

Q&A

Interview with
 Carolyn Davis, CMP
 Owner, Strategic Meeting Partners
 San Diego, Calif.



Carolyn Davis, CMP is a 25-year veteran of the meetings industry. She is the owner of Strategic Meeting Partners, a full-service company providing destination management services nationally, and meeting planning and travel director services globally. Prior to launching Strategic Meeting Partners, she served as a senior manager for more than 17 years with one of San Diego's top DMCs, among other positions.

What led you to start your own business?

Starting my business was the culmination of a five-year professional and personal plan. Surprisingly, the timing couldn't be better. With the economy in its current condition, it has knocked out some of the weaker and peripheral players, which allows greater opportunities for individuals and companies that are truly motivated and committed to the industry.

Where are you planning meetings these days? Has that changed?

When I first started, San Diego was our primary focus, but looking back over the past year, in addition to the local business, we planned meetings in Vail, Colo., Arlington, Va. and Charlottesville, Va. Currently, we have proposals pending for Louisville, Ky., Anchorage, Alaska and Santa Barbara, Calif. Also, last fall I was in Cancun and the Riviera Maya for an educational conference, site inspections and hotel evaluations for potential client programs. So my focus has definitely changed, reflecting a wider

geographic and global marketing effort. In addition, I have developed strategic alliances with other planners to help facilitate this reach.

What's the outlook for 2010 from your clients' perspective? Are they measuring ROI?

Many clients are taking advantage of the poor economy to make some bargain meeting investments, some are business as normal, and still others are playing it safe with a "slow and steady wins the race" mantra. Some of my clients count the number of smiles as an indication of ROI, while others call out for a professional evaluation system.

How do you see the role of the meeting professional changing as we go forward?

I see the meeting professional needing to be cross-trained in different aspects of the industry. At one time, being a specialist was the key, and although I think that is still in the top three [responsibilities], I believe that meeting planners need to wear more hats, and to understand more aspects of the role of

the meeting for their client. I work not only as a planner, but also as a consultant, sharing experience and education gained over 20 years in the industry, to provide them with support and advice.

What are some tips you'd like to share with planners who want to start their own business?

Remember first and foremost that you are starting a business! Other tips would be:

- Get your infrastructure in place. Don't forget the little stuff, such as your business license, insurance, tax ID number, bank accounts, business cards, telephone line, fax, etc. Develop scalable systems and processes; you never know just how successful you might become in the future.
- Set goals. A goal without a plan remains a dream. Develop a reasonable business plan and stick to it. Track, measure and evaluate your progress to your goal and be sure to enjoy yourself along the way.
- Get your marketing in place. Identify your future clients, create a database, keep it current and work it. What is your marketing message? Why would someone do business with you? Work on your elevator pitch.
- Join MPI and network, network, network. Attend industry educational conferences, local meetings and meetings in other cities; and use professional networking sites. C.K.

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