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Enterprise| By SIMONA COVEL

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## Briggs Retains Clients By Helping Them Cut Costs

### *Events Firm Offers Cheaper Venues, Scales Back Extras*

Anthony Napoli doesn't blink when a client asks him if he can arrange a fireworks show over New York City's Ellis Island or book a private performance by comedian Jerry Seinfeld. His company, [Briggs Inc.](#), specializes in only-in-New-York, often-lavish customized experiences that corporations use to woo top clients or reward staff.

But tough economic times demand change, even for those companies catering to the elite. And Briggs offers a vivid illustration.

"We're seeing downsizing of events, and things are more cautious," says Mr. Napoli, president of the 16-person business. "And people are not making long-range plans."

### **Staying Flexible**

Briggs is one of many small firms catering to nervous big businesses looking to cut costs. So Briggs is trying to hold on to such clients by saving them money -- moving an event to, say, a cheaper venue or scaling down decor and entertainment -- while still



Kevin McCormick

Anthony Napoli (right), with some of Briggs Inc.'s staff in Times Square

maintaining its aura of high-end service. At the same time, the firm is trying to tap new European business, convincing companies that a trip to New York is a relative bargain because of the weak dollar.

When clients are hesitant to spend as lavishly as in the past, that's an opportune time for a small company to leverage its small size and personal attention to clients, says JD Norman, vice president of brand strategy at Winsper Inc., a luxury-branding firm in Boston. "A niche firm is able to play on insider knowledge," he says, because it has fewer clients and can play to each one's individual desires.

That service is even more important, Mr. Norman adds, when clients may be shopping around for cheaper alternatives.

### **Trimming Extras**

For longtime clients that used to bring several hundred people to New York, Mr. Napoli will now arrange an event for a group as small as 20. Briggs generally plans events with at least 80 or so people.

Extras are being trimmed as well. A few months ago, a large hotel company maintained a scheduled gala for several hundred people at a location in New York's Rockefeller Center. But it

did away with a planned \$250,000 investment in custom linens, floral arrangements, and a lounge setup. Executives at the hotel company decline to talk on the record because they don't want to be associated with economic troubles.

Jeffrey Grisamore, president of EGR International Inc., a Briggs client that designs sales-team incentive programs for big companies, says "there is an increased awareness-slash-paranoia [among firms] about what might be coming down the road."

While the downscaling helps to keep clients from canceling events altogether, it can be a financial burden for Briggs. Smaller events require employees to put in as many hours finding venues and making arrangements as larger ones, but they bring in less money.

"We have to be very adaptable and fluid," Mr. Napoli says, "We're in it for the long run."

Briggs also is leaning on longtime relationships with vendors, squeezing them for more personalized service that doesn't cost extra. Instead of a four-course meal at a famous Manhattan eatery, for example, Mr. Napoli might arrange for three courses, at a lower cost to the client. But after dinner, the chef might emerge from the kitchen for an introduction to the

group. Or, the sommelier will offer a short tutorial about the wine, rather than simply pouring it and disappearing. So far, he says, vendors have been accommodating.

**• The Problem:** Briggs, a planner of customized events for corporations, risks losing clients that are reluctant to spend lavishly in a slowing economy.

**• The Strategy:** The aim is to help clients save money. Events are being moved to cheaper venues, entertainment is being scaled back, and extras that don't add to the cost are added.

**• Branching Out:** Briggs also is trying sell its services to European companies, which may be enticed by the weak dollar.

To facilitate negotiations, Mr. Napoli has given employees more freedom. Before, he would field most client requests regarding fees. Now, a junior staffer might, say, reduce client costs by changing an open bar to all wine without letting Mr. Napoli know.

### Interest From Abroad

That also leaves more time for Mr. Napoli to drum up new business -- mainly European firms that may be inclined to spring for a New York trip for staff or clients given the euro's current strength.

He has attended extra trade shows overseas over the past 18 months. He says clients used to be about 90% domestic; these days, the figure is closer to 75%.

Briggs also is entering new markets when it comes to venues. For a client planning a trip for a small group of people in their 20s or 30s, for instance, he will recommend a boutique hotel that might be cheaper than a Fifth Avenue location, emphasizing its trendiness.

About 10% of clients are now willing to stay outside Manhattan, instead going to Brooklyn, Westchester County or northern New Jersey, he says, where prices tend to be lower. That's a shift from a year or two ago, when almost no one expressed interest in leaving the island.

Mr. Napoli says he emphasizes Brooklyn's local flavor -- smaller, more eclectic eateries, for instance. And he reminds clients that fewer distractions might mean greater focus on business goals.

