

from bravados to bravos

by patti ryan photo essay by rob marks

Event planning can be a glam job, but veterans say it requires negotiating skills, a passion for detail and the peculiar ability to be “pushy with charm.”

It was the summer of '93 and I had just finished a graduate degree in journalism. After two consecutive years of taxing 80-hour weeks, I was ready to take a breather from the whole profession and do something a little more relaxing, so I decided to take the glamorous job of publicist for the Ottawa International Jazz Festival.

That's a little inside joke at my own expense, directed to those who work as event planners, most of whom are likely guffawing loudly right now. What actually happened was this: I traded my 80-hour weeks for 90-hour ones, half of which were generally unpaid, since the festival couldn't afford overtime. I earned \$9 an hour and spent a lot of time photocopying flyers, stuffing envelopes, stapling posters to telephone poles and cringing while harassing suppliers about goods or services that were overdue or not delivered properly.

However, when it wasn't bad, it was really, really good. I got to drive the jazz festival van around town, carry a walkie-talkie, visit a lot of music stores, go to every concert and event for free, listen in on jam sessions and enjoy a passing flirtation with a hot drummer. I got to show up late for work, hungover and dressed in the previous day's outfit, and get away with it. I got to work with fabulously quirky colleagues, including a volunteer co-ordinator who took his breaks in the men's washroom, hanging upside down in gravity boots.

I didn't take it up as a profession. But for those who have what it takes, event planning can be a dream job.

Michel Gauthier is one such person. Currently the executive director of

the Canadian Tulip Festival in Ottawa/Gatineau — a job that keeps him busy year-round — Gauthier has also managed Winterlude, Ottawa's winter carnival, and spent several years heading up his own company and running various events in Montreal. He's been working in event planning for more than 30 years.

"I love the passion of creating an event, working with the community, creating a product that fulfills so many needs," says Gauthier. "A festival like the Tulip Festival is the pride of the city, a community event, and a tourism product with a \$40 million economic impact. It's about working with partners in the community, getting all levels of the community involved."

The right person for such a job, says Gauthier, is someone who knows how to have fun. It's a guiding principle of his that if you're not having fun, you might as well give up, he says, because it's going to show in the end product.

Fun aside, however, successful event managers must thrive on with long hours and strict deadlines, says Gauthier.

"You can't count your hours," he says. "Because ready or not when you set the date for the festival — and we've set the dates for the next five years — ready or not on May 5 the Canadian Tulip Festival will start. The dates are out there, and tour operators in Japan and the US are already selling those dates. In this business there are deadlines, and you have to live by deadlines."

Carolyn Luscombe, president of the Toronto chapter of the International Special Events Society (ISES) and Toronto-based Eclectic





Events International, says event planning is a young industry whose popularity and appeal have increased greatly in recent years. But, she cautions, it's a field that is "still learning to walk overall," and has growing pains as a result.

The Toronto industry took a hit with SARS, but that may have been a blessing, she says. "We are saturated with people who want to have event planning as their career, SARS 'cut the fat' in our industry, which was actually a good thing."

Women dominate the business. Luscombe, who teaches several event planning courses at George Brown College in Toronto, says over the last seven years, 98 percent of her students have been female.

Event planning is a competitive field, but not particularly unfriendly to women. However, it can be a "taxing" field for those who have responsibilities to children and partners, says Luscombe. "The hours are often very long and demanding, and can take you away from your personal life a lot," she says. "This I know from experience. I love what I do, though, and I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Event planners can make anywhere from \$24,000 a year and up, says Luscombe, depending on their educational background, skill set, responsibilities and contractual arrangements. There is considerable variation in salary potential because while some event planners are employed by corporations, others are independent consultants; still others work only seasonally or part-time.

Those who are self-employed can earn anywhere from \$50,000 up to \$200,000 a year, says Luscombe. "When you're self-

employed, salaries are more difficult to estimate," she says. "The economy plays a large role because events are the first thing corporations cut in a weak economy."

One of Luscombe's primary concerns in her role with ISES is credibility. As a relatively new specialty, event planning doesn't require people working in the field to have any particular educational background or designation.

"Anyone can say they produce events, but how do you prove that?" asks Luscombe. "Credibility via education and earning designations are becoming key in this industry and raises the bar for this profession. Corporations are becoming very wise in their selection process and are seeking those who possess recognized designations in this field."

Ted Wykes, department chair of the Tourism Management Department at the University College of the Cariboo in Kamloops, BC, says right now, event planners come "from all over" in terms of their educational background.

"Marketing, public relations, even public administration are common," he says. "One successful event planner I know is an engineer by profession. Another has a background in military logistics. I have a contact who has a degree in anthropology, another in languages."

But that is changing, he says. There are now all kinds of post-secondary certificates and diplomas in event management offered by colleges and universities across Canada.

"The industry is pushing for certification," he says. "But there's still nothing to stop anyone from printing up a business card and





calling themselves an event manager. For the larger companies, that's a concern — the lack of credentials, no checks and balances to ensure a certain level of quality."

Sheila Beveridge has similar concerns. She owns Portfolio Conference Planning & Event Management in Vancouver, an event management firm that counts such high-profile events as the BC Sports Hall of Fame Awards, the Red Cross Power of Humanity Awards and BC Premier Gordon Campbell's annual fundraising dinner among its regular contracts. She says it's "perturbing" that anyone can hang out a shingle and call themselves an event planner regardless of education, training or experience.

"I'm 100 percent behind people getting the necessary certification," says Beveridge. "The industry is pushing for it now, and it's completely valid."

Beveridge often talks to young people aspiring to become event planners, and always emphasizes that event planners are not

party planners — a popular misconception, she says.

"We're a serious administrative and management company," she says. "We do take care of everything from mailing lists to the creative side of decor, but our service includes good budget management and strong negotiation skills."

Still, there is living proof that when you're not busy crunching numbers and playing hardball with suppliers, event planning can sometimes live up to its more exciting image. For example, there's Alison Silcoff, who runs Alison Silcoff Events in downtown Montreal. One of her more high-profile contracts is The Daffodil Ball, an annual fundraising dinner for 650 guests, including the who's who of business and politics in Montreal and Toronto. A show-stopping event with fabulous decor and a gourmet menu, the dinner raises funds for the Canadian Cancer Society. This year alone, it raised \$1.7 million net.

» According to Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), the average event planner in Toronto made \$19.70 per hour in 2003.

» The British Columbia government reports that event planners working full-time and year-round in that province earned \$35,100 in 1998.

» The majority of people working in event management are women. Carolyn Luscombe, president of the Toronto chapter of the International Special Events Society, says about 85 percent of event planners in Canada are women.

» Although the 9/11 terrorist attacks hit the industry hard by causing a slump in travel and a slowdown in the US economy, things are picking up again. HRDC reports that the number, variety and popularity of special events are growing again.





Silcoff also fondly recalls the time she organized a tour of Montreal's best gardens for a troupe of 50 Italians who were members of an exclusive gardening club in Milan. "They were travelling the world visiting fabulous gardens, and came to Montreal," she says. "I worked on finding people with exceptional gardens who were willing to host events in their homes. I had a private reception at the Botanical Gardens and we went to the Arboretum. It was a whole horticultural week. They were thrilled. They all went home with cuttings and after that they kept in touch with the gardeners they'd met here."

So what does it take to be an Alison Silcoff in the world of event planning?

"You don't have to be a rocket scientist to do this job well," Silcoff insists, "but you have to be

detail-oriented, I'm very punctilious about doing things on time, and very precise. Every single detail must be right. No aspect of any event can be overlooked, or the results can be horrendous."

It also helps if you're a logical thinker and articulate speaker, she says. And you have to be "pushy with charm."

"It's no good saying 'But I left a message.' If the event is next Tuesday, I don't care if you left 10 messages — I need an answer from that person! Find another way to get that answer because we need it now."

What drives her, she explains, is the love of creating something from scratch. "It's creating an event from nothing," she says. "I'm a perfectionist, so I enjoy keeping tabs on hundreds of details, creating something really exceptional that has never been created before." ■

