ENGINEER'S EXPERTS

Nowshir Engineer, founder and director of EMDI, the Institute of Media & Communication, grills Dubai-based **Appellon Consulting partner Steve Ashby** to find out how planners can step in, cut back and save the day

ENGINEER: HOW HAS THE ROLE OF THE CORPORATE PLANNER CHANGED IN LIGHT OF THE FINANCIAL CRISIS?

ASHBY: Corporate planners need to go from just planning to being very economically minded in terms of being able to justify spends with revenue generation.

In good times it's easy for the CEO to agree to a golf day for example, but now the boss will ask 'why are we doing this' and planners need to be able to explain.

Planners also have a big role in ensuring companies retain existing business through interaction with account clients and in generating new business through events, programmes, sponsorships and so on.

ENGINEER: HOW CAN PLANNERS ADAPT TO ADD MORE VALUE TO THEIR ROLE?

ASHBY: In this market being selective is critical. It's a matter of reviewing everything you do. Take a hard look at which meetings and events generate business and stop those that don't. This isn't the time to be thinking strategically with the view that in a year's time it will work. If it's costing money, but not making any now — stop it.

With limited resources at the moment you have to be very focussed and targeted. Don't work in a vacuum; approach the CEO and say we need to continue to run this event and continue with these sponsorships because they're bringing in business.

ENGINEER: HOW DO YOU ASSESS HOW SUCCESSFUL A CONFERENCE OR EVENT HAS BEEN?

ASHBY: If it's just being done because it seemed like a good idea, but you don't have any knowledge of whether it's working then I'd stop it.

There should be cost benefit analysis of every event to assess whether it has generated additional sales, revenue or recognition.

One way is to be clear about what the expected outcome is going to be, then your resources, such as people's time and money, are being effectively utilised.

ENGINEER: WHAT OTHER CUT BACKS CAN PLANNERS MAKE?
ASHBY: Analyse all expenditure on the basis of categorising it, reviewing it and cutting it. If there are loss-making contracts or high-priced suppliers, renegotiate hard. Negotiate everything from the mints on the table to the folders, lunches, gifts and room rates. There's nothing to be lost, everybody's in the same boat. Saving 10% here and there adds up to significant savings, making it easier for the CEO to say yes to an event.

ENGINEER: HOW CAN CUTBACKS BE MADE WITHOUT SENDING THE WRONG MESSAGE TO CLIENTS?
ASHBY: It would be foolish to stop doing the conferences and events that get you out into the marketplace, because when things do turn for the better, you won't be there.

It's about managing existing clients' perceptions to ensure that you look like business is in the pipeline at all times, so that they don't get shaky because they've seen you go from having a level of market exposure to zero.

Don't organise a lavish conference in an exotic location; this itself sends the wrong message with delegates asking 'don't they realise we're in a recession'.

Instead change the ambience and the dynamics of the conference to suit the current situation and — even more crucially — communicate what you're doing and why you're doing it.

ENGINEER: HOW CAN PLANNERS CONTRIBUTE TO KEEPING DELEGATES' MORALE UP?
ASHBY: They need to make sure that it's clear that everyone's behind the effort. It's not one rule for senior executives and another for the sales team.

This is a time when the entire organisation needs to pull together and say we're in hard times; that's not to say we should be cutting the pencils in half and issuing half sheets of paper.

ENGINEER: HOW CAN COMPANIES MAKE INCENTIVES PAY?
ASHBY: Don't stop incentives just make them self funding. One of the initiatives I've used successfully in the past involves creating ideas gurus.

Have a competition in the office where the team that comes up with the best cost-saving ideas becomes the ideas guru of the month and you reward them.

Make sure the reward is appropriate though — a week-long, all-expenses paid trip isn't.

Instead there are a number of things you can do to incentivise people through recognition; such as arranging lunch with the CEO for the winner.

ENGINEER: WHY IS IT CRUCIAL FOR PLANNERS TO BE SEEN AS THE HERO AT THIS TIME?
ASHBY: The people whose job it is to do the discretionary things, like organising events and conferences, are in a vulnerable position with job cuts being made. In times like these, organisations really value people who come up with creative ideas about how to do things cost effectively, how to save money and still get the benefit out of the event or conference.

> "What's better for the company than to outsource to someone who knows all about the business"

UP, UP AND AWAY

So according to Ashby, it is the planners who break the norms and take the lead who will not only survive, but prosper during the financial crisis.

However, even Superman had his weakness and while Kryptonite is the least of a planner's worries, there is the very real, global threat of redundancies being made across the board.

"You may have a dedicated events planner who might find that they don't have a full week's work and what companies all over the world are saying is that they can't afford to pay them," observes Ashby.

That is why planners should have a back-up plan. If you find yourself in this situation pitch yourself for the two days of business that the company can afford to pay you for and go away and decide what to do with the other three.

Why not set up your own business? It may at first seem unrealistic, but Ashby says that in this region it is straight forward enough to set up a one-man-band company within a week.

In similar circumstances, he claims to have seen companies offer to pay registration fees, desk space and transfer visas as part of an exit package. It is even in the company's interest to become your number one client.

"What's better for the company than to outsource to someone who knows all about the business and who has already formed valuable relationships with suppliers and venues," says Ashby.

"Plus you know their budget and how much the company currently pays for events, so you can promise to undercut this for the next one. Include that you organise the company's events in your marketing blurb.

"Organisations have several choices when it comes to people they've got a reduced need for; they can invite them to take a pay cut, ask them to take leave of absence or they can do something innovative like this," he concludes.

While the world may be in a state of crisis, it is not about to end. As Ashby points out, the downturn can even lever opportunities; now is the time for planners to be innovative and grab them. M

10 EASY STEPS TO BECOMING THE OFFICE HERO

- Now is the time to be selective — think 'need it, review it, cut it'
- If something isn't making money now — stop it
- Don't work in a vacuum — justify necessary events to the CEO
- Cost-benefit analyse everything
- Plan efficiently to be clear about the desired outcome of an event
- Negotiate and renegotiate hard with suppliers
- Now is not the right time for lavish meetings or events
- Apply the same standards to all delegates
- Make incentives self-funding
- Communicate, communicate, communicate