

Getting Started with Meetings Management



STRATEGIC MEETINGS MANAGEMENT DURING THE PAST FEW DECADES HAS evolved from a niche concept popular in a few industries to a widespread pillar of corporate travel management and procurement. Many companies have deployed at least some aspects of model SMM programs, like technology implementation, sourcing consolidation or the creation policy governing contract-signing authority. But beginning an SMM program can be a complicated and arduous, with many stakeholders, disparate data streams and potentially countless employees involved in planning meetings. The following can help break down that process and help launch a successful SMM program.

I. BENEFITS OF MANAGING MEETINGS

- A. Cost savings.** This is often the impetus for a meetings management program, but many times proves not to be the most important outcome. That said, savings and cost avoidance potential are significant; companies report as much as 20 percent to 25 percent reduction in direct and indirect costs after establishing meetings management.
 1. Policy modification and compliance, including demand management: 1.5% to 8%.
 2. Supply management consolidation, strategic sourcing and logistic planning savings, including leveraging TMC for group travel: 4% to 12%.
 3. Process automation for end-to-end meeting tasks and group online booking: 3% to 6%.
 4. Payment and recovery, including rebates, commissions and fee collection: 2% to 4%.
 5. Resource management, including reuse of materials, reducing duplicative resources: 3% to 5%.
- B. Reduced contractual liability.** Fragmented throughout an organization, meetings are often organized by nonprofessional meeting planners. These planners may rely on personal relationships and/or sign binding contracts without seeking approval from a purchasing or legal department. Financial ramifications can be serious, and lack of visibility into overall meetings activities prevents them from replacing the business with another program to mitigate losses.
- C. Attendee safety and security.** Consistent meeting planning processes and sourcing requirements will include internal requirements for attendee safety, a review of the vendor's safety and security record and onsite procedures. SMM leaders should work with procurement, human resources, risk management and/or security departments to identify these details. Aligning the SMM to existing corporate duty of care policies and processes can go a long way in securing program adoption.
- D. Regulatory compliance.** Particularly in the pharmaceutical and healthcare industries, as well as in financial firms, regulatory compliance for meetings and events is required in order to avoid penalties.

- E. Meeting quality and delivery.** Without a clear planning process, significant variation in meeting quality and delivery is practically guaranteed. Over-spending can deliver a quality meeting, but hurts the organization financially; careless planning delivers subpar events that deliver poor results even if costs are held in check.

- F. Supply chain management.** Identifying suppliers and driving consolidation, including moving group travel toward the preferred travel management company, will support risk mitigation, cost savings and productivity goals. In addition, master service agreements and proper service-level agreements can be put into place for suppliers to adhere to service requirements.

- G. Brand consistency.** In the hands of multiple planners without clear direction and policy guidelines, an organization's brand may be diluted in its delivery to attendees—or worse, compromised by breaches in data or confidentiality.

- H. Attendee experience.** Related to meeting delivery and brand consistency, attendee experience of the brand, the level of the meeting product and the quality of the content should be streamlined and consistent within a managed meeting program.

- I. Return on investment.** All these elements contribute to a meeting's overall return on investment for the organization. Controlling spend is just the first step; delivering a quality meeting with the right branding and content in the right environment—and without distractions from mishandled or arduous logistics—contributes as well. A fully established meetings management program may also integrate with training, HR or CRM capability to track longer-term outcomes for meetings ROI.

II. DEFINING SCOPE

Given its complexity, many companies develop a meetings management strategy for a single market or a small selection of markets with intensive meetings activities. That said, larger regional and global implementations have become more common as local programs have matured and delivered significant savings,

productivity increases and risk reduction. Regardless of the ultimate goal, a phased rollout is a proven best practice.

- A. Local.** A local or single-market SMM implementation can provide quality learnings and a template for rollouts in other markets. Starting small often is a smart strategy. Even within a local implementation, launching the effort with a small group of meeting planners to beta-test policies, processes and technologies is a best practice before rolling SMM out across an entire market.
- B. Regional or global.** When looking to implement a larger rollout, organizations should consider the 80/20 rule, determining which markets are the most intensive users of meetings. That said, simultaneously implementing SMM across all markets comprising that 80 percent is not advisable. Instead, a scalable approach that provides flexibility for each market is a best practice. Rating each market by the following attributes can help identify which to implement first:
 1. Regulatory/financial/legal requirements.
 2. Comparative meetings volume.
 3. Meetings-associated spend.
 4. Stakeholder engagement.
 5. Technology readiness.
 6. Ease of entry in the market.

III. DISCOVERY PHASE

In this critical moment, be thorough, but avoid “analysis paralysis” that can come from realizing that the corporation may never uncover every meetings center in the organization, especially when scoping a regional or global program. Understand as much as possible, and trust that a managed meetings program, even partially implemented, will reveal more over time.

- A. Identify stakeholders.** Meetings management is often a grassroots effort in its early stages. Still, it is important to gain support even in the discovery phase. A meetings management program will touch meeting planners (both professional and occasional), travel management, procurement, legal, HR, finance and accounting. Corporate management will need to understand the overall strategy, while IT will need to understand goals for implementation and systems integrations. An early coalition of interested parties may grow

into a cross-functional governing team as an SMM effort formalizes.

- B. Gather data and information on the current state of the meetings program.** This effort is most critical for grassroots meetings management efforts that require SMM leaders to build a business plan in order to attract needed resources. Sources include:
 1. Use accounts payable, corporate cards and supplier data to determine spending on all types of meetings and events, including internal, external, conferences, tradeshow, booths and incentives. If using AP data:
 - a.** Look for individual hotel charges of \$5,000 or more. Ask hotel suppliers to detail attrition or cancellation fee payments.
 - b.** Look for individual ground transportation charges of \$500 or more.
 - c.** Look for any spending with audiovisual or production suppliers or booth builders.
 - d.** Look for any spending with destination management companies and meeting agencies.
 - e.** Look for individual restaurant or meal spending of \$1,000 or more.
 2. Examine meetings payment processes. Current payment mechanisms used by the organization as they are a good place to begin a search for meetings spend, particularly if the organization uses procurement (P-cards) and/or meeting cards for any of its meetings, conferences or events.
 3. Assess contracts with hotels and other suppliers.
 4. Examine policies or guidelines that may be in used by division or country.
 5. Find the individuals in different departments who plan meetings and assess their roles.
 6. Examine meeting sourcing processes.
 7. Assess meetings technologies in place, including attendee management platforms, mobile apps and SMM technology.
- C. Find out which departments have large budgets set aside for on-going, client facing, product launches, consumer roadshows, etc.** Investigate current pain points and map resolution to your SMM initiative. By offering a solution for current pain points to stakeholders, you enlist their support and participation. Don't try to boil the ocean by

bringing all department business and their uniqueness into a managed program at the same time. Look for scalability that can demonstrate proof of concept successes, then start to add different stakeholder groups. The following divisions usually house the lion's share of a company's meetings activities, but by no means is it an exhaustive list.

1. Sales and marketing organizations. From product launches and large sales meetings to regional trainings, these divisions hold both high- and low-profile meetings. Higher-profile events may be fully or partially outsourced to third parties, and are likely to be among the best managed meetings in the company. In addition to looking for meetings spend in these divisions, also review planning processes or informal policies for best practices. Acknowledging these may ease SMM buy-in for these divisions. Also inquire with this division whether any type of meetings technology has been implemented, as this could influence the choice of SMM technology provider.
 2. HR and training. Training and employee development meetings are common, but may be considerably smaller in scope when compared to sales and marketing events.
 3. Service centers. Especially in technology companies, off-site client support and service meetings are common and may require teams to stay overnight.
 4. Executive/VIP meetings. Often organized by executive assistants, this category of meeting may be among the most difficult to uncover as they are often meant to be high level and discreet. It is, nevertheless, important to understand their spend levels as well as the expectations involved so that a SMM program can support them.
 5. Suppliers. Aside from payment providers, contracted hotels, airlines, ground transportation services and agencies often track meetings spend better than their clients. Go to them with a spreadsheet listing the required data and ask for as much information as they can offer.
- D. Identify synergies with travel management, procurement and finance.**



1. Travel and meetings management converges in several areas. Travel and meetings management leaders should conduct joint quarterly business review meetings with hotels, airlines and travel management companies.
 - a. Travel management companies and other suppliers. There are opportunities to leverage suppliers for group travel, venue sourcing and meeting planning. For transparency into tracking of all meeting participants, the organization's TMC should be used for all group travel and offer high-level service by group service agents.
 - b. Hotel programs. While not all transient hotels can host large meetings, organizations with significant hotel spend globally have an opportunity to negotiate agreements at the chain level to combine transient and group operations in one master service agreement describing how to work together. Negotiations and contracts still are required for each meeting. Ground transportation companies also may offer synergy for both travel and meetings.
 - c. Payment programs. There are opportunities to use meeting cards, purchasing cards, virtual cards or business travel accounts for meetings to improve payment efficiency, obtain detailed data on spend, and access to card rebate programs. Note that a thorough multi-person card initiation and reconciliation process should be used for fraud reduction.
 - d. Technology. Use the organization's online booking tool for group travel. Other options include using influential, digital reminders, at the time of booking transient travel, to consider the use of virtual technologies.
2. Procurement. Meetings management can benefit from formalized negotiation and purchasing processes, as long as there is an understanding of the uniqueness of each event and all stakeholders remain flexible. Procurement can assist with uncovering supplier data and support master service agreement efforts, combining transient and group volume

for hotels, airlines, and agencies. It is important to note that many procurement departments hire meeting sourcing professionals who understand the nuances of meeting and event contractual requirements.

3. Finance. Card payments and commission collection are areas where finance may be able to support meetings and events. Finance can help identify the benefit of using a card product for deposits, ancillary charges and travel costs. Finance can also support the decision to collect commissions, split commissions or require noncommissionable rates.

IV. MEETINGS CONTRACT MANAGEMENT

In addition to cost savings, SMM efforts are often driven by a desire to mitigate contractual risk. Many companies experience financial losses from signing agreements with lop-sided attrition and cancellation clauses or when inexperienced meeting organizers fail to protect the company from a supplier-side cancellation. With the hotel category currently experiencing a seller's market, experienced contract management with tight approvals and workflow requirements has become even more critical.

- A. Standardize contracts. Establishing a standardized hotel contract allows organizations to "cut to the chase" when it comes to contract management. The standard agreement should include language that addresses cancellation and attrition liabilities, as well as an "act of God" or force majeure clause that defines both supplier and buyer responsibilities should an unforeseeable event force the meeting to be cancelled. Some companies will not contract with vendors that refuse to sign their standard agreement; in a seller's market, however, this hardline approach may put an organization's meeting placement at a disadvantage.
- B. Require contract approval. When not using the standard contract—or when implementing changes or additions to the standard contract—a contract approval process is key. The agreement may be trafficked through a procurement professional or even a specified legal advisor, but whatever resource is used, the turnaround time must be

reasonable or the organization will risk losing the proposal entirely.

- C. Limit signing authority on all contracts. Limiting the number of individuals who are authorized to sign meeting agreements offers two benefits: It ensures the contract has been reviewed by qualified personnel, and it centralizes visibility into the organization's overall meetings activities.

V. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE & OUTSOURCING

The choice to manage meetings internally or externally—or in collaboration with a third party—largely depends on overall program or individual meeting complexity as well as the amount of internal resources that may be dedicated to the effort. While outsourcing is not required to maintain a successful program, some companies have found benefits in doing so. Companies with a handful of marquee meetings may outsource a portion of the tasks associated with larger events, while delegating smaller programs to occasional planners supported by internal sourcing and contract management. The following organizational structures and outsourcing configurations are common. As a corporation's SMM program matures, these structures and related workflows may change.

- A. Internal organizational structure.
 1. Centralized meeting department. With this structure, all meetings are funneled through a single meeting planning department for resource allocation, approvals, sourcing processes and logistical planning. This structure leaves the meeting owner free to concentrate on meeting content and delivery.
 2. Decentralized meeting planning + internal sourcing support. Often adopted by organizations with a large number of smaller meetings, a decentralized approach relies on strong policy compliance to drive the sourcing and contracting process through proper channels, while meeting owners handle the logistical and content planning. Meetings registration in a centralized "calendar" is critical with this approach, as is responsive support from sourcing specialists and/or legal teams.
 3. Centralized department + occasional planners + internal sourcing support.



Even for organizations with large meetings volume and complex programs, a partially decentralized structure can be effective. Professional planners in a centralized meetings center likely handle large and/or complex meetings; smaller meetings with fewer vectors for risk remain the purview of the meeting owner. Meeting registration in a central tool is key, along with tight workflows and approvals that prevent contract missteps.

B. Outsourcing options. If working with third parties to partially or fully outsource an SMM program, the organization must ensure that all third parties support the established meetings policy and workflow guidelines. If the organization has implemented a meetings technology solution, partners should be required to use it so that all data can be captured within the system to support reporting and business intelligence goals. Contracts with third-party suppliers should include key performance indicators, and, depending upon the depth of the relationship, may include incentives for achieving certain savings or management goals.

1. External sourcing support. Whether an agency partner or meetings sourcing specialist, these partners will research appropriate venues, manage the request for proposal process, negotiate added value benefits and facilitate the contracting process. In addition to managing the process, third-party partners may be able to garner better rates and inclusions due to their high volume purchasing. In many cases, sourcing specialists are compensated by the venue where the business is placed (e.g., 10 percent of total room nights).
2. External sourcing and planning support. In addition to sourcing support, agency and meeting management partners offer logistical planning support. Organizations may find this type of outsourced help valuable for large and/or complex meetings types, such as product launches, national sales meetings or consumer events. Organizations may also rely on outsourced logistical and planning support when dealing with large meeting volumes, allowing

internal planners to concentrate on content delivery and strategic goals.

3. Fully outsourced SMM. Because it is not a core business, some companies outsource much of the planning, implementation and maintenance of a meetings management program to a third-party partner or partners. Particularly when the effort has a regional or global scope, the expertise of specialized meetings management companies can be invaluable. Whether the organization chooses to outsource to a single partner or execute a more regional or local strategy often depends on organizational culture. A local or regional approach may be more difficult from a supplier and data management perspective, but can facilitate adoption as stakeholders may continue to work with familiar partners.

VI. MEETINGS POLICY

A. Developing a meetings policy is a core component of meetings management. It should reflect the company culture, include approval workflows and identify exceptions to the general policy wherever applicable. Recognizing the diverse objectives of their meetings, some SMM teams create tiered policies according to meeting type when it comes to budgeting, assigning the appropriate venue class of service and parameters for food and beverage. Some companies implement a different level of approval for small meetings versus larger ones, resulting in different workflows. In general, however, a meetings policy should define roles and responsibilities for meeting planners and stakeholders, and include the following elements:

1. Meeting registration and approval criteria.
2. Supplier sourcing guidelines for air, hotel and ground transportation.
3. Contracting requirements, workflows and approvals.
4. Use of supplier sourcing tools.
5. Budgeting guidelines.
6. Preferred payment method(s).
7. Use of attendee registration and management tools.
8. Food and beverage guidelines.
9. Meetings ethics, including points/loyalty programs, gifts, free room nights, etc.

10. Guest and spouse attendance.

11. Attendee safety and security requirements and procedures that support corporate duty of care guidelines and policies.
 12. Consequences for noncompliance to the meetings policy.
- B.** Meetings policy should be easily accessed and clearly communicated via a corporate intranet, but posting policy guidelines is rarely effective in driving full awareness. Specific communications and trainings should be part of the overall compliance strategy. Some companies with extensive meetings programs establish on-going best practice education sessions to support awareness and meeting planner education.
- C.** Program policy and workflow parameters should be embedded in a meetings management technology tool for consistency of execution and compliance.
- D.** Meeting policies should be reviewed annually to ensure relevance especially with multi-generational workforce dynamics currently in play. Special attention should be given to communications about SMM policies or training, etc. The communication methodology for SMM should not be one-size-fits-all. Identify various communication channels and post relevant content accordingly.

VII. MEETINGS MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGY

Meetings management technology creates the backbone of a successful SMM program. Not only does it create a central data repository for meetings activities, but also standardizes workflow and may dictate certain choices to ensure meeting planners remain within policy. Meetings technology tends to be modular, and many companies begin their exposure to meetings tools through event website creation and attendee management modules. Extending the use of technology beyond individual event support is critical for SMM.

Understand that SMM technology likely will not satisfy the technology requirements for large-scale conferences and events. Functionalities for conferences and events are more complex and often require customizations. Attempting to get your marketing and event organizers to scale to your SMM technology may result in loss of credibility and cooperation. For these stakeholders, target areas where



SMM can assist like in eRFP sourcing and contracting, payment and data collection/reporting, etc.

A. Required capabilities.

1. Planning. Event registration and central calendar.
2. Sourcing. eRFP and supplier data.
3. Budgeting. Budgeted, negotiated and actual costs.
4. Attendee management. Invitations, websites and attendee information.
5. Reporting. On spend, savings, suppliers and attendees.
6. Mobile applications. Data from mobile apps has grown in importance, especially regarding attendee engagement and direct real-time feedback.

B. Configuration.

1. Don't use more technology than is required. A full technology suite is a powerful tool for SMM, but even a small implementation can make an impact. For example, by requiring event registration in a central calendar, organizations can implement an approval process and vastly improve visibility into overall meetings activities. Companies may choose to implement certain modules first and then add as the SMM effort matures.
 2. Simplify workflows. Meetings technology tools offer extensive policy and workflow configurations. These are invaluable for customizing the tools for each organization. Just because it can be done, however, does not make every configuration capability worth using. This can be a temptation, particularly for programs with tiered meetings policies and workflows. Simplifying choices, creating "lite" forms and workflows for simple meetings and more complex data capture for larger events can be helpful for driving adoption and reducing training—particularly for occasional planners.
 3. Ensure local customization. Especially for global programs, ensure the technology platform offers multiple languages and local customization options. Only allow customizations to data collection that will not undermine the standard consolidation of spend, savings, supplier and attendee data.
- C. Technology integrations.** More advanced SMM programs are increas-

ingly integrating meetings technology with transient travel tools and other employee technology systems.

1. Transient online booking tools.

Particularly for internal meetings, integration with OBTs can provide organizations with the ability to understand what portion of overall business travel is actually related to the organization's meetings activities.

2. Global distribution systems. Integrating with global distribution systems and OBTs allows for real-time visibility into room block availability.
3. Payment. Integrating with payment tools can facilitate spend reconciliation.
4. Customer relationship management tools. Some companies are integrating meetings tools, particularly mobile meetings apps, with CRM to track follow-up from client-facing events and longer-term business opportunities and conversions to better quantify return on investment.

VIII. MEETINGS PAYMENT

Consider using a specialized meetings payment card for all meetings purchases. This payment option offers companies an easier way to categorize meeting line items, reconcile accounts and streamline the payment process. Consider the following best practices:

- A. Consolidate meetings spend with a single provider.** This will allow the organization to drive better rebates based on total meetings spend volume. Consider using the same provider as the corporate card to leverage joint volume. Pick your card provider according to your SMM strategy; if your goal is to have a global SMM card provider, then research card acceptance information during your RFP so it doesn't become an issue after deployment.
- B. Current best practice is to generate an individual card for each meeting.** This requires expedited request and disbursement on the part of the organization, especially for meetings with short lead times. Assigning an individual card per meeting can ease reconciliation processes. Card setup can be configured to whatever process is most acceptable to the corporation for example, some prefer one parent card for all meetings and identify expenses per meeting engagement by unique meeting identifiers.

IX. DRIVING ADOPTION

Meetings management initiatives take time and resources. Many organizations do the legwork to understand meetings spend, analyze their markets, source good suppliers and invest in technology only to stumble when it comes to adoption efforts. To succeed, organizations must also budget and plan effectively for change management and create a realistic adoption roadmap. Following are several strategies to maximize SMM results:

- A. Participation.** Allow meeting planners of all levels to have a voice when designing an SMM program.
- B. Position as a resource.** Market the program as a support structure for planners. Show how new tools and processes will alleviate pain points.
- C. Pilot.** Test the program with a select group of planners to work out any major glitches. Get feedback and make changes.
- D. Communicate and train.** A communications campaign is critical to SMM success, but go beyond a one-time promotion by offering lunch-and-learn education sessions, online learning opportunities and a dynamic "planner community" resource.
- E. Get more feedback.** Create a channel for ongoing feedback. Planners of all levels will be able to suggest program refinements. Look for tool configurations or workflows that are not effective and change them.
- F. Make exceptions to policy.** Regardless of the range of suppliers chosen or the number of meeting tiers included in policy, consider an official approval process for allowing planners to book non-preferred suppliers for specific programs.
- G. Understanding stakeholder needs and drivers is critical for adoption and SMM deployment success.**
- H. Senior executive champions and support.** Without executive stakeholder support and champions, SMM deployment can be challenging. Close the loop by ensuring executive stakeholders get monthly reports of only high-level summaries of SMM successes and gaps. Identify areas of opportunities and ask for their help to close existing program gaps and noncompliant departments.

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