

How to Keep the Competition Away From Your Attendees

I recently read about Google's "Let Freedom Ring" party, originally planned to coincide with the eBay Annual Convention in Boston June 14-16. Google had planned to host an event that would have in all likelihood siphoned off some of the eBay convention attendees. One article called it "Crashing eBay's Annual Convention." At the last minute, responding to pressure from eBay, Google cancelled the event.

This is not an unusual situation. Organizations that sponsor events or exhibits often have to deal with these so called rogue events. What I found surprising about the situation was that a company as large as eBay had not taken steps to prevent it from occurring.

When you think about it, it is easy to see why this happens. In some cases vendors decide to bypass the exhibit hall and try to siphon off attendees by hosting information sessions in the same hotel as the conference or one nearby. Another tactic a competitor may use is to try to capitalize on having many of its potential clients gathered in one place and drop marketing materials around the venue. Or as we saw with the cancelled Google event, they will host a reception designed to draw attendees of a conference they are not affiliated with.

The sponsoring organization needs to maintain control over who else is using the hotel or conference venue during the event and what those potential competitors are allowed to do.

What I do to prevent rogue events is to include a competition clause in my hotel contract. I name those organizations that are my client's competitors and get the hotel to agree that they will not book an event for these organizations during our meeting dates. The more narrowly we are able to define the competition, the better. I try to be sure the clause is specific enough to cover whatever situation we realistically believe may arise.

The hotel may try to limit the exclusion to my client's event dates, but that would open the door for a competitor to host an event the day preceding my client's conference. Sometimes the exclusion needs to continue for the entire week of the event.

Vendors can be tricky. If your contract has a clause indicating the hotel will not rent meeting space to your competition, you could find that your competitor has reserved a suite under an individual's name and is using that to host a reception for your attendees. You can prevent that by including all the suites in your room block so that only individuals associated with your event may rent a suite during your convention. As you can imagine, the size of your event and the percentage of the hotel's room block you are booking will influence how willing the hotel is to agree to these conditions.

When you are negotiating, make sure you understand how much leverage you have. If the property and city really want your event and it is a good fit for the space, you may have substantial leverage. However, if the hotel's sales team think they might be able to do better (i.e. book a more lucrative piece of business) then they might not be as flexible.

You may discover that your competition plans to host an event at the property across the street. This is where it can get tricky. If you are not signing a contract with the hotel across the street you may not be

able to get this property to agree. However the larger your event, the more clout you have. I find if my event is bringing enough dollars into the city, I may be able to get the Convention and Visitors Bureau to help. A key point here: All these solutions need to be executed in advance. Once the party is booked, it might be too late to stop.

Shelley E. Griffin, CMM, the president of Boston-based Griffin Conference Group, is a respected industry leader with over twenty years experience. For more helpful tips, please visit our web site at www.griffinconferencegroup.com.