



Your Next Event Won't Go Well: Here's Why

By Susan Saldibar

How much planning do you put into your events? How many creative new ideas do you kick around? Do you include staff members in addition to sales and marketing? How about residents? Or are the same people sitting around the same table asking the same questions? "What's the theme this time?" "Who will speak this time?" "What can the chef prepare for appetizers or a meal?"

The planning process for events is often a broken one, according to David Koelling, President of [Strategic Dining Services](#), and RonnDa Peters, VP of Marketing and Sales (Strategic Dining Services is a Senior Housing Forum partner). Both have witnessed, first hand, communities hosting an event that has no measurable goals, and is often a repeat of a previous event ("We always have a spring fling"). The result is a mediocre event and one that is also far more expensive than it needs to be.

Don't have an event just to "have an event", David tells clients.

The key is changing the way you plan your events, RonnDa and David tell me. It's not rocket science, but it does involve eliminating old habits and bringing some fresh ideas into the process. Here's what RonnDa and David recommend:

- **Start with a specific goal.** What often happens is that somebody comes up with a theme, tells the ED how much it will cost, and is met with immediate pushback. What's missing? A goal, according to David. "Discussions need to happen more along the lines of 'Well, for \$1,500 we need to get 5 tours and 1 deposit.'" Now you have a tangible goal that all departments can work towards and support. "Don't have an event, just to have an event," he adds.

The food you prepare should also reflect the plan and the targeted audience. For instance, you will have a totally different menu for the top five professional referral sources versus the 25 hottest families in your pipeline, according to David and RonnDa. “Someone may insist they want filets and shrimp,” says David. “But you need to ask, do you really need filets and shrimp to accomplish your goal? Encourage your chef to bring creativity and innovation to the plan. Maybe there are leftover beef tips . . . how about individual beef Wellingtons? With planning, you can spend peanuts and really get a ‘wow’ factor,” he adds.

- **Hold planning meetings.** You may be doing this already, but David and RonnDa suggest you invite a broader group of people into these sessions. “The shocker is when you get a maintenance guy who says, ‘I could hang this up and make the room look like . . .’ What a great idea! Everyone can bring something to table,” David says. But it takes work and dedication to make these planning meetings routine. “We set up required monthly meetings between sales and marketing, dining and hospitality, maintenance and programming,” he tells me. “If you don’t force it, they’ll have a couple of meetings, then it slips away. These meetings must become routine. This builds culture over time. It becomes a way of thinking,” he adds. And, most importantly, the meeting topic should be dedicated to events only. Don’t try to combine it with other agenda items!
- **Communicate your plan!** This is especially important between your sales/marketing and dining and hospitality teams. If you don’t have good communication, one party ends up driving the entire event. “You’ll end up with a ‘Just do it my way. I want filet in front of every person’,” David explains. Or the kitchen staff dictates the menu based on making their budget numbers at the end of the month. Neither approach will maximize the success of the event.
- **Include and empower everyone (that also means residents!).** Don’t let the chef, alone, drive the menu. Empower people to contribute their creativity. Many make the mistake of excluding residents since the goal is to get outsiders through the doors. And it can backfire, David tells me. “Let’s say you’re serving lobster. On the day of the event, you are likely to have residents say things like, ‘The last time I had lobster was before I moved in.’ But they’ll support you if you bring them into the loop. Too many operators exclude them. And they are your most powerful referral source!” Great point.

The advantages of good planning cannot be overstated, especially when you use a broader circle of involvement. And RonnDa points out that this can be more challenging if you are working with a third-party food service management organization. “It’s so important that those people who prepare your food are 100% committed to your goal, not the goal of their own corporate headquarters. While they may have good intentions, their goals may be at odds with what you want to do.”

RonnDa and David also talked about the huge impact creativity in food presentation can make to your events. Who would believe that you can make potato chips look more appealing than lobster? It’s a great topic that we’ll cover in our next article. Stay tuned!



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