

IN DEPTH: HOSPITALITY AND CONVENTIONS
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Event-planning companies help other businesses shine in the spotlight

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One started as a social worker. Another hails from the stage. The third planned to be a lawyer.

What's the common denominator? An eye for design, a nose for detail and a touch for entertaining/communicating -- all with an ear for the needs and means of their clients.

Looking for linen from Latvia? Want to land a plane in a convention center? Planning to film employees dancing the Macarena? Gotta keep it all under budget? Done, done, done and done.

Kelley Moore, John Vadino and Kevin Howard St. John are successful event-planning specialists. From trade shows to sales meetings to upscale weddings, they create the environments that they hope lead to memorable and productive occasions.

"Each event is like a child you watch grow and develop," says Moore, president and creative director of Red-Letter Day. "You take an idea, work on it and watch it go off perfectly. It's an incredible high."

Before founding Red-Letter Day, Moore worked for the state's Child Protective Services department. "My job was taking care of people," she said. "I do the same thing in event planning."

Likewise, Vadino considers his background in theater the key to his event-planning success -- and a permanent part of his mindset. "Just like the opening of a theatrical show, you're waiting to hear what the reviews are going to be," said Vadino, CEO and co-founder of The Production Network.

For Howard St. John, a childhood spent watching his mother lead a Polynesian dance troupe and organize luaus instilled a natural interest in event planning that led him to book bands while still in high school, abandon plans to become a lawyer and ultimately devote his entire career to event planning.

"It's exciting," said Howard St. John, CEO and founder of the Howard Group. "You're not doing the same thing day after day after day."

Moore's itch to become an event planner sprang from her experience as a volunteer helping nonprofit groups organize fund-raisers. She enjoyed it so much, she quit her job with CPS and went to work for a Washington, D.C., event-planning company -- initially as an unpaid intern and later as a paid employee.

Working in event-rich D.C. taught Moore the ropes. She even learned how to work with the Secret Service. A year later, she returned to Seattle and in 1999 launched Red-Letter Day. Originally a one-woman show, the company now has two-and-a-half employees. Meanwhile, annual sales have climbed from \$25,000 to \$300,000. The company's clients include Microsoft and its signature event is the annual Hockey Challenge, which features celebrities such as Kiefer Sutherland and Wayne Gretzky and benefits the Ronald McDonald House.

Moore says 60 percent of Red-Letter Day's business is corporate and 40 percent is social. The company specializes in moderate-size gatherings of fewer than 1,000 people and prides itself on creating "intimate" settings. "We create these environments where it's like walking into your living room," said Moore.

No detail is too small. Whatever services Moore and her staff don't provide, they obtain through caterers, florists and other vendors. Once, when planning a \$500,000 wedding, the bride insisted on -- and Moore procured -- custom linens from Latvia. Another time, following a celebrity auction, Moore was sent to find Cuban cigars at 2 a.m.

Unlike Red-Letter Day, The Production Network focuses on just one service -- event production. Borrowing from their education and experience in stage production, Vadino and his partner, Richard Moore, plan and execute all the elements -- sets, lighting, sound, content -- related to what occurs when the curtain goes up.

Vadino co-founded The Production Network in 1989. The company now has 62 full-time employees and its annual sales have climbed from \$400,000 to \$14.5 million. Its clients include Boeing, Microsoft and Intel.

While entertainment is part of the equation, The Production Network is really all about helping clients identify, compose and deliver specific messages with specific purposes.

"Clients are becoming smarter and smarter about how they spend their money," said Vadino. "I don't see clients wasting their money."

That wasn't always the case, said Vadino.

"Fifteen years ago, you might have the Rockettes up there," he says. "It wowed the audience, but it didn't relate to your message."

Still, there wouldn't be much point in a company hiring The Production Network if it wasn't interested in making a splash. Take Allstate Insurance, for example. During an annual sales meeting at the Washington State Convention Center, The Production Network arranged for the CEO to make an entrance the audience would never forget.

The theme for the meeting was "The Right Stuff." First, The Production Network obtained a small jet airplane and removed its engine. Then it built an 80-foot runway inside the convention center. Finally, with a clip from the movie playing on a giant screen in the background, the jet, suspended by a cable, glided onto the runway and out popped Allstate's CEO.

Howard St. John, who started his business in 1983, said more clients are insisting that their events -- be it a trade show or product launch or employee recognition -- produce specific and measurable outcomes.

"They're looking for examples of value that have been created, not just assuming that it's there," he said.

That means starting with the end result in mind and "designing the event backwards," said Howard St. John. "Clients say, 'Here are the five objectives we're looking to achieve. How can you help us achieve them with this event?'"

Having evolved into five different divisions, the Howard Group can meet many demands of midsize events -- up to 2,000 people -- in-house. Events Northwest is the corporate event-planning division. Other divisions focus on activities, entertainment and -- most notably -- decor. With a 14,000-square-foot warehouse, the Howard Group has a vast inventory of props, scenery, stages and the like. "If you want an 8-foot Buddha, we've got it," says Howard St. John. "If we didn't, we'd make it."

Howard St. John declined to disclose his company's revenues, but says it experienced steady growth until 2000, when business flattened and then dipped a little. Even so, the Howard Group, which has 15 full-time employees and at any given time another 100-plus part-time employees, produces about 1,500 events a year for a host of clients including Microsoft, Washington Mutual and Nintendo.

One event Howard St. John would just as soon forget involved a morale-boosting project at an electronics manufacturing plant. The client wanted to make a video of groups of employees throughout the plant doing the Macarena. Howard St. John says he still winces at the memory. "We said, 'Yes, we can make this happen,' and we did, but my God, it was the Macarena."