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## MEETINGS & CONFERENCES

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# Event planners roll with even the trickiest requests

BY KEITH REGAN  
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Event planners are all about getting things done. No matter the circumstances or the specific nature of the request, they simply aren't in the business of saying no.

The customer, after all, is always right, and planners have to find a way to make even the most outlandish request happen, or at least to leave the customer feeling like it was.

The Boston Business Journal asked some local event planners to recount their most difficult or unusual event-related requests.

### It's nice to play Mother Nature

When a Florida company decided to hold its corporate meeting in Boston, the powers that be wanted to give attendees a true taste of a New England winter — without actually leaving the hotel where business meetings were taking place.

"Under the category of unusual or surprising requests recently, it was one for the record books around here," said **Adam Sperling**, general manager of the **Hotel Commonwealth**, where the event took place last spring.

Instead of the typical after-meetings cocktails reception, the hotel turned its main ballroom into a skating rink, working with an events production company to install a plexiglass-like floor on which ice skates could be used. Skates were available for rent and attendees glided around as skating rink sounds were piped in and hot chocolate was served.

The theme was carried further with a snow machine rented to produce the white stuff and drinks served at a bar made entirely of ice.

**'Under the category of unusual or surprising requests recently, it was one for the record books around here.'**

Adam Sperling, general manager, Hotel Commonwealth

"It really felt like you were at a skating party," Sperling said."

### Heart of darkness

A few years ago, **Marjorie Randell-Silver**, the owner of **Copper Leaf Productions** in Needham, attended a meeting of a local nonprofit organization's event committee.

A live auction was being planned, and at one point during the meeting, the event chair pulled Randell-Silver aside with a special lighting effect request.

"She insisted that I find a way to throw black light around the area where the auctioneer would be standing," Randell-Silver recalled.

Perplexed, she assumed the client meant ultraviolet lighting. "I suggested that using UV in that context would not be very effective. She said, 'I didn't say UV, I said black light.'"

"Do you mean," the planner asked, "That all areas but where the auctioneer would be standing would be dark and the auctioneer would be in the light? Spotlight?"

"Exactly," the client responded, "now you've got it." Randell-Silver stopped short of pointing out the ob-

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Adam Sperling transformed a ballroom in the Hotel Commonwealth into a winter wonderland.

# REQUESTS: Meeting planners are accustomed to fast thinking

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vious fact that absence of light would create the same effect as the desired “black light,” and on the night of the auction — which turned out to be a fundraising success — the auctioneer was indeed in the spotlight.

“The client was happy and learned something about lighting and I hopefully learned something, too, about good communication when it comes to technical event details,” said Randell-Silver, who has been organizing events for 25 years and founded Copper Leaf in 1996, said. “Is this what is known as a teachable moment?”

## Stop the presses

Like many event planners, **Valerie McSorley**, president of **Avante Garde Events Inc.** in Milton, isn’t easily daunted by special requests, even those that seem outlandish at the outset.

Yet even the simplest request can become complicated and challenging when it’s presented at the last minute.

“If someone says six weeks in advance that they want a pink elephant, you have options,” McSorley said. “If

they said, ‘We need a pink elephant in five minutes’ — that’s when you start scrambling.”

The middle of a weekend-long corporate retreat for senior management of a high-profile Boston company, McSorley awoke to a request from the client that all attendees have copies of the morning paper waiting for them when they received their wake-up calls — which would happen in 15 minutes.

“We were somewhere remote where I didn’t know the lay of the land, so I didn’t have the time to go and physically get the copies,” she recalled.

She commandeered the hotel’s stash of papers, sent a staffer out to find more, and woke the innkeeper to find out which executives were in which room. The executives awoke to the news and the client remained satisfied.

“It’s all about keeping composure and a level head so you can come up with Plan B,” McSorley said. “Picture the most beautiful vase and five minutes before you present it to somebody, it gets smashed. As the planner, it might not be my fault, but it is my problem.”