



More Show Than Tell

The owner of an incentives company in Madison, Wis., launches a local DMC with a party in her own backyard.

BY MITRA SORRELLS

SANDI DANIEL HAS OWNED FIRE LIGHT GROUP, a full-service incentive company in Madison, Wis., for more than seven years. During that time, most of her business has been with clients from other cities, producing incentive events for them around the U.S. and around the world. Earlier this year she decided the time was right to start Madison's first DMC to begin creating what she calls "wow experiences" in a city she has called home for more than 30 years.

To introduce the new company to her local business community, she opted to show rather than tell by hosting a party that demonstrated the type and quality of services the new DMC—Wisconsin Meetings & Events—can offer.

"I think a lot of times with meeting planning, if we do our job really well, it doesn't

really look like we are doing anything" she says. "That's the goal you try to achieve. So it's hard to sit down with a prospective client and just say, 'We do this really well.' So we wanted to demonstrate what it looks like when we plan and execute an event."

The July party was also the monthly "New Faces, New Places" networking event for Downtown Madison Inc., the city's not-for-profit business association with more than 500 members. Daniel chose to host the event in the backyard of the 105-year-old home that serves as her company's office for several reasons: first, as a nod to the fact that her new company brings her services, literally, into her "own backyard;" second, to take advantage of the funky, beatnik vibe of her location, known locally as "Willy Street;" and third, to demonstrate

her belief that events can be successful in non-traditional venues because, "If you have a creative team, you can throw an event anywhere. You don't necessarily need to find a sanctioned event space."

Daniel and her team designed the event to be both fun and educational: Since this is the first DMC in Madison, they knew many of the guests did not have an understanding of the services it could provide. The guest list of about 130 people included primarily members of Downtown Madison Inc., but also included other local business leaders personally invited by Daniel and her staff.

"We asked Downtown Madison Inc., 'Can we invite some potential clients of ours so they could see what we can do and on the flip side you can go after them for membership?' So we were able to bring in clients,"



says Diana Decker, CMP (MPI Wisconsin Chapter), operations manager for FIRE Light Group.

In order to demonstrate that one function of a DMC is to harness the services of other businesses, Daniel invited more than a dozen local vendors such as caterers, entertainment providers and rental companies to showcase their services at the event. To generate excitement as guests arrived, Gallant Knight Limousine parked a Mercedes Sprinter limo on the front lawn of the building, and Event Essentials provided a red carpet that lined the driveway leading to the backyard. After being greeted by staff, an Event Essentials model served guests the event's signature drink from a "table skirt," a long gown that had a table attached underneath it. The cocktail, a mix of tart cherry syrup made by local company Quince and Apple, mixed with Belaya Rus vodka, basil and seltzer, was so popular, says Daniel, "We could not keep them in stock. In a city where beer is king, we hardly went through any beer."

A 20-by-50-foot tent from Bucky's Rentals covered half of the backyard space, while the rest remained open (and fortunately, the weather cooperated). During the two-hour party, local catering companies offered butler-passed hors

d'oeuvres as guests mingled, took pictures in a photo booth and played blackjack at a casino table from Celebrations Entertainment, the company that also provided a DJ for the party.

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During the evening, guests could see examples of the company's work in a slide show displayed on large screens. Daniel and her staff also offered tours of FIRE Light's historic home

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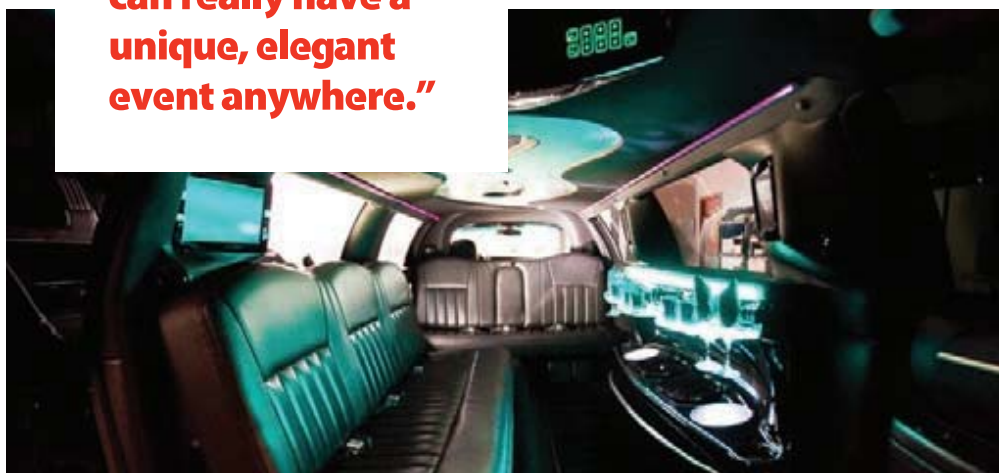
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DIANA DECKER, CMP
MPI Wisconsin Chapter

WHAT I LEARNED

"We've been focused on making this event a success for months now. Seeing it all come together the day of the event is one of the main reasons I love doing meeting and event planning. You start with a piece of paper and by the end of the event you sit back and it went off successfully, and it makes you smile."





office, and she gave a brief presentation about the services available through Wisconsin Meetings & Events. Daniel says the response from guests was overwhelmingly positive.

“We wanted it to be, ‘Wow, this is not an ordinary networking event, it’s an experience,’” she says. “A lot of the attendees came up to us afterwards and were amazed. It

brought everybody together and leveraged everyone’s talents, and yet tied them together in this unique and funky setting.”

As senior director of programs and communications for Downtown Madison Inc., John Cerniglia is in charge of the monthly networking events. He says this one was definitely different than any others they have held.

“It was an event, not just a gathering of

people,” he says. “A lot of other hosts have people go into their place of business, but [FIRE Light Group] really did a transformation and made it an experience for people. It had that special feel that this was something different.”

Lisa Loup, events manager at Steenbrock’s on Orchard, says the event was a great mix of elements, but it wasn’t overkill.

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"They had a DJ, but he wasn't too loud," she says. "They had a casino game area, but it was just one table. They had a lounge space and some more classic setups. So it mixed a lot of things, and I loved that they weren't afraid to do that."

The launch of Wisconsin Meetings & Events is the culmination of an idea that developed more than five years ago. But as Daniel and her team started to think about opening a DMC in Madison, the recession hit and put a stop to those plans. Now the city is rebounding and showing signs that the growth will continue.

"Downtown hotels are running at high 70s, low 80s occupancy rates near Monona Terrace, which means we've got a volume of business," says Deb Archer, president and CEO of the Greater Madison CVB. "So we are ripe for this opportunity."

Several hotel projects are under way or recently completed, including the US\$100 million renovation and expansion of the city's historic Edgewater Hotel. The property, overlooking Lake Mendota, has more than 200 guest rooms and 45,000 square feet of meeting and event space. Archer notes that there's also a proposal to build an AC Hotel, a European boutique brand owned by Marriott, in the city.

Daniel says these new hotels, coupled with the vibrant research activities at the nearby University of Wisconsin, position the city to attract new events.

"It's an exciting time here and we look forward to being ambassadors for our city,"

she says. "The quality of workforce we can get in Madison is amazing because we have thousands of students graduating from the University of Wisconsin every year. I really believe Madison will continue to grow in terms of a meetings and incentives destination."

In the days and weeks after the party, Decker says the business community has been buzzing about the uniqueness of the event.

"When people are still talking about it, that's when you know you did a great event," she says.

More importantly, the party has generated inquiries from attendees who are now potential clients for Wisconsin Meetings & Events.

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