

On-Site Communications

You plan for months – or years – for your event, and the big day is almost here. Your program kicks off tomorrow, and it's 5:00 a.m. on your setup day. The exhibit service company is moving in the pipe and drape and registration counters.

But the hotel hasn't removed the set from last night's reception, and it's right where your registration area needs to be.

You pick up the house phone and dial the number for the Meeting Planner Hot Line. You've been told this number is answered 24 hours a day. But now it just rolls over to the hotel operator. She tries another line for you. This time you are connected – to your service manager's voice mail.

Your AV company was planning to start setting up at midnight for your keynote session. You go to the ballroom and can tell they have been working, but now there's no one there. You need to connect with them, but realize that the cellphone number you have is for your sales rep, not for any of the setup crew.

Your staff will be reporting shortly to begin checking the room sets. This is a large property, and the meeting space is spread out between two buildings. You have rented walkie-talkies and begin to label them with your staff's names when you discover that they won't work, because none of the batteries have been charged.

Communication on-site is critical to the success of your program. The day it most often breaks down is the all important set-up day. Here are some tips to help ensure successful communication.

Verify the hotel's process

Ask your convention service manager (CSM) how on-site communication is handled at the property. Will you be given a Nextel walkie-talkie or similar tool so you can reach key hotel staff? During what hours? Who is your contact when your CSM is not available? At some properties your CSM will carry one of your walkie-talkies. This works well and can speed up the response time by allowing the CSM to hear the request at the same time you do.

Ask your CSM to inform you when they will be in a meeting or leaving the property. Once I tried repeatedly to contact an allegedly "on duty" CSM over the course of an hour – but to no avail. I later found out that he had been out walking his dog.

Test the system

When you are on your site inspection, try the Meeting Planner Hot Line number and see what happens. Is the phone actually answered, or does it roll over to voice mail? Do you reach someone who can help you, or just a message taker? How quickly is the line answered? You need to try this at several times of day to see what happens. Is there a chance you might need to reach someone at 4:00 a.m. during your event? You want to be assured that people will be there when you need them.

Testing the system also means checking for dead spots within the property. For example, if you know in advance that walkie-talkie reception is spotty in the exhibit hall, you can instruct your staff to call you on your cellphone instead.

Get names and numbers

Ask the hotel for the names of those who will be working from midnight to 6:00 a.m. and ask for a second way to contact them, such as their direct line or Nextel number. Get this information for each day of your program. Tell the hotel several days in advance that you will need this information. Remember to get contact information for your AV team as well.

Have multiple ways of contacting your key team members. Create a contact sheet that includes everyone associated with your event.

I like to do two lists – and get this – I have them on paper. One list includes address, e-mail, and phone numbers (office, cell, every number I have.) I include every staff person involved with the event (including temps), every vendor, all sponsors or exhibitors, etc. I have it all in one place. Some planners skip this step because all this information is in their computer. But what if it crashes? Or the battery goes? Or you need to access this information fast?

I do a second sheet that contains just my key contacts with their phone numbers. I like to keep this to one page that I can quickly access it. Be sure to include the phone numbers for all your key hotel contacts and the phone extension of not just people but locations, such as your speaker ready room, registration area, office, etc.

My final communications tip is this: Remember that you can't repeal Murphy's Law, which says that anything that can go wrong will go wrong. But with enough preparation, reality-checking, and information gathering, you can keep from getting clobbered at your big event.

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.