological development becoming more prominent in everyday discussion. In the rapidly changing global culture of business, companies are focusing more on collaboration—within their organizations and with external clients and vendors. Forward-thinking companies understand that success is ultimately a function of the collaborative efforts of all internal stakeholders and powerful, trust-based relationships with like-minded partners.

In its recent position papers, MPI's Global Corporate Circle of Excellence has focused principally on the power of the "Partnership Model"—from the collaborative efforts of meeting professionals and procurement departments to the uniting of planners and suppliers through key business practices in strategic meetings management environments. The message: Meeting professionals can achieve strategic success—and seats at the executive table—by speaking the language of business, embracing the Partnership Model and developing meetings management programs that support that model.

This position paper first takes a contemporary snapshot of the ever-changing global business environment, identifying the core competencies in the Partnership Model as well as the key drivers of change in business. It then raises the question: How are strategic meetings management programs defined? Also, how do they fit into and support the Partnership Model and incorporate global business trends to add value for internal and external customers?

This paper goes on to identify several critical ways in which meetings drive business and ascertain the key components and objectives of a thriving strategic meetings management program. In terms of partnerships with internal and external stakeholders, what does such a meetings program look like, and how does it work? Ultimately, such programs position meeting professionals as key drivers of business in partnership-focused companies.

Core Competencies in the Partnership Model

The partnership process in the business world is always evolving. As one's business grows and changes and the global business environment responds (including development of new policies and regulations), sustaining trust, accountability and true partnership requires analysis and change. Continual reassessments of “what we might do six months from now” make a person more visionary and optimally strategic and useful to his or her organization.

The basic principles of partnership, however, don't change. In any corporation—whether or not a strategic meetings management program is in place or even in development—the sharing of key information is essential.

The Partnership Model requires participants to possess several core competencies.

- **Consistently communicating and sharing information.** Keeping colleagues “in the loop” optimizes individual awareness and involvement and substantiates that partnership is a priority in the organization and not just a “buzzword.”
- **Instilling trust.** People can still work together in a professional manner and hold each other accountable, but in most successful models, trust is central and underlies all business processes and decisions. Underlying trust and honesty facilitate success across departments in support of broad organizational objectives. It's virtually impossible to take risks when you don't trust your peers—or even managers. Taking risks leads to more profound rewards, so if an underlying lack of trust inhibits constructive risk-taking, the business is harmed. And once trust is lost, it's very difficult or impossible to get it back.

- **Building respect.** If colleagues understand and respect what each person stands for, the work product will reflect it.
- **Requiring accountability.** Everyone plays a role and takes responsibility for his or her actions, whether they have positive or negative impacts.
- **Giving sincere recognition and rewards for work well done.** Acknowledgment of efforts and resulting successes builds loyalty and trust, both integral to the Partnership Model.
- **Encouraging risk-taking to achieve objectives.** Advocate approaches antithetical to “what’s always been done,” and watch for great results when people take the initiative to do things in new ways.
- **Evolving the roles of leaders as facilitators.** The best leaders in the Partnership Model are the ones who encourage—both aggressively and subtly—contributions from all members of a team, making everybody feel they are involved and contributing to the bottom line.
- **Mandating continuous process improvement.** Steadfastly maintaining the status quo will threaten any business, while emphasizing ongoing process improvement will keep stakeholders involved and deliver results.
- **Inviting participation and input of ideas.** Brainstorming sessions are powerful tools, facilitating everyone’s involvement in the Partnership Model and building consensus.
- **Involving all appropriate stakeholders.** Make team members vital participants in decision-making processes and the development of key initiatives to maximize their interest and impact on operations. It is also important to know your own limitations and where to go to fill the skills gap to provide the appropriate expertise. Strategic managers know they don’t have to be experts in everything.
- **Encouraging buy-in.** Generating mass support—especially for new programs and processes that support the organization’s strategic mission—will strengthen the organization against internal and external pressures.

Focusing on these core competencies will virtually ensure a company’s long-term success in the face of rapid change in the global business environment.

Key Drivers of Change

In the past year, studies show the world economy grew by approximately 5 percent—its fastest rate for many years—led by an extraordinary surge in China and high growth in many developing countries. According to *Forbes* magazine, China's gross domestic product grew by 9.4 percent in the first nine months of 2005 alone.

What factors are driving this growth and, in turn, revitalizing organizational emphasis on the Partnership Model?

- **Corporate operational accountability and regulations.** The influences of Sarbanes-Oxley in the United States and Safe Harbour in Europe, among others, are emphasizing the importance of communicating and sharing information to internal and external stakeholders.
- **Personal accountability for projects / deliverables.** In a Partnership Model environment, everyone's work matters, and that increased accountability drives performance.
- **Increased cost-consciousness and cost containment.** Amid ongoing security concerns (such as terrorism), the rising costs of key commodities (oil, health care) and impacts from natural disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes), companies are much more vigilant about threats to their bottom lines.
- **Technological tools and enhancements.** As technology augments individual connectivity and productivity on a global scale, organizations are seizing opportunities to grow their businesses in ways never previously considered.
- **Increased globalization.** Companies are conducting more cross-cultural business in Europe, Asia and elsewhere, putting more emphasis on cultural awareness in communications and making trust-based partnerships even more vital.
- **Consolidation and measured growth of companies.** As more companies merge and combine operations, partnerships are changed and reoriented to drive new or revised organizational objectives.
- **Management changes within corporations.** New C-level management may affect how meetings departments address strategic partnerships.

- **Privacy acts in U.S. and Canada related to customer data.** New regulations substantially affect how companies can do business, requiring team efforts to reorient objectives and expectations.

How Meetings Drive Business

How do strategic meetings management programs fit into and support the aforementioned Partnership Model and incorporate global business trends to add value for internal and external customers?

Meeting planners worldwide are adapting to this business model, in which powerful partnerships—with both internal and external constituents—are integral to an organization's strategic success. One especially vital process for many corporate planners is the development of a strategic meetings management program, simply defined as an overarching business plan that aligns with a company's unique mission, vision, landscape and culture.

Meetings typically have three critical components: logistics (the tactical elements on which many planners will continue to focus), strategic sourcing and budgeting (which also involve an organization's finance, operations and procurement professionals) and content branding and messaging (the marketing aspect). Today, however, most corporate meeting planners' roles and responsibilities comprise much more than logistics—they also involve strategic management, through which planners utilize their companies' cultures and values as frameworks for successful meeting outcomes. A solid meetings management program incorporating key elements of business is what ultimately differentiates a strategic, influential meeting director from a logistics-oriented meeting planner.

As more and more organizations abandon traditional, linear business models in favor of a Partnership Model that emphasizes organizational matrices, meeting professionals must meet day-to-day expectations while learning new ways of doing business together. In short, planners are increasingly involving many internal and external stakeholders to achieve successful outcomes.

Meetings drive business in several critical ways.

- **Bringing people together and maintaining key professional relationships.**
- **Touching employees and customers and other key stakeholders, such as shareholders.**
- **Showing strategic influence.**
- **Providing methods of cost containment and avoidance.**
- **Providing access to key information through technology.**
- **Providing brand protection and promotion.**
- **Providing the ability to negotiate and leverage attractive business propositions.**
- **Maximizing value through appropriate and targeted communications.**
- **Providing training in new processes that drive cost savings and other efficiencies.**
- **Influencing employee performance.**
- **Providing opportunities for savings, cost avoidance and ROI, and thus positively impacting the bottom line.**

Ultimately, meetings serve as the vehicle for all company initiatives. As a result, meeting professionals working within successful strategic meetings management programs possess key “seats at the table” to facilitate the ever-evolving Partnership Model, making them indispensable business partners. Planners add tangible value to their companies by seizing more opportunities to show strategic influence, drive change, implement bottom-line efficiencies and position meetings at higher levels of value in their organizations. The more than meetings are woven into the fabric of a company’s overall operations across departments and incorporated into the organization’s strategic plan, the more successful the organization will be.

Savvy planners are no longer focusing only on meeting logistics and other tactical concerns. Instead, they are striving to better understand each business unit’s objectives and strategic functions. Planners can position themselves strategically simply by the questions they ask—all in the language of business. For instance, “What are your business objectives, and how can I help you achieve them?” Planners can tie everything they do back to an organization’s mission and vision.

Defining Strategic Meetings Management Programs

Companies' needs for strategic meeting management programs evolved from current global trends in business, both external and internal, to what might be called a customer economy. In a customer economy, an organization or department must provide added-value solutions, not just a commodity or service, because the customer (whether an internal customer or an external one) has more options to replace that commodity or service than ever before. While cost may be a driver, provision of value is a differentiator. Businesses are refocusing on value, strategy and structural realignments to produce the most efficient supply chains.

The meetings industry, in turn, has reached a "tipping point" in its evolution. Through the corporate trend toward strategic meetings management programs, the industry will ultimately differentiate based on value, or it will become a commodity that competes on price alone.

A strategic meetings management program has many vital components and objectives, all defined and dictated by a company's culture. (See Appendix A for a comprehensive list.) Beyond acknowledging the components and objectives, however, savvy planners identify the program's key drivers in their organizations (the unique management styles, processes, content and messaging most important to the company) and realize that the successful implementation of such a program must involve key internal and external stakeholders. For some, marketing and brand management concerns may drive the meetings program; for others, finance, operations and procurement may be the integral drivers.

Whatever the unique situations and influences in their organizations, planners will maximize their programs' opportunities for success by speaking the language of business, networking with peers and obtaining buy-in. The power of these partnerships still reigns supreme.

Involving Internal Stakeholders

What does a successful strategic meetings management program look like in terms of partnership with internal stakeholders? Who are these stakeholders, and what ensures their buy-in for a meetings program?

Meeting professionals utilizing a strategic meetings management program must identify internal stakeholders and the core competencies they possess that complement theirs. The stakeholders may include corporate planning, procurement, finance, legal, corporate travel, customer lead management, corporate regulation and compliance, technology, multimedia marketing, security, internal customers / clients and international colleagues. These stakeholders' core competencies may include procurement activities, cost containment and avoidance, contract development and review, risk aversion / management, leveraged buying with preferred suppliers, messaging/communications, brand integrity, Sarbanes-Oxley / compliance, data measurement and reporting, leveraging spend, budget targets, crisis management and security of property and proprietary information.

When a meeting planner delivers value that meets internal stakeholders' needs and objectives, buy-in is assured. In short, the "what's in it for me" standard is met.

Developing trust is critical to this process. Once the internal stakeholders have positive experiences from working within the meetings program, they will be more inclined to trust the process. And if their input in the program was valued and utilized in making it work, that truly ensures buy-in. Follow five key steps to make it happen.

- **Invitation.** Ask for stakeholders' ideas and assistance.
- **Input.** Gather the results and review them.
- **Involvement.** Create opportunities for stakeholders to actually get involved and do more in support of the meetings program and its strategic outcomes.
- **Incorporation of Ideas.** If an idea makes sense, use it. The more a planner actually utilizes the input, the more likely individuals will contribute again.
- **Identify Return on Involvement.** Explain precisely how stakeholders' efforts drove the program's success. A team effort yields team reward.

Involving External Stakeholders

What does a successful strategic meetings management program look like in terms of partnership with external stakeholders? Who are these stakeholders, and what ensures their buy-in for a meetings program?

In an evolving global business environment where procurement departments play an increasingly vital role, executives now expect that corporate meeting planners will achieve cost reductions and efficiencies by consolidating their expenditures with a short list of approved vendors. In addition, utilization of preferred vendors as part of a strategic meetings management program maximizes process efficiencies by, for instance, simplifying RFPs and contracts, streamlining day-to-day tasks and increasing volume savings and discounts.

The preferred-vendor process is most accepted and tends to work best in supplier categories such as hotels, airlines, meeting planning companies, ground transportation, trade-show services and audiovisual providers. Some planners may find, however, that other suppliers fit well into their companies' lists of external partners, including speaker bureaus, marketing / public-relations firms, production and staging companies, contract / legal negotiators, companies with technological tools and services (such as registration, surveys and evaluations), meeting management firms for outsourcing options, database and project management, destination management companies, writers and photographers.

The strategic meetings management environment will inevitably influence what constitutes a mutually beneficial business relationship between a company and a vendor. Savvy suppliers will ultimately adjust to this new way of doing business and see a preferred-vendor agreement as an opportunity to continue and improve an existing relationship.

In the end, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, meaning external stakeholders are essential to the success of any strategic meetings management program. Through a blurring of boundaries, external partners, vendors and consultants are often positioned as extensions of staff, making the Partnership Model equally applicable to internal and external stakeholders.

Technology has had a significant impact on the blurring of boundaries—and, in some cases, their elimination. Consultants are now not even being referred to by that name to avoid any perception that they are not integral to a process. “Seamless teams” are the goal in the Partnership Model.

As with internal stakeholders, trust is also essential—and perhaps more so—with external colleagues. Companies often must trust them not to divulge proprietary information and to “have their backs” as partners in many capacities. Such trust requires a letting go of “old-school” thinking as boundaries blur. In the Partnership Model era, it’s essential to avoid reliance on politics, cliques, old relationship issues and a “that’s not my job” mentality. In seamless teams, the realms of responsibility also blur.

Re-establishing trust in the era of business failures such as Enron and WorldCom is vital to the Partnership Model. Constructing, evolving and growing a strategic meetings management program that truly involves external stakeholders positions meeting planners as facilitators of rebuilding that trust—which, in turn, secures planners’ seats at the executive table and establishes them as integral to building consensus.

Whether or not their organizations have strategic meetings management programs, corporate planners can still make a difference by embracing this shift in thinking. Pursuing the core competencies of the Partnership Model in a structured manner, staying abreast of key global trends and speaking the language of business will ensure planners’ continued strategic importance in their organizations.

It’s All About Relationships

Business is still all about relationships, and each company must map its own strategic course to build or rebuild trust as part of the Partnership Model. Planners play an integral role in this process. Successful strategic meetings management programs ultimately facilitate the transitions of meetings from simple commodities to value-added solutions for visionary organizations.

* Members of MPI’s Global Corporate Circle of Excellence convened in New York City in October 2005 to develop this position paper, which demonstrates how meeting

planners' utilization of strategic meeting management programs supports a new "Partnership Model" and solidifies their seats at the executive table in today's evolving global business environment. This is the fourth in a series of position papers on topics vital to meeting planners and suppliers. The first paper—*The Power of Partnership: Capitalizing on the Collaborative Efforts of Strategic Meeting Professionals and Procurement Departments*—was released in January 2005. The second paper—*360 Degrees of Influence: Demonstrating Professional Value Through the Development of a Strategic Meetings Management Program*—was released in June 2005. The third paper—*360 Degrees of Partnership: Uniting Planners and Suppliers Through Collaborative Business Processes in Strategic Meetings Management Environments*—was released in September 2005.

For more from MPI's Global Corporate Circle of Excellence—including a list of current members, the group's previous position papers and a toolkit offering several indispensable resources, documents and templates for meeting professionals—visit www.gccoe.mpiweb.org.
