

# Can you **do it yourself?** Probably not, but you can bargain

By **BARBARA PASH**

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One of YesEvents' biggest clients is a conference in Kentucky, and in the past the Pikesville event management company has run the entire event. Now, **YesEvents** handles just the logistics and registration. The client has hired another planner for stage-setting.

Barry Blank, YesEvents' president, is realistic about the change.

"No one is going to say, 'Either we get all of it or none of it,'" said Blank. "That's suicidal."

In the current economic climate, everyone is looking for a bargain. There are different ways to accomplish that. You can negotiate the price of the total package. You can split up the package and hire other, cheaper vendors. You can do some of the package in-house.

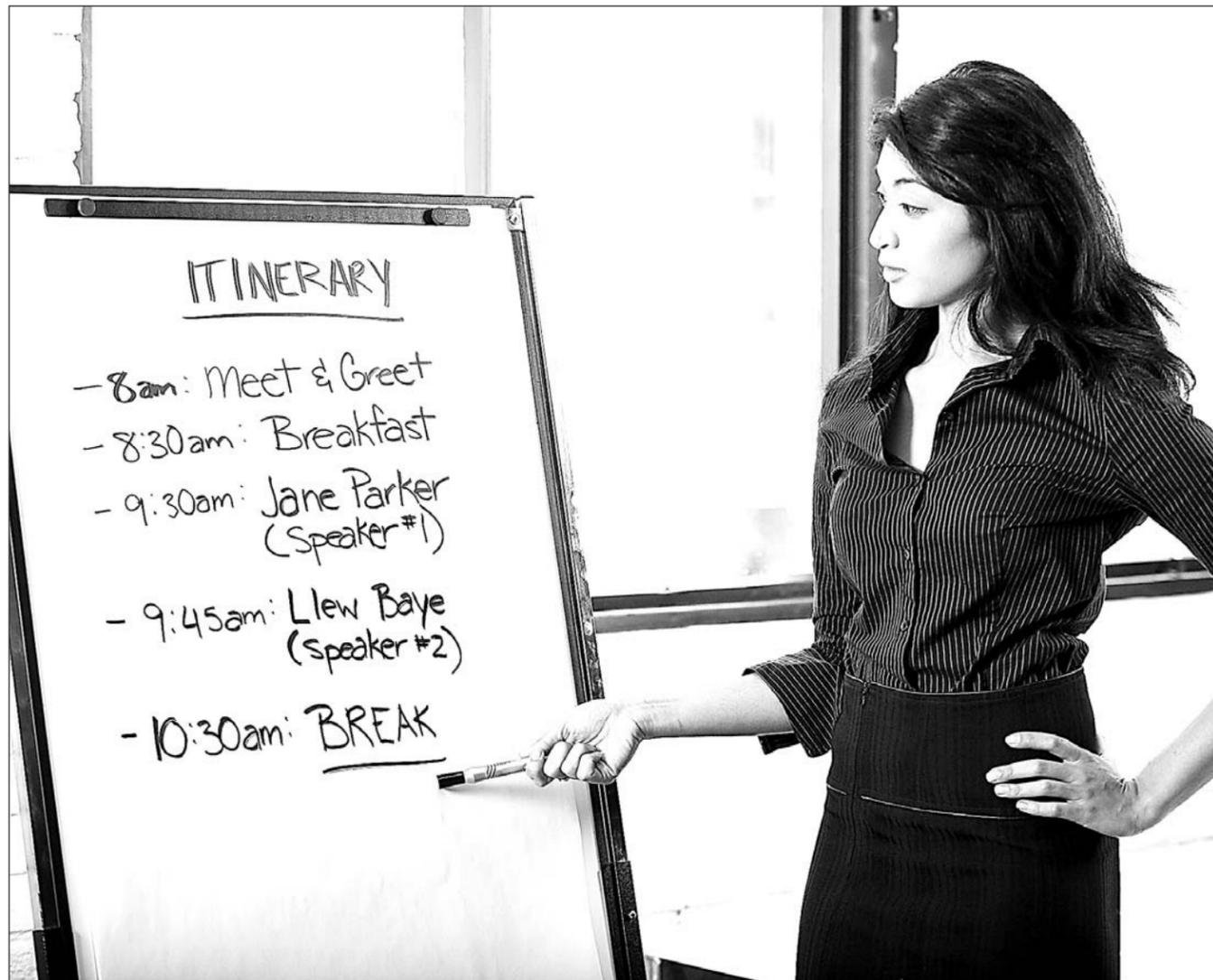
Blank has worked both sides of the fence. He has been hired by full-service event planners to do part of an event. He himself offers pricing for the entire event or any service within. And, he added, clients often insist on doing some parts themselves.

Kim Bray is a senior producer at **Fandango Special Events**, a Baltimore exhibit and booth designer that works with event and corporate planners. Like Blank, she takes a flexible approach to pricing, offering discounts on her existing inventory and an itemized plan from which clients can choose.

If a client wants to fill in the details, that's fine with Bray. For a party, they can buy their own white lights and string them on the railing. But do-it-yourself has limits, she said. Most clients have neither the time nor the resources of Fandango.

"Anyone can buy a poinsettia, stick it on a table and call it a centerpiece," said Bray. Her point: that's not necessarily the best effect.

The cost-cutting is affecting vendors at every level. Bill Reeder is owner of **Affairs to Remember**, a balloon and inflatables specialist in



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Many companies still hire event planners to set up conferences and parties but do some of the work in-house to help keep costs down.

Kingsville who works with individual clients and event planners.

"Clients are coming to me because we can do something that looks great without spending a lot of money," he said.

Even so, Reeder is being asked to use props he already has rather than custom designing for an event. He is creating a "look" by doing the entrance and the stage or head table only. A planner may order 200 balloons, then have his staff create centerpieces with already-owned bases.

At **Alan Agency**, an Owings Mills music, entertainment and staging company, president Sandra Alan said corporate and industrial clients that formerly hired a 15-piece band for an event are now using a disc jockey. Instead of getting a name personality — a singer, comedian or motivational speaker — from out of town, they are using local talent.

"They don't want to pay the expenses, such as airfare, lodging and requirements for sound, lights and the limo from the airport to the hotel," said Alan. "But they still want entertainment."

Barbara Clapp, president of **Barb Clapp Advertising and Marketing**, a full-service firm in Timonium, said price negotiations are particularly competitive in certain fields.

One is the hospitality industry, where hotels and conferences centers are under pressure to get the deal done. Another is the wedding industry, where brides cannot afford, for example, the \$10,000 wedding package.

"They'll say, 'I have \$4,000. What can you do?' Or, they'll tell the caterer, 'You do the entrée, I'll bring the dessert,'" said Clapp.

Clapp's own experience is different. Not many of her clients want to do things themselves, particularly a big event. The opening of the downtown **Hilton Baltimore**, opposite **Oriole Park at Camden Yards**, required the full-time attention of one of her staffers.

"Events take on a life of their own and problems always arise," said Clapp, who finds that, rather than negotiating over price for a single event, businesses are reducing the total number of events.

**Conference and Logistics Consultants**, an Annapolis executive-level conference management and consulting firm, handles large conventions, in the 1,000 to 5,000 attendees range, for associations' annual conventions and professional groups' certification conferences.

In 2009, attendance was down 5 to 10 percent across the board, according to vice president Janee Pelletier, who cites reduced travel budgets as the reason.

At the request of clients, Pelletier is looking to trim costs. Better deals from vendors, including food, beverage and audiovisual, are one way. Another is negotiating with hotels and convention centers, even renegotiating contracts that were signed the previous year.

For the most part, she said, venues are receptive. If the convention goes elsewhere they lose revenue not only from the event space but from all the attendees who tend to stay in the convention hotel. Moreover, guests use the hotel's restaurant, room service and business center, adding an additional 50 percent revenue.

"There are excellent deals to be had," said Pelletier. "We tell our clients, 'You can still meet your objectives and not take a bath.'"



MAXIMILIAN FRANZ

The opening of the downtown Hilton Baltimore, opposite Oriole Park at Camden Yards, required an event planner's full-time attention.