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Theme Park Meetings

Using Family-Friendly Venues to Boost Attendance

PAGE 16



California Transit Association Legislative and Regulatory Advocate Sabrina Means and daughter Kyrie pose with Mickey and Minnie during CTA's Public and Community Transportation Conference & Expo at Disneyland.

Photo by Tony Kawashima

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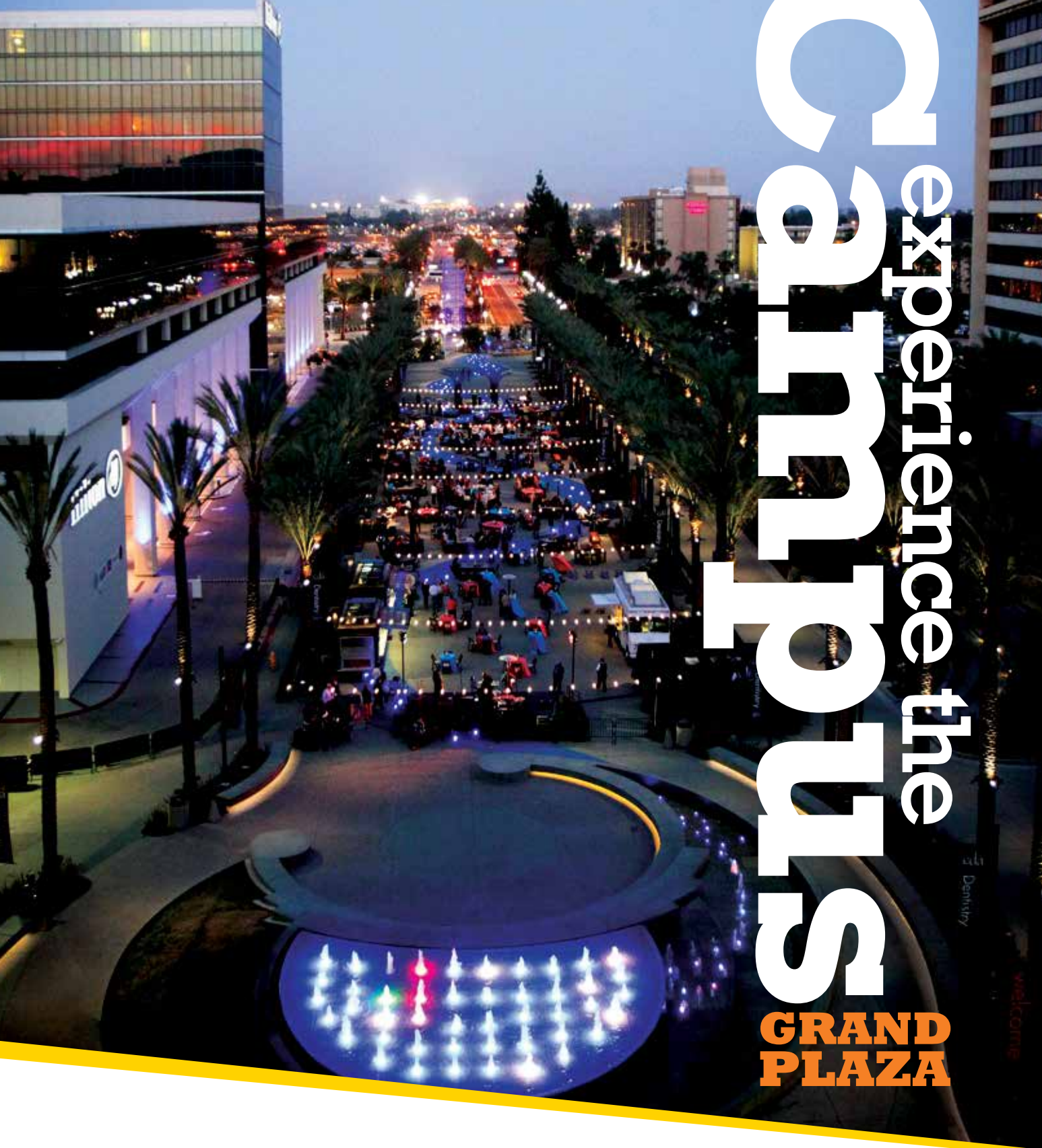
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Expect the Best



The economic forecast for 2014 is for continued brightening, a welcome prediction to be sure following anemic exhibition industry growth during the third quarter of 2013. The Center for Exhibition Industry Research Index indicates that the mediocre performance was due mainly to sequestration and a decline in government meeting attendance. However, government spending is still strong, said CEIR President and CEO Douglas L. Ducate, CEM, CMP, in a news release, with this optimistic observation: "Anecdotal, there are many events doing very well and in fact setting records now in the fourth quarter. Hopefully, that will result in meeting our forecast for the year and provide momentum moving into 2014."

In agreement is Chris Brown, E.V.P., conventions and business operations at the National Association of Broadcasters. "In general, I think we're in for a pretty good year," he says in our "Outlook 2014" report. "Certainly, having several years of stability in the economy has helped the meeting industry, despite the fact that the government likes to throw a scare at us every now and then. But what we've seen is a pretty nice, steady rebound in the economy as a whole since the end of the recession." Other meeting and convention planners are more cautiously optimistic — a true reflection of our economic recovery's fits and starts.

In the interest of family economics, and to ensure a Happy New Year of healthy attendance, many associations will consider theme parks for meetings (page 16). Maurice Foster, Esq., CMP, executive director of the National Association of Black Journalists, says that when the choice comes down to attending a meeting or spending the money on a family vacation, theme parks provide the perfect compromise between professional and family development. NABJ offered a youth enrichment program for the first time at its 2013 Convention & Career Fair in Orlando. "What better place to begin than at home and to create a training atmosphere where the children can be exposed to what their parents are doing for a career?" Foster says. Talk about generational membership marketing!

The California Transit Association invited families to its 2013 Public and Community Transportation Conference & Expo at Disneyland (featured on our cover) to help boost attendance. Post-meeting feedback showed the intangible benefits gained: "Attendees were really happy...that their families could share in a portion of the conference. I think they felt like we cared about their families and we cared about them," says Amy Lai, association services director for the CTA.

That level of caring is seriously escalated when it comes to disaster preparedness, as our feature "Lessons from Superstorm Sandy" illustrates. Whether it's the weather or the economy, meeting and convention planners know all too well that they should expect the best but always prepare for the worst.

Here's to a healthy, prosperous — and storm-free — 2014!

Harvey Grotsky
Publisher

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CONVENTIONS & FACILITIES
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A COASTAL COMMUNICATIONS CORPORATION PUBLICATION

PUBLISHER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Harvey Grotsky
cccpublisher@att.net

GROUP PUBLISHER
Arthur Hyman
cccgrouppublisher@att.net

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
Mitch D. Miller
cccartdirector@att.net

MANAGING EDITORS
Susan W. Fell
ccceditor1@att.net

Susan S. Gregg
ccceditor2@att.net

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Michael Bassett
Karen Brost
John Buchanan
Timothy Herrick
Stella Johnson
Derek Reveron
Patrick Simms

PRESIDENT & CEO
Harvey Grotsky

VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS
David A. Middlebrook
cccoperations@att.net

ADVERTISING SALES OFFICES
2700 N. Military Trail, Suite 120
Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394
561-989-0600 Fax: 561-989-9509

NORTHEAST/MID-ATLANTIC
Ric Rosenbaum
914-643-1193 • Fax: 914-864-0673
ric.rosenbaum1@gmail.com

FLORIDA/CARIBBEAN
Arthur Hyman
561-989-0600, ext. 108 • Fax: 561-989-9509
cccgrouppublisher@att.net

MIDWEST/SOUTHWEST
561-989-0600, ext. 114 • Fax: 561-989-9509
cccadvertising@att.net

SOUTHEAST
561-989-0600, ext. 114 • Fax: 561-989-9509
cccadvertising@att.net

LOUISIANA
Arthur Hyman
561-989-0600, ext. 108 • Fax: 561-989-9509
cccgrouppublisher@att.net

WEST
Marshall Rubin
818-888-2407 • Fax: 818-888-4907
mrubin@westworld.com

HAWAII
Marshall Rubin
818-888-2407 • Fax: 818-888-4907
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Universal CityWalk to Expand



Rendering of expanded Universal CityWalk.

ORLANDO, FL — Universal Orlando Resort announced that in 2014 Universal CityWalk will add eight new venues. The new venues include Hot Dog Hall of Fame, featuring iconic hot dog creations from some of the nation's most famous ball parks; CowFish, an innovative and trend-setting concept out of Charlotte, NC; and the popular frozen dessert shops Cold Stone Creamery and Menchie's. Original concepts include Antojitos Authentic Mexican Food; Bread Box, a homestyle sandwich shop; a new modern Italian open-kitchen concept; and the newly opened Red Oven Pizza Bakery — Universal's first-ever Neopolitan-style pizza bakery. Also opening in 2014 at Universal Orlando Resort will be Universal's Cabana Bay Beach Resort and The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Diagon Alley. www.uomeetingsandevents.com

Visit Jacksonville Considers New Convention Center

JACKSONVILLE, FL — Visit Jacksonville wants to start a "meaningful discussion" on how to capture a greater share of convention business, according to a report in *The Florida Times-Union*. Visit Jacksonville Board Chairman Bill Prescott recently told the Duval County Tourist Development Council that they want to revive the convention center study that was begun in 2007 but did not progress due to the recession. Now that tourism is improving, Prescott said the study should focus on building a new convention center near the Hyatt Regency hotel as the location is close to restaurants and nightlife that does not surround the existing center — the Prime F. Osborn III Convention Center. The council is considering various options about reviving and funding the study. www.visitjacksonville.com

New Houston Marriott Marquis to Open in 2016

HOUSTON, TX — RIDA Development Corporation in conjunction with the Houston First Corporation will develop a 1,000-room Marriott Marquis in Houston. The hotel, which will have more than 100,000 sf of meeting space, will be across the street and connected via skyway to the Houston Convention Center. It is scheduled to break ground in 2014 and open in 2016. The hotel will have a coffee shop, a sports bar and two restaurants, a 5,000-sf spa with seven treatment rooms and a 5,000-sf fitness center as well. The outdoor area will include an infinity edge pool, a Texas-shaped lazy river and seven event lawns. www.marriott.com

VisitPittsburgh Welcomes Planners to the Light-Up Night Familiarization Tour



Guests of VisitPittsburgh's recent FAM tour included (l to r, first row) Jaci McDonald, Planit Meetings; Kristin Durand, HPN Global; Carolyn Sistare, Interstate Technology and Regulatory Council; Valarie Landers, Illuminating Engineering Society; Cindy Orr, Association of Equipment Management Professionals; Terry Hix, Location Solvers. (Second row) Henry Richards, ConferenceDirect; Traci Browne, Trade Show News Network; Sean McDonald, Planit Meetings; Jenny Blackford, American Gear Manufacturers Association; Madelaine Morgan, American Gear Manufacturers Association; Bob Kaiser, IFCA International; Karen Kaiser, Guest; Diane Morgan, Tree Care Industry Association; Dale Gibbons, Emergency Nurses Association; Leslie Dreiske, Emergency Nurses Association.



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1 ASAE's CIO Reggie Henry and panel at the ASAE 2013 CEO/CIO Pre-Conference Program and Technology Conference & Expo, held in December at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center with 1,233 total participants — the second highest attended conference in its eight year history. **2** (l to r) Visit Seattle President and CEO Tom Norwalk; Steve Vissotzky, general manager of Grand Hyatt Seattle and Hyatt on Olive 8; and Marco Bloemendaal, Visit Seattle SVP convention sales and services at Visit Seattle's annual holiday breakfast at The Westin Seattle Hotel. **3** (l to r) Johnnie White, CMP, executive director of the Cardiovascular Research Foundation and immediate past chair of PCMA; Julie Coker, senior vice president, convention division, for the Philadelphia CVB; singer Eric Benet; and Stephanie Mays Boyd, director of sales, marketing and convention services pose at the National Coalition of Black Meeting Planners fall meeting held at Pennsylvania Convention Center. **4** Attendees at Dreamtime 2013 in Sydney, Australia, were introduced to all the harbor city has to offer for incentive programs. **5** A volunteer with Food Services of America (FSA) assists guests in assorting items designated for composting, recycling and the landfill at the Oregon Convention Center, which has collaborated with FSA to make its annual Trends Show a fine example of sustainable practices. **6** The Visit Florida staff gather at the Florida Encounter in December, and **7** Kim Hentges with Lennox International, Holly Coger Lavanentz with Visit Tampa Bay and Scott Pearson with MedAssets pose at the event, which was held at the PGA National Resort & Spa.

How to Customize the Event Experience



Andy Johnston

No More 'One Size Fits All'

You have an association filled with engaged, involved members. It's easy to assume that everyone has the same priorities and expectations, just because they belong. You want to please everyone, so your events end up being like those sweat-shirts from airport gift shops, the ones labeled One Size Fits All. The problem is: They fit everyone and no one equally well.

You can change that and develop agendas that capture more of your members' attention and build their loyalty with this one key strategy — by making them feel unique.

IT'S THE EXPERIENCE

Producing an association event takes budgeting and planning to come up with the right combination of location and venue. But as important as those elements are, the reality is that your attendees don't come for the city, hotel, food, speeches or various parties and activities. They come for the personal experience. Your attendees are looking for diverse opportunities to select powerful content that's relevant to their specific needs and to leave with practical ways to use the information immediately.

You can break away from one-way communication at one-size-fits-all events and give your members more reasons to attend this year — and every year.

To create a unique experience, reorganize your planning around: **Audience Segmentation; Focus on Function; and Target Sessions.**

AUDIENCE SEGMENTATION

Start by developing a better understanding of your membership. Inside your anticipated event audience will be smaller sub-groups of individuals who share the same interests and requirements. Audience segmentation helps you understand the needs and desires of every person you rely upon for success. For example, a civil engineer, a process engineer and a structural engineer don't want or need the same conference information or support.

An audience segment is a group of people who share enough common situations, goals, functions or challenges to cause them to have similar needs.

As the first step in planning your next event, take the time to gather some fresh intelligence. We aren't talking about demographic pie charts, renewal rates and membership totals: The goal is to better understand the current needs of the individuals who are your members. Take a closer look at people, not statistics. It is simple to do with an electronic survey. There are several online tools available. The trick is to make the survey simple and easy. Don't make it too formal or long.

You want to give your members and attendees a direct voice into the content and design of your upcoming event. They get the opportunity to customize the experience to better match their specific needs, and your association gets members who are already engaged in your next conference before the first session even kicks off. Some of the things you might explore are: job function or responsibility; type of business; critical needs; expectations; top challenges and emerging issues; experience level; skill level.

About six months before the event send the survey to everyone who has attended your association conference in the past three years. That way you are engaging people who attend every year as well as those who haven't for a while. Be sure to give them an email address where they can send more detailed suggestions if they wish. Then really listen to the answers.

Look for patterns you can target and areas where people overlap. Your only goal is to identify common objectives, topics, interests and needs. A major caveat: Don't rely on registration data for segmenting your audience. It's too little, too late. You have to segment the audience early in the planning stages and tailor the agenda to the results.

FOCUS ON FUNCTION

The main areas where people split into natural groups are your audience segments. That's where you want to focus your content and messaging. The key is to focus on function, not semantics. People who do similar things have common interests and goals. It really doesn't matter what their titles might be — they perform the same jobs or pursue the same

goals. These are the areas where attendees will need, appreciate and value the resources your event provides the most.

Segmentation makes the rest of your planning much easier. With your attendees divided into groups based around common interests, needs and functions, you can design your agenda and content with greater confidence than with any one-size event. You will find it easier to identify: high-interest topics; major issues; people the attendees want to meet; personal interests; personal priorities.

Segmenting your audience doesn't have to be complicated or costly. It is simple common sense. You are looking to create a manageable number of groups with key things in common. Then you develop content and experiences to serve them.

TARGET SESSIONS

One-size-fits-all events often end up being general fly-overs from 30,000 feet where speakers attempt to offer some-

thing for everyone. The downside is that participants have to sit through 45 minutes of content that doesn't interest them in hopes of finding that two-minute nugget. That's why they call them "general" sessions.

Instead, design your agenda around a series of timely, Target Sessions that address each group's specific needs. Let's use an education conference as an example. The survey showed that middle-school teachers in urban areas want to offer more culture-based class activities but don't have many resources. You start with that insight and build target sessions around it. Based on that realization, you can:

- Develop two to three target sessions that give this audience segment real-world insight and detailed information about free resources in their states and school districts, plus an opportunity to share ideas and tips.
- Identify education experts and cultural speakers who can lead a discussion on the impact of cultural knowledge on student achievement.

- Offer valuable content participants can use immediately in their own classrooms and that will build session attendance.

The best target sessions take dead aim at the specific interests of your major audience groups and challenge you to fine-tune your content and step up its quality. But it's worth it. The teachers in the example above will recognize the value they receive that goes far beyond exchanging their attendance for a few continuing education credits. Plus, you are giving them compelling reasons to attend and to encourage their professional peers to participate.

Your most recent meeting participants are the greatest salesforce you can have for increasing membership.

A WINNING STRATEGY

It's a winning strategy. Provide each person with the information, ideas, solutions and motivations they need to accomplish both your goals and their own. Simple audience

Your most recent meeting participants are the greatest salesforce you can have for increasing membership.

segmentation, prioritization and focused content can shift a one-size-fits-all event design from what the organization or sponsor wants to say to vivid personal experiences where people get what they need and value.

Make your attendees feel unique and not one of a crowd by focusing on the functions, needs, motivations and goals your individual members have in common. It will pay off in a huge meeting success — the kind of meeting they will remember. Talk about. And make plans to attend again.

Create an interesting experience that makes them feel their time was worth the effort, and you will see them all again — next year.

Andy Johnston is president and creative director of The Idea Group and is a sought-after industry expert in developing ingenious ways to engage and motivate audiences. Andy has deep expertise in strategic planning, messaging, creative direction, marketing and events. He can be reached at andy@ideagroupatlanta.com or 404-213-4416.

Attracting a Global Audience to Your Conference

Phelps R. Hope, CMP



It's Anything but Planning as Usual

You're planning a Florida conference for global manufacturers next year. Surely the planning can't be much different than for a similar conference you hosted last quarter for just North American companies, right? After all, it's all manufacturing, and international is international. Well, it's not as simple as that.

Remember: "International" is not a country. One size does not fit all. Conference goers' needs change country by country and region by region, as do expectations. Even for event planning veterans, drawing an international audience is a challenge.

On the plus side, the core building blocks of conference planning will remain the same, regardless of where your attendees are coming from. The most limited resources are always money and time. How you plan and market to an international audience could mean the difference between a successful event and a flop. Below are a few tips:

PUT YOURSELF IN THEIR SHOES

If you aren't familiar with the countries to which you're reaching out, you'll stumble right out of the gate.

- **What are the travel restrictions?** Getting from China to the U.S. is much more difficult than, say, coming from Canada. And those are the obvious ones. You'll lose participants right away if you fail to acknowledge travel hurdles. At the very least, point them where they need to be to ensure easy travel to the event. And ideally, do what you can to walk them through it. It'll demonstrate



your savviness and give your target attendees more confidence in the event.

- **Be sensitive to current affairs.** The world is changing, and travel restrictions are constantly in flux. Attracting Egyptian attendees to your event today could be wildly different than the same conference you held just a year ago. Know what's happening in the part of the world in which you're marketing, and don't oversimplify the challenges for your attendees.
- **Moving people is one thing. Shipping boxes overseas is another.** Give your attendees fair warning throughout the event marketing and communications process about the obstacles they'll face. Propose a customs broker to make it easier.
- **Know the quirks.** Did you know that China-based credit cards limit how much you can spend in a single transaction outside of that country? Or that in China, Baidu is their Google and that VK is the Facebook of Russia? Don't let these regional quirks surprise you after you've already rolled out your event marketing campaign. Know what you're getting into so that you can better reach international attendees.

- **Give them the info they'll need, too.** This isn't just about your planning. It's about theirs. Provide them with a list of restricted goods, for example. They'll appreciate the extra steps you've taken to make their planning easier.

MAKE THE EVENT PERSONAL

You must tailor your marketing and make it more personalized for attendees coming from other countries. This isn't black and white. You can't take the same marketing strategy for an event for Alabama almond growers and use it to draw

SHOW THE VALUE PROPOSITION

You've studied the various cultures of your attendees and have tailored your marketing accordingly. You know the restrictions that could impede attendance from certain parts of the world. You've given them the how — now tell them why. Show your attendees who might otherwise be unfamiliar with your event that this is how they should spend their valuable time and limited budget.

- **Market in simple terms the benefits of attending your conference.** What knowledge will they leave with? Any certifications? Connections? Business transactions? In

Conference goers' needs change country by country and region by region, as do expectations.

German aviation engineers. So how do you let your international attendees know this conference is about them?

- **What voice should you be using?** A conference for mostly German engineers could mean more detail-oriented logistics in your marketing, whereas a gathering that would draw Brazilian cooking professionals could be more about the passion and excitement of marketing materials.
- **Know what your attendees prefer taste-wise, but don't generalize.** Make a note in your marketing materials about kosher options, for example, or alert target attendees that, yes, vegetarian options will be available. Put this all in the context that attendees will have options and that you are aware of special requirements.
- **What are the cultural influences that could affect your attendees?** Will prayer rooms be needed for events that overlap with the weekend? Should you be sensitive about promoting alcoholic beverages for attendees coming from more restrictive regions of the world?
- **What about timing?** Different regions celebrate different holidays. Say it's peak vacation season in Europe but not in the U.S.; offer deals that accommodate European attendees who might want to dovetail your event with a vacation in California.

any culture, the conference takeaway is THE detail that dwarfs all others.

- **Justify the expense, and use verifiable statistics to support your claims.** Time and money are the most limiting factors when it comes to attending a conference. Your attendees likely have a list of potential conferences — some of which are probably a lot closer to home. Spell out in clear terms how your conference offers the most bang for their buck, and push your gathering to the top of their list. Remember that your audience is international and might be forced to make tough travel decisions. Now is your opportunity to guide them to make the right ones.

In summary, be sensitive to cultural and geographical barriers that would dissuade attendees. If you know the obstacles ahead of time, you can help overcome them. Make the conference planning process easier on yourself and on your attendees.

Phelps R. Hope, CMP, is vice president of meetings and expositions for Kellen Company, an association management company with offices and representation in the United States, Europe, China, the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia. He can be reached at phope@kellencompany.com or 678-303-2962.

Outlook 2014

Rising Costs Create New Challenges Despite Rising Optimism

By John Buchanan

Although lingering effects of the recession, such as reduced attendance at many U.S. trade shows, continue to challenge budget-strapped planners, the outlook for 2014 is generally favorable, despite key challenges such as rising costs.

On balance, however, planners are optimistic that the industry will continue its ongoing recovery and return to general health.

"We had a real solid year in 2013, and we expect to have another solid year in 2014," says Mary Pat Heftman, executive vice president of convention and strategic alliances at the Chicago-based National Restaurant Association.

However, she notes, she does have an overarching concern that could have significant impact on the industry next year. "Whether it's a meeting or any of the things related to a convention you're planning, I think our biggest challenge is going to be the cost of travel," she says. "And that's true of both flights and hotels. And those things are going to start to become prohibitive for many attendees."

Chris Brown, executive vice president, conventions and business operations, at the National Association of Broadcasters in

Washington, DC, shares Heftman's concerns about rising costs. But he, too, is largely optimistic in his forecast for 2014.

"In general, I think we're in for a pretty good year next year," says Brown, whose Las Vegas-based annual show drew more than 93,000 attendees from around the world this year. "Certainly, having several years of stability in the economy has helped the meeting industry, despite the fact that the government likes to throw a scare at us every now and then. But what we've seen is a pretty nice, steady rebound in the economy as a whole since the end of the recession."

As a result, NAB has seen growth in its annual show each of the last two years. "This was one of the best growth years we've ever had," Brown says. "And it's looking like that for 2014 we'll have another year of significant growth in our show as well. And I am hearing the same thing from other major shows, such as the Consumer Electronics Show for January."

However, Brown says, one impact of rising travel costs is that instead of sending three, four or even five attendees to the NAB show, in some instances companies have cut back to only two — primarily as a result of rising airfares.

Johnnie White, executive director of the Center for Education at the Cardiovascular Research Foundation in New York, and the current chairman of the board of PCMA, also is guardedly optimistic about 2014.

"I think the industry next year will look similar to the way it has looked this year," White says. "I don't see a lot of growth happening. I think that in general, things will be flat. But I also think there will be some bright spots, such as international attendance continuing to grow. I hear from a number of my peers that they are investing in developing programs designed to attract more international attendees to their events in the U.S. But they are also doing more programs outside the U.S. aimed at international markets."

As a result, White says, the meeting industry's long-term growth prospects are largely based on building international membership and attendance at U.S. events.

And that is critical to the future, because he believes that the downturn in domestic attendance is a permanent change, partly based on the sluggish U.S. economy and also on the ever-growing range of competitive challenges associations face in the delivery of content via technology.

But the larger issue, White says, is budget cuts that also will be permanent. "At the time the recession was happening, people were trying to cut back," he says. "And because they were successful at it, a lot of organizations then said well, you should be able to continue working within those budget constraints."

And as a result of domestic attendance remaining flat, budgets also are destined to remain flat, White says.

Although Heftman's budgets are flat for 2014, one potential exception is content development, she says.

"To do successful meetings today, you have to provide attendees with insightful content that delivers real solutions for their industry," Heftman says. "And sometimes you can't just say we're going to hold flat on the costs of doing that. We've never been an organization that did lavish events at our meetings. But we've also always understood the value of content. So that is something we will continue to invest in."

The important point for planners to understand, Heftman says, is that although meeting and convention attendees are still hungry for face-to-face events, they are choosing the meetings they attend much more judiciously. "That means your content has got to be really top-notch and forward thinking," she says. "And accomplishing that costs money."

HOTEL COSTS

One key issue planners will face in 2014 is that the proverbial pendulum in the hotel industry has swung back to a strong seller's market. Not only are room rates and F&B costs rising sharply, but in many cases major meeting properties in high-demand destinations are once again being booked years in advance, meaning that availability also is limited.

In its 2014 Global Meetings and Events Forecast, American Express predicts a relatively modest 3–5 percent increase in hotel costs in all areas of the world, except Europe, which will remain largely unchanged. But with planners almost universally facing flat budgets, even that will be a challenge, planners agree.

"Room rates are always a challenge for any meeting," says Steven J. Stout, CAE, director of meetings and special events at Hospitality Financial and Technology Professionals, located in

"This was one of the best growth years we've ever had. And it's looking like that for 2014 we'll have another year of significant growth in our show as well. And I am hearing the same thing from other major shows, such as the Consumer Electronics Show."



Chris Brown
E.V.P. Conventions and Business
Operations
National Association of
Broadcasters, Washington, DC

Austin, TX. "And that's especially true for my meetings, because our attendees are from the hospitality industry, so we have to be able to deliver good rates. Or else they could just call one of their buddies in town and get a better rate and not be in my block."

Like most planners, Stout is now concerned about rising hotel costs. And, he says, the pricing of a gallon of coffee is now an excellent indicator of whether a planner can fit a particular property into his or her budget.

"So a lot of planners now just go straight to the price of coffee, and they won't even look at the rest of the menu when it comes to assessing a property in terms of cost," Stout says. "They say yes or no based on the price of a gallon of coffee. And if that is too high, they just say this hotel will not work for me."

Stout has recently seen coffee prices range from \$34 to \$110 per gallon. "So that can give you a very good idea of what your F&B costs are going to be," he says. "And you might love the hotel and the rooms and the meeting space. But if the price of coffee is too high, you just walk away now because you know you can't pull off your budget at that hotel."

An even broader budgetary consideration, White says, is that because hotel costs and airfares are going up, it's going to continue to be a challenge for association meeting planners to create events that make a profit. "The fact that hotels are now in a seller's market is going to hurt a lot of meetings going forward," White says. "So rising costs are the big challenge I see. And that is something we have not seen over the last few years."



Johnnie White
Executive Director, Center for Education
Cardiovascular Research Foundation
New York, NY

“But I also think there will be some bright spots. ...They are investing in developing programs designed to attract more international attendees to their events in the U.S. But they are also doing more programs outside the U.S. aimed at international markets.”

When rising costs are measured against flat budgets, White says, planners face what he calls “the perfect storm.”

FOOD AND BEVERAGE COSTS

While hotel costs are rising in general, F&B costs in particular are becoming a primary budgetary challenge for many planners. And they are requiring a different approach to planning an event.

“For example,” says Stout, “for one of our big annual meetings, we used to do a dinner event every night. But now we’ve done away with one night and given attendees an open night as a way of saving money. But on the other hand, that’s also something that is appreciated by vendors, because now they can take customers out that night and entertain them.”

Stout’s current big F&B concern is rising service fees, as much as 22 or 23 percent in some destinations. “I see various blog posts and articles about how to fight them and get them reduced,” Stout says. “But they still show up in everything we book. In some cases, those costs are just getting ridiculous. And because we’re in the hospitality business, we understand why hotels have to charge more. But that doesn’t mean we don’t challenge it, too, now.”

And recently, he has found hotels more open to negotiation. “That’s good,” he says, “because not that long ago they just said, ‘That’s our pricing. Take it or leave it.’”

F&B costs also are a major concern for White. But his focus is more on labor costs than service fees. “What’s hurting the most is the labor fees,” White says. “Because of that, what you pay now for a lunch is just crazy. And when you try to negotiate that, the thing that the hotels always bring up is their labor costs. That’s particularly true if you’re dealing with a unionized hotel.”

At the same time, White says, the food costs hotels must pay also are going up significantly. “So as a result of that, what many associations are doing is hosting fewer meal functions or finding ways to reduce costs,” White says. “For example, we now do continental breakfasts instead of full breakfasts and instead of a lunch buffet, we’re now doing box lunches. And we also don’t do any kind of extravagant dinner programs anymore because of the costs associated with them.”

AIRFARES AND AIRLIFT

For 2014, airfares will only increase, on average, by about 1.6 percent, with a 1.1 percent increase predicted for 2015, according to American Express’ 2014 Global Meetings and Events Forecast.

However, planners who host meetings in some major U.S. destinations are already reporting increases significantly larger than that. And an even bigger concern for some planners is the availability of airlift to and from particular destinations.

Although NAB has largely been able to hold the line on hotel costs, largely as a result of its leverage and long history as one of the largest trade shows held in Las Vegas each year, Brown is now concerned about airfares and airlift.

“The air issue is really the significant one for us right now,” Brown says. “It’s become a much bigger part of the equation as we look at alternate destinations for meetings and events. If it’s expensive or difficult to get into a particular city, we are much less likely to really take a look at that destination.”

Stout, however, has actually found fares and routes to be more favorable for his major meetings. “A lot of air routes are actually becoming more accessible, with more direct flights,” he says. “But in some instances, I agree that fares are an issue.”

On the other hand, he says, he now finds that attendees are often willing to pay a small additional price in fare for convenience in order to experience new destinations. “It might be a little harder to get there, but once they’re there, I find that a lot of attendees like the diversity of going somewhere new,” he says. “And sometimes that means a destination other than a top-tier city. So based on that, we’re mixing our destination selection up a little bit more.”

As a cost consideration, HFTP has been using second-tier destinations for several years. “And I now feel like second-tier destinations are really competing with first-tier cities for meeting business,” Stout says.

One good example is his home town of Austin, an eclectic destination that also offers a strong value proposition. “And now

As a cost consideration, HFTP has been using second-tier destinations for several years. “And I now feel like second-tier destinations are really competing with first-tier cities for meeting business.”



Steven J. Stout, CAE
Director of Meetings and Special
Events, Hospitality Financial and
Technology Professionals
Austin, TX

Austin is successfully competing with first-tier destinations like Orlando or Las Vegas because the city is offering something different — and also a more personalized experience, because first-tier cities have so many other meetings going on while you’re in town,” Stout says. “So if you go to a place like Austin, you get treated like a VIP. And who doesn’t like that?”

TECHNOLOGY CONCERNS

Somewhat surprisingly, the biggest single concern among planners is access to and the potential cost of technology, such as wider Wi-Fi access and the bandwidth required to support it.

“A major issue I see is that demand for technology is really coming to a head,” White says. “Everybody is demanding more technology. And that’s because the average attendee now brings three devices with them to a meeting — their phone, their PDA and their laptop. And they’re expecting to be connected at all times.”

In a truly surprising number of instances, planners agree, even major flag hotels in A-list destinations are ill-equipped to meet the burgeoning demand for onsite mobile technology and bandwidth.

“So we’re getting to the point as organizations where we have to bring in our own IT folks and other technology experts to be able to deal with all of that,” White says. “And that’s something I’m doing now, because we use a lot of technology at our meetings. As a result, I’m now bringing in a dedicated IT person to handle technology, because our meeting planners do not have that expertise.”

The practical challenge for planners, White says, is a better understanding of how much bandwidth they actually need — and why — for a particular meeting. “And the hotels and convention centers are not particularly upfront about educating planners about what they need, because they’re looking out for their business and trying to make as much money as possible,” he says. “And that means they usually sell a package. But that package might not be the most appropriate for the planner. And a lot of planners don’t really understand how to determine that.”

Brown agrees that bandwidth challenges with hotels and other venues are becoming a significant new issue for planners of major events.

“We are certainly running into it as a technical issue,” Brown says. “And that is usually based on bandwidth and capacity. So those things are now a significant part of the discussion we have upfront in preparing for an event.”

The underlying conflict, Brown says — and White agrees — is that on the one hand there is spiraling demand for bandwidth as a result of the ever-increasing number of mobile devices attendees bring to meetings, while on the other hand hotels have grossly underestimated the extent of that demand.

“It’s just a matter of demand and infrastructure and the fact that many hotels just have to catch up with the demand,” Brown says. “And that means not just catch up in terms of the technology itself, but also in terms of the business model, which starts with how

they are being charged for the increased bandwidth and then continues on to how they are going to pass those costs along to their meeting customers.”

A related issue is that meeting planners and attendees expect to get the capacity free or almost free. “So that in and of itself is a significant factor that the hotels need to catch up to and figure out,” Brown says.

And the obvious reality, he adds, is that hotels will have to pass

“Whether it’s a meeting or any of the things related to a convention you’re planning, I think our biggest challenge is going to be the cost of travel...both flights and hotels. And those things are going to start to become prohibitive for many attendees.”



Mary Pat Heftman
E.V.P. of Convention and Strategic
Alliances
National Restaurant Association
Chicago, IL

on the cost of improved infrastructure to meeting hosts. “It’s already expensive,” he says. “But it’s also going to continue to get more expensive. And so that’s an issue we have to grapple with as an industry. And it is a challenging one because it leads all the way back to the telecom providers themselves. But it goes to the idea of being able to deliver the kind of experience we and our attendees want.”

Stout acknowledges that the issue is one of growing concern to HFTP’s hospitality industry members. “Our members are usually members of IT departments, so they are the ones recommending the changes that their hotels need to make,” he says. “But they’re not the ones that approve the change. So we have worked on giving our members the information they need to create those presentations to their GMs and owners. But hotels are notorious for having been behind the tech curve for quite some time. And U.S. hotels always seem to be a step behind hotels in places like Asia when it comes to technology. But now U.S. hotels are working to change that.”

He also agrees with Brown that the solution to the problem will drive up meeting costs even further because upgrading the technology is expensive.

Thus, from rising costs to inadequate technological capabilities, the significant challenges facing meeting planners in the coming year will be mitigated to some degree by an improving economy and an optimistic outlook for the future.

Theme Park Meetings

Using Family-Friendly Venues to Boost Attendance

By Karen Brost

Maurice Foster, Esq., CMP, and executive director of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), clearly sees the attendance-boosting advantages of making an annual meeting a family-friendly event.

“Meetings are more than just a professional development opportunity,” he says. “Some families take the opportunity to turn it into a summer vacation, a family gathering, and that’s being done in the interest of economics.” He adds that members may have to make a choice between attending a meeting or taking the kids to a Disney theme park or another fun place in the summer. “You don’t want to be in a position where you’re competing against the family. So how do you create an atmosphere that allows a lot to be accomplished and allows a family to maximize on its resources? One way to do that is to create a family-friendly convention environment.”

To accomplish that goal, NABJ, which is headquartered in College Park, MD, held its 2013 Convention & Career Fair in Orlando at the Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center. For the first time, the organization offered a youth enrichment program that included workshops on health, fitness and performing arts; visits to Disney theme parks and Downtown Disney; a pool party; and other fun activities. Foster describes what made Orlando a good choice for



Photos by Tony Kawashima



The California Transit Association’s Public and Community Transportation Conference & Expo featured a Disneyland-inspired theme: “Imagineering Transit.” The association bought out Cars Land (above) for rides and a dessert reception; and attendees and their families posed for photos with Mickey and Minnie.

NABJ’s annual event. “Orlando is a very difficult place to say no to. It’s a very family-friendly environment.”

MENTORING OPPORTUNITIES

Foster says that another advantage of making conferences family-friendly is the opportunity that they offer for mentoring. “Sometimes, the best mentorship programs you can have are in the

family, with the children,” he notes. “Doctors’ children tend to look toward becoming doctors, lawyers’ children tend to become lawyers, and so forth. A lot of groups have internship programs or some youth mentoring aspect. What better place to begin that than at home and to create a training atmosphere where the children can be exposed to what their parents are doing for a career?”

Foster made sure that NABJ’s youth enrichment program

appealed to kids of all ages. But, he says, the success of the program all depends on how many kids register. "This is the difficulty about it. You have to make sure you get enough kids in each age category to participate. I developed a similar program with a bar association several years ago. I would say they've been doing it for 15 years now, and that program is very similar to what we are doing here."

He described his next goal for the program. "We want to get high school kids doing more, doing a college tour to take advantage of the location and allow them to go around and see the campuses. This year, we didn't get enough of the high school-age kids to participate, but the vision has got to be there because you never know (who is going to attend)."

He says that having a youth program makes it possible for parents to turn their attention to attending the workshops and the other things that they need to do for professional development. "Our program is very cost-effective," he adds. "In fact, it's very inexpensive, comparatively. It allows you to drop the kids off in the morning and they're under care all day long in programs and activities. In the evening time, we did a few things to allow the parents to make it to some of the receptions, particularly the night of the banquet. In the future, we may look at having a miniature banquet for the kids. There are a lot of options to create an award program, award contest or have a talent show to allow them to engage."



Families in attendance at the National Association of Black Journalists' 2013 Convention & Career Fair in Orlando enjoy Disney World's magic.

Foster received a positive response from parents who registered their kids for the program. "The coordinators of the program actually created a site, a chat group, where parents could stay in contact with the kids throughout the day. It worked great when they were out at Disney. They were sending photos back

"There is a segment of folks that are opting out (of meetings) because they have kids. You have to have a summer vacation, and sometimes the meetings can take a back seat. One way to get those folks back involved is to create a family-friendly environment."



Maurice Foster, CMP
Executive Director
National Association of Black Journalists
College Park, MD

and forth to their parents about that. I think that (visiting Disney attractions) is something that parents intended to do with their kids, but just couldn't figure out how to fit it in. It gave them the opportunity to connect and be there, but not be there."

DESTINATION DISNEYLAND

The Disneyland Hotel was the site of the California Transit Association's (CTA) Public and Community Transportation Conference & Expo. Amy Lai, association services director for Shaw/Yoder/Antwih Inc., which manages 11 trade associations including CTA, planned the conference in partnership with the California Association for Coordinated Transportation. The iconic hotel, which opened in 1955, is conveniently located near Disneyland and the Disney California Adventure Park, and the Downtown Disney shopping, dining and entertainment complex. The event had a Disney-inspired theme: "Imagineering Transit."

"When you have a venue such as Disneyland, it just lends itself to inviting families," Lai says. "We thought it would help our attendance by saying, 'Come for the education, however, (also) come for fun and bring your families.' I think it really did help with boosting our attendance. When you have it at a place where you want to take your family, people will kill two birds with one stone, so to speak."

The conference's organizers made a decision that proved to be popular. "We rented Cars Land," Lai explains. "It was mostly older children, but there were some younger ones. It was late. It was when the park closed, so we had it from 9 to 11 p.m. We obtained a few sponsors, and we had a dessert reception there and had three rides available. It was a real highlight of the conference."

The conference also included another event for the kids. "On the last day of our conference, we ended around noon," Lai explains. "In the morning, we had just a short business meeting and then we had photos with Mickey and Minnie, and then we set up some Halloween carnival games. It was just some simple games for the younger kids with some prizes and some Halloween treats."

"Disneyland is great if the group can afford to rent a portion of the park to do a ride or you can have a family dinner event," she continues. "This is the first time that we've really gone to this extent to say families are welcome. It's Disneyland — you just can't ignore the family factor there."

Lai says the attendees were happy with the outcome. "They loved it. They were really happy to have their families with them and that their families could share in a portion of the conference. I think they felt like we cared about their families and we cared about them." She added that the idea for making the event family-friendly came from her executive director. "It started from the top down because he really wanted to do a family event and he was excited about bringing his son, so he said, 'why don't we make sure we do something for the families on Friday at our conference?'"

The Disneyland Hotel has revamped its 975 guest rooms and 65 suites through what it calls a "modern makeover with a magical twist." The rooms now have a contemporary look and feature classic Disney artwork and memorabilia. "They've renovated the rooms to make them more corporate-feeling," Lai notes. "They're trying to cater a little bit more to the convention market."

The property has 136,000 sf of indoor and outdoor function space, including the 18,000-sf Disney Grand Ballroom that features a built-in stage, full lighting and sound capabilities and a private pre-function area. The hotel also recently unveiled the Blue Sky Suite, a 3,000-sf purpose-built meetings suite designed to encourage "blue sky thinking." It can accommodate meetings for up to 15 people.

"(The Disneyland Hotel) is very convenient, right outside Downtown Disney," she continues. "They bring in that 'happiest place on earth' feeling into the hotel, so I would say it is a fun venue to have a conference at. Everyone was very friendly. Some of the rooms there are very large and then they've got some rooms that are kind of small. The thing that I learned — get a double/double room. You're going to get a bigger room."

"I think anywhere you promote family-type activities will boost your attendance. It gives them another reason to go. We would probably go back to Disneyland Hotel and do another conference there," Lai says. But she faces the same dilemma many other planners face. "After Cars Land, it's going to be a hard act to follow to do another special event because we rented that side of the park and it was just amazing. I'm telling you that was fantastic."

SWEET SUCCESS

Jessica Winger, meeting manager for the Pennsylvania Society of Gastroenterology (PSG) recently planned the organization's annual scientific meeting at The Hotel Hershey in Hershey, PA. A member of Historic Hotels of America, the Forbes Four Star, AAA Four Diamond property offers 276 guest rooms and 23,500 sf of meeting space.

The town of Hershey is known as "The Sweetest Place on Earth" and is home to a wide array of family-friendly venues, including the Hersheypark theme park, Hershey's Chocolate World, ZooAmerica and Dutch Wonderland. Hershey is located in central Pennsylvania, just 90 minutes from Baltimore and Philadelphia, two hours from Washington, DC, and three hours from New York City.

PSG's group primarily included physicians, but there also were



Opportunities for "revolutionary" themed events abound at Colonial Williamsburg, which offers a variety of accommodations and meeting spaces.

nurses and physicians' assistants in attendance. "With this group, some of the families attend," Winger explains. "The meeting is to get their CME (continuing medical education) credits."

"They like Hershey because of the whole Hersheypark (complex), so we had the afternoon open for the families to take the time to go to Hersheypark and Chocolate World and do that," she adds. "With The Hotel Hershey, you can get discounted tickets through the concierge. They enjoyed it. Between the Boardwalk, which is the water park area, and having the actual rides, it's nice and convenient having both of those options all in one at one park."

"It's a beautiful hotel," she continues. "They have the spa there, too, which is nice for the spouses to do while their husbands or wives are in meetings." Known as "the Chocolate Spa," it offers such tasty-sounding treatments as the whipped cocoa bath, chocolate bean polish and the chocolate fondue wrap. And if that's not enough to keep spouses busy, they can head over to the Tanger Outlet mall nearby.

"They were really happy to have their families with them and that their families could share in a portion of the conference. I think they felt like we cared about their families and we cared about them."



Amy Lai
Association Services Director
Shaw/Yoder/Antwih Inc. for the
California Transit Association
Sacramento, CA

Winger also liked the layout of the meeting space at The Hotel Hershey. "We were all in one area of the ballroom. I had posters for my residents, which we utilized the foyer areas for, and then we had a general session and hands-on sessions for our docs. The space worked out great. It was all close by, all on one floor."

She also lauded the long tenure of the hotel's staff. "The service was great. My convention service manager has been there, I think,

20-plus years. That's always nice, especially in the hotel industry. (Sometimes, at other hotels) I start planning a year out, and half-way through I have a different convention service manager.

"I think that my group would definitely look into going back again in the future," she concludes.

WINNING THEM OVER IN WILLIAMSBURG

As a family-friendly destination, Williamsburg, VA, offers a wealth of attractions for spouses and kids to explore while attendees are taking care of business. The 425-room Kingsmill Resort is conveniently located near historic Colonial Williamsburg as well as the European-themed adventure park Busch Gardens and Water Country USA, the largest water park in the mid-Atlantic region.

Kingsmill Resort occupies 2,900 protected acres along the James River, and includes three golf courses, 15 tennis courts, three pools and a lazy river. Five restaurants and the Spa at Kingsmill are also located onsite. For meetings, the resort offers a 16,000-sf conference center, which has been certified by the International Association of Conference Centers (IACC) and offers 16 meeting rooms that are soundproofed and feature adjustable lighting, individual climate controls and state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment.

In June, the resort will debut the first four cottages in a new community named The Cottages on The James. As the name im-



Photo courtesy of Universal Orlando Resort

The new "Despicable Me"-inspired suites at Loews Portofino Bay Hotel at Universal Orlando Resort feature custom-designed missile beds.

Hotel contains 750 recently renovated guest rooms and 42,000 sf of event space. Guests staying at the hotel are entitled to special benefits that include "skip the regular lines" and "early park admission" at both of Universal's theme parks with paid admission.

Opening in 2014 at Universal Orlando Resort will be Universal's largest hotel — the economical and family-friendly Cabana Bay Beach Resort — and The Wizarding World of Harry Potter's Diagon Alley. And Universal recently announced that in 2014 Universal CityWalk will add eight new "culinary concept" venues. The 30-acre CityWalk complex currently features a collection of nightclubs, restaurants and shops. CityWalk also is home to the karaoke club Rising Star, Hollywood Drive-In Golf, and the renowned live show Blue Man Group.

Earlier this year, Walt Disney World Resort announced plans to transform Downtown Disney into Disney Springs, an expanded shopping, dining and entertainment destination. New areas will be opened in phases, and when the new complex is completed in 2016 it will have twice the number of shops, restaurants and other venues that Downtown Disney had.

THEMED-CRUISE NEWS

After undergoing a "reimagining" transformation in Cadiz, Spain, the Disney Magic cruise ship is now offering new experiences for meeting attendees, including a new grand atrium and the Senses spa. Of course, there are plenty of ways for attendees' kids to have fun, not the least of which is AquaDunk, a three-story slide. The 2,700-passenger ship contains 11 decks, and planners arranging onboard meetings are assisted by a Group Services Manager.

From May to August of 2014, the Disney Magic will sail the Mediterranean, using Venice, Italy and Barcelona, Spain as its home ports. Then, from September to October, the ship will sail a series of seven-night cruises to the southern Caribbean from San Juan.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Foster was pleased with the outcome of NAJB's first family-friendly program. "It was good to start it and launch it, and we hope that it will pick up and continue year after year. There is a segment of folks that are opting out (of meetings) because they have kids. You have to have a summer vacation, and sometimes the meetings can take a back seat. One way to get those folks back involved is to create a family-friendly environment." AC&F



Jessica Winger
Meeting Manager
Pennsylvania Society of
Gastroenterology
Harrisburg, PA

"They like Hershey because of the whole Hersheypark (complex), so we had the afternoon open for the families to take the time to go to Hersheypark and Chocolate World."

plies, they will be situated on the James River, and will include three to four en suite bedrooms and a gourmet kitchen. Two of the resort's golf courses are located just steps away, making the cottages ideal for VIPs or an executive retreat.

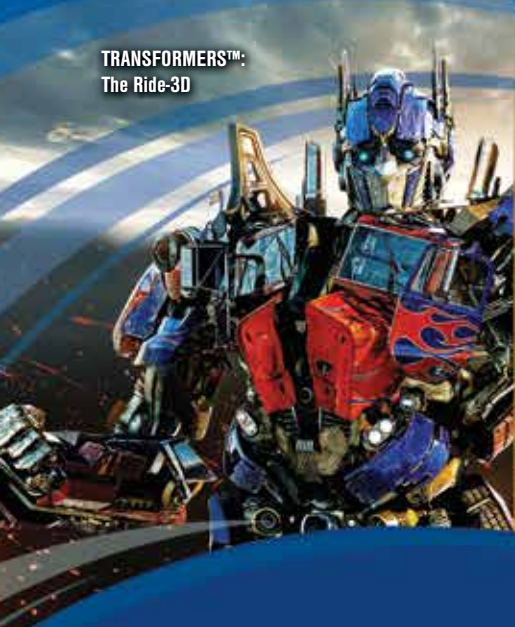
THEME PARK NEWS

Attendees with children who are fans of the movie "Despicable Me" will likely appreciate staying in one of the 18 new two-room suites inspired by the movie that are now available at Loews Portofino Bay Hotel at Universal Orlando Resort. The kids' room in each suite is minion-themed and contains custom-designed "missile" beds, while the adults' room features the hotel's new Italian luxury design. The Italian Riviera-themed Loews Portofino Bay

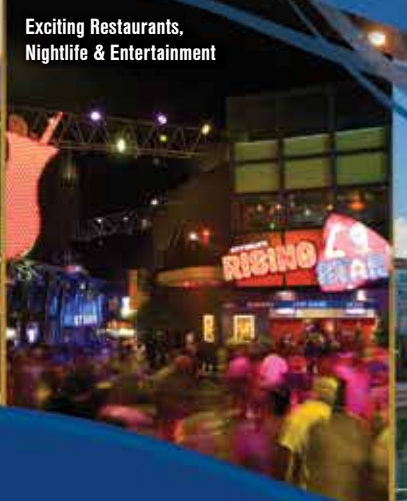
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Overhaul Your Annual Meeting

By Gabi Logan

How You Can Top Last Year's by Rebranding, Revamping and Revising

For association meeting planners, annual meetings are a perennial challenge. How do you get essentially the same group of people together every year, provide content that keeps everyone from new attendees to seasoned veterans interested, and top yourself year after year?

With the recession hampering budgets and technology enabling more and more remote, digital meetings, many

associations are facing — or fearing — dropping attendance and bland evaluations.

“The one feedback that we always got was, ‘This is the way that we’ve always done it,’” says Rafael Rivera, CMP, CAE, executive director of the El Segundo, CA-based Professionals In Human Resources Association (PIHRA). “If that’s the case, you have to look at the trends and see where your content fails. It’s usually because you’ve been doing the same thing year after year.”

“Adapting to the business climate of your attendees is important,” adds Joanna Beaver, assistant vice president of meetings at the Consumer Bankers Association (CBA) in Fort Myers, FL. “If you are not evolving on a continuous basis, you are not keeping up and — more crucially — you risk losing the attendees that make an event successful. We are constantly questioning what we are doing, what we should be doing and what we should stop doing.”

Associations around the country have turned issues of staleness into rave reviews by dramatically overhauling their meetings through complete rebrands, venue and content revamps, and changes as simple yet powerful as a money-back guarantee.

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

When Rivera set out to launch a new branded annual meeting for PIHRA, he says, “My goal was to offer something that no one else was.” His imperative highlights an important re-



Rafael Rivera, CMP, CAE
Executive Director, Professionals In Human Resources Association
El Segundo, CA

“This was the second year we said, ‘If we don’t meet your education expectations, we’ll give you your money back.’ ...I think people were much more comfortable registering because of it.”



Happy and engaged attendees flank award-winning comic John Heffron (c), the featured performer at the California HR Conference held at the Anaheim Convention Center’s new Grand Plaza in August. Rafael Rivera, the executive director of the Professionals in Human Resources Association, successfully overhauled the annual meeting with a new place, a new date, a rebranding and initiatives such as an attendance-building money-back guarantee.

quirement for all association meeting planners: the demand for a differentiated product.

“PIHRA has hosted this annual conference for 55 years, so we had to wait for a non-milestone anniversary year to introduce the new brand, which would encompass a larger audience in terms of who would attend as well as who we were trying to target,” Rivera explains. “The biggest challenge that we faced along the way was the worry of losing the identity of the organization. Our acronym is PIHRA, and our attendees knew our product as the PIHRA annual conference. How are you going to take that away? How do our members know that this is our annual conference?”

To make all parties happy, PIHRA used different names in their segmented marketing. Information sent to members called it the California HR Conference by the Professionals in Human Resources Association, while non-members received information on the CA HR Conference. “That better resonates with them as an education opportunity,” says Rivera.

“California human resource employment laws are at times more stringent than those in other states, and people felt,

‘Should we go to that conference? I’m not sure it’s for me.’ They’re California practitioners because they have HR out here, but they work elsewhere. This year we had attendees from 27 different states. The added benefit is that they can share how things are different in Texas and how things are done in New York.”

For Rivera, the rebrand had immediate benefits. “In 2010, about 80 percent of our members were attending our conference, and we gained 10–15 percent that aren’t affiliated with any organization and another 10–15 percent that are affiliated with an organization that doesn’t offer these education opportunities,” he says.

In the aftermath of the recession, meeting planners for banking associations have particularly struggled with the imperative for product differentiation. Five years ago, at the height of the recession, the Consumer Bankers Association combined their eight conferences into one large annual event.

“With the financial crisis having a major impact on all our annual events, we made a strategic decision that brought about a more widely attended and more cohesive conference,” says Beaver. “The first year of our conference had more attendees



“We’re seeing a lot more younger attendees when we look at the demographics, and the feedback shows they like more participatory events. ...We knew that it was time to refresh and introduce new elements that were energizing.”

Megan Ogden
Meeting and Event Manager, National Association of Colleges and Employers
Bethlehem, PA

than we had in all our conferences combined the previous year. Since then, we have seen a 50 percent increase in attendance and are recognized as the premier event for leaders in the retail banking industry.

“Signature elements and industry disruptors are key to keeping our content fresh,” she says. For the association, technological innovation is such a key differentiating factor that they have even incorporated it into the name of their new event — CBA Live. During general sessions, audience response devices poll the audience with questions and show responses, keeping attendees engaged and measuring the effectiveness of meeting content in real time. In a move that heightened both the digital and eco-friendly quotient of the event, CBA reduced their print expenditures with a mobile app that served as a guide to the entire conference as well as an appointment scheduler.

“We’ve also added an entirely new forum to meet the needs and interests of our attendees,” Beaver says. “Each forum has eight hours of programming specifically tailored to a topic our members are hungry for information on.”

CUTTING-EDGE CONTENT

Content features like CBA’s new forums can have a powerful impact on attendees’ educational takeaways, but you don’t have to rebrand your entire meeting to make these sweeping changes.

Megan Ogden, meeting and event manager at the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) in Bethlehem, PA, is slowly moving her annual meeting’s workshops from long, PowerPoint-based talks to punchy, laser-focused briefs on hot-button topics as buy-in from attendees and speakers grows year after year. “We run roughly 70–80 workshops during the event,” Ogden says. “The first year, SMARTtalks and Peer2Peers only accounted for about 10 percent of the event. Now we have about 20–25 percent participation.”

When Ogden looked at feedback, evaluations and at the event itself, she realized that they were facing an important attendee shift. “We’re seeing a lot more younger attendees when we look at the demographics, and the feedback shows they like more participatory events. We noticed a lot of traditional workshops that were death by PowerPoint, and we were getting feedback that the format of the breakout sessions was static.

“We knew that it was time to refresh and introduce new elements that were energizing, and coincidentally, the topics in the meeting planning industry in 2009 and 2010 were how to actively engage learners,” Ogden says. “Two years ago, based on our ‘smart solutions’ theme that year, we launched SMARTtalks, modeled after the success of TED talks.”

SMARTtalks are 15-minute presentations focused on a take-away grouped into one-hour-long presentations made from four SMARTtalks. “We give speakers topics based on what we’ve heard from our members are the hot topics,” Ogden says. “Learning and networking are the goals of most attendees, so we also created a format that addresses those two goals at once. We describe Peer2Peer to speakers as 60-minute, no PowerPoint sessions led by a facilitator in which participants discuss cutting-edge practices and brainstorm how to resolve issues, but we pretty much leave it to the presenter to interpret what that means to them. Some people create table discussions or small breakout groups, but each of the presenters does it somewhat differently.”

When NACE invites proposals, presenters can choose between Peer2Peers, SMARTtalks or regular presentations. “At first speakers were confused that we were asking them to do more than just present on their expertise, so that’s why it was a choice if they wanted to try it,” Ogden explains. “We had a few people say, ‘What is this concept? I’m not sure if I want to try it. Is it okay to break away?’ and we really encouraged those who were interested, and we had resources to help them.”

“By moving all of our speaker sessions to the exhibit hall, we created a flow that benefited both attendees and exhibitors. Attendees love the compactness, while exhibitors love that attendee flow through their booths increased.”



Jason Weinstein, CMP
National Event Director, AARP
Washington, DC

Ogden always views these changes as a risk, but a necessary one. “From the attendees, we’ve received very positive feedback, in that they were very receptive that we were trying new things to engage them in their learning process. It’s nice to hear people say that because it validates that there is a need to make things fresh every year. It encourages us to keep taking risks every year.”

ONE BIG, HAPPY FAMILY

While many meeting overhauls involve better serving attendees, you can’t forget to address the needs of your exhibitors. Attracting exhibitors and sponsors has become increasingly difficult as budgets tighten and companies re-examine which and how many events to send their delegates to, leaving association meeting planners looking for new ways to make their events more attractive than the competition.

AARP has addressed this challenge by relocating their entire event to the exhibit floor. “We’ve created session ‘rooms’ on our main exhibit floor for a more centralized hub of activity that has changed the overall attendee flow and created more time for attendees to experience all of the different aspects of the event,” explains Jason Weinstein, CMP, national event director for AARP in Washington, DC.

This dramatic change came as a result of complaints from attendees, who “felt as if they were missing out on sessions or interacting with our exhibitors because they were walking long distances throughout the space,” according to Weinstein. “By moving all of our speaker sessions to the exhibit hall, we created a flow that benefited both attendees and exhibitors. Attendees love the compactness, while exhibitors love that attendee flow through their booths increased. Attendees no longer lose momentum between sessions, and exhibitors no longer lose their audiences when attendees take in these sessions.”

Though it seems that, like the format changes NACE introduced with SMARTtalks and Peer2Peers, speakers would take a while to warm up to centralized hubs, AARP’s solution has had un-

expected perks for speakers. “Session presenters also found not only that attendance increased, but also that attendees remained in place for the entire session,” says Weinstein. Larger exhibitors and sponsors, several of which provide speakers and topical programs, have found the proximity advantageous to participation in their booth activities because of continued dialog at the conclusion of individual sessions.”

IN&OUT

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Joyce DePass, director of meetings and special programs at the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) in Washington, DC., hasn't yet taken the leap of bringing her entire event to the exhibitors, but she's found ways of using some of the biggest crowd draws to bring people to the floor.

"Like many organizations, we need our attendees to spend more time on the show floor to keep our exhibitors happy, so we



"Like many organizations, we need our attendees to spend more time on the show floor to keep our exhibitors happy, so we look for things that are out of the ordinary that will draw their attention to the exhibit hall."

Joyce DePass
Director of Meetings and Special Programs, American Society of Landscape Architects
Washington, DC

look for things that are out of the ordinary that will draw their attention to the exhibit hall. In Boston this year, we are doing a Student Pecha Kucha Theater. Winners of the ASLA Student Awards and EPA's Campus RainWorks Challenge have just 20 seconds to present their awards with just 20 images. We've also moved the ASLA Sketch Boston display, which allows attendees to see Boston through the eyes of landscape architects as captured during one of our 16 field sessions held earlier in the week, to the exhibitor floor."

LOVE IT, OR IT'S FREE

Overhauling your annual meeting takes time and buy-in from many different stakeholders. It's not an easy fix. When you know you need to do something to reinvigorate your annual meeting, but don't yet have the support to make sweeping branding, programmatic or venue changes, there is one tactic that you can try. It starts the process slowly, builds directly on attendee needs, and creates excitement among members that your association is working to better serve them.

When Rivera introduced the reorganized PIHRA annual meeting — beyond waiting for a non-anniversary year, drumming up support from new audience segments, and finding a new date and location — one of his biggest risks, and biggest payoffs, was his money-back guarantee.

"I put my cell phone number right up there on the slide and

said, 'If you have a problem, let me know. If I didn't do everything to be your chief experiential officer, then call me,'" Rivera says. "I think every association wants to stand behind their product and say they're very customer service-centric," he continues. "This was the second year we said, 'If we don't meet your education expectations, we'll give you your money back.' I don't have data that 15 percent of people registered for the conference just because of the guarantee, but I think people were much more comfortable registering because of it."

Rivera found that before the conference, the money-back guarantee affected his speaker selection as well as how prospective attendees viewed the conference. "We took a very business angle. We understand the relationships that we have, but we need to meet the needs of the people who are coming to our conference," he says. "I had to make some calls saying, 'I really appreciate that you've spoken at our conference for the last 20 years. This is the data that we've had from our surveys, and it says you weren't in the top 10. You weren't even in our top 80. My concern is that we have this guarantee, and we can't take the risk of putting anyone on our program if their session will not be as well received, because we will have to give money back.'"

At this year's conference, Rivera received a slew of phone calls and texts the first day because the session rooms were too full for many attendees to catch the talks they were interested in, talks from speakers who had drawn them to the event in the first place.

Rivera and his team jumped into action immediately, opening up rooms and changing them from classroom-style seating to theater-style setups. The next morning, he announced that everyone who had registered for the Monday sessions would receive a free subscription to the on-demand video of that day's talks. "No one asked for their money back this year," says Rivera.

Rivera suggests meeting planners spend more time analyzing whatever data they have available to make sure it's really feeding their association objectives. "I ask for the metrics of everything: What is the percentage of return exhibitors and return attendees? What is the breakout of members among return attendees? Are new members only with us because they want to get a lower rate for the conference? What are the demographics of who is coming? Are there more 1-50 or 1000+ employee companies, etc.?" he says.

No matter how large or small of an overhaul you are able to implement for your own annual meeting, the effort can go a long way to show attendees that you are concerned about meeting their needs.

"Try it. You're not going to know success unless you try," advises Ogden. "If it doesn't work, it doesn't work, but I think it's important to recognize that there needs to be change, and the majority of the time your audience is going to be receptive to you examining their needs and responding to them." AC&F

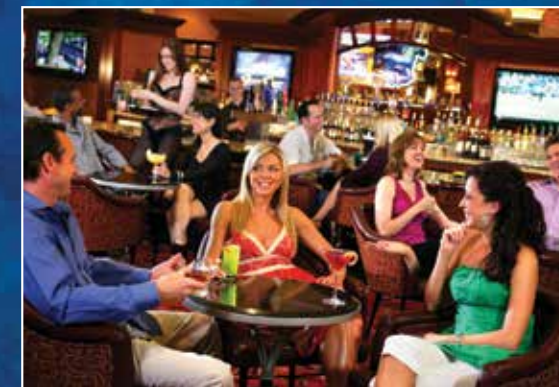
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Lessons From Superstorm

Be Prepared With a Solid Communications Strategy

By Derek Reveron

Hurricane Sandy, which severely battered the East Coast in October 2012, was a hurricane of historic proportions. Sometimes called Superstorm Sandy, it was the first storm in recorded history to take a sharp left-hand turn into New Jersey as it traveled northward, and it was the first time historical maximum water levels were recorded in several places in NJ and NY.

Today, the fallout from the storm lingers as associations were forced to cancel or postpone conferences that were scheduled in destinations in the storm's path.

Moreover, some associations learned that their severe weather emergency plans were neither strong nor broad enough to cover such a weather event. These groups learned valuable lessons and tweaked their crisis plans accordingly. Most of all, organizations learned that a strong and comprehensive communications strategy is a crucial element of a weather crisis plan.

In addition, some associations continue to recover financially after losing much-needed revenue from canceled conferences. Recovering from Sandy has become a recurring theme for many associations, which are meeting again in 2013 after missing out because of Sandy.

One such association is the New Jersey State League of Municipalities (NJSLOM). The group, which canceled its annual conference scheduled for



An iconic image — The Casino Pier Star Jet roller coaster was submerged just off the Seaside Heights, NJ, boardwalk after Hurricane Sandy in October 2012 and demolished in May 2013.

Gymnis Jones / Shutterstock.com

Atlantic City, NJ, 10 days before Sandy hit, met late in 2013 with about 18,000 attendees. Severe weather planning and recovery were a big part of the agenda, much of which was a carryover from last year's canceled conference. "We had a terrific conference lined up before the storm struck and didn't want to throw all that work out the window," says Michael Darcy, assistant executive director of NJSLOM. "So we kept it and added seminar tracks about emergency response programs, lessons learned, and state and federal recovery programs."

The NJSLOM conference's theme "Navigating Recovery and Renewal" was developed as a direct result of the storm. "The theme came out of damage done by the storm because our members are the local government officials actually engaged in trying to get the state restored," says Darcy. "We took a cue from some of the themes that were prominent around the state such as 'Restore the Shore' and 'Stronger than the Storm.'"

The conference also included several sessions on ways to beef up emergency response programs. "We have done emergency response education programs for years," says Darcy. "In fact, the year before Sandy, we did a very intense program on how to deal with storm emergencies. But Sandy gave us a real-life drill, so we're talking about what we learned."

Seminars covered several aspects of weather crisis management such as "Emergency Management Leadership for Local Elected Officials," "Chronic Major Flooding in New Jersey,"

"Implementing Effective Risk Management," "Sandy One Year Later," and "Challenges of Disruptions of Utility Services." During the seminars, attendees shared lessons learned from their emergency response programs.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Some seminars emphasized that a crisis communication plan is crucial to keeping attendees and others updated on managing canceled and postponed meetings. The NJSLOM recognized that its crisis communication plan worked well. "The more I hear about the disasters that other (groups) have experienced, the more I realize that our emergency communication plan was the backbone of our response and helped us avoid what could have been a catastrophe by collapsing under the weight of confusion," says Darcy. "We really haven't changed it since Sandy."

The NJSLOM's emergency communications plan was launched immediately after it canceled its conference on November 2, which was three days after Sandy struck on

October 29, and 10 days before the meeting's scheduled start on November 12.

The NJSLOM's crisis communication strategy consists of several key components including lists of people to call, office and cell phone numbers, and who is responsible for making calls. "There is a lot of communication that has to happen in a short time," says Darcy. "We have to call hundreds of people — 18,000 attendees, over 1,000 exhibitors and vendors, our board of directors and staff. We are ready to do broad-based communications through many modes of technology and do it quickly. We have to be ready to do constant conference and individual calls, and we have all the numbers we need to do that."

The New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), based in Trenton, launched crisis communications after canceling its annual conference about four days before Sandy arrived, which was also about 24 hours before starting early setup for the convention, says Michael Cohan, director, professional development and instructional issues and head of conference planning. "We have 260 people on our association staff and a whole section devoted to communications including media relations and social media. We communicated our decision very quickly to all audiences. What I learned from Sandy is how skilled our staff is under pressure," says Cohan.

Associations can learn from the experiences of groups that Sandy impacted. The main lesson: Even the best crisis management plans are ineffective without a solid communications strategy, says Will Engle, CMP, director of conferences and events for AMR Management Services, an association management company in Lexington, KY. Engle has a crisis communication plan that it tailors for each client, some of which lack their own crisis management plans.

The plan covers everything from poor weather conditions and natural disasters to medical emergencies, accidents and terrorist attacks. However, "communication is the No. 1 thing," says Engle. "We communicate internally and externally and designate people to contact attendees, the media and offsite staff. We have contact lists for local police, fire and emergency management officials, and the Department of Homeland Security's color-coded terrorism threat advisory scale. We give a copy of the plan to any staff we send to conferences."

DETAILS MATTER

Associations affected by Sandy also learned that a catastrophe can test the limits of the act of God clause and vendor relation-



ships. Some of NJEA's vendors could have legally disputed the clause in contracts with the association, but didn't. "We understood how strong our business relationships were in that they understood our problems," says Cohan. "They granted us relief for some things they had not yet completed but might have been able to assert a contractual right to. We knew we were obligated to pay for certain goods and services already rendered. For instance, our exhibit service company's warehouse had a bunch of our materials shipped to it already. We weren't going to ask any partner to take a loss."

The NJSLOM reviewed its contracts and agreements with suppliers and others, and reassessed other aspects of its severe weather preparedness. "We asked ourselves questions internally and operationally," says Darcy. "One of the first questions was 'Are our contracts and business relationships in order?' We never had a clause with exhibitors that covered what we would do for them if we canceled a convention so we added one saying we would offer refunds based on a scale. We didn't invent the wheel on this, but we had to make sure everything was up to standards."

Another question the NJSLOM asked: "What if we have high-level speakers at a luncheon but, due to an emergency, changed the speaker but still had the luncheon?" says Darcy. "We modified our lunch ticket order form to say that if we decided to modify the event, there wouldn't be a refund. Little things like that are important."

The NJSLOM also re-examined the ability of its headquarters building to withstand a severe weather event. "There are things we would like to do to make our building stronger. We have done initial planning and cost-outs, but we can't afford it now," says Darcy.

Not holding an annual conference in 2012 dealt the NJSLOM a financial loss. "It's difficult to estimate how much we lost but it is in the hundreds of thousands of dollars," says Darcy. "We don't have an exact number because of the way we gave people cred-

its for last year's registration fees so they wouldn't lose money. But we didn't collect much additional money in 2013. But the good news is that our number of exhibitors bounced back to pre-recession levels."

The loss occurred in spite of event cancellation coverage due to severe weather. The NJSLOM reviewed its coverage but decided not to change it due to cost considerations.

EXPERT ADVICE

Associations also are reviewing their insurance policies as a result of Sandy. "Some of our clients are asking questions about

"Communication is the No. 1 thing. We communicate internally and externally and designate people to contact attendees, the media and offsite staff. We have contact lists for local police, fire and emergency management officials."



Will Engle, CMP
Director of Conferences and Events
AMR Management Services
Lexington, KY

their policies," says Larry Huttinger, CMP, director of D. Lawrence Planners, a full-service meeting and convention management company based in Atlantic City, NJ. "A number of groups are concerned about vulnerability although another Sandy may not happen again for a long time, if ever. Some groups that were not impacted are being proactive."

Huttinger says that insurers typically require groups to have some type of emergency management program. "The problem with cancellation insurance based on weather is that there are a lot of particulars in the fine print," says Huttinger. "It scrutinizes things such as weather reports, the impact of the weather, was the cancellation necessary, was the damage caused by the weather, the impact on the community, etc. If you aren't careful, you could end up with a policy that will never pay."

Huttinger also suggests association planners ask hotels, conference centers and other venues about their emergency response procedures. "Planners must be aware of what goes on in those places in case anything happens," says Huttinger. "Those are many questions that should be asked. When we go to hotels, we try to get an idea of how emergencies are handled and who is in charge of emergency issues. We also try to get a copy of emergency plans. Hotels will usually cooperate."

Moreover, he suggests that planners take every weather warning seriously. Also, take safety precautions even when bad





Michael Darcy
Assistant Executive Director
New Jersey State League of
Municipalities
Trenton, NJ

“We have to call 18,000 attendees, over 1,000 exhibitors and vendors, our board of directors and staff. We are ready to do broad-based communications through many modes of technology and do it quickly.”

weather — but not necessarily catastrophic weather — is forecast. “I have been involved with conferences where bad weather was bearing down on a hotel during a convention, and we ended it early,” says Huttinger. “We went ahead with a planned reception but didn’t serve alcohol in order to make sure that people could travel more safely.”

Engle also experienced a severe weather warning that turned out to be a close call. In 2012, Engle was holding a pre-conference workshop in a hotel in Lexington, KY, the day before the meeting was scheduled to start. During the workshop, local officials indicated that a tornado warning could be issued. “We immediately put all staff on high alert to enact the emergency plan if needed. The warning came through as expected, and we evacuated into the hotel basement. Luckily, it ended up being a 30- to 60-minute scare. The tornado missed us, and there was no damage so we could go on with the conference.” Such close calls happen more often than major catastrophes that result in canceled meetings.

Superstorm Sandy taught planners not to take for granted that potentially destructive weather will end up being a close call. “It was another reminder to make sure we have emergency planning down,” says Engle. “If something like this happens every 10 years you may forget or not think about it because there are so many fires to put out on a daily basis. But we have to make sure this is top of mind even though it hardly ever happens.”

Untold numbers of meetings were canceled during Sandy, and it could happen again should another storm strike. Deciding whether to cancel or postpone a conference can be difficult, and the timetable for making a decision is different for each weather event and for every association. But planners must be prepared to confront such a decision and should heed this advice:

- **Consider purchasing event cancellation insurance.** Most

groups never get to use such coverage, but it can provide peace of mind and cover a great deal of a potential loss. Cancellation insurance usually covers loss of revenue, hotel attrition fees and other expenses resulting from disasters. The cost of these policies depends on the size and location of the meeting and several other factors. Large events that produce considerable revenue may merit coverage. For smaller events, compare the cost of insurance with the potential financial loss.

- **Determine the weather’s impact.** Bad weather can affect a suburb of a city without impacting the downtown area where a convention is meeting. Get accurate information after the weather passes. Don’t depend entirely on the media for information to make a final decision. Verify the impact by talking to local convention officials, emergency management officials and DMCs.
- **Communicate to attendees, exhibitors and vendors redundantly via several platforms.** Once there is a decision to cancel, communicate it via phone calls, email and social media as well as print, online and broadcast media outlets.
- **Don’t over-communicate.** Avoid sending constant updates via e-mail or other methods to attendees. Sending too many messages is worrisome and distracting.
- **Designate spokespersons.** Choose specific people to communicate at headquarters and onsite, and to specific audiences, including attendees. This helps deliver uniform messages to various audiences.
- **Get attendee emergency contact phone numbers.** Ask attendees to submit the information as part of their registration process so they can receive calls or text messages in an emergency. Tell attendees why the information is necessary and assure them it will be kept confidential. Also, encourage attendees to keep identification information with them at all times.
- **Consider special needs.** When asking venues about their

emergency plans, inquire about procedures for attendees with special needs such as the hearing-impaired and physically handicapped.

Associations that are without severe weather management procedures are taking a big gamble by depending on odds that most of their meetings will never face a monster storm. But, as the horrendous devastation and loss of revenue wrought by Sandy continues even today, it would be wise for

associations that lack strong crisis management plans to remedy that situation as soon as possible.



A sign in Breezy Point, NY, in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

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Gretta Brooks was named corporate director, global sales, for Omni Hotels & Resorts. She previously served as the regional vice president, sales and marketing, for Aimbridge Hospitality.

Gregg Herning was named vice president, sales for MGM Grand, Las Vegas, NV. He formerly was brand vice president for The Peabody Hotel Group and vice president of sales and marketing for The Peabody Orlando, Orlando, FL.

Stephanie Glanzer was named vice president, sales for Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas, NV. She most recently served as vice president of sales and marketing at Aria Resort & Casino, Las Vegas, NV.

Bryan Gay was named vice president, sales



HERNING

for The Mirage, Las Vegas, NV. He most recently was vice president of sales at Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas, NV.

Tony Youfsi was promoted to vice president, sales for Aria Resort & Casino, Las Vegas, NV. He most recently was Aria's executive director of sales.

The San Francisco Marriott Marquis has named **Lisa Rubino**, CASE, as senior sales executive. She most recently served as national sales manager for the Red Rock Casino Resort Spa in Las Vegas, NV.

Ann Garvey, CMP, was named national sales manager for the Pasadena Convention & Visitors Bureau, Pasadena, CA, responsible for the East Coast and mid-Atlantic regions. She was director of Northeast



GLANZER



GAY

region sales for the Los Angeles Convention & Visitors Bureau. **Sindy Cruz-Schiller** was named associate director of sales for the bureau, responsible for the Midwest and Western regions. She was senior sales manager for The Westin Kierland Resort & Spa, Scottsdale, AZ.

Visit Tampa Bay, Tampa, FL, has named **Karen Johnston** as regional account executive in the Chicago satellite office. She formerly served as director of association sales for Choose Chicago.

Jamie Jordan was named director of sales and marketing for the Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista in Orlando, FL. She most recently was director of group sales at the Harbor Beach Marriott Resort & Spa in Fort Lauderdale, FL.



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