

"It is good to see the suppliers in their own environments sometimes" as opposed to formal presentations in the office, Norfleet says.

"Suppliers are our partners," emphasizes Shannon Murray Kasakevics, manager of meeting planning and events, Country Music Association, Nashville, TN. "Rely on them," she says, because while a planner may hold 10 meetings or events a year, the supplier probably has 100. "Allow them to have a vested interest in the outcome of your project," she advises. "Give them the floor and let them tell you what they know, what they've seen, and more important, what they suggest."

## Take Time To Play

Everyone knows the cliché about all work and no play, but did you know that it also applies to creativity? Naiman says that "play opens up new channels of creativity" which enhances job satisfaction.

This, in turn, is directly related to employee productivity, she says.

"Play is as important as work," Naiman asserts. "The quality of our work suffers if we don't take the time to play. Play generates joy. Play replenishes

and revitalizes our human spirit. It clears the mental cobwebs that keep us from thinking clearly. Play frees us from worry and stress, relaxing the brain and making it easier to be more creative. Solutions that seemed so evasive earlier now appear effortlessly in the midst of play."

Naiman quotes Diane Ackerman's book, titled "Deep Play:" "Play is our brain's favorite way of learning and maneuvering. The spirit of deepplay is central to the life of each person, and also to society. Swept up by the deepest states of play, one feels balanced,

creative, focused." When work demands and pressures are at their highest and you feel drained and without creative inspiration, most planners just try to work harder. But a more effective solution might be to quit working for a while and do something fun instead. Recharge your batteries with an activity you enjoy and just get away from all the stress. The break is likely to promote enhanced creativity when you return to work, and you're more apt to tackle the problem with a new energy and to be much more effective than if you hadn't taken time for fun.



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**"A change of scenery often helps. By getting out of the office or our normal surroundings, new ideas seem to flow."**

It's also important to incorporate play into the corporate culture of your department. It's wonderful to plan fun events to stimulate creativity for your attendees, but you need to incorporate play into your own job to perform at your best, too. It doesn't have to be complicated — and in fact, it's usually quite simple. Simply by "creating an atmosphere of joviality," as

Naiman puts it, you can lighten the load and improve the creativity quotient.

## Brainstorming

Brainstorming sessions, done properly, are highly effective

ways to increase creativity and generate solutions to problems and new ideas. Brainstorming with colleagues who are working to plan an event with you can be very valuable, but brainstorming with others outside your department — people who don't necessarily know a lot about what you do — may be even more productive.

The problem, Naiman says, is that "hardly anyone brainstorms properly."

For a truly dynamic session, she suggests telling colleagues ahead of time what you're working on so they can reflect on the problem or situation, sleep

on it, and subconsciously develop ideas in advance. Then prior to the brainstorming session, "Do something fun to make people laugh."

When working with a group, Naiman wants to get the participants laughing before they start tackling the issue or problem at hand. She uses activities such as "telling a joke, telling a story, or playing improv games" to lighten the mood. "Laughter releases endorphins in the brain and relaxes everyone," Naiman says. "When you have an atmosphere of freedom and trust and an atmosphere of mirth, that's the ideal climate to generate ideas."

Once you have everyone in a playful, light-hearted mood, you can begin brainstorming and get down to the business at hand. Take your time, and give everyone with an idea — no matter how far out — a chance to share.

"It's really important to allow space and time for ideas," Naiman says. Too often, sessions start out with a few people generating a few ideas, she says, "and then everyone jumps in and attacks those ideas," but the idea is to "collect first and then evaluate the ideas."

During the initial phase of brainstorming, the object is to come up with as many ideas, however far-fetched or seemingly impossible, as you can without evaluating them. Once you have gone beyond the obvious ideas and solutions, then you can start assessing the pros and cons of each.

"When we get stuck or need to elaborate on an idea, we call a quick all-staff brainstorming session in the board room," Norfleet says. "Drop everything at your desk, adjourn to the board room, and brainstorm on the topic for a maximum of 15 minutes. Jot down all the ideas on a flip-chart, type them onto an ideas sheet, and then review them later in the day when ideas have had a chance to gel."

Says Kasakevics: "The basic principal I use when creating and problem solving is if you can't push the door open, then try pulling it open. Take risks by

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sharing your ideas and allow them to work and not to work." During the evaluation stage, Kasakevics adds, "be aware of the ripple effects an idea can have on the big picture."

Colleen A. Rickenbacher, CMP, CSEP, former vice president of event planning for the Dallas (TX) Convention & Visitors Bureau and now president of Colleen Rickenbacher, Inc., says that for each new event, "We just block off a whole day, or at least half of a day, and we create. We don't throw out anything. We just sit and create the most spectacular event that would cost us thousands and thousands more than we could ever find in our budget all year. Then from these ideas we start putting it all together. You never know what will work until you start molding everything into your theme, goal, and purpose for an event. Sometimes an idea or maybe your best event or meeting can start from a single word, a single thought, or a single idea."

Allen says, "One of the biggest blocks to creativity is logistics. To be really creative, for a moment I have to suspend the 'how to' part of my brain and let the ideas come forth. Later I can evaluate the feasibility of the idea for costs, time, location, and approval. Often, our most creative ideas come from general conversations when we are least expecting them."

### Look Outside Your Industry

We've all heard the saying, "you can't see the forest for the trees," but we may not understand how it applies to us.

Truly creative people take themselves out of the forest so they can see

not only the trees but the mountainside and the prairie nearby the forest as well. They look at everything around them and use what they see to feed their creativity.

"One of the best ways to get ideas for your work is to look outside of your own industry," Naiman advises. "Music, art, science, and business outside of your own industry can all generate ideas for your work. Inventors, for example, have a curiosity. They have their radar on, always looking for new opportunities and what's going on, what's happening in the world, and how can I use this or apply it to me. They

make links between things that on the surface don't seem to relate. The question to ask is: 'In what ways can this apply to us?' Often we have blinders on. We go through experiences in life and business and think they don't have anything to do with me, and we ignore them." In doing so, "we miss the opportunity for new ideas and insight."

You can use just about anything in the world as the basis for a theme if you stretch your mind beyond pre-conceived expectations. "One of the weaknesses in business — any business — is that many are too insular and busi-



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ness people look inside their own industry too much," Naiman says. "They rely too much on their own industry for future direction." To be a leader in your industry, "you have to do something different, be memorable and unique," she says. "If everyone's looking inside their own industry, everything gets cannibalized and there is no market differ-

entiation. The key is to always ask, 'How can this — whatever it is — apply to my project?' That's how I personally get a lot of ideas. All kinds of things in my own world will stimulate ideas for a project. That's a fun and effective way to generate ideas that will help you maintain the com-

petitive edge in your own industry."

Allen says watching television often provides her with inspiration: "Great themes are built around TV shows, but you need to be current." Considering the popularity of meetings based on shows like "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" and "Survivor," it's obvious that lots of planners do the same.

Even a chance mention of an outside interest,

*Planners run out of fresh ideas all the time, but the true professional knows how to get them flowing again.*

