

INSURANCE & FINANCIAL MEETINGS MANAGEMENT

THE EXECUTIVE SOURCE FOR PLANNING MEETINGS & INCENTIVES

Las Vegas Revisited

Gaming's Not the Only Game in Town
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Lisa McQuerrey, Vice President, American Equity Investment Life Insurance Company, has held her Million Dollar Producers Forum exclusively in Las Vegas for the past five years — the last two at Bellagio.

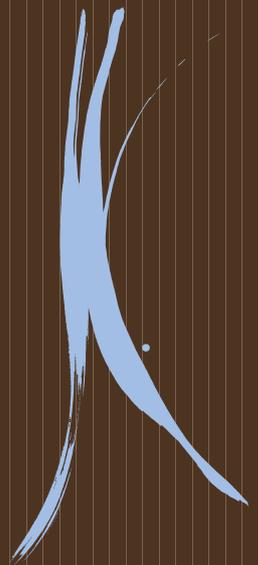
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Photo courtesy of ALIH

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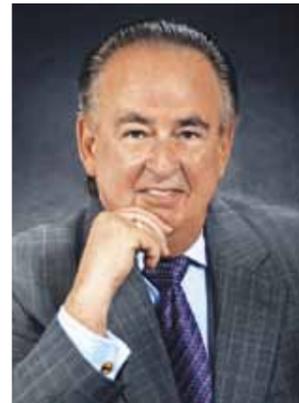
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Publisher's Message

The Game Changers

Change is inevitable and sometimes difficult to say the least. I have been in this game for more than 30 years, and the changes swirling around the meetings and hospitality industries nowadays are surely game changers: The fallout from the recent economic downturn, the nagging perception issues, the advent of a new digital world, the rising importance of managing strategically, the clarion call for ROI at every turn are all significant game changers. Las Vegas was hit particularly hard, but in our cover story this month, "Las Vegas Revisited...Gaming's Not the Only Game in Town," we show how the top convention city is back better than ever.



Vegas Revisited...Gaming's Not the Only Game in Town," we show how the top convention city is back better than ever.

Amy Riley, senior director of convention sales for the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Association, says business is picking up this year. "This year looks fabulous" Riley said. "We're seeing many 2007-2008 organizations coming back, so I think budgets are stronger after companies got through the two 'panic years.' The insurance/financial market is also coming back. We're not getting that questionable feedback that we were in '09."

And Lisa McQuerrey, who graces our cover, is the vice president of West Des Moines, IA-based American Equity Investment Life Insurance Company. The firm has held its Million Dollar Producers Forum in Las Vegas for the last five years. This spring, for the second consecutive year, they held the Forum at Bellagio. "We chose Las Vegas because of its airlift, variety of meeting spaces and the fun activities available," says McQuerrey. "The convention space (at Bellagio) is laid out very nicely between the two guest room towers, which made it easy for our participants to find us." Those producers "had a lot of great things to say about Bellagio, and we're really confident that they liked the Forum itself because our numbers have increased so steadily through the years. Last year we were just a little over 600, this year approximately 800 — our highest attendance to date, a very successful event."

One of McQuerrey's first-time attendees summed up what it's like to meet in Las Vegas these days: "I came back full of enthusiasm, energy and ideas. It was amazing, so well done. It was one of the best conferences I have been to in years." Now that's how to manage change: Confront it, learn from it and come out a winner.

Harvey Grotsky

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■ **KSL Resorts.** Planners who book meetings with 50 or more rooms at a KSL Resort by June 30, 2011 and consume those meetings by December 30, 2011 will be eligible for Site Inspection Reward Certificates for a stay at one of the following resorts in the KSL collection: Hotel del Coronado, La Costa Resort & Spa, The Homestead, Rancho Las Palmas Resort and Spa, Barton Creek Resort & Spa. There are three tiers of reward certificates, which are based upon the number of rooms booked. 866-KSL-7727, www.kslresorts.com

■ **Wyndham Rio Mar Beach Resort & Spa, Rio Grande, Puerto Rico.** Planners are eligible for one to three of the following benefits depending on number of rooms booked. Benefits include: 10 percent off F&B; one-hour welcome reception; 1/35 comp room; 1/50 comp upgrade to suite; three upgrades to suites at group rate; five

VIP amenities; 25 percent discount on 18 holes of golf; comp welcome amenity for all attendees; comp Continental breakfast for all attendees; 1/35 comp staff room and breakfast. Groups booking 20–40 rooms receive one benefit; 41–75, two benefits; and 75 or more, three benefits. 800-4-RIO-MAR, www.wyndhamriomar.com

■ **Rosen Hotels & Resorts, Orlando, FL.** Planners receive 10 percent credit toward the group's master account for new meetings that meet minimums of \$25,000 and up excluding service charges and tax. The offer, which must be booked and consumed before September 30, 2011, is valid at Rosen Shingle Creek, Rosen Centre Hotel and Rosen Plaza Hotel. Based on offer and date availability and not applicable with other discounts, definite business or citywide groups. 866-996-9939, www.rosenhoteles.com

Rosen Centre Skywalk Officially Opens



Gathering for the ribbon-cutting were (l to r) Orange County Commissioner Fred Brummer, OCCC Deputy GM Kathie Canning, Rosen Hotels & Resorts V.P. Sales Leslie Menichini, Rosen Centre GM Phil Caronia, Rosen Hotels & Resorts President/COO Harris Rosen, Rosen Centre Dir. Sales & Marketing Todd Frappier, Rosen Centre Resident Manager Christina Thomas, Orange County Commissioner Ted Edwards, Visit Orlando President and CEO Gary Sain.

ORLANDO, FL — The 1,334-room Rosen Centre Hotel in Orlando, FL, recently celebrated the grand opening of the Rosen Centre Skywalk. The covered pedestrian walkway spans International Drive and connects the hotel to the Orange County Convention Center. It's the third hotel property to connect to the OCCC, along with The Peabody Orlando and Hilton Orlando. The \$2 million walkway has been available for use since earlier this year. www.rosencentre.com

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Revel to Open in Atlantic City in 2012

ATLANTIC CITY, NJ — Revel Entertainment Group LLC announced that Revel, its \$2.5 billion beachfront entertainment resort, is expected to open in 2012. Located at the northern end of Atlantic City's boardwalk, the 20-acre site is one of the largest, most uniform and contiguous beachfront properties in Atlantic City. The 1,090-room casino resort will provide 160,000 sf of space for meetings and conferences. The hotel has the capacity to add 800 more guest rooms at a future date. www.revelinac.com



Rendering of Revel, Atlantic City, NJ

New Westin Opens in Phoenix

PHOENIX, AZ — Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc. announced the opening of The Westin Phoenix Downtown, its second Westin hotel in Phoenix, AZ. Located in a prime location one block from Phoenix Civic Plaza, the city's largest convention and entertainment facility, the new hotel offers 242 guest rooms featuring a new Westin room design, inspired by natural elements and featuring neutral color palettes, natural woods and stone. The new design concept brings to life the brand's philosophy of preserving wellness on the road in three dimensions and evokes a sense of balance.

The hotel offers more than 15,000 sf of meeting and event space including the 3,000-sf Copper Ballroom, three large prefunction areas, three smaller meeting rooms, six hospitality suites, a boardroom and the Lapis pool terrace. www.starwoodhotels.com

Hilton Ponce Golf & Casino Resort to Undergo Major Redo

PONCE, PR — The Hilton Ponce Golf & Casino Resort's multimillion-dollar renovation is slated for completion in 2012 to coincide with the Puerto Rico beachside resort's 20th anniversary. The renovation program encompasses all areas including the 255 guest rooms, public areas, restaurants and the more than 25,000 sf of meeting spaces. Guest rooms in both the East and West towers will be completely revamped with a new look and feel, introducing contemporary décor combined with local elements and "Ponceño" accents. The rooms also will feature 36- and 42-inch LCD televisions, as well as wireless high-speed Internet access, new electronic safety deposit boxes and large sleeper sofas for flexible accommodations. Some renovated rooms are currently available, while the full inventory of newly designed rooms will be unveiled later this year. www.hilton.com/ponce

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The Magic Formula

By Scott Klososky



To Enhance Events Using Social Technologies

Before you read this, I must disclose that I am a speaker and a technology guy. This is important because I have a unique viewpoint on events in that I attend many, and I also have a geek's ability to see how tech tools could be better used. I yearn to be involved with meeting and event planners who do more than make tiny changes to their events because they fear taking big steps forward.

It is time to make large improvements and I don't say that just because I like change, I say it because many attendees and sponsors are getting bored with the routines and are becoming curmudgeonly about the value they are receiving.

Finding the magic formula for using social technologies (social media, social networking and social relevancy) to enhance events is all the rage nowadays. There is actually good reason for the optimism because the palette of tools now available has the potential to greatly enhance the value of events for participants, sponsors and the event hosts. However, taking the approach of simply bolting on social tech tools to the existing routines for events is not the answer. It is time to rethink many of the core foundational habits, AND weave in social tech tools. Allow me to suggest just a handful of the changes that will help all players:

1. Repackage events. Events need to be repackaged as more than two-day experiences where the value is only delivered and received while at the event. They must be reconstructed to be content creation moments where the bringing together of people not only allows for networking, but is also the main catalyst for unique content creation and delivery. This content can be delivered for the next three

to six months in a "content echo," which provides continuing value from the event. This is not a new thought, TED does this very successfully. (TED is a nonprofit devoted to Ideas Worth Spreading. It started out in 1984 as a conference bringing together people from three worlds: Technology, Entertainment, Design.)

2. Provide networking tools. The networking aspect of events can be greatly enhanced by providing more useful tools in the months leading up to an event. Instead of just creating an eCommunity for the event that struggles to attract participants, add the capability to let attendees see a list of the other attendees and to reach out to them for meetings during the event. If a participant could spend 30 minutes a couple of weeks before an event sending out invites to all the people they would like to meet with, the networking value would be better facilitated, and the eCommunity would have a strong reason for being.

3. Ask for digital content. Lean on speakers and content creators to provide more than just a one-hour keynote. We (they) get paid a tremendous amount of money for that one speech, and in this digital world we live in, there are lots of additional pieces of digital content we can provide you, which would enhance the value of an eCommunity before an event and help create a powerful content echo after an event. Besides, most speakers would enjoy having a deeper level of contact with attendees in this way.

4. Use a storyline. Think about replacing your theme for an event with a storyline. Instead of just saying your next event is titled "Innovating

_____," find a story about someone who has been very innovative and build your entire event around that story. Give a taste of the story at the opening session. Provide pieces of the story as you go along. Tell the end of the story at the closing session for the big finish. Give out something as a talisman to people so they remember the story when they leave. Bring in an unknown, but intriguing person to deliver their story in pieces over the entire time frame of the event. This can serve to improve the event in many ways as you can imagine.

5. Employ innovative delivery methods. Add new ways to deliver content so that you are not stuck in the mode of either a panel discussion or talking head. Have speakers take Q&A the entire time they talk by letting the audience use a system such as www.wifitti.com to text message questions to the screen. Use this same system to lead idea-harvesting sessions with the audience so that they are engaged and not just spoken to. Change the time limits for speakers so that certain sessions have five speakers at 12 minutes each, then let your more high-powered content speakers have more time if they are going to deliver practical and actionable information. Do anything you can to break the monotony of the patterns you have been using year after year. Attendees like change more than you believe.

6. Engage sponsors in new ways. First, encourage them to sponsor some of these new technology uses. Let them sponsor the eCommunity before the event and take some responsibility for getting the participation both of you want. Let them sponsor the event storyline. Let them sponsor a system such as

Wifitti or the content echo. Provide something other than booths, meals and entertainment for them to sponsor. As an added benefit, the sponsors often can use these digital tools to harvest useful prospect information.

7. Remember the content echo. Provide the attendees with a constant stream of repackaged content from the event, mixed

Finding the magic formula for using social technologies to enhance events is all the rage nowadays.

with new content provided by speakers, sponsors and participants. This both increases the perceived value of the event, and also sells the attendees on next year's version. **I&FMM**

Scott Klososky specializes in looking over the horizon with how technology is changing the world. His unique perspective on technology, business culture and the future allows him to travel the globe as a speaker and consultant, working with senior executives in organizations ranging from Fortune 500 corporations to universities and nonprofits. He is the author of The Velocity Manifesto and Enterprise Social Technology. For more information, please visit www.klososky.com.

New and Renovated Properties

Provide Great Value, a Pristine Product and Cutting-Edge Technology and Services

By Derek Reveron

It's one of a meeting planner's worst nightmares. After booking a meeting at a hotel under construction or renovation, the planner discovers that the work will not be completed by the event date as promised. Even worse, a planner books a hotel more than a year in advance only to learn just weeks before the event that the property is starting renovations.

That nightmare was once a real-life experience for Jody Huber, business development director for Irving, TX-based SEI Meetings & Incentives. Huber, who handles site selection and development as well as onsite meeting logistics, learned just 30 days before the start date of an incentive program that the hotel was renovating the pool area. The hotel built a temporary (and unsightly) wall to separate the construction area from the outdoor meeting space where SEI planned to host receptions and other events for the 600 attendees.

"We had an option in the contract to change the venue. But 30 days out? Trying to move or cancel the event wasn't in the client's best interest. Our focus was to make sure the event went on as the client envisioned it," says Huber. "We weren't happy that the hotel waited so long to tell us, but we were able to negotiate additional décor and lighting at no charge, camouflage and decorations for the wall, additional lighting and better pricing for the entire event." Overall, attendees were pleased with the incentive," Huber reports.

Risky Business or Savvy Planning?

While some meeting planners avoid hotels under construction and renovation, others consider booking such properties because they can't find the appropriate space at the right time at an existing property in the desired destination; they operate on a tight budget; or they want to obtain the latest amenities and services at the best possible value.

New properties may provide a better meeting experience and boost attendance. But there is a big risk. If the hotel doesn't complete work as scheduled, a planner must find other accommodations or endure construction noise and eyesores as well as reduced access to some facilities and services.

Booking meetings at unfinished properties may work better for some types of groups than others, depending on several factors. Planners must consider the length of the meeting and its agenda, as well as the size and makeup of the group. "Our plan-

ners would weigh the benefits and risks of such a decision and whether it meets the objectives of the meeting," says Issa Jouaneh, vice president of American Express Meetings and Events and Maxvantage, an AMEX unit that provides strategic meeting management services for clients, including insurance and financial firms. "If it's an international meeting, it might be an option. But when you are looking at designing an experience for business prospects and clients, or if you are holding an incentive or implementing programs, it will be a challenge. We encourage our clients to communicate the availability of opportunities throughout the process to their stakeholders and have a backup plan," says Jouaneh.

Over the next few years, planners will have a harder time finding new properties. In December 2010, the total number of U.S. hotel development projects in the construction, planning and final planning stages was 3,049, according to the STR/McGraw Hill Construction Dodge Pipeline Report. The number represents a 20.9 percent decrease from December 2009. The supply of new rooms is expected to increase 0.9 percent in 2011. Occupancy rates nationwide will rise 1.6 percent to 58.3 percent in 2011.

"New construction or new supply coming into the market in the U.S. is at an all-time low, and that's not going to change soon," says Robert Gilbert, CHME, CHA, president and CEO of

the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International (HSMIAI). "Supply growth in 2010 was very low and will be less than 1 or 2 percent for 2011 and 2012. Those numbers are pretty firm because we can tell what's already in the pipeline in the construction or preconstruction planning stages. If you look at what's in the pipeline in terms of the number of rooms, there's just not a lot, and most of that will be branded hotels," says Gilbert.

Negotiating Edge

With occupancy rates at relatively low but improving levels, and properties anxious to book meetings be-

"New construction or new supply coming into the market in the U.S. is at an all-time low, and that's not going to change soon. Supply growth...will be less than 1 or 2 percent for 2011 and 2012."



Robert Gilbert, CHME, CHA
President and CEO
HSMIAI
McClean, VA

fore they open, planners may have a negotiating edge with hotels under construction. "If you are one of the early groups in a hotel you are probably going to get an especially good

value. You're also going to get a brand new product," says Gilbert. One hotelier agrees. "The biggest thing is value," says Cory Chambers, director of sales and marketing at the JW Marriott Indianapolis, which opened in February. "You get a product with more availability in the short term that can pass on pre-opening specials. Even if the hotel doesn't give a lower price point, you may get a price comparable with other properties but it's a pristine product with cutting-edge technology and services."

A meeting planner's ability to negotiate with a property under construction depends partly on the market. Gilbert advises planners seeking deals with a new hotel to understand the local market and competition. For example, new room supply is absorbed more quickly in a market such as New York City than in many other markets, he notes.

Of course, there are also risks to booking meetings at properties under construction and renovation. "The downside is that sometimes there are construction schedule changes that a hotel can't control. That's why there is a trade-off in terms of the value piece of it. Part of the trade-off is maybe

you get hotel staff who are newly acclimated to that property, so they may be in training for the first 30 or 60 days of operation," Gilbert observes.

Meeting planners typically alleviate risks by booking existing hotels. Jouaneh notes that the meeting planners of American Express Meetings and Events rarely reserve meetings at hotels under construction or renovation and implement backup plans for those instances. "Where there is availability of space, we have had the ability to relocate our clients. In other cases, depending on the situation, we have worked to mitigate the situation (without relocating). It's a mix of both strategies," says Jouaneh.

Backup Plans

There are several factors that meeting planners should consider when negotiating a possible backup plan. Do the upfront costs of reserving backup space offset savings gained by booking with a property under construction? It depends on the size of the meeting, objective, budget, hotel,

destination, lead time and the planner's relationship with the proposed backup property, says Jouaneh. It's also important for planners to ensure that contracts with hotels under construction and renovation include es-

"Our planners would weigh the benefits and risks of (booking a new property) and whether it meets the objectives of the meeting. ...If it's an international meeting, it might be an option."



Issa Jouaneh
Vice President, American Express Meetings and Events and Maxvantage, New York, NY

cape clauses should the property not be completed on time. "Usually contracts allow for any changes that are outside of the control of the hotel or planners. The hotel could be responsible for helping planners find a space in the market or they could have control of that themselves," says Gilbert.

Another factor to consider is the willingness of hotels to serve as a backup plan. "The challenge for hoteliers is that if you book a backup plan, then you are taking inventory off the shelf that will not be sellable for a period of time. It's also a matter of hotels being willing to accept a subordinate contract. I would not likely agree to being a backup for another hotel that's plan A. There's little incentive in it for the backup hotel to accept those terms," says Chambers.

Planners who book meetings at hotels under construction and renovation should check with properties regularly to ensure that they are on track to complete work as scheduled. It's best to know as soon as possible whether a hotel is meeting construction timetables because it allows

time to seek an alternative property. That's something that hotels want to avoid. "Every month that goes by, if you hit your construction milestones, it helps to illustrate to potential clients that you will meet or exceed your opening date. As you hit milestones and get closer to the date, it's easier to book meetings. Every time you hit a milestone such as bottoming out, topping out or enclosing the structure, you have more credibility for saying you will meet the opening date," says Chambers.

He cites the JW Marriott Indianapolis as an example. The hotel broke ground about 2 1/2 years ago and promoted an April 2011 opening date. As construction started, groups understandably weren't comfortable saying they would book meetings because the completion date was so far away, says Chambers. However, booking became easier as the property hit or exceeded its milestones and eventually moved its opening date up from April to February, explains Chambers.

Most newly built hotels don't open ahead of schedule. While many properties meet their opening deadlines, some don't. So planners must tread cautiously when contemplating the use of hotels under construction. "It's about looking at your objective, understanding the benefits and weighing the risks, being prepared to communicate throughout the process with stakeholders and the property and having a backup plan," says Jouaneh.

New and Renovated News

The recession has slowed, but not completely stopped, new hotel construction. Eighty-eight percent of hoteliers expect business to increase this year, according to a recent survey by Knowland Group, a McLean, VA-based provider of products and services for the hospitality industry. However, instead of building new properties, many hotel companies are looking for properties they can convert to their own brands.

Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, which operates the Sheraton,



Scheduled to open in early 2012, the 1,000-room Omni Dallas Hotel will be connected to the Dallas Convention Center and feature 110,000 sf of meeting space.

Westin, Four Points by Sheraton, W Hotels brands among others, recently announced that it plans to open about 20 hotels in North America this year. More than half of the openings will be conversions of other brands. "The hotel real estate market in the United States is in a very different situation than other types of real estate," Starwood CEO and president Frits Paasschen said in a statement. "Despite economic woes, and even with unemployment above 9 percent, hotel occupancies are back at pre-crisis highs, and we're facing record low new supply here. While we expect new-build activity to remain low, we are watching the transaction markets, which will fuel conversion opportunities and ultimately new hotel construction," he concluded.

In Birmingham, AL, ground was broken for a new 300-room Westin hotel, which will be located near the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex (BJCC) and adjacent to the Sheraton Birmingham Hotel. The city is also constructing a \$20 million entertainment district featuring restaurants, retail shops and nightclubs.

Birmingham expects to complete both projects in early 2013.

The 406-room Westin Oaks Houston recently renovated its guest rooms, lobby and meeting space, which totals more than 26,000 sf.

The Westin Peachtree Plaza Atlanta completed an exterior renovation that included replacement of 6,350 windows. The property provides 1,068 rooms and 80,000 sf of meeting space.

Wyndham Hotels and Resorts plans to open the 119-room Mining Exchange, a Wyndham Grand Hotel in Colorado Springs, CO, by the second quarter of this year. Four existing historic buildings will be the site of the new hotel, which will offer more than 20,000 sf of meeting space.

Among other hotel operators, the first JW Marriott hotel opened in Chicago in the historic Burnham building, after a \$396 million restoration. The 610-room JW Marriott Chicago offers 44,000 sf of meeting space and a 20,000-sf spa. There is also an 8,000-sf ballroom.

The JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa opened in January 2010 with more than 1,002



The brand new JW Marriott Indianapolis features 55 meeting rooms and 104,000 sf of meeting space, including the 40,736-sf Grand Ballroom for 4,500 attendees.



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rooms and 265,000 sf of meeting and event space, including a 40,000-sf ballroom and 40,000-sf exhibit hall.

Omni Hotels, based in Irving, TX, has a new convention center hotel going up in Dallas. The Omni Dallas Hotel, scheduled to open in early 2012, will be connected to the Dallas Convention Center. The 1,000-room property will feature more than 110,000 sf of meeting space, several restaurants and a spa.

The Omni Mount Washington Resort in Bretton Woods, NH, has completed enhancements, part of a comprehensive, \$60 million expansion and renovation, which included a new spa; a large, refurbished wraparound veranda; renovation of the main dining room; a new 20,000-sf conference center; and the restored Donald Ross-designed Mount Washington golf course. More recently they completed renovating all guest rooms and suites throughout the hotel. The second phase also included updating several of the casual food and beverage venues.

The 453-room Omni Los Angeles Hotel at California Plaza will remain open during a renovation to upgrade guest rooms and meeting spaces that will start in mid-2011 and take place in several phases.

The Omni Houston Hotel at Westside completed a comprehensive lobby, bar and meeting room renovation, including 25,000 sf of meeting space, including ballrooms and boardrooms, as well as the hotel's Black Gold Bar.

New York City's Omni Berkshire Place completed a multimillion-dollar renovation of all of the hotel's 396 guest rooms and suites.

Several Hyatt properties are undergoing renovation. The 632-room Hyatt Regency San Antonio is undergoing a \$30 million renovation. The first phase of the project, which included the lobby, façade and restaurants, was finished in November. The second phase, which includes the property's 40,000 sf of meeting space, is scheduled for completion in July 2011.

In Los Angeles, the 726-room Hyatt Regency Century Plaza has completed a \$1 million upgrade that included guest rooms, the Plaza Level, the executive conference center and a 24-hour business center. The property offers more than 12,000 sf of meeting space.

The Hyatt Regency Atlanta is renovating its lobby. Plans include a new lobby bar, coffee shop and restaurant. The project is scheduled for completion by this summer.

The Hyatt Regency Atlanta and the Atlanta Marriott Marquis are now connected via a pedestrian skybridge that was completed in August. Another skybridge connects the Hilton Atlanta and the Atlanta Marriott Marquis. The two skybridges connect a total of 4,341 rooms and about 450,000 sf of meeting space.

The Hilton Anatole in Dallas completed a five-year \$120 million renovation of 1,606 guest rooms and 344,000 sf of meeting space. The project included new meeting planner offices and conference registration area. Ballrooms, breakout rooms and pre-function areas all showcase new carpet, lighting, décor and audio-visual technology, lighting and wiring. Three new restaurants and an executive lounge were also added.

The famed 1,015-room Roosevelt Hotel in New York City recently announced the start of a multimillion redesign and upgrade that includes new artwork, guest room and hallway carpeting, furniture and fixtures. The project's completion date is February 2012.

The InterContinental New York Times Square opened in July near the Broadway theater district. The 607-room property features 10,000 sf of meeting space and a 4,000-sf ballroom. The 36-story hotel is the largest in New York City to carry LEED certification.

The Peabody Orlando completed a \$450 million expansion project including a 32-story tower, 10 dining and entertainment venues and a 22,000-sf spa and fitness center. The property provides 1,641 guest rooms and 300,000 sf of exhibit space. **I&FMM**

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Building Buzz

By John Buchanan

Leverage Social Media to Elevate Attendee Engagement

With the new year — not to mention a new decade — Caryn Taylor-Lucia, CMP, director of corporate events at financial services company SEI in Oaks, PA, has been tasked with a daunting new challenge: Design and implement a social media initiative that will help her organization prompt more peer-to-peer communication and loyalty among its attendees. That's especially important to SEI, because like many financial services and insurance companies, it must attract third-party attendees based on benefits and buzz.

As a result, Taylor-Lucia and SEI are in the same position many companies will be this year: playing catch-up as social media is becoming an indispensable tool of the meetings industry.

"We feel like it's a train that's going to pass us by if we don't get on it," says Taylor-Lucia, who oversees a 10-person meeting planning team. But on the other hand, she adds, "There are some people in the company who want to do this really quickly." By attending social media seminars hosted by FICP and other entities, Taylor-Lucia has mastered an essential caution — to take her time, because effective implementation of social media takes a lot of planning and attention to detail, based on your unique needs and expectations.

Michael Lyons, DMCP, executive vice president of AMR Meetings &

Incentives in Newtown Square, PA, is another veteran planner who has recently wrestled social media — after 37 years of planning "old school" meetings, he says. **"Like it or not, whether you choose to fight it or to go along with it, social media is here to stay," Lyons says. "And you have to get on the train, because you're going to get left behind if you don't."**

Nevertheless, he adds, there are still many planners who haven't gotten — or absorbed — the message yet. "There are a lot of planners out there who are still wishing and hoping that we could keep things the way they've been for so long," he says, "because they're afraid or don't understand how to deploy a lot of these newfangled technologies."

Underlying the fear, note Lyons, Taylor-Lucia and social media experts, is a transformational reality: Thanks to the explosion of social media over the last several years, meeting planners have lost control of their events. It no longer matters what you say about your meeting. What matters is what your attendees say — and that process now begins the moment a meeting is announced. Consequently, Taylor-Lucia has been challenged by the practical demands of the proper implementation of social media. "It's overwhelming to a lot of people in our company, even people in the marketing department," she says. "There's just so much going on and things are

moving so fast. So it's hard to figure out what you should be doing."

For Lyons, the entire issue can be reduced to a simple rhetorical question. "What it really comes down to is, what do we do with all this stuff?" he says. "How does this make us better as meeting planners?"

Despite the instinctive anxiety it can provoke, social media is, in principle, fairly easy to understand, explains Bellingham, WA-based Corbin Ball, CMP, CSP, one of the country's leading experts on its application to meetings.

Four Steps to Success

Ball explains that social media has four basic components, which work together to create an integrated process: collaboration, publishing, networking and feedback.

① **Collaboration.** When it comes to collaboration in 2011, e-mail has been supplanted by wikis, Google Docs and crowdsourcing, explains Ball. "E-mail is now outdated as a tool for meeting planners," he says. "It's a terrible project management tool." Nevertheless, e-mail remains the go-to communication platform for many planners.

② **Publishing.** Social publishing invokes the use of blogs, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook as "announcement tools" that deliver information about a meeting and drive engagement, buzz and attendance, says Ball. "Blogs are the mother of all social media when it comes to content," says

Ball. But YouTube is another powerful tool that is now being used very creatively, he adds. "For example, you can ask speakers or other presenters to create a three-minute video that promotes their appearance and topic, then you post that on your meeting website."

The key to success is content that is benefit-oriented from the perspective of the attendee. In other words, it gives them a reason to get excited and engaged, then helps build the buzz. Meetings that include exhibitors should engage them to post YouTube videos that tout a show special only available via that channel, or some other clear benefit.

At the meeting, you can distribute small Web cameras to attendees who then post video from the meeting to your site as the event is in progress, Ball says. Posting photos to image-sharing site Flickr is another way to get attendees involved in promoting their own participation in the meeting.

These days, Ball notes, applications and results are limited only by the imagination of the planner and his or her attendees.

③ **Networking.** In turn, the social networking component empowers attendees to use Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter to communicate about their experience, perceptions and insights before, during and after the event.

Such peer-to-peer communication among attendees, at any stage of the meeting's life cycle, is going to happen, whether you want it to or not. As a result, it's important to monitor and react to such communication. One basic way to do that is to use hashtags from tweets to monitor and measure attendee chatter.

Using a hash symbol # in front of a specific topic name, such as #abccorporationannualmeeting allows you to organize specific tweets. It's important to continually remind attendees to use the specific tag for tweeting about the meeting or conference.

"Smart meeting planners today are monitoring the tweet streams about

Social Media Checklist

The effective deployment of social media to engage attendees throughout a meeting cycle is not a simple process. It involves the coordinated use of various tools. Award-winning engagement and communications company TBA Global provides a comprehensive checklist.

Before the Meeting

- Identify** Review where your attendees are to determine the right distribution channels for social content. For example, many insurance and financial services companies are tasked with attracting third-party attendees, such as agents or brokers, who are not captive attendees. That requires a different approach from engaging captive employees.
- Integrate** Jump-start engagement and early registration using e-mail, Facebook, Event Bright, LinkedIn, custom e-vites, Twitter — and traditional media.
- Create** Develop a Facebook page, Twitter account and hashtags that will allow you to monitor and track attendee-to-attendee communication and general feedback.
- Promote** Intrigue attendees with new content. Empower them to share their ideas and provide feedback on yours.
- Buzz** Encourage and assist your influencers, from speakers to meeting hosts, to share content and spread the word.
- Listen** In the social media world, listening has become known as "crowdsourcing." Discover what your attendees really want — and then give it to them.

During the Meeting

- Optimize** Make sure that all of your content is ready to be shared easily and efficiently by attendees, exhibitors, management and other stakeholders.
- Facilitate** Offer free wireless onsite and provide plenty of power stations. Make sure you have a strong signal for all mobile carriers.
- Listen** Appoint an onsite "monitor" to review and respond to posted comments. Treat negative feedback as an education rather than an insult. Fix all perceived problems immediately.
- Photo op** Provide attendees and other stakeholders with a fun photo op featuring your brand in the background — and watch the share rate climb.
- Share** In addition to live streaming for those who could not attend, be ready to share video, audio and blogs.

After the Meeting

- Ask** Pose fundamental questions about the event to get attendee feedback.
- Convert** Identify your fans and motivate them to be followers of your other social media initiatives.
- Encourage** Promote the enthusiastic sharing of media and attendee personal stories from the meeting.
- Develop** Create forums to continue attendee dialogue.
- Measure** Measure results, then measure them further.
- Promote** Exploit the buzz from this year's meeting to create early buzz for next year's meeting.

— JB

their events,” Ball says, “because the first place they’re going to hear a negative comment or complaint is in tweets from attendees.”

④ **Feedback.** Finally, there is social feedback. That is the cumulative response, across a spectrum from positive to negative, that ensues as a direct result of the meeting. That is the genie that can never be stuffed back into the bottle. Post-event feedback will turn up in a number of places, from the individual Facebook pages of attendees to yours, and even in places such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, or other review sites. But you must be prepared for that, too.

Advice on Getting It Right

Despite the obvious allure of social media, many meeting planners make fundamental mistakes when they first attempt to leverage it, says Pam Moore, a former corporate meeting planner who is now founder and CEO of Lithia, FL-based FruitZoom Inc., which helps planners and corporate executives deploy social media.

“The No. 1 mistake is that they don’t integrate it with the rest of their marketing and promotional activities,” says Moore, who spent 15 years as a planner before forming her company last year. “It’s like an ‘attachment’ that is isolated. The other issues are a lack of proper planning and a lack of appropriate resources to do it right.”

As a result, Moore sees a lot of what she has dubbed “random acts of social media.” That means a planner is doing it, but not doing it in a way that will really engage their attendees or help make sure the meeting is a success.

“Another mistake is having no real structure to what you’re doing,” Moore says. “And it can be confusing, because there are so many tools you can use now.”

Moore’s most important piece of practical advice is to abandon the old-school notion of “announcing” the meeting. Instead, the starting point should be a “call to action” to get attendees involved in the meeting — from day one.

Another related and common mistake is that many planners perceive social media as a magic wand that will transform and invigorate their meetings simply because it exists.

“Too many planners rely on the tool,” says Lorrie Thomas, CEO of Santa Barbara, CA-based social media consultancy Web Marketing Therapy. “They project all responsibility for the message and the result onto the technology, thinking it’s going to magically do the job that they’re supposed to be doing,” says Thomas, author of *The 36-Hour Course to Online Marketing*, published in January by McGraw-Hill. “In reality, it’s not about the tool. It’s about how the tool is used.”

To meeting planners, Thomas preaches a simple sermon: “Strategy comes first,” she says. “Execution comes second.”

In her observation, what percentage of planners who pursue social media do it right? Just 15–20 percent, she says. Moore believes that one-third do it well. But that still means that at least two-thirds are missing the mark from the get-go.

A common mistake Ball sees is that planners think they will use social media to “sell” or promote their meetings. “Don’t approach it that way,” he says. “Approach it as a better way of engaging attendees and generating real collaboration, buzz and feedback.”

In that specific context, Thomas sees another elementary error: Most planners still look at a big meeting for 2,000 attendees as a homogenous exercise, instead of segmenting that audience by key characteristics or preferences and addressing them as individuals rather than as cogs in a giant wheel. And a big part of that, she says, is to allow attendees to have a real voice in the process from the beginning, from their individual perspectives, whether that’s an attendee, exhibitor, stakeholder or vendor.

Best Practices and Strategies

If your goal is genuine, long-term success, start with one overarching

principle, advises Moore — use social media as it is intended to be used, by building an engaged community from your attendees. “Community is the Holy Grail of social media,” she says.

Once you create a community, ask attendees to help you get the buzz out for the meeting, Moore says. **“Make them feel important and engaged,” she says. “Then they will help you create real buzz. And they’ll do it within their own peer groups with their own social media communication.”**

One essential best practice is to enable easy sharing among constituencies, she says. For example, exploit the “share button” functionality of Facebook and other social media tools to make it easy for attendees to spread the word and generate excitement.

Another popular tool for generating attendee engagement and communication is Pathable, a highly innovative, attendee-oriented technology that has introduced new features recently, such as an interactive show-floor map and improved meeting scheduling.

In turn, recommends Aron Ezra, CEO of San Francisco-based MacroView Labs — which helps planners create social media synergies with the latest custom mobile applications — make the effort to create and manage buzz during the meeting. “And as a planner, you no longer have to wait until after the meeting to see how it went,” says Ezra, who founded MacroView Labs in 2008 to help planners get the most from their meetings. **“Planners can now track in real time what’s going on, from how well attendees like the keynoter to the hotel or the banquet menu.”** And, he adds, real-time feedback is usually more accurate and easier to deal with than after-event, anecdotal information.

Another engagement strategy touted by Ezra and other experts is the ability to segment constituencies and address them individually with customized mobile applications that tie into an overall social media platform. The result is a more personalized, individual experience for attendees.

Given the plethora of possibilities out there, Ball cautions planners to take a good look before they leap. “And you don’t have to do everything all at once,” he says. “Set up an event Web page on Facebook and LinkedIn. That doesn’t take a lot of time to do. Then you expand to Twitter and start thinking about more ways you can use social media.”

Social Media Manager

The two most important considerations, he says, are to establish a social media policy and appoint or hire someone to manage it day-to-day. To create a policy, gather a group across the generations, making sure that social media-savvy 20-somethings and 30-somethings are well represented, along with older constituencies. Then get extensive input from attendees about what they want — and don’t want — when it comes to meetings.

Then hire a dedicated, social media specialist to manage the program. At AMR, Lyons has done just that. And Taylor-Lucia will do the same thing at SEI. For their part, the experts are unanimous that a social media manager is essential for success.

And one key responsibility should be measuring and assessing results. “There are community metrics, such as how many people respond,” says Moore. “Social media is all about action. That’s why it’s important in engaging and motivating attendees. So, the first measurement of your social media activities is simply the response that you get.”

Thomas cautions against “social media overload,” too. For example, do not have a Facebook page and Twitter account for every meeting, she says. Deploy a single, fully integrated social media platform that can address all of your meetings and events under one functional umbrella.

Then just go about getting it done, says Lyons. “Planners who are new to this just need to study up and learn what’s out there in the social media world,” he says. “And they need to determine what applications will work in their particular situation. But they also

need to understand that the social media train is leaving the station and they need to get on it.”

Despite her tribulations and the intimidation factor experienced at SEI, Taylor-Lucia says she is now confident that social media will enhance her ability to create successful meetings that offer a deeper level of engagement for her attendees — the risk factor of negative feedback notwithstanding.

“We’re confident that when our attendees do start talking with each other, in the long run, it can only generate positive things,” she says. “And that’s because even if they are unhappy, we need to know that. But we also believe that no matter what, they will appreciate that we have engaged them further and gotten them talking. And if there is an issue, we’re going to fix it and life is going to go on.” **I&FMM**

A vertical photo credit on the left side of the image reads: ©CREATOR MIAMI CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

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Most planners these days know that strategic meetings management (SMM) is about more than consolidating meetings. It's not just being "strategic" about the meetings planned by one's department. It's an enterprise-wide approach to meetings, and what many want to know is, how can I help establish or maintain such a system?

The heightened interest is reflected in the Global Business Travel Association's (GBTA) educational programming on SMM, which has

expanded significantly in recent years. "When I first came to GBTA, the Groups and Meetings Committee would do about two sessions on SMM at our annual convention, and in 2008 we actually upped that to seven to eight," says Alana Joyce, senior director of global education for GBTA (formerly the NBTA). "In our last convention in Houston we had 10 SMM-related sessions and about 1,200 delegates. In those three years, we more than doubled the number of folks coming through those sessions."

But the GBTA isn't the only driving factor behind strategic meetings management programs (SMMPs) in the industry. C-level executives at insurance and financial firms are increasingly concerned that meetings don't fall into the category of "rogue spend," and that the contracts signed don't put the company at undue risk.

These, of course, are just the things a good SMMP will prevent, by channeling the planning of all meetings to the appropriate professionals, instituting approval procedures and hav-

ing a company-wide, spend-tracking system in place. "We find that the CFOs and CPOs are now intimately involved with how a corporation is going to be managing its meeting spend," says Jane Wolfe, senior director of product fulfillment for StarCite. Wolfe, who started her 25-year career in the meetings industry as a planner with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Ohio, notes that "the insurance and financial industries especially have been early adopters of the SMM approach along with pharma and technology companies, and we increasingly have been seeing auto, gas and manufacturing companies jumping on board." Especially for the first three industries — insurance/financial, pharmaceutical and technology — meetings are crucial for getting their products to market with their client base, Wolfe explains, so it's natural that they'll be focused on tracking spend and ROI in that area. "Also, for many insurance and financial firms the TARP legislation applies, which specifically calls for an approval process in order to ensure that meetings are following the guidelines," she adds.

Fundamental Tech Tools

While Blue Cross Blue Shield had the makings of an SMMP during Wolfe's tenure, "today we are much more advanced due to technology: You cannot effectively manage and report your spend, manage your suppliers and participants, without that fundamental tool," she asserts. The ideal is one tech tool that supports meetings company-wide. "If you don't do it that way, your life is going to be greatly complicated by not having one place to go to get your information," says Wolfe.

For example, the StarCite Meeting Management Platform facilitates what Wolfe calls the "six steps" that comprise SMM: meeting registration; approval process; strategic sourcing and procurement; planning and execution; payment and expense reconciliation; and data management and reporting.

A recent tech offering in this

space is StarCite's trademarked tool Meetings 1:1, which "was very big within the financial vertical," says Wolfe. Designed to help planners coordinate one-to-one and small group meetings, the tool ultimately provides valuable data on attendee movement during a larger event for SMMP reporting purposes. "One of our financial companies was kind of our partner in developing the 1:1 product because they had a need through the TARP requirement to report on and manage all participant movement. The financial industry seems to be pretty keen on it. It's the ability to track all your executives and customers during a particular event."

Christine Ottow, director of corporate communications for StarCite, adds, "Because we have some very deep relationships with clients in the insurance and financial industries, we've realized over the years that they have certain best practices as to how they set up their systems and configure approval processes, budgets and reporting. So what we're really moving toward is creating a version of our system for those industries so that they can start right away with having that preconfigured solution."

Capturing Spend

MetLife's SMMP is supported by Cvent, notes Peggie Milane, CMP, SMMC, manager of strategic meeting management/conference and event management. "Capturing corporate-wide spend and mitigating risk was the big part of why we went into this," she explains. "We really had little idea of what was being spent in the company for meetings other than what our department handled."

One of the first steps was requiring that anyone who plans an event involving a contract register the meeting through the system.

"Every meeting has a unique ID number that follows the meeting from the point of registration to the

last payment," Milane says. "The meeting ID goes through the financial approval process, follows through with the payment process and then (is checked for) compliance through access to accounts-payable reporting."

For any unidentified meeting expenditures, Milane can inform the responsible party that they "need to fol-

"During the (SMMP) training...a key issue was to assure associates ...that we were not 'taking their jobs away,' just making sure the spend is captured and that there is no risk to the company."



Peggie Milane, CMP, SMMC
Manager, SMMP
Conference and Event Planning
MetLife, Long Island City, NY

low the guidelines." But overall, the SMMP has been "very well accepted company-wide," Milane reports.

"During the training on the process, a key issue was to assure associates that were handling small meetings on their own that we were not 'taking their jobs away,' just making sure the spend is captured and that there is no risk to the company."

From Data Gathering to Buy-in

Even before the training stage, an SMMP can take years to develop. Amy Harris, CMP, SMMC, vice president of strategic meetings management with Atlanta, GA-based SunTrust Bank, began her research on an SMMP for the bank in 2005, about two years before the program launched.

That project involved "gathering all the data on internal stakeholders, RFPs, technology and meeting management partners, and determining

Ride the Strategic Meetings Management

By George Seli

Wave to the Future



what our policy and resource model would look like and how our suppliers fit into that plan. You then make the business case, and as you're presenting it to various C-level executives the plan changes until you get the final buy-in."

Ultimately, SunTrust's SMMP is facilitated through Cvent and positioned as a hybrid resource model, with an internal core team in the marketing department handling the planning and strategy, and an external BCD Meetings & Incentives team handling the purchasing and registration management portion. "It's modeling to fit the business we have to cover, based on our core competencies," Harris explains.

And there's always room for improvement, even for well-established SMMPs. In the future, Milane foresees improved data capture. "There's always more and more data that we need, and senior management asks for more reports. They want to see different variations on what we can already produce," she says.

Accurate reporting on meetings activity and spend at the enterprise

strategic meetings management certification (SMMC) program most interesting and helpful. In particular, she cites the importance of showing the ROI of having an SMMP in place, which for MetLife meant very significant savings. "The first year we had the SMMP in place there was a nearly \$19 million year-over-year savings in meeting spend," she notes.

A Living Curriculum

The SMMC is a relatively new educational offering, with the first core week taking place in the fall of 2009 and the second in the summer of 2010. The curriculum includes three electives, homework and a case study.

"It's definitely a living curriculum," says Joyce. "We evolved from the field of practitioners. Our faculty, which changes every core week, includes folks who have been very active in this space professionally, such as Kari Kesler and Mike Malinchok. They teach from a developed curriculum but also from experiences from the field. We feel that keeps the course and the content fresh." That content is quite distinct from that of other designations in the meetings field, such as the CMM and CMP, insofar as the SMMC focuses on enterprise-level strategy and policy for meetings.

The CMM and CMP are focused on delivering meetings, although a CMM "is probably more likely to be elevated to a strategic role," Wolfe feels. "But I would like to see all meeting planners get that certification even if their career path doesn't move them to a level of strategic design. And the reason is that the more people in our industry who understand the big picture, the more we can not only sell it but manage to the big picture." And since many SMM professionals are from the procurement and travel management sides, a meeting plan-

"Focusing on an overall meetings strategy that aligns with the objectives of the company creates real ROI impact and demonstrates the value-add of meetings to the organization."



Amy Harris, CMP, SMMC
Vice President, SMM
SunTrust Bank
Atlanta, GA

ner with that understanding "offers a unique perspective," Harris feels.

"Having the SMMC shows that I have the knowledge and skillset in the SMM space necessary to speak to the development, implementation and practice of an SMMP, but also I have the planning and execution background. I sometimes think we need not be so procurement-disciplined in this space but to remember the meetings management process as well, focusing on an overall meetings strategy that aligns with the objectives of the company, creates real ROI impact and demonstrates the value-add of meetings to the organization. My meetings management background allows me to find a point where the disciplines intersect."

Insurance and financial services professionals were among the first students in the course, Joyce notes, and "we've seen great interest from those sectors." Looking ahead, she expects the ROI and ROO content of the program to further develop with input from Dr. Elling Hamso, managing partner of European Event ROI Institute. The SMMC should also evolve to offer more coverage of hybrid meetings and how they can fit within a corporation's meetings strategy. "I'd like the participants to be conversant in those opportunities," says Joyce.

Certification Opens Door to Opportunities

Deborah Borak, SMMC, director of global accounts/team director with ConferenceDirect, certainly saw a business opportunity in the designation. "I thought it might be a good area for me to focus on because it's helpful to have that specialty for our clients," Borak relates. "I helped one group build their SMMP and thought that this is really something that is going to be big in the future."

Third parties are in fact helping companies develop their meetings strategy more and more. "There are two different pieces of the pie, one is strategy and one is operations, and what is predominantly being outsourced is operations," Wolfe notes. "However, we are definitely starting to see a shift from strategy being (designed) in house."

Sometimes the third party may be used to effect the centralization of functions like sourcing, contracting, execution, expense tracking and reporting, and more for all of a company's meetings. "The SMMP process helps to streamline everything through one department, and that's where I feel I'm most beneficial — as that one point of contact that anybody in the company can have" regarding meetings, Borak explains.

And her background in having helped a client establish its SMMP proved a "huge advantage" in her coursework for the SMMC, which is not for someone who doesn't already have a basic understanding of the meetings industry, she maintains.

Many participants already had SMMPs in place at their companies, and fruitfully interacted with those who did not. "There was so much information brought to the table. And it was also an opportunity to hear from people who were just initiating the process, what their thoughts and problems were," says Milane. "I was lucky enough to be able to help a few people because our SMMP has been in place since February 2009. We've all kind of stayed in touch. It

gives us an opportunity to benchmark our ideas going forward. We've also planned for an anniversary meeting where we can get together and discuss where we've gone and where we can go with our programs."

Harris, who is also part of the group, stresses the value of exchanging knowledge with one's peers. "I was excited about having 20-plus people in this space in a room for two solid weeks talking about their programs and benchmarking practices," she says. "You think you've built the perfect robot and then you meet someone who has built it better in certain respects, and you want to incorporate various pieces into your original design."

The SMM Toolkit

The other new offering from the GBTA on the SMM front is the Toolkit, which is a product of the Groups and Meetings Committee, specifically its SMM Fundamentals Subcommittee, on which Harris serves.

The SMM Toolkit, a work in progress since 2009, includes templates, sample documents and business-case scenarios designed to help guide smaller companies and those less experienced in SMM to best practices in various areas, such as meeting registration, policy, communication and data reporting.

The Groups and Meetings Committee will present the latest version of the Toolkit, covering all stages of SMM development and maturity, at GBTA's annual convention in Denver, Aug. 21-24. Whether the product will afterward be available to the public or just to GBTA members has not been decided.

"We are also developing a new, fully online fundamentals course in SMM, really just to take you through the business case," says Joyce. "We plan to repurpose or leverage the toolkit components, like the sample meeting policies, in the course." "The Fundamentals of Strategic Meetings Management,"

comprising five modules, will launch in April of this year. "It's for those not yet ready for the SMMC, who are still at the discovery stage or exploring the concept for their organization. If you take the online course, you of course get all the resources from the toolkit that are embedded," Joyce explains.

The Wave of the Future

In essence, the GBTA is tailoring SMM education to all experience levels, and is finding interest from meeting planners, procurement officers, travel managers and other professionals from a variety of industries.

And it's not only the major corpo-

"We have no choice now due to the economy to take SMM as a predominant concern. We must know where the money is being spent on meetings and ensure that risk is being mitigated."



Jane Wolfe
Senior Director, Product Fulfillment
StarCite
San Jose, CA

rations who hold thousands of meetings per year; the principles will also increase efficiency and save money for small insurance and financial firms. "I happen to have a very close friend at a small insurance company, and she is constantly calling me to ask for advice on SMM," Wolfe relates. "Whether you're a Fortune 500 or a small startup, we have no choice now due to the economy to take SMM as a predominant concern. We must know where the money is being spent on meetings and ensure that risk is being mitigated. So I believe this is the wave of the future for any corporation regardless of the size."

I&FMM

"The SMMP process helps to streamline everything through one department, and that's where I feel I'm most beneficial — as that one point of contact that anybody in the company can have."



Deborah Borak, SMMC
Director of Global Accounts/Team Director, ConferenceDirect
Littleton, CO

level is of course critical to assessing the company's overarching ROI for its meetings, and Milane found the ROI discussions within the GBTA's

LAS VEGAS REVISITED

Gaming's Not the Only Game in Town

By George Seli

Insurance and financial planners who are banking on vast availability at Las Vegas hotels this year and beyond may need to hedge their hopes a bit. While there is plenty of rooms inventory with major new properties such as the CityCenter complex, convention business is picking up this

year, after what Amy Riley, LVCVA senior director of convention sales, calls “a slow progression” in 2010.

“This year looks fabulous” Riley said. “We’re seeing many 2007–2008 organizations coming back, so I think

budgets are stronger after companies got through the two ‘panic years.’ The insurance/financial market is also coming back. We’re not getting that questionable feedback that we were in ‘09.” But, Riley adds, incoming incentive programs are seldom “pure.” They’re typically combined with at least a half-

day of business meetings, reflecting a stronger focus on maximizing ROI during the time that attendees are together.

In Las Vegas, of course, there is more than enough diversion on offer for a pure incentive, and even companies that are not in town for an incentive are beginning to add more offsite entertainment, which is good news for DMCs. Tami Hance is vice president of Destinations by Design, which

has a robust insurance/financial client base. “When groups started coming back they weren’t necessarily spending much money with a DMC because they would stay in the hotel to meet their F&B minimum, which is understandable,” she explains. “But what we saw toward the end of last year and this year is that firms are feeling a little better about spending additional money, taking a chance, stepping

outside the hotel and maybe taking attendees to a show.”

Having worked in the city’s meetings industry for some 20 years, Hance has seen her share of trends, and one of the most significant is a diversification in Las Vegas entertainment for groups. Essentially, casinos are now far from the only game in town. “As an incentive destination we have everything at your fingertips: celebrity chef res-



Looking north on the Las Vegas Strip, the Bellagio's famed fountain spectacular takes center stage.

Photo courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau

The Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health with its Frank Gehry-designed Keep Memory Alive Event Center (below) is a centerpiece of Las Vegas' new Symphony Park.



Photo by Matt Carbone Photography



Photo by Irene Hahn

options for groups are "similar to what you'd find in a metropolitan city like New York, Chicago or San Francisco, but which we've never quite had here. It's really the first time Las Vegas has had a true performing arts center, and corporate groups will be able to take advantage of that and have a whole night that isn't at all about The Strip."

Indeed, the notion of an "adult playground" doesn't suggest the city's urbane side, nor the quality of its hospitality industry, which is critical to corporate groups. Las Vegas is now home to 15 AAA Five Diamond resorts and restaurants, more than any other city in the country. In its debut year, CityCenter Las Vegas has received the AAA Five Diamond Award for both Aria Resort & Casino and Mandarin Oriental Las Vegas. Among the repeat winners are The Venetian, The Palazzo, Skylofts at MGM Grand, Four Seasons Las Vegas (12 consecutive years) and Bellagio (10 consecutive years). A five-time AAA Five Diamond winner, Wynn Las Vegas and sister property Encore are two of only 54 hotels in the world to receive the Forbes Five Star distinction.

Symphony Park Sophistication

Las Vegas entertainment is also going in a more sophisticated direction with the highly anticipated 2012 opening of The Smith Center, a world-class performing arts venue at the heart of the downtown arts and science community known as Symphony Park.

Also in Symphony Park is the completed Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health and its Frank Gehry-designed Keep Memory Alive Event Center, which can host corporate functions. The space features 199 windows in an undulating, surrounding stainless steel trellis canopy and accommodates 300 seated or 700 for a standing reception, with fine cuisine available. "The architecture is simply stunning," says Hance. Symphony Park's entertainment and special-event

ance Company held its Million Dollar Producers Forum for the first time at the 3,933-room Bellagio last spring. The company invites independent agents for a day and a half of educational meetings, some led by recognized industry

speakers such as IRA expert Ed Slott. The event "allows us to remind our existing producing agents of all the value-added benefits of doing business with American Equity. A percentage of our attendees is actually made up of agents who have qualified to attend through production with other companies and are new to American Equity, so it also gives us an opportunity to talk to these agents and earn their business," explains Lisa McQuerrey, vice president with the company.

Entering its fifth year, the event has been exclusively held in Las Vegas. "We chose Las Vegas because of its airlift, variety of meeting spaces and the fun activities available. Because our guests are paying their own way to come (the company pays lodging expenses, but not airfare), that gives them a little more incentive to visit." And the layout of Bellagio's 200,000 sf of meeting space was "well suited to our needs," McQuerrey adds. "The convention space is laid out



Million Dollar Producers

West Des Moines, IA-based American Equity Investment Life Insur-

Those producers "had a lot of great things to say about Bellagio, and we're really confident that they liked the Forum itself because our numbers have increased so steadily through the years."

Lisa McQuerrey, Vice President
American Equity Investment Life Insurance Company
West Des Moines, IA

very nicely between the two guest room towers, which made it easy for our participants to find us." Those producers "had a lot of great things to say about Bellagio, and we're really confident that they liked the Forum itself because our numbers have increased so steadily through the years. Last year we were just a little over 600, this year approximately 800 — our highest attendance to date, a very successful event." McQuerrey noted one comment from a first-time attendee: "I came back full of enthusiasm, energy and ideas. It was amazing, so well done. It was the first one I have attended and I will tell you that next year, I want to have at least 50 producers there. It was one of the best conferences I have been to in years."

What's New On and Off The Strip

One of the most anticipated new industry events of the year will take place in Las Vegas October 11–13: IMEX America — America's Worldwide Exhibition for Incentive Travel, Meetings & Events. The Venetian/Palazzo will be the headquarters hotel and the Sands Expo and Convention Center will host the first-ever IMEX America show with more than 2,000 hosted buyers. The Venetian/Palazzo offer a combined 7,000 suites, and together with the Sands Expo and Convention Center, they boast more than 2.25 million sf of meeting and exhibit space.

Wynn Las Vegas is becoming still more luxurious with the renovation of its 2,716 guest rooms and suites, ongoing through early 2011. The Wynn offers groups 200,000 sf of meeting space, an approximately 110,000 sf casino, an onsite 18-hole golf course, an onsite Ferrari and Maserati dealership, two nightclubs and lounges.

A more comprehensive, \$180 million renovation is ongoing through July at the Tropicana Las Vegas. The hotel's 1,375 guest rooms are complete, as is the casino and conference center, which now offers more than 60,000 sf of meeting space. The end of

May will see the debut of Nikki Beach, a trendy beach and nightclub, and a new spa will open at the end of July.

Caesars Palace and Nobu Hospitality have announced plans to co-develop the world's first Nobu Hotel. The interior of the Centurion Tower at Caesars Palace will undergo a multimillion-dollar renovation to create the 180-room Nobu Hotel within the resort. The noted Nobu Restaurant and Lounge di-

rected by world renowned chef Nobu Matsuhisa will be showcased at the base of the Nobu tower.

And there are notable hotel developments removed from The Strip, thus offering a less distracting environment many corporate groups will prefer. "Insurance and financial are among the markets that use many of our off-Strip properties," Riley remarks. "Obviously Vegas increases at-

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tendance, but they don't necessarily want to be on The Strip."

Perhaps the most newsworthy off-Strip hotel development is the February debut of the 349-room Ravella at Lake Las Vegas, located on the site of the former Ritz-Carlton at Lake Las Vegas. Dolce manages the rebranded resort, which encompasses 39,000 sf of meeting space, a spa and the Southshore Golf Club, and offers specialized "Meeting Cuisine" as well as preferred reservations at the restaurants of The Village Lake Las Vegas. Situated on the shores of the largest privately owned manmade lake in the U.S., Ravella is named after the picturesque coastal town of Ravello in southern Italy.

Last summer, the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino's expansion added the HRH Beach Club to the city's myriad entertainment venues. Suitable for a casual outdoor reception, the five-acre pool area includes a sandy beach, 24 luxury cabanas, a Bar & Grill and more.

On the South Las Vegas Strip, the four-star M Resort Spa Casino, which celebrated its second anniversary in March, is ideal for small or medium-sized meetings. Along with its 60,000 sf of indoor meeting space, the resort showcases 100,000 square feet for special events on the Villaggio Del Sole, the outdoor events piazza, which features a built-in stage with an event capacity of 4,000. All six of the resort's restaurants are available for group events and all afford views of The Las Vegas Strip. The indoor meeting space includes a 17,400-sf ballroom, four meeting rooms and a boardroom.

Minutes from The Strip is the 2,163-room South Point Hotel, Casino & Spa. The hotel has expanded its casino to 55,000 sf and now offers one of the largest gaming floors in the nation. There is 170,000 sf of flexible indoor meeting space, which includes an 80,000-sf exhibit hall; a 22,000-sf ballroom with permanent stage; and 22 breakout rooms. A new 400-seat showroom features



South Point Hotel, Casino & Spa has 170,000 sf of indoor meeting space.

headliner entertainment and dancing to live bands on weekends. Unique to other Las Vegas casino-hotel properties, South Point has a 16-screen movie complex and a 64-lane bowling center.

Another off-Strip gem suited for small to mid-sized meetings is the Westin Casuarina Las Vegas Hotel, Casino & Spa, offering a tranquil retreat from The Strip's non-stop action a block away. Relaxation comes at The Hibiscus Spa, the outdoor heated pool and the WestinWorkout gym. The hotel has 20,000 sf of meeting space including 15 meeting rooms and two ballrooms. A 2,000-sf theater with stage offers seating for 175.

Special Events Venues

A very different special-event ambience can be found at New York-New York Hotel & Casino's new Sporting House Bar & Grill, offering more than 130 video monitors and a second-story



M Resort Spa Casino features a 100,000-sf outdoor special events piazza with built-in stage.

All-Star Arcade with 10,000 sf of interactive and competitive sports-themed attractions.

From New York to Paris, the just-opened Chateau Nightclub and Gardens at Paris Las Vegas is a 40,000-sf venue located directly under the iconic replica of the Eiffel Tower. A group function on the rooftop dance

floor with panoramic views can be coordinated through Las Vegas Meetings by Caesars Entertainment.

"Anything you can do in the city where you can be outdoors with a view of The Strip and feel like you're on top of the world is going to be a home run," advises Hance, who takes advantage of the views afforded by venues such as Moon and ghostbar (at The Palms), Mix (at Mandalay Bay), Foundation Room (at the House of Blues) and Surrender (at Encore).

Offer Attendees a Personalized 'Vegas Experience'

Hance also advises planners to build in a little free time for their participants, if possible. With the sheer amount of dining and entertainment options, "if you pack every single day and night then people are going to have a wandering eye. So you should let them have their own Vegas experience, which might not be gambling. It might be Tom Colicchio's restaurant because they've seen him on 'Top Chef' for five years and can't wait to go to Craftsteak (at the MGM Grand). So if you can let everybody have their own Vegas experience in addition to the one that you've planned for them, you're going to be golden."

As Hance suggests, fine dining has become a sought-after experience in the city. Las Vegas' Five Diamond award-winning restaurants include Guy Savoy at Caesars Palace, Joel Robuchon at MGM Grand, Picasso and Le Cirque at Bellagio, and Alex at Wynn Las Vegas.

This December, Steve Wynn and restaurant impresario Michael Morton opened La Cave, a wine and food "hideaway" inside Wynn Las Vegas. Here attendees can enjoy a modern American small-plates menu and wines personally selected by Wynn Resorts'

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executive wine director. In November, Wynn Las Vegas opened the Lakeside Grill, featuring modern twists on classic American dishes, situated beside the resort's Lake of Dreams.

Last October, the Tropicana introduced Biscayne Steak, Sea & Wine, a South Beach-style restaurant, as part of its phase-one transformation. And The Forum Shops at Caesars Palace is now home to P.J. Clarke's first West Coast location. Established in 1884 in New York, P.J. Clarke's characteristic saloon atmosphere spans a 12,000-sf venue seating 323 attendees in two dining rooms.

New Services and Apps

Las Vegas hotels are not only pleasing attendees with new eateries, they're also pleasing planners with new services. On the high-tech side, Bellagio, Mandalay Bay, MGM Grand, The Mirage, New York-New York and Luxor recently unveiled property apps for iPhones, Blackberrys and Droids that offer an all-new passcode-protected way for event managers to send news, special offers, meeting schedules and presentations to their attendees. Through the app, guests also can register for an event, see updated schedules, rate the venue, suggest topics of discussion, find a meeting room, review event photos and more.

At the Bellagio, interactive reader boards throughout the meeting space help attendees navigate the venue through touchscreen monitors.

Mandalay Bay Catering and Con-



The Westin Casuarina Las Vegas Hotel, Casino & Spa is a relaxing haven from the hectic pace on the nearby Strip.

vention Services has introduced five new packages specifically designed for groups of 10 to 50 participants. The distinctive programs include an intimate beach barbecue, a VIP wine tasting, a teambuilding culinary challenge and the opportunity to work and learn side-by-side with celebrated chef Rick Moonen.

Community Service and Sustainability

One kind of activity that's becoming increasingly popular for groups in Las Vegas is community service. "You don't necessarily think about that in Las Vegas, but we're a destination just like everybody else, and to be able to give back to a local community is really exciting," Hance says. "Financial and insurance companies are prob-

ably one of the biggest leaders in that." Community service is one form of corporate social responsibility (CSR), along with green practices. MGM has recently been making green strides with its Las Vegas hotels. Last summer, 12 MGM Resorts International properties in the city were awarded the Green Key designation for green business operations by The Green Key Eco-Rating Program, the largest international program evaluating sustainable hotel operations. Topping the awardees

were Aria and Vdara at CityCenter, both earning "5 Keys."

In addition, Las Vegas Meetings by Caesars Entertainment (formerly Las Vegas Meetings by Harrah's Entertainment) recently announced that all of its sales and services managers, more than 100 across all eight Las Vegas properties, have been certified as Green Meeting Professionals by Esty Environmental Partners. Caesars Entertainment Corporation itself was recently honored by the U.S. Green Building Council Nevada Chapter with the 2010 "Organizational Excellence Award" for the company's leadership and advocacy for green building and for its CodeGreen programs that promote a more sustainable future in Nevada.

Las Vegas Meetings by Caesars Entertainment also has been doing its best to reach out to meeting planners and further the revitalization of corporate business. Last fall, nearly 400 planners converged on the city for two installments of the Las Vegas Educational Experience, marking the event's most successful turnout in its five-year history. Planners learned about the brand's properties and services, networked, and, in a sign of the times, participated in a community service project. Both planners and Caesars Entertainment team members helped out at St. Jude's Ranch for Children, a local nonprofit that cares for abused, abandoned and neglected children.

While Caesars' is the largest event of its kind in the city, Wynn Encore, MGM Resorts International and the LVCVA also regularly offer these programs. "As an organization we have found that there are certain vertical markets that are very strong for us, such as insurance and financial, and we continue to bring clients in for an educational opportunity. That's been very successful for us," says Riley. The remarkable turnout at these events is not only promising for Las Vegas. It also means that companies are less preoccupied with "perception" and looking to book more face-to-face meetings, which makes for a healthier industry. **I&FMM**

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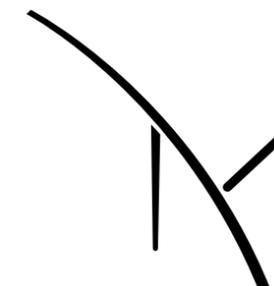
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The Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort & Spa, in the Pueblo of Santa Ana, NM, has named **Mary Dean Smith** as associate director of sales. She was sales manager for Heritage Hotels & Resorts' Hotel Albuquerque. **Toshi Goto** was named as sales manager for the Northeast and mid-Atlantic regions of the country. He was sales manager for the Hyatt Summerfield Suites in Los Angeles, CA. **Tiffany Tang** was named sales manager for the Texas and New Mexico markets. She was assistant revenue manager for the Grand Hyatt Seattle and Hyatt Olive 8 in Seattle, WA.

The Broadmoor, Colorado Springs, CO, has named **Tammy Page**, CMP, as director of national sales, Midwest region. She formerly served as The Broadmoor's director of national sales for the Rocky Mountain Region.

Marla Dunn was named sales and services director for Aulani, a Disney Resort & Spa, Ko Olina, HI. She most recently served as director of catering and conference services for The Westin Maui Resort & Spa, Lahaina.

Paul Goslin was named area director of sales and marketing for Hiltons of Washington, DC, representing Capital Hilton and Washington Hilton. With 30 years of hospitality experience, he most recently served as senior direc-

tor involved in the planning and collaboration of the Marriott Sales Force Transformation initiatives.

Francine Rattenbury was named national sales manager for The Renaissance Resort at World Golf Village, St. Augustine, FL. She was senior sales manager for Windstream Communications, Daytona Beach, FL.

Donna Kelley was named director of sales and marketing for the Hilton in the Walt Disney World Resort, Orlando, FL. She formerly served as director of sales at The Peabody Orlando.

The Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, Destin, FL, has named **Terri Marsh** as regional sales manager responsible for the Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee markets. She was director of sales and marketing at the Nashville Marriott at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN. **Florencia Shiffer** was named regional sales manager responsible for the Northeast region of the U.S. She was senior sales manager at the Marriott mid-Atlantic regional sales office in Gaithersburg, MD.

The Westin St. John Resort & Villas, St. John, USVI, has promoted **Bahia Husband** to director of group sales. **Barb Hildebrandt** was named

senior sales manager. Husband has been a member of the Westin St. John Resort & Villas sales team since 2009. Hildebrandt was director of group sales for The Westin Casuarina Resort & Spa, Grand Cayman and The Westin St. Maarten Dawn Beach Resort & Spa.

Grand Wailea, A Waldorf Astoria Resort in Maui, HI, has promoted **Alex Matthies** to associate director of sales. She was director of insurance and Northeast sales and continues to handle these markets. **I&FMM**

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