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Contact: Kaitlin Friedmann
Phone: 609-799-6000, x 21
Email: kfriedmann@cmasolutions.com

APEX: A Playbook for the Meetings Industry

By Lynn McCullough

More time to think creatively. Less repetitive work to complete. The ability to establish better relationships with your customers and suppliers. Who in the meetings industry would not want to say they can achieve these on a regular basis? Thanks to the commitment of leaders from several different industry organizations united through the Convention Industry Council (CIC), the Accepted Practices Exchange (APEX) provides professionals working in the meetings industry with much-needed resources and standards. But after the integration of APEX into our daily work lives, how useful is it? When is it referred to most and what parts still need work?

Let's first take a close look at what APEX is and the reason for its inception. APEX is an initiative of the CIC that brought together all stakeholders in the development and implementation of industry-wide accepted practices to create and enhance efficiencies throughout the meetings, conventions and exhibitions industry. The CIC put together this initiative in consultation with 32 member organizations involved in the industry. Its main purpose, quite simply, is to streamline the meeting management process, increasing efficiencies and enhancing everyone's ability to "talk the same language." APEX guides and templates are available online at www.conventionindustry.org/apex or the APEX Meeting and Event Toolbox software can be purchased at the CIC website or through CIC affiliated organizations.

Planning inefficiencies have historically been created due to the complexity of an industry composed of buyers, sellers and third parties where interests do not always intersect and business practices do not always align. Past attempts have failed at creating industry standard practices because the agreed upon measures did not always incorporate input from all of the players in the planning process.

I recently had a chance to talk with some members of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM) about APEX. How are these professionals from

Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVB), Convention Centers and hotels utilizing APEX's practices and resources? Let's take a look at the core areas of APEX in relation to how they can be put to use.

The Glossary

Perhaps the most used part of APEX, the glossary should be frequently referenced to ensure that all parties are communicating in the same terminology. The online glossary, developed by the APEX Terminology Panel, is searchable by keyword and provides clear, comprehensive definitions for everything from a la carte to Zulu Time.

"In St. Louis, we use the APEX glossary consistently. It's a great tool to make sure we're 'on the same page' with our customer," said Beverly Totten, Vice President of Services at the St. Louis Convention and Visitors Commission.

The glossary also serves as a great learning tool for people new to the industry who may not know the meaning of commonly used industry terms such as "drayage," "manifest," or "attrition." Additionally, the APEX glossary helps to decipher the many acronyms used in the industry for associations or other terms by just typing them in. For those studying for the CMP certification, the glossary is an essential resource to review.

Event Specifications Guide

Particularly useful for large-scale conventions or events, the Event Specifications Guide (ESG) is used as a template for delivering information to appropriate venues and suppliers regarding all requirements for an event. The ESG is a detailed work order completed by the organizer that clearly defines all needs, timing and details of an event. According to Totten, St. Louis distributes the guide to all involved hotels, restaurants, attractions, shops, taxi services and public transportation. It is also provided to the city's Mayor's office, police and fire departments, airports (including individual airlines as well as TSA officials), area parking lots and other affiliated concierge organizations.

The ESG can also be easily modified to show only the sections needed for a particular event. For example, since the guide is in an electronic format, you are able to simply remove the exhibition section if you do not require it in your specifications. There is a separate Function Set-up Order for smaller or individual events (similar to a BEO). To

engender more comprehensive communications, meeting planners should be directed to use this tool to avoid any extraneous, back-and-forth clarification issues.

Post Event Report

APEX developed an effective Post Event Report (PER) for other professionals to review the details and activities of an event. The report is beneficial to the meeting planner, Destination Marketing Association International Meeting Information Network (DMAI MINT) and the future CVBs, hotels and convention centers where the convention will be held. A collection of PERs over time provide the complete history for an event and allows others in the industry to view and learn from other professionals' ideas and practices.

Contracts

The APEX Contracts Panel was assembled to review all aspects of industry contracts, and develop acceptable contract language guidelines. In the course of forming these standardizations, it was decided that some practices were better off left alone. Interestingly, the panel determined that for legal and practical reasons "acceptable contract language" should not be created. According to the report of the Contracts Panel, it was simply not possible to create a "standard" contract in an industry with many types of vendors, customers, facilities and requirements. For legal considerations and to foster healthy competition, the panel voted against the creation of such a document.

However, the Contracts Panel has contributed a wealth of useful tips and templates for deciphering contracts. Anyone who is involved in contract reviews knows that sometimes the clauses can become very cumbersome and complex, leaving a lot of room for various interpretations. APEX provides a great resource for learning standard clause definitions.

RFPs

Don't know where to start when working on an important Request for Proposal (RFP)? APEX aggregates comprehensive templates, each designed for several appropriate areas including Audiovisual, Destination Management, Service Contractor, Single Facility and Transportation.

“As we launched our new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, we’ve adopted the APEX terminology into our system. We’ve also built our CRM system to accept any RFPs sent by customers utilizing using the APEX Meeting and Event Toolbox,” said Junior Tauvaa, Senior Director, Sales Operations & Market Development at LA INC. The Convention and Visitors Bureau of Los Angeles.

Technology

We all have computer systems but they can’t “talk” to each other. This line was stated as a “Reality Check” in the 2006 APEX Annual Report in regards to technology. But there’s good news when it comes to leveling the technological playing field. The APEX Technology Advisory Council (TAC) is creating tools for both low-tech and high tech users. APEX templates are Microsoft Word compatible and are also being developed in eXtensible Markup Language (XML) for computer to computer transfer. It is predicted that most facilities will eventually integrate the data specs into their computer systems, increasing operational efficiencies by 40 percent or more.

The next CIC branded APEX software will be PowerShop. According to Rich Hunter, Director of APEX, PowerShop is scheduled to launch in early 2008. Once PowerShop is installed on your computer or on a corporate network you can share data between users.

“PowerShop will be based on web technologies that have the ability to push information between parties via the web,” said Hunter.

In such a fast-paced and often demanding business, APEX standards help to streamline, modernize and simplify time-consuming event planning tasks. These well thought-out practices are designed with every one of us taken into consideration and the result is a comprehensive how-to guide for virtually anything that CSMs, hotel professionals, vendors and meeting planners come across. Try it out today if you haven’t already integrated APEX standards into your work routine. I guarantee your time will be used more wisely and efficiently.

About the Author

Lynn McCullough is Executive Director of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM), where she is involved with the direction and management of the association, as well as membership recruitment and retention. She provides direction on

strategy and tactical issues, with responsibilities that include Board of Director relations, strategic development, and event planning and management including promotion, set-up and follow-up. Lynn earned her Bachelor of Journalism degree from the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

ACOM was founded and incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in 1988 and is dedicated to advancing the practice of convention services management in the meetings industry, and to preparing Convention Service Management professionals for their critical role in the growth and success of their organizations. ACOM members hold many positions in convention and visitor bureaus, convention centers, conference centers, hotels and resorts including: convention service managers, housing managers, operations managers, event service coordinators, directors of convention/trade shows, catering managers and directors, facility managers, attraction/entertainment facilities, audio visual companies and decorator management companies. For more information on ACOM, call (609) 799-3712, email info@acomonline.org, or visit the ACOM website at www.acomonline.org.