

2008

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## Recommended Citation

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The conventions and meetings market is now generating over \$300 billion annually in the United States (Eventective, 2008). This industry is comprised of conventions, trade shows, corporate meetings, social functions, and political events among others.

Political events comprise a significant portion of the meetings and events market, yet this sector garners little attention within the hospitality industry or the public. Detailed exploration of the topic through qualitative research will serve to combat that problem by disseminating information about the topic. The outcome of this project consists of the identification of attributes unique to political event coordination and an evaluation of the skill set necessary for political event management as it differs from that required of other event divisions.

## **Degree Type**

Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

## **Department**

Management

## **Keywords**

Campaign management United States, Special events Planning

**Exploring the Role of Meetings and Events Coordinators in the Political Arena**

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An Honors Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Departmental Honors in Hotel & Restaurant Management

Eastern Michigan University

April, 2008

## **“Exploring the Role of Meetings and Events Coordinators in the Political Arena”**

### **Abstract**

The conventions and meetings market is now generating over \$300 billion annually in the United States (Eventective, 2008). This industry is comprised of conventions, trade shows, corporate meetings, social functions, and political events among others.

Political events comprise a significant portion of the meetings and events market, yet this sector garners little attention within the hospitality industry or the public. Detailed exploration of the topic through qualitative research will serve to combat that problem by disseminating information about the topic. The outcome of this project consists of the identification of attributes unique to political event coordination and an evaluation of the skill set necessary for political event management as it differs from that required of other event divisions.

### **Introduction**

The meetings and events segment produces more revenue per attendee than any other segment of the hospitality industry, an average of \$2,352 per person (Barker, 1999). As a rapidly expanding field, meetings and events are receiving more attention in hospitality curriculum, from catering management classes to those covering special events, conferences, and trade shows. Attention to the political events segment of the market is lacking and deserves increased coverage both within the industry and by hospitality educators. Contributing to the rectification of this problem, the following research and analysis serves to highlight the unique components of political events.

## **Methodology**

The research methodology employed tactics of a qualitative study, defined by Wikipedia as “using small, focused samples to investigate the how and why of decision making and categorizing data into patterns as the primary basis for organizing and reporting results” (2008). Following the Delphi method, focused interviews with political event planning professionals formed the backbone of the research (Campbell, 2004). Specific topics covered in the interviews included a skill inventory, function planning and management, attendance, site selection, suppliers/vendors, budget and financing, legal issues, security, press/media, and food and beverage. Data was collected over two and a half months through personal interviews, telephone interviews, and an emailed interview questionnaire. Other critical research methods utilized include: job-shadow style observation and participation in the planning and execution of specific political events via short term internships and volunteer opportunities. Although the research methods were skewed toward the elicitation of qualitative data, some quantitative data was available and used for comparisons. All relative data was compiled and analyzed based on the stated project objectives.

## **DISCUSSION**

Two distinct areas of interest emerged upon analysis of the research. The existence and nature of Advance Teams is exclusive to the political events world. These political events professionals organize and execute events for political officials. Their name comes from their role in planning an event and mobility, moving from one event to the next across the country. Short lead times on all virtually all political events significantly impact the Advance Team and separate political fundraisers into a category

of their own. Fundraisers are a bona fide component of the events market, but the public and media scrutiny of politics necessitate an atypical approach to their planning and management. Certain supplemental skills are required of Advance Team staffers, fundraising coordinators, and other political events professionals to handle the distinguishing characteristics of political events.

### **Advance**

The Advance Team is unique to political events because only high ranking politicians have a need of one (Mantatos, 2008). These prominent individuals hold positions authority in the government, are more recognized; they make more public appearances than other politicians, and require a security detail. Political officials without an Advance Team plan and execute their public appearances through their own staff, assistance from the sponsoring organization or governmental office, or in conjunction with the Advance Team of the person with whom they're traveling.

As with most institutions, Advance staffers fall into general organizational roles. The "lead" manages the entire operation and supervises team members assigned to handle the press, crowd, site, motorcade, and rooms over-night, ("R.O.N.") aspects of the event. The lead is personally responsible for the politician once they arrive at the venue or throughout the day if multiple events are scheduled; effectively acting as their handler. The "press, crowd, and site persons" typically have assistants who contribute to their work. These Advance Team members are designated P2, P3, C2, C3, S2, S3, for second and third press, second and third crowd, and second and third site persons to define their standing in the Advance organizational structure. [See Figure 1.]

The “press person” is frequently second in command. They cover virtually all press logistics including setting up file areas, acquiring internet access at the venue, managing press buses and other press vehicles (e.g. the CNN bus, ensuring all satellite equipped buses can pick up a signal), designating separate press entrances, and procuring food for them when necessary (Yuen, 2008). The networks, newspapers, and other media consortia reimburse the campaign or sponsoring organization for the expenses their staff incurs (Ziskend, 2008).

The “crowd person’s” responsibilities involve both building the crowd before the event and managing them on site. Local outreach constitutes the majority of pre-event crowd building by encouraging members of various organizations to attend, promoting the event through the local media and on the internet, personal connections with opinion leaders in the community, and through conventional methods such as sign posting. On site, the crowd person deals with staging the crowd to create a well attended appearance and the perfect “cut shot” for the cameras. The critical “cut shot” creation entails constructing the crowd seated behind the speaker so they reflect the diversity of the audience and convey the message of the event. The crowd person also allocates space for “clean” attendees who have passed the security screening and those who have not gone through it or were not approved. They manage the crowd size, staging, and crowd flow through access points.

The “site person” directs the site selection process and then coordinates with the venue manager and suppliers to build the site. Similar to selecting theater, herringbone, crescent rounds, hollow square set-up, etc. for other meetings and events; the set-up of a political event is determined by program format and crowd size. Most site persons prefer

large, open venues for popular rallies and speeches rather than facilities with fixed seating arrangements. The flexible spaces allow them the freedom to structure the set-up to craft a jam-packed cut shot based on attendance. For example, Risers and bleachers are used to accommodate a larger number of people in the same space that would hold less in standard floor seating. Risers would be used to fill the space if a large crowd was expected, and standard floor seating selected if not.

If the Secret Service is not involved in the event production the motorcade staffer plans and coordinates the route for multi-stop trips. Some of their other duties include selecting and managing the drivers and vehicles in the motorcade. They are in charge of all the transportation for the staff, traveling press, politician, and other officials. The size of the motorcade is dependent on the size of the event and the media coverage expected. A typical motorcade length with Secret Service is eight to 12 cars, plus a coach bus and two additional staff cars if the event is part of a multi-stop bus tour. The motorcade is smaller absent Secret Service protection. Traveling press commonly ride on their own coach bus. The motorcade staffer works with the press person to determine when the press bus is and is not part of the motorcade, how they get to the event, and where they go afterward based upon which events they want the press to cover (Ziskend, 2008).

The “R.O.N”. is named after their rooms over-night job, but actually encompass much more than that. The R.O.N. handles all hotel logistics for multi-day trips. Their most critical duties are procuring the accommodations, handling the billing, and distributing room keys to the staff and press. The “overnight” portion of their title doesn’t just apply to the sleeping part of an overnight stay. R.O.N.s work all night to compile



briefing books and obtain all other related materials faxed or emailed from the agency's, politician's, or campaign's headquarters (Yuen, 2008).

These positions allow the team to function most efficiently since each trip has a beginning, middle, and end with specific boxes that must be checked off at each stage. Every Advance Team staffer has their own boxes to check; they work independently but are in constant contact to ensure the production of a cohesive event. Advance Teams play the most significant role in national campaigns where they are responsible for coordinating trips across the country and executing several events during the two to four day trip (Yuen, 2008). Although a trip may last several days, individual political events are short in duration, lasting under four hours compared to a multi-day conference or the day long affair of a wedding ceremony and reception. They also have significantly shorter lead times as a result of a constantly, nuanced shifting of the political environment and the fluidity characteristic of politicians' schedules. [See Figure 2.]

Site selection considerations for political events are based on two related factors: the crowd size and the media presence. The media pays far more attention to political functions, so the site selected must be photogenic and structured around "the shot" – the visual image that conveys the message of the event. For example, an event promoting the a bill supporting green energy initiatives would be held in a 'green building' equipped with solar panels and flooring made from recycled tires. The purpose of the event is rarely the event itself, but rather to garner the media's attention and that of the public at large.

Crowded events convey a positive image of support and enthusiasm for the speaker, initiative, or movement. Consequently the venue must be structured to present

10-20% of the audience on camera, the “cut shot.” The site must be small enough to appear crowded regardless of actual attendance, but large enough to accommodate everyone who shows up. The history of similar events is used to determine attendance, though overflow rooms and rooms portioned with collapsible walls are a staple contingency plan employed to manage unexpectedly large crowds. Much of it is based on guesswork and how effectively the event is promoted (Manatos, 2008; Schneider, 2008).

Events that are “open,” allow the media’s presence and place additional demands on the site selection requirements; the press riser should be 45 to 55 feet away from the speaker, level with the speaker, and high enough to clear the crowd’s heads (Ziskend, 2008). Audio-Visual capabilities, press filing space, and a “spin room” for pundits make up other considerations. The site, press, and crowd staffers all work together to allocate space for both crowd and press as well as for VIPs and security. The press is responsible for providing their own equipment, but the Advance staff must ensure the venue has the technical ability and space to accommodate it.

In order to construct successful events in a very limited time frame the constantly traveling Advance Teams use local contacts to find appropriate venues more swiftly than through the traditional Request For Proposal (RFP) process. Supporters and local politicians often get involved and use their influence to make things happen faster. Personal and political relationships play a sizeable role in planning the event expediently. Occasionally staffers are reduced to searching for venues or vendors using Google or a phone book, representing the “whatever it takes” mindset of the Advance Team (Boylan, 2008; Yuen, 2008). Campaigns strive to use reputable local suppliers and vendors in order to maximize their impact and generate goodwill in the

community (Schneider, 2008). A personal referral or exceptional reputation is the surest method for vendors and suppliers seeking to secure a contract for a political event.

Advance Team members regularly end up building relationships and working with people they barely know for a short, but intense period of time. Because the interaction periods are very short and dynamic, a good working relationship and positive attitude is very important. It can make or break the event (Ziskend, 2008).

After the event start time has been established two to five days prior to the event Advance staffers work backwards to create a timeline that will deal with logistical issues. Security is of particular concern at political events for high profile speakers. Advance coordinates with the Secret Service, police, and the press to ensure that the venue, press, and crowd are all swept at least one half hour before the event begins. The lead, press, crowd, site persons, and motorcade staffer all work with Secret Service employees to plan and execute secure events (Yuen, 2008). The secret service coordinates nearly everything for events attended by the president and vice president due to the increased security risks (Schneider, 2008). Protesters present the most common grounds for concern; security is a preventative, not reactionary in nearly all cases. Still, the security presence found at political events is notably more extensive and thorough than in other segments of the events industry. The basic structure and function of Advance Teams is well established and varies little within the political arena, but Advance Teams operate in the shadows of more mainstream event segments in the world outside of politics.

### **Fundraisers**

Fundraisers are the most popular type of political event. They exist to generate revenue for the candidate, cause, or party and to introduce the audience to a particular

government official or candidate. Because of their political affiliation, political fundraisers are impacted by stringent legal regulations, fewer venue and vendor choices, and feature a consistent program structure.

The Federal Elections Commission (FEC) closely tracks monetary and in-kind contributions. These FEC regulations and other finance laws like the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007 make managing the budget a primary concern for each event. Campaigns cannot accept donations above the limit, \$2,300 per election for federal candidates and a total \$108,200 biennial limit. They must report the source and amount of each contribution. Historically, campaign fundraisers were notorious for not complying with some non-finance related laws like venue insurance and workers compensation claims, but this trend has been gradually correcting itself over the past decade (Oklok, 2008).

The average budget constitutes 10% of the total contribution goal for the fundraiser. The tone of the event is set by the “ask” – how much money is requested of each attendee. Large dollar fundraisers have asks on a sliding scale up to \$5,000 per couple. Smaller dollar fundraisers may have asks as little as \$20 - \$40. Depending upon the “ask,” attendees are selected upon expected financial contribution and other factors using NGP, (National Geographic & Political software) which is a campaign oriented database. “The demographics match pretty closely with the people who regularly come out to vote,” a higher percentage of people between the ages of 30 and 60, more college educated voters, and a racial breakdown reflective of the geographic area (Fleischmann, 22 Feb. 2008). Regardless of the “ask,” costs to the campaign or sponsoring organization are kept as low as possible by working with venues and vendors who support the

candidate or cause since the purpose is to raise, not spend, money (Blair, 2008; Courey, 2008).

Cocktail receptions are more prevalent than sit down dinners in the political events arena. Passed hors d'oeuvres and bar service featuring beer, wine, and soft drinks constitute the basic food and beverage (F&B) offerings. Dinner buffets or plated dinners are reserved for pricier functions, as is liquor at a host bar. Whether the event provides a host or cash bar is determinant on the hosting individual or organization, the formality of the event, and the ask price. There is wider a wider variety alcohol service style than in any other F&B component of the function: host bar, cash bar, wine bottles at tables, beer or wine self-serve at events hosted in a supporter's home, etc. Yet this doesn't impact the overall program design. The cocktail reception format supports the goals of both the sponsors and the attendees; the host, guest speaker, and candidate can easily address the guests, and the guests have ample opportunity to network and mingle before and after the speeches (Courey, 2008; Fleischmann, 2008; Oklok, 2008; Schneider, 2008).

Where non-profit organizations have a long term presence in the community and may produce a signature annual fundraiser, campaigns have a short life-cycle where everything builds up to Election Day (Johanek, 2008; Kolber, 2008). Campaign fundraising consultants act as fundraiser coordinators and have very compressed time frame in which to build the event. [See Figure 2.] Further complicating the process is fundraising reporting rules and working with guest speakers. Campaigns “try to schedule at least one event in the middle of the fundraising reporting period and another about two or three days before the end of it to shuttle in any last minute money” (Fleischmann, 22 Feb. 2008). Guest speakers are frequently other elected officials and politicians with

packed schedules that can shift rapidly in reaction to political developments. They garner additional attendance and income at the event, but coordinating with a political speaker's staff to pick a day is labor intensive and time consuming. These guest speakers are more prone to confirming or rescinding their RSVP at the last minute (Schneider, 2008).

Once confirmed, political speakers require a host of other accommodations. Their staff or party organization, such as the DCCC (Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee) must approve all event literature, the guest list, and the event program. These special guests need to be made to feel special, "coddling" as one professional described it. Political speakers rarely remain at the event for the duration, so political event coordinators may need to clear driveways and hold elevators to keep the speaker happy with an efficient in-and-out procedure. For events held at larger venues, like conference hotels, a high level guest speaker's presence is kept on a need-to-know basis; their names aren't featured on the daily reader boards or otherwise advertised for their security and to restrict attendance to invited guests (Carbonaro, 2008).

### **Skills**

Certain skills are considered industry standard among meetings and events professionals: detail oriented, organization, creative problem solving, good communication skills, negotiation, seeing the big picture, and the ability to expect the unexpected. Political event professionals concur that these are vital competencies, but also argue that the skills list should be expanded and tailored to meet the specific needs of the political world.

There are layers to every political event (Boylan, 2008). For example, a campaign rally is just one part of a multi-event trip through a state or region, which is, itself part of

a national presidential campaign. Political event professionals have to consider how each event fits into the broader picture and remain alert of the constantly shifting political landscape in order to handle any challenges spurred by current events (Schneider, 2008).

Political events, especially advance team work, develop in a high velocity environment and rely on a lot of individual work. Advance Team members don't have the luxury of delegating some work to other committee members or the need to submit all decisions to an advisory board; each staff member has a specific task area and one immediate supervisor. Advance Team staff must be able to work independently while simultaneously communicating with the other staff members (Yuen, 2008; Ziskend, 2008).

Interpersonal and communication skills are particularly important in the political events arena. Elected officials and politicians have earned a reputation for their healthy egos. The best way to accommodate these demanding personalities and ensure a successful event is by "keeping people at ease," (Schneider, 7 Feb. 2008). Diplomacy is essential in the political environment because internal politics play a role in every political event. Designing seating arrangements can become a lengthy process that calls for multiple consultations, checks, and double checks since everyone doesn't possess the same insider knowledge on various cordial or adversarial relationships among attendees. As in other areas of hospitality, this necessitates a service with a smile attitude without compromising the event objectives. This commonly requires a bit of finesse, such as saying 'no' without actually saying the word and making someone think they had the great idea by leading them there (Oklok, 2008; Manatos, 2008). Political event

professionals must be firm but polite and “not be fazed by the important people around you” (Ziskend, 23 Feb. 2008).

Strong leadership skills and good judgment are critical because of the short lead times characteristic of political events (Courey, 2008). That “the immediacy of responses is so key” stems from the limited time available to plan and execute the event. Political event professionals have to be on top of their email and extremely proficient with their BlackBerry and cell phone (Manatos, 29 Feb. 2008).

Technical skills are typically learned on the job and relate to the greater media attention political events receive. This may include, but is not limited to: programming a “mult. box,” (one microphone with many feeds) operating circuit breakers, and using gaffer’s tape. Familiarity with Microsoft Office Suite programs is industry standard for computer skills (Ziskend, 2008). This segment of the meetings and events industry has a steep learning curve. Time on the job and experience are more valuable than a specific education level. However, many of the skills one learns in college are transferable to political event coordination and most political events professionals hold a college degree (Fleischmann, 2008).

Political and hospitality careers are both known for their long hours and propensity to mandate evening and weekend work. Political event coordination blends these two fields and demands a high level of commitment. An 18 hour days isn’t unusual for a wedding planner the day before the nuptials, but 18 hour days are the norm for an Advance Team staffer in the weeks before an election (Ziskend, 2008). Political event coordination commands a “willingness to do the work, to do whatever you need to do to make sure it gets done” (Yuen, 25 Feb. 2008).



**Tables & Charts**

Figure 1 Advance Team Organizational Chart

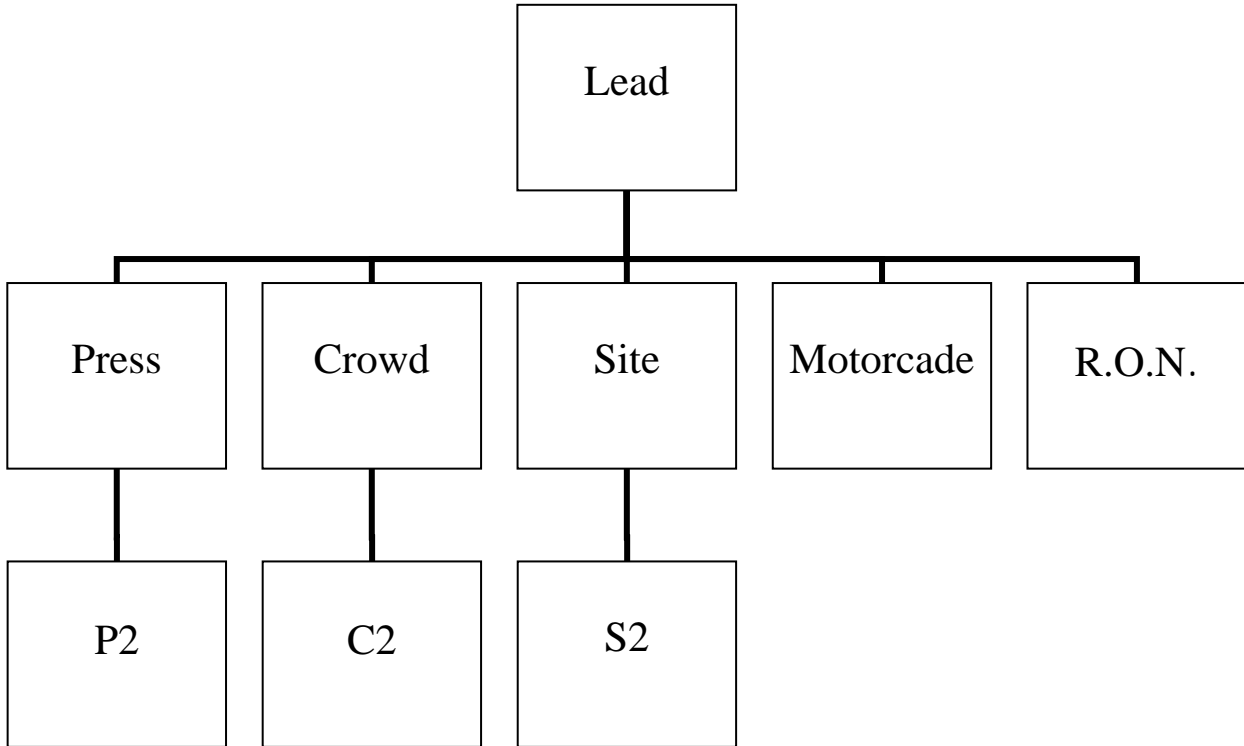


Figure 2 Average Lead Time for Political Events

<u>Political Event</u>	<u>Lead Time</u>
Rally.....	2 - 5 days
Debate.....	10 - 21 days
Low \$ Fundraiser.....	2 - 6 weeks
High \$ Fundraiser .....	6 - 8 weeks
Non-Political Events:	
Exec. Board Meeting.....	1 - 2 months
Incentive Travel .....	3 months
Exhibition.....	6 months
Wedding .....	9 - 15 months
Annual Fundraiser.....	12 months
Annual Convention.....	18 - 24 months

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