

Inside Job



Laura Schwartz doesn't mind talking about her past, though the former event director of the Clinton administration White House would rather talk about what she's up to now. In a three-hour interview with Editor-in-Chief Christine Born, she talked about her new book, the power of live meetings and networking, and what she learned in the White House.

Your book is about the power of networking and you were certainly in a position and place to witness and participate in networking at a level most of us don't experience. Planners often stay behind the scenes at their events. Can you

give us some quick pointers about how planners can better leverage their position and why they should?

First of all, the power of reaching outside of your circle is one of the really neat things I learned throughout my years at the White House. Jackie Kennedy made a rule that at any White House event, guests and staff can meet and talk with anyone at the threshold but once they move into the dining room, they cannot choose to sit with those they are comfortable with. A White House event can be quite intense, and even people in power want a safety nest. I'd give them some conversation starters, some information about who they are sitting with. You should sit with someone new on every trip on that shuttle. When you're at a fun event, you want to sit with your friend but you miss opportunities. Exercise your skills. If you're not comfortable socializing, start by giving yourself a specific task: I will meet one person tonight, then two.

As event planners, we plan every minute of our event, so why not take a moment to prepare, write down some goals, do some research? Who else is going to be there?

Find out more about sponsors, vendors and colleagues by going to their websites and seeing what projects they are working on. Help connect them to someone who can help them. You don't have to promote yourself to make an impression. You get something to build the relationship on when you do some research. Have a list. Have an agenda—whether it's a social event or a business meeting.

The key to bringing it all together, from doing research to reaching your goal, is timing. Being on time is the most important thing you can do. Right away you signal to the per-

son you are meeting with that they are important. You get to greet people when they arrive. You meet the key people you wanted to meet and will be able to find them in the crowd later.

Planners are under pressure to prove the ROI for face-to-face meetings. Can you give our readers some more ammunition?

I believe the most intimate form of communication around the world, across cultures and across socioeconomic circumstances is breaking bread, whether around a five-course meal in Washington, leftovers the next morning or for coffee. There is a great validity to breaking bread together. It connects us. It's where our core mission lies in life. That's where I saw the biggest deals being made when I was in the White House. There are certain things we cannot accomplish with technology; it's great and it helps but there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings.

What do you consider your most valuable asset as a meeting planner, or a characteristic most planners share?

Collaboration. No team of one can do anything and I certainly learned that at the White House.



What's the quality you seek in other team members?

Always being ready to help no matter how small or how big the task. Some people just want to help when it's big stuff, exciting stuff. You have to remember everything is a stepping stone.

What surprises you most about attendees?

Oh, boy—those who drink too much. What a missed opportunity to have conversations and extend beyond your circle. You're a guest for a reason; it's sad when you see missed opportunities.

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment connected with a White House

event?

The best one we did every year had no U.S. Marine Band, no pomp and circumstance. It was the Children's Miracle Network event. We tried to schedule it when the president was in town so he could stop by and spend time with the families. He always made it. It was not about pomp and circumstance; it was about the moment in time: Let's just make it the best four hours we can.



It all comes down to the emotion your guests leave with, whether you're successful or not. What's your thread to the event? Six months later, guests won't remember the color of the linen or the flowers. They'll remember the message they connected with; the way they were feeling; the nicest person they met.

When I talk about the art of the event, I like to talk about it like a painter approaches his art. You see every color, every brush stroke, everything in the painting when you're in front of it. Later, you remember the emotions it evoked.

How do you accomplish that?

I like to do things differently. The message can be accomplished without a lot of step and repeat. You show the message with the people you invite, with the style of the host. If it's a nonprofit event about children and family, you have children and families attend even if it's black tie. You don't just need signage to get the purpose across.

I like to take some time and, instead of running through the event as a schedule, think of it like a play with characters. Set the stage. You need someone who is good at greeting, maybe your chairman? Who can talk about why you're all there celebrating? You need someone to introduce speakers. You need someone to deliver the key message with true conviction, so guests leave with the emotion that they matter. They met the CEO, who really cared about their experience. It makes a great impact. They leave thinking, at that moment—and in comparison with other events—the president or the owner was there

to greet me. And they'll remember the event.

How did you choose who would attend and who the key speakers would be?

It depended on the organization and purpose of the event. Who do we need? Where are they? What groups do we need? We'd work through those organizations and find someone who could connect, especially with someone at home if it was televised. We'd find a compelling individual to put on the program.

You also need to include a person who you have to give a nod to. I always had to know who should open something. Did the message relate to someone on the Hill, the president or someone at home who needed to understand how the message affected them, whether it was 20 people or 3,000?

Were your venue choices at the White House limited by tradition or access?

The nickname for the White House property is 18 acres, which includes the North and South Lawn, the residence in the middle, and the East and West Wing. There are the Rose Garden and the East and West Garden. Then, there is the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, including the White House Briefing Room, news office and ceremonial meeting room. They were all within my responsibilities, including bill signing, press conferences, family events, etc.

I loved the really grand events because we had a lot to work with. The Rose Garden requires no staging. We had a president and first lady who were very willing to do outdoor events. There are so many areas. There is the Children's Garden...the First Lady's Sculpture Garden. The lower end of the South Lawn with its Japanese maple provided a great backdrop. I would grab lighting experts and photographers to take a look at how it would work depending on the sun at different times of the day. I'd get their buy-in; give them what they needed to make it happen. You have to build external and internal working relationships.

Do you have any advice for planners on choosing venues?

Grab your stakeholders and get their buy-in. (I would get the president ahead of time and show him what I wanted to do.) Empower clients. Just like that ballroom can get stale year after year, so can the South Lawn. How can you do it differently? If it's a ballroom you've used year after year, bring along the vendors. Get them involved. Can we do this? What kind of workaround can we do? Do it well in advance; bring them into the fold.



The best thing about those trade shows is the access to vendors. It's your chance to ask, "Have you ever done anything like this?" They may say yes, and here are the flaws, or yes, this will work. Even hotels that have standard ways to set up ballrooms want to do things differently.

How many White House events did you coordinate?

We counted them up: I directed more than 1,000 events at the White House. The average size was 200 guests. For a seated dinner, we might have 1,400. For big head of state arrival ceremonies, 6,000 to 7,000. For public events, like the Easter Egg Roll, 10,000—though not all at the same time or sitting down.

What was your budget for events?

We don't discuss budgets. The details are too much and too varied for me to go into with any accuracy. Each division has its own budget. For example, there is a budget allocated for state dinners. There are different pockets but we always were aware of that.

How big was your staff?

It was very small. We had five in the White House office. We also used three calligraphers who did everything from Office of the Chief of Protocol for things like food allergies, likes and dislikes. There were all-day meetings the day ahead of the event with military attaches, personal aides, etc. We'd walk through the entire schedule. Someone from the White House kitchen was always there and we went through culture protocols.

The five branches of the military each had a social staff aide...special commissions to escort and seat guests, start conversations and help move people out so we could close off rooms at the end of the event.

What reporting requirements did you have after events? Did you do formal post-event reports?

The days were very long. I would arrive at 5 a.m., check all details, do walkthroughs and meetings, and at 4 p.m. would shower (we had showers and changing rooms near our offices). We would immediately break down the event that night when we were still wired. Of course, we talked about what everyone wore. If there was a problem, we talked about how it was resolved. We'd jot some things down and usually didn't go home until after 3 a.m. The next day, we would set aside some time in the morning meetings to discuss the event further. There wasn't always time for a written report. We'd talk with everyone involved. How many more volunteers do you need next time? We'd touch base with the chef and florist and see what people liked. The Clintons would give feedback, and we'd have to follow up with the people responsible for every aspect of the event.

It's just as important to get feedback from the guests. They're seeing it from a different perspective. How did it match up with what you thought?

Do you have some food and beverage tips or favorite ideas from all those White House dinners?

Well, I never had a mashed potato bar, but I love those. My biggest thing about food—and you can do this on any budget—is to remember for standing receptions that people are going to have a drink in hand and want to socialize and shake hands. Give them morsels that won't force them to lick their fingers or have napkin in hand...no sauces. You need food at every event; some people come with an empty stomach so I like to have some carbs and things that are easy to grab—chicken, veggies, finger sushi. And you have to think about vegans and offer gluten-free choices.



What was the best thing about your White House job?

Interacting with so many people who were so talented. People who would say, “OK, I’m going to figure that out and let you know,” not “I’ll get to that tomorrow.” The dedicated staff and volunteers were a big part of everything. We had about 20 regular volunteers. I wanted to empower volunteers and interns by giving them responsibility and access. I’d include them in walkthroughs.

The worst?

The isolation from family and the hours. I don’t regret any of it. It was an incredible journey, though it takes a toll on you physically and personally. I was lucky. My parents came out

so we could visit, and they volunteered, too. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to include them, but I wasn’t always present.

What was (is) your smartest business idea?

Honestly, translating what I did at the White House into the lives of corporate America, nonprofit America, academia and small business. For eight years, I didn’t have time to stop and think; I was just doing...and suddenly when it’s over, it’s over. You’re gone. You’re out of your office. You have no badge, no Air Force One. For a few years, I traveled with President Clinton for the Clinton Global Initiative and took time to travel on my own. I didn’t want to be in an office. How was I going to translate what I did for eight years into something that I could be just as passionate about and dedicated to, but also have a life? I didn’t want to miss any more birthdays or anniversaries.

I started thinking about the fact that as social as any event may appear, it is still business. The word “networking” was my biggest struggle. It can often be manipulative: “What can you do for me?” rather than “What can I do for you?” “How can I help you?”

“What will help you with your next meeting?” “...with your life?” Everything I have done in my life has been about positive relationships and giving back. It works. I felt a need to find a message that would cross all borders—cultural, geographic, social and economic.

What advice do you have for meeting planners—other than reading your book?

The moment you queue the gates to open your event, you’re done planning. You’re managing.

Learn more about Laura Schwartz by taking a closer look [here](#).