



MEETING PROFESSIONALS INTERNATIONAL

Q & A with Julia Silvers

November 17, 2009

Getting your H1N1 Preparedness Plan to the C-level

Q: I have an event coming up in January, should I be making extra overnight arrangements with the hotel in case someone takes sick on site?

A: Discuss the possibility with the hotel because this will be a matter of rates and availability. If you do not have any rooms booked with the hotel in conjunction with your event, discuss the availability, rates, and reservation policies (deposits, cancellations, etc.) for this contingency. If there are room nights already included in your agreement with the hotel and the attendees are self-pay, you want to discuss ensuring the room rate for your event dates remain in place should that person need to extend his or her stay longer than the negotiated rate dates. If you are the one paying for the rooms for all your attendees or only certain participants, you want to discuss a different “guarantee” (i.e. attrition) for this contingency plan. Unless the hotel is fully booked, extending a stay should not be a problem.

Q: Can you give example of Health tips for a 500+ convention?

A: Promote hand hygiene and cough/sneezing protocols in pre-event and on-site communications. Provide hand sanitizer stations and products, tissues, and “touch-free” trash receptacles. Provide more space to prevent overcrowding. Make certain surfaces, including counters, door handles, railings, etc., are cleaned regularly. Consider limiting self-service food service.

Q: You mentioned what is “flexible” and what is “essential.” While acknowledging that every event is different, can you give a few examples?

A: “Essential” items are those that must be in place in order to have the event and to achieve the objectives of the event. “Flexible” refers to the ability to use alternatives or to forego certain aspects altogether.

For example, let’s say you are organizing an in-person meeting of participants from around the world, at which decisions are to be made and action plans are to be created. The essential items are a venue in which to meet face to face and a method for dialoguing, collaborating and capturing the decisions made and the action plans devised. If a specific date is essential but travel becomes an issue, you may still be able to achieve the objectives by holding the meeting via video conferencing and using a web-based collaboration tool such as Google Docs or some other “white board” technology.

If your event is a conference featuring various speakers and one of them is unable to attend (due to a variety of reasons), if that speaker was the primary “draw” for the attendees (i.e. essential), unless you can get a replacement of equal perceived value or have them appear electronically, you will probably need to offer refunds to those attendees who choose to cancel their participation. If the speaker who must cancel is not essential, you might be able to have one of the other speakers facilitate the same session topic, or you might simply cancel that particular session. The same would apply to a special event at which a specific entertainer is featured... if the main attraction, refunds would likely be necessary; if not, substitutes would likely suffice.

Q: What are real life preventive measures that need to be used to prevent the spread of H1N1?

A: See number 2 above... plus staying home if you are ill. Education is the best prevention, which makes communication a primary tactic. Carefully consider your refund policies and your alternate workforce possibilities so that people are not forced to make their attendance decisions based on loss of income or loss of investment.

Venues have been notoriously not-forthcoming in sharing their emergency preparedness plans in general during pre-conference planning. Are you seeing them be any more forthcoming specific to their H1N1 plans? A venue's emergency action plan often has confidential, sensitive, and/or proprietary information included in it, which is why they are reluctant to provide you with a copy of this internal document. And, unfortunately, sometimes creating such a plan is one-time exercise to comply with legal regulations and the plan then sits in a desk drawer somewhere. Or the person you are dealing with is simply not versed in it. Smart venues are preparing a fact sheet that covers the basics including the emergencies they are prepared to handle, the procedures for an evacuation or medical emergency, and contact numbers for security, fire, police, and other emergency responders as well as area hospitals.

Event organizers need to be adamant about having these discussions with the venue, particularly in the context of how roles, responsibilities, and authority are to be delegated. You need to know how you can and should be integrated into their overall plans, and what facets you will have to prepare for on behalf of your attendees exclusively. You also need to prepare your own event-specific emergency action plan, which you will use when you are having these discussions. You might prepare a checklist to be included in your RFP that addresses both general emergency preparedness and your specific concerns or the range of threats you have considered.

For more information on Emergency Action Plans, go to <http://www.juliasilvers.com/embok/Risk/EmergencyMgmt/eap.htm>.

Q: I agree a plan is critical and all of the preparedness and communication is essential as well, however, how do you best present and convince a reluctant executive group to support and implement these proposed measures?

A: Show them the financial vulnerabilities (the worst case costs) and potential PR damage if an incident should occur and preparedness plans could have mitigated either the possibility or the consequences of it happening. Remind them that from pundits in the media to jurors in a courtroom... hindsight is always 20/20.

When people say to me that they've been doing this event for X number of years and nothing has ever happened, I look at my watch and ask, "Well then, precisely when would you like it to happen?" Preparedness plans are like, and include, insurance. You invest in them to cover costs (or consequences) that you can not afford.

Q: H1N1, to date in the US, has not resulted in the number of fatalities that we were anticipating/preparing for 6 months ago. How do we keep Risk Management on the radar screen for our C-level executives without having them consider us "hysterical"?

A: In addition to number 6 above... one of your standard operating procedures should be to conduct a risk assessment, also known as a threat and vulnerability assessment, for each and every event project. H1N1 is one of the possible risks that you identified at this particular time because it exists, not because of any personal "hysterics"... although the media tends to report it in that fashion and that has an impact on people's perception.

You should present the risk assessment findings and preparedness plans in a matter-of-fact manner. "These are the results of the risk assessment for the XYZ event, which identifies the primary risks that could affect our

event, how they would affect it, and how we should be prepared to respond to them.” This should be part of your overall event plan and presented in the same context as your site selection recommendations, food & beverage plan, registration, content development, and other logistics. Explain that this is part of the due diligence that needs to be performed for any event project.

Q: Is it appropriate to contact attendees after a conference to let them know about exposure they had during a conference to H1N1 or other contagious diseases?

A: Let me change your question to say “any contagious diseases”... to which I answer “Yes.” This would be considered part of your Duty of Care and Duty to Act. For an example, here is an excerpt from my book *Risk Management for Meetings and Events* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008):

On 22 September 2005 the Clark County Health District (CCHD) in Las Vegas, Nevada, was notified that a person serving free ice cream samples at the Global Gaming Expo (G2E) 2005, held 13-15 September at the Las Vegas Convention Center, was infected with hepatitis A, a viral infection of the liver. People who were served ice cream samples by the infected food handler may have been at risk for developing the illness. Although there is no treatment for hepatitis A, symptoms can be prevented in exposed persons who receive gamma globulin within fourteen days of their exposure, in this case no later than the 28th of September. The G2E organizers immediately provided the CCHD with the names and contact information for everyone registered as a conference attendee and the CCHD distributed a public health notice via e-mail to all attendees on 23 September 2005 with the name of the specific booth, the dates that the infected food handler was working, and the nature of the disease so that any person who ate free samples served at the booth could contact their local health department and/or physician to determine the need for gamma globulin.

I do not advise, however, that you send out exposure notifications that are not “official”... ONLY do so in conjunction with or through the local health authority (as shown above).

Q: Is there a general rule of thumb about the percentage risk management could/should cost of an event's total revenue?

A: I’m assuming that you meant total “expense” rather than “revenue” (you can only save costs, not make money on risk management endeavors). Many event professionals recommend five to seven percent as a “contingency” line item on the expense budget. However insurance, security, and other risk management items will likely be sprinkled throughout an expense budget. In addition, if, as I advise, you make risk assessment a standard operating procedure, the administrative costs of conducting a risk assessment (e.g. human resources, time, etc.) would be bundled in with your general management line item.

Q: When is the flu season over? We have a conference next March, is there still a need for great concern?

A: With the caveat that I am not a doctor, nor do I play one on TV, there is no guarantee that H1N1 or other form of influenza will no longer be a concern in March 2010. “In past years, seasonal flu activity typically did not reach its peak in the U.S. until January or February, but flu activity has occurred as late as May.”

(<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/season/current-season.htm>) The reports are that H1N1 has and may still mutate, which may extend the “season.” If you will recall, the H1N1 outbreak was first reported in Mexico in March of 2009 and was declared a pandemic in June (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_flu_pandemic). You simply must monitor conditions throughout the planning and production of your event.

Q: How do you approach a vendor, asking them to be a "back up" without insulting them?

A: If the back-up vendor was included in your initial RFP process, when you contact them to let them know they were not selected you could begin a discussion regarding being part of your contingency planning. If they were not included in the initial RFP process, you simply discuss your contingency plan needs. There might be certain deposits required, which may or may not be refundable, and you will certainly have to discuss their procedures for “saving the date” and decision deadlines. Turning lemons into lemonade... you have the lemons, water is free; all you need to pay for is a little sugar.

Keep in mind that a local planner or supplier will likely have a long-standing relationship with other local suppliers, and this relationship comes into play especially when there is a crisis. We are, for the most part, a close-knit community. Ask your primary vendors who they would turn to if unable to serve your needs.

Q: How do you give advice without scaring the receiver from attending the big conference?

A: Acknowledge their concerns, but present the information in a “public service” or “helpful tips” context... something you’re doing for their benefit. Include more than just H1N1 advisories; there are plenty of safety tips that would be useful to attendees. Include links to information and advisories on your website and other pertinent websites. If your communications are calm and positive, their reaction should be likewise.

Q: How do you ask for attendees "ICE" info when some would see it as a privacy issue?

A: Have a standard but optional line item in your registration procedure. Specify why you are requesting this information. Clarify the limits of its use and how and when this information will be destroyed after the event. It’s a good idea to develop a formal Privacy Policy, which you can include on your website and in your materials.

Q: In the case where your company is exhibiting at a trade show, not hosting, what sort of elements do you think should be included in a smaller version of a risk management plan for staff attending the show?

A: This would be, in essence, the same process as any risk assessment (see number 7 above)... what could go wrong, how it would affect you, and what you can do about it. The risks would likely include something happening to those staffing the exhibit (for any number of reasons); loss, theft or damage to the exhibit or its contents (for any number of reasons); and cancellation of the show (for any number of reasons). Check your contracts, have a plan for staff replacement (know the location and contact numbers for area hospitals and other healthcare resources), and purchase the appropriate insurance coverage.