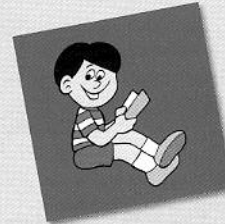


FAMILY FUN



Photos by Brad Olander



We Brought the Kids!

Children's programs can make for happy families and successful meetings.

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any parents struggle to find a balance between work life and personal life, especially when it comes to business travel and days spent away from home. Parents faced with a choice between a weekend conference or a weekend spent with the kids may well choose the latter. As a meeting planner, how can you improve attendance without asking your attendees to choose work over family?

Add children's programs to your event and invite the family to come along!

Such a move may result in increased attendance and happier attendees. In the past, Ryan Brems of LimoLink, Inc. appreciated his company's family-friendly efforts.



"I was an insurance agent for Northwestern Mutual Life," he says. "They have an annual meeting each year in Milwaukee, WI.

While [attendees are] in meetings all day, [spouses] and children are transported by bus to amusement parks. Later in the evening, the Milwaukee Zoo is closed down for NML families to tour and eat in the parking lot."

"[The meeting planners] are able to get more participation from attendees because families are welcome," says Christine Tempesta, president of KiddieCorp, Inc., which organizes and runs children's



programs across the country. "People stay longer, and in fact, many attendees wouldn't come if they couldn't bring their children. We hear this all the time. Or maybe they wouldn't have chosen this conference over a similar one if it wasn't for the children's program. It's a

great marketing tool in addition to being a needed service."

Caprice Caster, CMP, manager of meetings and special events for the National Cable Television Cooperative in Lenexa, KS, says in 1997, the NCTC moved its annual meeting into the summer months. Many attendees brought their families to vacation before or after the conference. This prompted the NCTC to make its evening events family-friendly. However, a few issues arose involving attendees who brought children into educational sessions and exhibits.

To create a win-win situation for all, the NCTC



developed its official children's program in 1998, hiring a DMC to handle the onsite arrangements. Caster says the adult registration grew by 25% after the program was added.

Including a children's program may aid attendees who like to bring their kids along on business trips but have nowhere to take them during "grown-up" times. Many companies that run children's programs tune in to scheduling needs and work with the planner to help make sure everyone's taken care of at all times.

"Our service is designed so we can arrange everything,"

Tempesta says. "Our hours match their function hours. This way, the meeting planner's time is free for other things. That's one big compliment we get, that we arrange

so much and pretty much run ourselves, so that clients never have to worry about us."

Tempesta says knowing the attendees plays a critical part in providing the right services.

"We ask lots of questions in the beginning, about the families attending, about the schedule, whether they have had a program in the past, how children fit into other parts of the meeting, etc.," she says. "We try to stay very flexible

and accommodating; it's what working with the meetings industry requires."

While the cost factor may cause some companies or organizations to balk at such programming, the cost of onsite daycare is often in the same range.

"A very rough rule of thumb is that it costs, per child, in the range of what a hotel babysitter would cost," Tempesta says. "Some established programs practically pay for themselves. Most programs share the cost with the parents (for example, 50-50), although sometimes the organization or company provides it as a complimentary service."



Many people can identify with the stress of wondering what's going on at home while trying to focus on work. Knowing children are onsite and taken care of may allow your attendees to free themselves up toward business matters. And children's program organizers know how important security is to parents.

"We use photo ID for the children and the families," Tempesta says. "Any authorized adult has to be in the picture. We monitor the space at all times, and the same management team is always present, knowing who is authorized to be in the area. For larger programs, we like having security guards stationed by exits."



Such efforts toward providing peace of mind allow attendees the unique experience of taking care of business and enjoying quality time with their families - at the same time. Not only will attendees appreciate the



gesture, but their children are likely to have fun and enjoy a memorable experience as well.

"We plan all kinds of activities for each age group in their own space, sort of like a preschool or summer camp. We have also organized family events with the parents and children participating together," Tempesta says. "Sometimes we tie in with the conference theme or with the uniqueness of the city we're in. As far as activities, scavenger hunts are a favorite of most children, and we have come up with some pretty creative ones. We have had crazy hat parades marching through general sessions, and clients with computer labs for kids where they designed their own conference newsletter."

Fostering an environment in which attendees' families are welcome may help to forge connections that can live on in between meetings - and those connections count. *M*