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Pg. 3

SECURITY COUNSEL

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FACING THE FACTS of today's event environment means seeing security as a top priority. So how does the diligent planner stay current on advances in event Protection? Here, security pros track emerging trends and offer planners advice for making a safe choice among security providers.

PREMISES, PREMISES

As the variety of event venue options available to planners grows, so do the challenges associated with site safety and security.

But despite venue differences, "the risks are typically the same - things that could take place that could cause injury to guests or staff are non-discriminating," notes John Fannin. To help venues minimize these risks, Fannin's 10-year-old SafePlace Corp., based in Wilmington, Del., recently launched an independent accreditation program to certify the safety and security of hotels in addition to the other facilities, such as academic institutions and health care facilities, that it rates.

The program uses a "three-leg protection model" - covering technology, staff employment and training, and processes and procedures. In its first year offering the SafePlace seal of security approval to hotels, the company has accredited three properties, while another 400 hotel accreditation applications are being processed, Fannin says.

He adds that knowing a property is SafePlace-accredited "should bring warm, fuzzy feelings to an event planner" for two reasons: Not only will an assurance of security accreditation help planners quell client, guest and staff anxiety, but it can become critical should liability become an issue. By ensuring that events are held in accredited facilities, planners "distance themselves from that litigation by saying, 'We took extraordinary efforts to ensure the safety of our attendees

and staff.'" He adds, "For [planners] to assume the liability for someone they're paying ... is just foolish."

THE IN CROWD

Along with site security, access control at events is becoming a more pressing concern for planners, security providers say.

Jerry Heying, president and CEO of the New York-based International Protective Services Agency, which works on more than 300 events annually, cites "stricter access control" as today's dominant security demand. To accommodate clients, Heying's company is outfitting more event entries with metal detectors and staff trained to operate them.

But he is quick to point out that equal attention needs to be paid to low-tech access control elements. "The best identification system is a 'layered' combination of various systems," including checklists, laminate badges often favored by guests as mementos, but vulnerable to compromise as they are worn on removable lanyards, and wristbands, which work well, but might be inappropriate for more upscale events, he says. "When you combine this with proper enforcement from security agents, the holes are filled up pretty well."

Anthony Poveromo, whose Brooklyn, N.Y.-based 21st Century Security has provided services for such high-profile events as the 2002 World Economic Forum and the wedding of basketball star Allen Iverson, agrees that human diligence is as important an access-control factor as advanced technology. "If we're not controlling the guest list, we tell our client, 'Don't let anyone see the list, and badges should not be facing forward,'" he says, noting that such common-sense measures often are overlooked. Also, he continues, "We're asking event planners to put on the invite, the e-mail, the guest ticket - whatever it is - 'Please arrive early enough to go through a security screening.'" Such advance warning can both deter would-be wrongdoers and reduce frustration at the event entry by properly preparing guests, he notes.

NEW AND NECESSARY

Besides offering access-control expertise, event security companies also can keep planners up to date on new security products.

Poveromo has been alerting clients to a new key system that was recently introduced to the event facility market. The system allows security providers to temporarily replace an existing lock with a cylinder lock that can be programmed to specific keys or remotes, or to open between certain hours. Poveromo advises using the technology "if you're storing things in rooms pre-event," such as decor, equipment or sensitive corporate materials.

At New York-based GSS Security, the newest service available to clients is a K9 division that teams officers and dogs in the search for explosives. Company principal Chuck Garelick says that while the possibility of such a threat may seem distant for some event clients, demand is growing. Since 9/11, he notes, his K9 units have gone beyond what may be the world's highest-profile annual event - the Times Square New Year's Eve ball drop, for which GSS has provided security for 10 years running - and become one of the company's primary services for corporate events.

GO WITH A PRO

With an increased awareness of security issues has come the inevitable boom in companies eager to meet the event market's swelling demand. To separate the best from the rest, planners must be proactive in searching for a qualified provider.

According to Garelick, planners should demand written copies of a provider's state license and insurance, which should include general liability, professional liability and disability coverage in sufficient amounts. They also should look for prior security, law enforcement or public safety experience among the company's owners and executive staff.

Poveromo adds that event experience is critical. "Get references. Ask them who they've worked for, and what they've done in the event industry," he warns. "You don't want someone who's going to work at your event to be star-struck instead of doing what they're supposed to do. You don't want your security people standing in line waiting for autographs."

A FEW GOOD MEN

Don't be afraid to press for details on the security strategy. "One thing I'm bothered with is when a client comes to me and says they got a quote from another company that said, 'You need 50 guys for the event,'" Heying says. "I ask, 'Did they say why? What are each of those 50 guys doing?'"

He notes that a well-designed security plan will deploy personnel strategically. "Sometimes we can stagger people in," he explains. "Sometimes we can pull from other places where we have guys positioned if it's not going to affect the overall security."

Richard Werth of Franklin, Tenn.-based Event & Meeting Security Services says qualifications should go beyond event experience to event expertise. "What the user needs to be looking for is someone who understands the special event industry and is working for the same objectives as the event client," he says. "If someone is going to be an event and meeting security pro, they need to be involved in the special event industry," he adds, noting that membership in event-industry professional associations is a good sign of dedication.

A security company should "provide their service in a caring manner, as if it was their own event," Heying adds. "If any part of the event fails, you're part of a failing effort. The company you hire should show this attitude without being total 'yes men.' If you find this kind of company, respect them and allow them to do what they are paid for: looking after the security and safety of you and your guests so all can focus on the most important objective - the purpose of the event."

Poveromo isn't afraid to say no. "What often happens is a planner who's throwing a party together will get warehouse space cheap - it's \$10,000 for a hotel, and maybe \$600 for four hours at a warehouse," he says. "Maybe the fire permit says the space can support 1,000 people. But if the exit points are not clear, if there are going to be couches blocking the way, or if there's going to be a car parked right outside the door, I will tell them outright, 'Unless this stuff is clear, we won't take the job.' We'd sooner walk away from an event than walk into a problem we can't control."

Just as security pros must think like event planners, event pros must start thinking like security pros. "Why have a great speaker, great food and beverage, a great destination, when the security isn't there?" Werth asks. "I strongly believe that when the meeting planner begins looking at risk management, along with budget and ROI, beyond just the fun stuff, it makes them a more valuable asset to their company."

THE COST OF SAFETY

The ongoing challenge for event planners today is delivering bigger events with smaller budgets, all while demonstrating ROI. And the cost of event security can be high.

"Security often appears high as a line-item expense because you cannot show what you are preventing from happening," says International Protective Services Agency vice president William Haire. "Other departments such as sound, lighting and catering have a clear result to their efforts. For security it is by 'what didn't happen' that we earn our keep."

Yet guests must be safeguarded. "We were working on the rededication of a synagogue, and we recommended magnetometers, a K9 presence, barriers - but it pretty much fell on deaf ears," Garelick recalls. "This was a very well-known New York synagogue with a high-profile congregation including individuals in media and government. The security decision boiled down to budget. Two days later, it was Sept. 11 [2001]."

RESOURCES

Event & Meeting Security Services, 615/377-3200; GSS Security, 212/764-5400; International Protective Services Agency, 212/947-1681; **SafePlace Corp., 302/479-9000**; 21st Century Security, 718/891-7550

CODE ALERT

The Quincy, Mass.-based National Fire Protection Agency currently is finalizing a document that SafePlace Corp.'s John Fannin calls the "first security standard that can be uniformly applied across the country" to event and meeting facilities.

The Premises Security Code NFPA 730 , which covers overall security for protection of premises, people and property in buildings from hotels to restaurants to university campuses, includes a full chapter on special events.

Fannin, who sits on the NFPA's Premises Security Committee, predicts the code will become official no later than May 2005. But event pros "don't have to wait," he says. "They can look at it for immediate guidance, because it contains valuable information, even in draft form. And they can watch the Web site for progress."

For more information on these documents and all NFPA standards and codes, visit www.nfpa.org , or call 617/770-3000.