



## **Look Who's Talking**

Diane Lyons, president, Accent On Arrangements

by Tommy Santora

10/02/2006

Age: 50

Hometown: Bogalusa, Louisiana

Education: master's degree in education, Louisiana State University; certified meeting professional, Convention Industry Council; and destination management certified professional, Association of Destination Management Executives

What if you weren't in event planning?:

I would be in the building supply or contracting business. It's the same thing we do. We do event planning with more finesse and fun but it's all really in the details and how you construct the final product and deliver what you said you were going to do.

Diane Lyons has worked in the New Orleans tourism industry for 28 years and opened Accent On Arrangements in 1991. Accent On Arrangements is a destination management and event planning company serving local and national companies. More than 10 years ago, the business expanded to include Accent on Children's Arrangements, which provides childcare services for employees while they attend meetings or conventions.

**How is business in the event planning industry?**

We're actually about the same as before Katrina, and I've talked to about three or four event planners who said they are at about 80 percent of their business pre-Katrina.

## **Did that surprise you?**

I wouldn't say it surprised me. I was very glad about those figures. Companies who have a good solid base of clients locally and nationally can hang in there. Most of the event planners around now either have a national base or they travel with clients.

According to the Convention & Visitors Bureau, there are about 40 destination management companies in the city. Now some of them have not returned or have closed up shop but there are three or four brand new ones who were not here before the storm, which I think is very ambitious.

## **Is the event planning climate not conducive to starting a new business?**

We're all going after the same piece of pie whether it be out-of-town companies or local ones. For local companies, they are outsourcing less and the size of what they do when they throw their parties after Hurricane Katrina has become less. It may have been a big band for \$5,000; now it may be a band for \$1,500. It used to be specialty linens; now it's regular linens.

For out-of-town companies, the focus in 2007 is continuing to rebuild and tourism will really lead the business community in the rebuilding of New Orleans. The groups that are coming to town are philanthropic and giving back to the city. But at the same time, everybody wants to bargain in New Orleans because they feel we should be selling things cheaper because we are all in the need for business and that's really hard. It's a compromising situation to be in for event planners.

## **What is the outlook for this industry?**

It seems to me that there will be more consolidation and mergers in the industry. We're looking at merging with people who are knowledgeable, seasoned professionals. You'll see more companies combining their services whether it's an entertainment company emerging with an event planner or a linen company coming in with an event planner. The client wants more one-stop shopping.

## **What's hot this fall for company holiday parties?**

Everybody wants beautiful linens and flowers on the tables. Lighted décor on the tables is hot. Rented décor is hot. Jazz music, jazz bands, parade lines are big — even for locals, just to get that feel of New Orleans back — why are we here, why do we stay?

Holiday screening backdrops are also big, along with photo and dancing machines. They have a dancing machine where you're singing but not moving, and people can watch you on a video that shows you dancing. The bands are back. People want New Orleans and Louisiana music, that local feel.

### **What are some of the hot company party venues?**

Mardi Gras World is still big. The Foundry is popular because it's close to the Convention Center. Plantations are big. They're doing a lot of business because it's nice, it's beautiful, it's green.

Restaurants are big also right now because they're dependable and they're still getting corporate party business — Zydeco's, Mulate's, August, Arnaud's — they are booking for the holiday season.

What are the advantages of planning a party through a certified meeting professional?

It means we know how many people can fit in this room or how many beverages or alcohol you are going to consume in an hour based on how many people you have. We know how to do those formulas. It's not just guesswork.

For an average three-day meeting, it takes 1,800 logistical details involved in planning that event out. The devil is in the details and you're only as good as your last event.

### **What's the most exciting upcoming event?**

In the next month, we have the American Society of Reproductive Medicine with 6,000 attendees at the convention center. We have an opening ceremony, a jazz second-line band with beads and a Mardi Gras atmosphere. We also have a Meeting Professionals International convention coming to New Orleans in January. That will bring meeting professionals around the world to New Orleans

where we will showcase the city with exciting events. Those are the people who sell and buy New Orleans. It's like the Super Bowl of our profession. •