

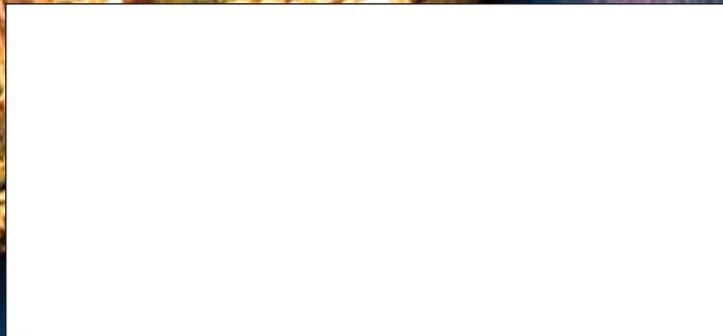
INSURANCE & FINANCIAL MEETINGS MANAGEMENT

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No More Cookie-Cutter

Customized Service Is Now the
Key for CVBs to Win Your Business
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JULY/AUGUST 2012

Vol. 19 No. 4



The pool deck grill at the new Omni Dallas Hotel.

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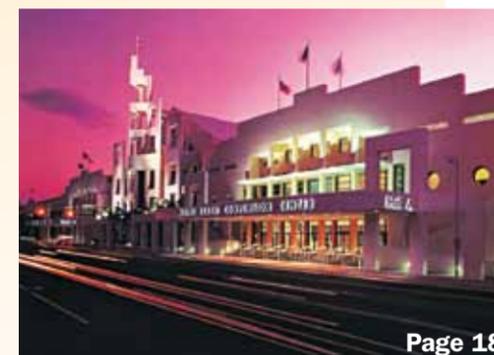
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Like many other proactive CVBs around the nation, the Greater Miami CVB has a dedicated website for planners, miamimeetings.com, with a full range of services and information.

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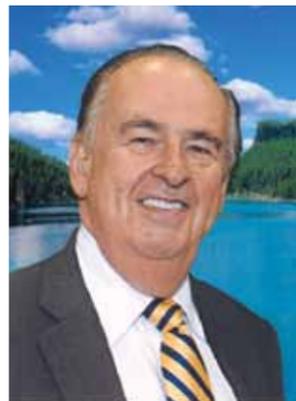
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Publisher's Message

The Best Customer Service

My colleagues and I recently returned from the friendly city of Seattle where we attended the Destination Marketing Association International's lively, packed annual convention, which attracted more than 1,300 participants, including the most Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) attendees in the organization's history. Themed "Local Passion. Global Impact." the event was billed as a one-stop shop for educational seminars, product familiarization and networking (see the great photos on page 7). In addition, DMAI President



and CEO Michael D. Gehrisch released the DMO Marketing Study — the first-ever benchmark study on DMO marketing practices. "It was important to create a study that would give the industry this information to better shape their marketing agendas. On a national level, this is a really great snapshot of what marketing needs are being met or underserved," he said. Gehrisch adds that the study will give all DMOs vital information that will help them to evolve and more effectively compete in the global marketplace.

DMOs, which have evolved from and are also still mostly known as Convention and Visitors Bureaus, are the intriguing subject matter of our cover story. In "No More Cookie Cutter...Customized Service is Now the Key for CVBs to Win Your Business," we learn how CVBs in Nashville, New Orleans, Denver, San Diego, Las Vegas and Orlando have customized sophisticated RFP services, innovative event marketing strategies and more to win your insurance and financial group meetings business, which "has really come back to life," according to CVB leaders such as Butch Spyridon, the veteran visionary of the Nashville CVB. Many of the CVBs have expanded their digital presence and offer special apps as well as interactive websites dedicated to group meetings. Rachel Benedick, the vice president of sales and services, Visit Denver, reminds us that "Many people want to go to a meeting in a place they want to visit." Thus, she says her CVB's mission is to make sure attendees become Denver ambassadors when they leave. Cynthia Tomei, CMP, CMM, meeting manager with Chicago-based Blue Cross Blue Shield Association is a fan of meeting in Orlando. After about 15 meetings there, she is very comfortable in calling Visit Orlando a top CVB because "they are consistent and their customer service is excellent; they seem to know their clients very well."

Harvey Grotsky

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WEBSITE

www.themeetingmagazines.com

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

John Buchanan
Karen Brost
Stella Johnson
Derek Reveron
George Seli

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

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cccadvertising@att.net

FLORIDA/CARIBBEAN

561-989-0600, ext. 108 · Fax: 561-989-9509
cccadvertising@att.net

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

MIDWEST

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

WEST

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

HAWAII

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FICP Study Finds Members Generate Upwards of \$900 Million in Meeting and Event Business

CHICAGO, IL — Financial & Insurance Conference Planners (FICP) released findings of its most recent Economic Impact Study, a comprehensive report of financial and trends data related to the insurance and financial services industry that was conducted in March 2012 by an independent research firm and included responses from 91 FICP member companies. Key findings include:

- The collective buying power of FICP member organizations ranges between \$659 and \$913 million annually.
- Members' average annual meetings budget is \$3 million, with 95 percent of respondents expecting budgets to increase or remain flat in 2013.
- Member companies spent roughly \$900,000 for their largest event and planned an average of 95 meetings in 2011.
- Despite the increase in meeting budgets and the number of meetings planned, only 21 percent of respondents expect an increase in the size of their meeting planning teams in 2013.

Other highlights include:

- 66 percent of respondents enrich their meetings with recreational activities.
- Nearly half the respondents reported the addition of entertainment in their meetings.
- 40 percent of respondents engage in event/meeting ROI/ROO.

To view the Economic Impact Study Executive Summary, go to www.ficpnet.com/economicimpact. www.ficpnet.com

The Scottsdale Plaza Resort Unveils Renovations

SCOTTSDALE, AZ — The Scottsdale Plaza Resort announced the completion of its \$3 million property-wide renovation, including updates to all 404 rooms and suites. The guest rooms are appointed with rich burgundy fabrics, custom window treatments, elegant taupe carpeting, new mahogany-toned case goods, new seating, flat-screen televisions, and fresh interior walls and ceilings accented by crown molding. The rooms also have new lighting, bathroom accents and décor. Facilities also were updated with a newly remodeled fitness center, complete with new equipment and a studio for group classes. Remington's Restaurant and Lounge was refreshed with new furnishings throughout; the Terraza tent received new carpeting; the tennis court was refinished; and state-of-the-art infrared saunas were installed at The Salon & Day Spa. www.scottsdaleplaza.com

DMAI's 2012 Annual Convention Breaks Attendance Records



MICHAEL D. GEHRISCH

WASHINGTON, DC — The Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) 2012 Annual Convention held July 16–18 in Seattle attracted more than 1,300 participants, including the most DMO attendees in the organization's history. Attendees came from 13 countries to take part in a record-breaking number of education sessions and hours of peer-to-peer idea sharing. Also, 120 DMO industry provider organizations participated in the event, a 20 percent increase, which included 33 first-time exhibitors. In addition, the highly anticipated DMO Marketing Study, the first-ever benchmark study on destination marketing organization marketing practices, was launched at the 2012 convention. "Until now there hasn't been a definitive, comprehensive study about how destinations are investing their marketing dollars and why," said President and CEO of DMAI, Michael D. Gehrisch. "It was important to create a study that would give the industry this information to better shape their marketing agendas. On a national level, this is a really great snapshot of what marketing needs are being met or underserved." The 31-page report covers themes such as: how budgets are deployed; traditional and digital marketing mediums and initiatives; international marketing efforts; current and future website applications and integration; and mobile websites and destination apps. Gehrisch said the study will give all DMOs vital information that will help them to evolve and more effectively compete in the global marketplace. For information on how to purchase the report, go to DMAI's product store at www.destinationmarketing.org.

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Pictured at The Destination Marketing Association International's 2012 Annual Convention in Seattle are **1** a volunteer event to spruce up the host city's Magnuson Community Park; **2** the Destination & Travel Foundation Golf Tournament & Live Auction at the Plateau Club; and **3, 4** the Opening Celebration at Bell Harbor. **5** The 2012 Financial & Insurance Conference Planners (FICP) Education Forum's charity give-back program benefited the Low Country Food Bank in Charleston, SC. (L to r) Jana Stern, ING, and 2012 FICP Education Forum Chair; Alan Ranzer, Impact 4 Good; Koleen Roach, Securian Financial Group and FICP Chair; and Amy Kosar, Lowcountry Food Bank. **6** At Site Nite Europe in Frankfurt, Germany, in May are Site International Board of Directors, Liu Ping (center in red) and members of the China team who invited all to Beijing for the Site International Conference this September. **7** At the Site EMEA Forum 2012 in Berlin, Germany, in June is Dr. Patrick Patridge (center), Site Germany Chapter president and member of the EMEA Forum planning committee. **8** The Incentive Research Foundation Annual Incentive Invitational was held in June in San Antonio, TX.



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New IRF Pulse Survey Shows Recovery, Stability of Incentive Industry

ST. LOUIS, MO — The Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) released the results of its Spring 2012 Pulse Survey, which in March polled industry professionals and discovered a generally positive outlook and slowing of reductions and cutbacks implemented in response to the economic downturn and media pressure.

General trends include: Economic recovery is being felt in program planning and implementation. For merchandise/noncash programs, the percentage that say the economy is having a positive impact more than doubled since October, from 25 percent to 53 percent, and 73 percent of respondents say their general perception of the economy in the coming year is positive. Also, for the remainder of 2012, most respondents say travel incentive budgets will stay the same (49 percent) or increase slightly (36 percent). Incentive travel trends include: The move from international to domestic destinations has slowed dramatically and seems to have leveled off. From a high of 42 percent in May 2010, the trend toward switching from international destinations to domestic destinations in order to cut incentive travel costs has become less pronounced. However, 30–40 percent of respondents seem to agree that reductions in the number of days and number of rooms will continue in the coming year. Also, in the past two years many companies have decided to only provide airline tickets and to have recipients absorb any other related costs of transportation. Merchandise trends include: Points-based programs are gaining in popularity — between October 2011 and March 2012, the percentage of respondents indicating they use a points-based system for their merchandise/noncash incentive programs rose from 40 percent to 74 percent. CSR, social media and gaming techniques are increasingly being used in incentive programs to inform and engage participants. To view the full spring 2012 survey, go to www.theirf.org.

Detroit Metro CVB Launches a Medical Meetings Initiative

DETROIT, MI — The Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau (DMCVB) announced the launch of Think Detroit. Think Medical. — a collaborative effort of area health care leaders to bring medical-related meetings to Detroit and contribute to the state's economic recovery. The announcement was made June 27 at the Michigan Health & Hospital Association board of trustees meeting on Mackinac Island. "Medical meetings are an untapped market for the metro Detroit region," said Bob Riney, 2012 chair of the DMCVB and president and COO of Henry Ford Health System. "The Detroit region has unique medical assets including physicians and health-care leaders who are nationally recognized as experts in their field. We have some of the most innovative practices in health care quality, wellness design, surgical technology and simulation, and more," said Riney. The DMCVB can accommodate meetings of all sizes, with and without exhibit space, in Detroit and surrounding suburbs. The newly renovated Cobo Center is creating a buzz among national meeting planners, according to the DMCVB. For information on Think Detroit. Think Medical. visit www.meetdetroit.com.

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Understanding New Rules For EU Events

Last year, the VAT rules that apply to the organizing of events, conferences and trade shows in the European Union (EU) countries changed. The new rules are in some instances very favorable to the U.S. event planner, but can in other instances be of a disadvantage.

First, however, a definition of VAT:

Value Added Tax (VAT) is a consumption tax of up to 25 percent that is levied on both goods and services in most countries around the world. The national tax systems of Europe, Japan and Australia and others often allow for a refund of VAT to non-resident business entities worldwide. For VAT claims that are not Travel and Entertainment expenses, registration for VAT may sometimes be required prior to the transactions in order to get a refund. For more information, go to www.eurovat.com.

Below is a description of the general rules that now apply. It is important to check the particulars for your planned event in the early planning stages as they can greatly vary.

1. The EU vendors will charge VAT on fewer items.

It used to be that the EU vendors, such as any DMC, venue, hotel and AV company had to charge VAT on all invoices issued to the U.S. event planner. This is no longer the case. The venue and hotel still have to charge VAT in most cases, but mostly the DMC and AV are not required to, so this can mean big savings. Note that the vendor may still charge VAT by mistake sometimes, so each invoice that includes VAT should be reviewed.

2. Can the approximate 20 percent VAT paid to the EU vendors be reclaimed?

Generally the U.S. company that pays VAT

to EU vendors for conference/event/trade show services can reclaim the VAT from the local tax authorities in each country. VAT registration prior to the event may be required in order to get the refund. This is usually the case if any fees are to be collected from the attendees of the event.

3. When is registration for VAT at the planning stage required?

U.S. companies usually need to register for VAT at the planning stage, and charge VAT to all or some of the attendees/exhibitors if they plan to either charge a fee to the people who will attend the conference/event/trade show or charge for exhibit space. Registration is usually not required if there will be no revenue collected for the event. For example, VAT registrations are generally not required for in-house meetings or marketing events where no fees are collected from the attendees or exhibitors.

The U.S. event planner who plans an event for a corporate client in one of the EU countries usually does not have to register for VAT nor charge VAT to their client. This is a huge advantage if the event takes place in a country that refunds VAT to U.S. companies, such as Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. It also means that the U.S. event planner can reclaim most of the VAT that they have incurred from the EU vendors without having to be registered and charging the VAT to their U.S. client. It is not an advantage if the event takes place in any other EU country, since it means the VAT cannot be reclaimed and will end up as a cost.

Sample Scenarios

A U.S. corporation organizes an in-house meeting in the UK. No fees are charged to any of the attendees. They contract directly with the UK vendors, and do not use a DMC:

Net cost from the UK vendors	\$100,000
20 percent VAT	\$20,000
Total paid to the UK vendors	\$120,000

Note: The \$20,000 in VAT can be reclaimed from the UK VAT authorities. Registration at the planning stage is not required

A U.S. corporation organizes a user conference in Germany. 1,000 attendees will pay a fee to attend, and there will also be exhibitors and sponsors. The U.S. corporation does all the planning in-house. VAT registration at the planning stage is required. VAT has to be charged to all the attendees and some of the exhibitors:

Fees from attendees and exhibitors	\$200,000
19 percent German VAT	\$38,000
Total charge to the attendees and exhibitors	\$238,000

Note: The VAT is refundable to almost all companies, so it will not be a cost to them

U.S. corporation pays to German vendors:

Net cost	\$100,000
19 percent VAT	\$19,000
Total paid to German vendors	\$119,000

Note: The VAT is refundable when the U.S. corporation files a VAT return to the German tax authorities.

The U.S. event planner organizes an in-house meeting for a U.S. corporation in Sweden and contracts with Swedish vendors.

U.S. event planner pays to the Swedish vendors	
Net cost	\$100,000
12 percent VAT	\$12,000
Total paid to Swedish vendors	\$120,000

Note: The event planner can claim back the VAT from the Swedish tax authorities without prior VAT registration.

The U.S. event planner organizes an in-house meeting for a U.S. corporation in Italy and pays to the Italian vendors.

Net cost	\$100,000
21 percent VAT	\$21,000
Total paid to Italian vendors	\$121,000

Note: The VAT cannot be reclaimed, since Italy does not refund VAT to U.S. companies. The VAT ends up as a cost.

The 27 EU countries are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Croatia, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and a few other countries do not belong to the EU.

I&FMM

Britta Eriksson co-founded Euro VAT Refund Inc. in 1992 and is president and CEO of the Culver City, CA-based company. She is one of the most knowledgeable VAT experts within the United States, frequently advising tax managers within the Fortune 500 companies, the United States Departments of Commerce, Revenue Canada, many European embassies and trade offices in the U.S. Contact her at britta.eriksson@eurovat.com or visit www.eurovat.com.

Travel Awards

By Melissa Van Dyke



Extend the Opportunity to All the People

Management and top-performing salespeople often enjoy the benefits of desirable travel, either for meetings, retreats or rewards. As more companies recognize the connection between customer loyalty and employee engagement, there is a compelling case to be made for extending the opportunity for a travel experience to everyone in an organization's community of customers, channel partners and employees.

An Opportunity for All?

A recent Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) study of a company that extends the opportunity for incentive travel to non-sales employees suggests that properly structured programs can provide important and measurable benefits in terms of promoting organizational values. The business uses a nomination framework to identify high-achieving employees. The study was based on 200 qualitative interviews and 256 survey responses gathered from participants in a long-standing group travel program for non-sales employees. The goal was to uncover the potential benefits and actionable best practices that could be used by companies seeking to implement similar programs.

The Results

The study found that while only 2 to 3 percent of employees were selected for the trip each year, more than 50 percent said the program helped improve performance. Given the incentive program is designed to promote values and behaviors and is not intended to have a measurable ROI, it is important to note that the study identified numerous benefits, as well as caveats, related to nomination-based incentive travel programs.

Keys for Program Success

Align the program with your values and desired behaviors. The program was designed to both reinforce the firm's mission and connect behavior to desired outcomes. The organization used a detailed and carefully communicated rewards program outline and reinforced the behavioral traits that defined its internal brand. Senior management dedicated a significant amount of time every year to determining award categories. Employees were recognized for their contributions to new product introductions, quality delivery, customer dedication, new revenue growth, idea-sharing, community citizenship, cost savings as well as creative solutions. Equally important to goal attainment was the manner in which employees attained their goals, and if their activities were aligned with the brand.

Implement integrated marketing campaigns and secure management support. The organization used an integrated marketing campaign across multiple media formats (email, posters, Intranet, audio, video, etc.) coupled with highly visible senior-level support to garner internal program awareness and acceptance. They also engaged line managers to embrace the program so that seemingly contradictory messages (e.g. save money but reward people) were not met with confusion and push back. Nominating employees for the program became every employee's responsibility, including managers. Consistent executive presence throughout the program reinforced the program's business rationale.

Clarify the nomination process early and often. Making the program eligible to all em-

ployees enterprise-wide helps reveal possibly overlooked, yet worthy, teams and individuals. However, to make an impact, all employees must first truly feel that they are eligible and capable of achieving that recognition. The mechanics of the nomination process must be streamlined and easy. Managers must have clear criteria and guidance for submissions. Companies should communicate rules governing eligibility, approval processing and other guidelines early and often during the campaign.

Make sure the selection process is transparent. The evaluation process must be open and transparent since, by nature, the winner selection is subjective. Corporations must determine who to involve in the evaluation/selection of winners, what criteria will be used in determining who wins, and to what extent the organization will share the process details. Companies should use surveys to reveal information gaps, update communications frequently and consider policies restricting the number of times a person can win to ensure fairness.

Warning: Program measurement can be a challenge. ROI and financial measures in any nomination-based program can be difficult to track. In this particular case, executives believed in the program because they were closely tied to both the award category and winner selection. They relished having first view into the extraordinary performances that drove annual results. Organizations also can combine non-financial metrics including increases in employee engagement, retention changes, as well as the cumulative business-building metrics of all winners to help strengthen their business case. They also can attempt to calculate the value of

implemented suggestions or the result of the recognized behavior.

Incentive travel is just one piece of the recognition equation. Top performer travel programs often happen only once a year. Organizations should build in quarterly, monthly, and/or on-going recognition and reward opportunities as well. By leveraging the personal story behind each nomination, all submissions essentially become an opportunity to recognize people and socialize the admired behavior. In doing so, companies not only endorse the actions of winners, they also promote the program.

Final Thoughts

Organizations wishing to optimize the contributions of all employees should take a second look at nomination-based, non-sales top performer group travel programs. In the IRF's study of such a program, feedback from multiple stakeholders suggested that the use of travel for non-sales employees provides long-lasting benefits — advantages that carry over long after the trip has ended and impact concentric circles of the winner's co-workers. When designed appropriately and combined with everyday informal recognition activities, travel awards offer a memorable experience and long-lasting effects that cash or other rewards arguably cannot match.

I&FMM

Melissa Van Dyke, president of the Incentive Research Foundation, previously was the managing consultant of the Employee Engagement Practice and held leadership positions in Solution Management, Product Development and Business Technology Solution Management at Maritz.
m.vandyke@theirf.org, www.theirf.org

Sales Training Meetings



Adapt to New Best Practices Now or Lose Your Edge

By John Buchanan

Sales training meetings, influenced by new technologies and major advances in knowledge about adult learning, are changing and evolving. And nowhere is that more important than in the insurance and financial services markets, which have always relied heavily on effective training as a key competitive advantage.

Today, however, the message is simple and clear: adapt to the latest best practices or lose your edge.

“One of the most common current shortcomings of insurance and financial services sales training meetings is the old idea of just bringing a whole bunch of people together and imparting knowledge to them,” says John Golden, CEO and president of Arlington, VA-based Huthwaite, a global sales training and performance organization. “If you really think about it, technology is actually a much better way to impart knowledge. So, one common mistake is where companies hold these events and they have speakers or present-

ers who just get up and start talking about a lot of concepts and lecturing. If you’re going to have an effective meeting, you have to take care of that stuff in advance and push it out to people online so attendees can prepare.”

Then, Golden says, onsite activities should break attendees into smaller groups to focus on hands-on learning experiences that include role-playing. The other important change is a growing understanding that the onsite phase of the meeting is only the beginning of an ongoing process of education and reinforcement, says Dan Seidman, principal of sales training consultancy Got Influence? in Barrington, IL.

“There’s this idea that a big sales training meeting is a trip to the top of the hill, where people have a peak experience,” Seidman says. “But anybody who’s a real trainer who understands adult learning principles knows that you have to have reinforcement, too. So, doing a national conference and having sales training

happen is not going to work unless you have a way to kick people in the butt afterward and reinforce practices and change behavior over the next few weeks and months.”

At the same time, Seidman says, the 50-year-old model of convening attendees in an offsite destination for intensive training is fading away. “Frankly, that model is just too expensive today,” he says. “You’re better off doing smaller meetings that are more regional or local. And they have to be interactive experiences where people can really practice their skills.”

Tactical Errors

In the wake of a deep recession, many insurance and financial services companies are making another mistake today, says Marvin B. LeBlanc, owner of Gonzales, LA-based Marvin B. LeBlanc Insurance Agency Inc. and principal of sales training consultancy Marvelous Performance Systems.

“Many of the sales meetings that are happening today are happening on the Internet or in a teleconference,” LeBlanc says. “Traditional face-to-face meetings are giving way to virtual meetings or teleconfer-

ences. More and more companies are embracing things like Skype and videoconferencing.”

But, LeBlanc cautions, that is not a step forward. It’s a step backwards. “The human interaction that takes place at a face-to-face meeting cannot be replaced by technology or software,” he says. “Technology certainly has a place in our industry. But when I’m talking to you in reference to personal selling, the larger the item you’re going to be asking customers to buy, the more important face-to-face training is.”

Seidman agrees that traditional face-to-face meetings are critical as a core strategy. “Technology can reinforce face-to-face meetings, but you still need face-to-face meetings and the attention and interactivity that happen at face-to-face meetings that technology can’t match,” he says. “You can teach somebody about a new product through video training or a webinar, or even in a teleconference. But you can’t do sales training without people being face-to-face with their peers and practicing what they’re supposed to be learning.”

Another key principle that Seidman preaches is that the extensive, complex product knowledge that insurance and financial

more they talk when they’re with prospects,” Seidman says. “They just won’t shut up on a sales call. And that’s the big problem when you base your sales training on products rather than process.”

Richard Newman, managing member, Life Audit Professionals LLC, an insurance consulting firm in Boca Raton, FL, agrees that too much focus on products is a widespread flaw in insurance sales meetings. “It’s the difference between creating ‘product pushers’ and planners who build relationships with their customers,” he says. “Understanding products and the nuances of products is really, really important. But where I think we have issues as an industry is that the whole sales cycle has become about pushing products.”

In the 21st century world of informed consumers, the focus of sales training should be on the needs of customers and prospects rather than a company’s products. “What’s changing now is that companies are starting to realize that their salespeople really need to know how to have a conversation that creates val-

ue in the minds of prospects and customers,” he says. “They have to really understand what the personal needs are of the customer and how to address those needs. And that goes beyond just selling products. You have to understand what really drives that

customer. It’s a much more investigative process that is focused on the buyer, as opposed to a push for particular products.”

As a result, Golden says, more executives and sales managers are changing the way they conduct sales training meetings. “But,” he adds, “I don’t think that most organizations yet understand how difficult a shift

“But you also see now that the more progressive companies are creating better agendas and focusing more on interactive breakout sessions where attendees can really learn something.”



Richard Newman
Managing Member
Life Audit Professionals LLC
Boca Raton, FL

that is and what it actually requires of their salespeople.”

LeBlanc and the primary insurance carrier he represents have been ahead of the curve on that issue. “For example,” he says, “a program we started five years ago is all about process and not about products. And that’s an example of why the leading companies in the industry are the leading companies. It’s not an accident. What they do is very intentional. And their national sales training meetings and other educational events reflect that.”

Increasingly, LeBlanc says, the focus is on what he calls “soft skills,” such as human relations, fundamental selling techniques, self-confidence, and how to use the latest customer relationship management (CRM) products that allow salespeople to be efficient and effective in their follow-up.

A Simpler Strategy

The other trend that Seidman sees in sales training meetings is a growing appreciation of the reality that less is more. “When you train people, you can choose to dump a ton of information on them — a whole bunch of things and hope that one or two stick — or you can choose to stick to one key piece of the sales puzzle and just beat that into people

“The human interaction that takes place at a face-to-face meeting cannot be replaced by technology or software.”



Marvin B. LeBlanc
Owner, Marvin B. LeBlanc
Insurance Agency Inc.
Gonzales, LA

services companies have featured at their sales meetings for decades have virtually nothing to do with selling them successfully. “And the more you teach people about your products instead of how to sell, the

“Having sales training happen is not going to work unless you have a way to kick people in the butt afterward and reinforce practices and change behavior over the next few weeks and months.”



Dan Seidman
Principal
Got Influence?
Barrington, IL

until they really get it,” he says. “I’m a one-piece-of-the-puzzle guy when I do training.”

For example, at a recent insurance company meeting, he focused his entire presentation on handling objections. “That’s a critical factor in selling anything,” he says. “So, that’s all we did at this particular meeting. And the company was ecstatic that we could focus on one thing that was critical to the sales process and really teach attendees how to deal with it. I’m a believer that focusing on one thing like that helps a meeting significantly more than trying to lay out a whole bunch of information or teach people about the entire sales process at one time.”

Closely related to that premise, LeBlanc says, is the undeniable fact that most salespeople are overwhelmed by information these days. “Salespeople, and even younger salespeople, are struggling with the speed of technological innovation,” LeBlanc says. “Even the youngest, most tech-savvy people are struggling with new technology and new kinds of software being shoved down their throats by their companies. A lot of people think that a 25-year-old person is really rocking with technology. But that is not a safe assumption.”

At the same time, however, he

says, effective salespeople must master the technologies that are transforming their role. “You have to realize that social media is the new ‘cold call’ in the sales process,” he says — stressing that salespeople must be properly trained in how to use social media as a tool. “When I do training, I ask my attendees a question,” he says. “I ask, ‘How are you using social media as a listening tool — and listening tool

is in bold type. It’s not just a way to broadcast to everybody that you can hit on Facebook. You have to learn how to use social media to really listen to what the market and your customers and prospects are saying. Then, as a practitioner, to respond directly to an individual person that has a need.”

Despite the critical importance of that point, LeBlanc says, he rarely hears it invoked at sales meetings he attends. But he teaches it at every one he conducts.

Best Practices

In a business world that becomes more complex every day, Golden says, the importance of teaching time-tested fundamentals increases exponentially.

“One of the most important things you can do at a sales training meeting today is to actually teach people how to plan a sales call with a particular customer,” he says. “That means the kinds of questions to ask, how to understand a need and develop a conversation based on that.”

And that requires a return to Salesmanship 101, or the discipline of listening rather than talking.

“The sales process today requires a lot of fundamental skills that a lot of salespeople just don’t have,” he says. “But I’m seeing more and more of a realization that companies are

understanding that their people need those skills. And they’re starting to teach them again.”

A companion principle is the need to know as much as possible about a prospect before the all-important first call. “You need to know about their business, what industry they’re in, things like that,” Golden says. “So, you need to do a lot more research today than ever before. But the Internet has made it possible to do that kind of research and be prepared for a sales call. And that kind of business acumen and knowledge is more important today than ever.”

Faced with that reality, Newman says, more and more sales training meetings are abandoning another component. “And that,” he says, “is the traditional speaker, whether he’s from the company or an agent or broker. But historically, they’ve been what I call a ‘war story’ speaker 95 percent of the time. A much better model today is to have a panel discussion where a lot of ideas and knowledge can be transferred. I believe that half of the agenda should

“But the Internet has made it possible to do that kind of research and be prepared for a sales call. And that kind of business acumen and knowledge is more important today than ever.”



John Golden
CEO and President
Huthwaite
Arlington, VA

be technical about products. But the other part should be the interaction with people — about how they are doing things and why it’s working for them.”

Another dinosaur that is facing extinction is the traditional motivational speaker. “At some meetings,

especially those held by the big insurance providers or financial services companies, you still see that,” Newman says, “But you also see now that the more progressive companies are creating better agendas and focusing more on interactive breakout sessions where attendees can really learn something.”

And, Seidman says, that learning is increasingly focused on basic techniques and challenges that are universal.

Three Winning Tips

“If I could choose only three things to teach at a major sales conference it would be three basic pieces of the sales puzzle,” Seidman says. “The first is the No. 1 problem that all salespeople face. And that is that they chase poor prospects. So, you need to teach them to quickly qualify or disqualify a prospect and to do it as early as possible in the process. In order to invest your time and energy — and your company’s money — you have to learn to make sure that you’re dealing with a qualified prospect that meets your company’s criteria as a customer.

“The next most important thing,” Seidman says, “is to learn to handle objections, which are the biggest single bottleneck in the whole process. As part of your training, you should be instructed in the top ways customers or prospects resist what you have to offer and master the responses that can be used to overcome those objections.

“And the third thing is to teach people to understand that one great opening is worth 10,000 closes,” he says. “If you don’t open well, you never get to closing. Every sales pro should have a way to take charge of a sales call, set expectations and help the buyer to identify if the relationship is a fit — and what the next step is to be. That’s what prevents the killer response from a prospect that ‘I’d like to think it over.’”

If more sales training meetings focused exclusively on such ba-

sic techniques, Seidman says, they would fatten their bottom lines with astonishing efficiency.

But, adds Golden, even the most effective sales training meeting must be understood to be the first step in a long process that does not end when the meeting ends.

“Your sales managers become coaches when they get back to the office,” he says. “They have to

coach people and reinforce the skills that they’ve learned at the meeting. Attendees must be given access to ongoing reinforcement, such as online learning resources. And you need to embed some of those tools and skills into your CRM system and other technologies that you use. Putting all of those things together is really what it’s all about today if you’re going to be successful.” **I&FMM**

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Forbes 2012



No More Cookie-Cutter Customized Service Is Now the Key for CVBs to Win Your Business

What's impressive about the services that convention and visitors bureaus provide to corporate groups these days is simple: quantity and quality. Many top-tier CVBs are reporting a significant surge in corporate group business this year, including insurance and financial clients, so they must extend their services to more incoming groups.

At the same time, they manage to deliver customized service to each group, whether a honed RFP distribution, an offsite venue suggestion that

fits group demographics or a thoughtful event marketing strategy.

The Nashville CVB is a case in point. With the new downtown convention center Music City Center and adjacent Omni Nashville Hotel opening next year, "the awareness on a national level of Nashville and of this new building has really peaked," says Butch Spyridon, Nashville CVB president. "Leads, phone calls, everything is at an all-time high." That includes corporate group business, which "has really come back to life," particularly

short-term programs, he adds. Yet the CVB is far from handing out cookie-cutter services to all these groups. "Certainly we have a laundry list of benefits or services, but if somebody wants more help with a shuttle, we might put resources there," Spyridon explains. "If somebody's really looking to book talent, we'll help them there. It's about tailoring our assistance to their needs."

Personalized Service

With new Ritz-Carlton and Four

Seasons properties opening recently in the Mile High City, Visit Denver also has experienced a greater interest and influx of corporate groups, reports Rachel Benedick, vice president of sales and services. "We have seen a huge uptick in the last year in corporate business. We had double the amount of business in 2011 vs. 2010, and 2012 has been gangbusters." But, just as in Nashville, there's no rote process for servicing all of those clients. "The days of a CVB sending leads to every one of its member hotels are dead and gone. It's now about customizing for each individual group, because that's what it takes (for repeat business)," she explains.

And customized service is best delivered by staff who are devoted to meetings. The Nashville CVB, for ex-

"When a planner is very interested in the city, we work with our hotels and share in the cost of bringing them in. That way we can give them a totally personal tour."

Nikki Moon, V.P. Sales
New Orleans CVB

they come to a city the size of New Orleans, don't feel like they're going to get the attention they need."

Baton Rouge, LA-based Louisiana Farm Bureau Insurance certainly gets its share of attention from the New Orleans CVB for events such as its annual award meeting, president's week-end and agency managers conference.

restaurants and is really up to date on what's going on."

With a city like New Orleans, one update that can be critical to meeting planning is information on what festivals are taking place. "We're helping them right from the beginning, guiding them toward dates that they should avoid or try to go for," says Moon. "We

By George Seli

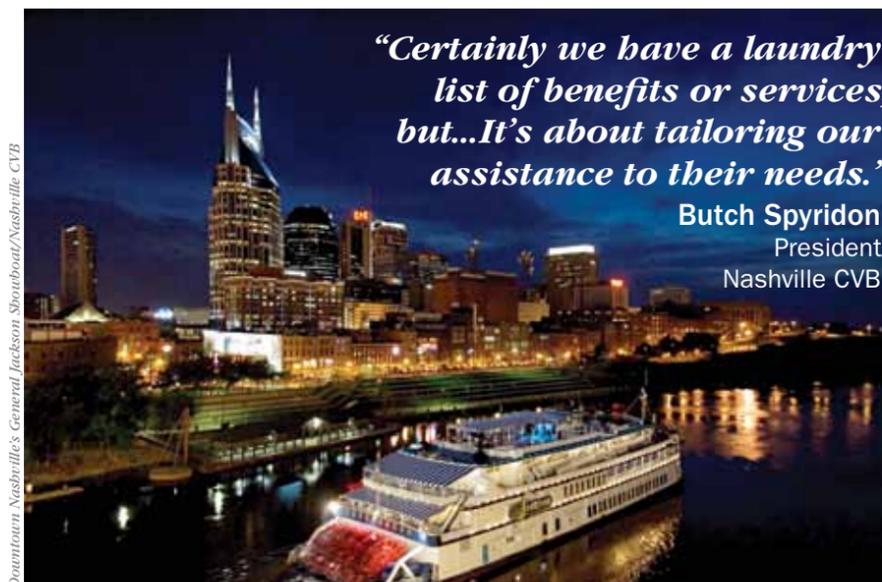
ample, boasts three full-timers and a vice president who oversee meetings, while the New Orleans CVB even has "four people dedicated to working meetings that utilize 10-400 rooms on peak, and that's all they work on," says Nikki Moon, vice president of sales. That's because "we believe that every meeting is an important one. And I think some customers, when

"I depend heavily on the CVB in New Orleans," says Jennifer Norsworthy Meyer, director of agency services, who plans the meetings. "Although I'm from the New Orleans area originally and I know the city pretty well, I like to try new and different things, and my sales contact knows the latest

are known for having festivals virtually every couple weeks. You have built-in entertainment, so why not utilize that to build attendance?" On the other hand, a planner might avoid a festival if she considers it an unwanted distraction for attendees. Either way, the CVB's "intelligence" is invaluable.

New FAM Plan

Equally helpful is the firsthand experience of the city a planner can get as a guest of the CVB. In some cases, the trend toward customization has caused the "FAM trip" to be eschewed in favor of a tour geared toward a particular planner. "Many planners are staying away from FAM trips because they want to experience the city in a more specialized setting," Moon reports. "So when a planner is very interested in the city, we work with our hotels and share in the cost of bringing them in. That way we can give them a totally personal tour of the city vs. a FAM trip where they have to go as a group. It's something we have found works very well for us."



"Certainly we have a laundry list of benefits or services, but...It's about tailoring our assistance to their needs."

Butch Spyridon
President
Nashville CVB



The Broncos' art sculpture at Mile High Stadium/Visit Denver

“The days of a CVB sending leads to every one of its member hotels are dead and gone. It’s now about customizing for each individual group, because that’s what it takes (for repeat business).”

Rachel Benedick, V.P. Sales and Services, Visit Denver

“We are often dealing with turnaround times that are anywhere from one hour to 24 hours; we really don’t see too many timelines that are beyond a couple of days,” says Benedick. “For example, we have booked three large groups for 2012 all in the last few weeks, one coming in August, one in October and one in December.”

A great CVB like Denver’s or San Diego’s will send out leads not just quickly, but selectively, and ensure that highly specific information about the meeting is provided to each hotel. Sitton, who was Starwood Hotels’ vice president of sales for Southern California prior to joining the San Diego CVB, stresses that CVBs should

have someone that checks the material before we even send it out. We are trying to be better hotel salespeople.”

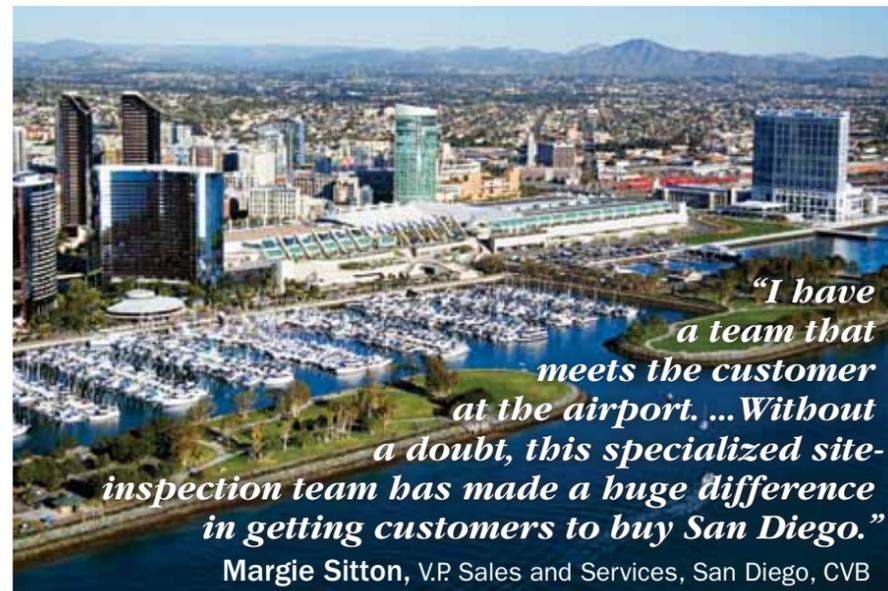
Sitton’s organization also utilizes a proprietary iLead system that allows her team to tell a client, “at any given time, what the status of any lead is. So when we send a lead, for each hotel it went to, we know when it was assigned to a sales manager, when the sales manager read it and when he responded to it. And then when they do a proposal in our iLead system, an email goes to the customer that says, ‘You just received a proposal from Paradise Point Resort,’ for example, and then they can take all the proposals and download them into an Excel spreadsheet.”

The approach also works well for the San Diego CVB. “I have a team that meets the customer at the airport. They know all the details of what that customer wants, and in a few days with that customer, they get to know intimately where that customer’s head is, and they take him around to any hotel or venue that he might be interested in,” explains Margie Sitton, vice president of sales and services. “Without a doubt, this specialized site-inspection team has made a huge difference in getting customers to buy San Diego. And at the end of the day, we have the customer evaluate each of the hotels: Are they efficient; did you meet the people you needed to meet; did they show you they wanted your business? Did we make an impact?”

A site-inspection team for a corporate client might include a convention services representative in addition to salespeople, as in the Visit Denver’s case. “Even if they haven’t selected Denver yet, they’re doing things in such a compressed time frame that they’ll want to talk about offsite venues at that very first site visit,” Benedick observes. “They’ll want that kind of convention service expertise, which isn’t something you see on site visits with some of our other markets.”

RFP Turnaround Time

The short-term nature of much corporate meetings business also affects the RFP distribution process, of course.



“I have a team that meets the customer at the airport. ... Without a doubt, this specialized site-inspection team has made a huge difference in getting customers to buy San Diego.”

Margie Sitton, V.P. Sales and Services, San Diego, CVB

Photo courtesy of Hilton San Diego Bayfront

not be “innocent bystanders” to the process: “It is not our job just to extend out a lead and hope for the best, hope that the hotels can manage it. My commitment to the hotels is that my team will get every hotel that is appropriate for that customer the best information about their buying habits and the key areas that they need to overcome in order to book the business. We give them everything we know, and we

Insider Info

Along with ensuring that San Diego’s hotels have the best information about a corporate client, Sitton also looks to give the client the most in-depth understanding of what the city offers. “People always say to me that selling San Diego has got to be the easiest job in the world. But it’s really hard to sell somebody on something that they think they know everything

about,” she explains. “Everybody does know San Diego’s beaches, SeaWorld, the art museum, and so on. But they really don’t know about our culinary scene, the history of San Diego, or the extent of our arts and culture scene. They don’t necessarily know that we’re the Smithsonian of the West with 15 museums.” And that’s a major part of a

CVB’s benefit to a planner: a source of insider info on the destination. For example, while Cynthia Tomei, CMP, CMM, meeting manager with Chicago-based Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, has been bringing groups to Orlando for “a good 15 years,” she still concedes that Visit Orlando “obviously knows the city better than I do.

I don’t live there, so they are going to be current on anything new that I may not be aware of. So as long as I keep them in the loop on what I’m doing, the agent keeps me in the loop on what’s going on in the city and gives me suggestions. They are a local presence for us.”

Similarly, the Las Vegas Convention

CVB Services Sampler

Whether they are marketing cities by the Pacific or by the Atlantic, the following CVBs are among the standouts in their services to corporate groups. Here are a few of the ways these organizations are making it easier for groups to “head West” (or East):

Anaheim/Orange County CVB

<http://meetings.anaheimoc.org>

- For larger events, the CVB can provide one full destination proposal, encompassing information on all hotels, as well as the convention center and offsite venues, if needed.
- They also provide references to other similar corporate clients that have met in the area, and ideas and suggestions based on their experiences.

Greater Miami CVB

www.miamimeetings.com

- Services include attendance boosters (e.g., micro-sites, e-vites), destination materials (e.g., specialty guides on various aspects of Miami, pocket guide for attendees), vendor and venue referrals, and a meeting planner update service.
- Online Meeting Planning Tool Kit includes promotional images and copy, maps and videos.

NYC & Company

www.nycandcompany.org/meetingplanners

- Works closely with planners to help them with venue selection, building attendance and connecting to its 2,000 member businesses.

- Quarterly Destination Services Newsletter.
- Over 220-page online event-planning guide packed with images and facility specs for all five boroughs.

Philadelphia CVB

www.philadelphiausa.travel/meeting-planners

- The Digital Services Kit is the bureau’s comprehensive resource for planners, covering everything from attendance promotion to in-depth logistical information on the city.
- Plan-it Philly (<http://philly.5-mmp.com>), a new fast planning tool, allows planners to create a brief RFP and returns personalized results that can be compared and saved.

San Francisco Travel Association

www.sanfrancisco.travel/meeting-planners

- MeetingMarketer (<http://meeting-marketer.sanfrancisco.travel/>) is a one-stop-shop for every promotional need for groups bound for the Bay Area. Among its features are: electronic marketing tools for building postcards, event micro-sites and more; a Media Center with videos, logos and city brochures; information on local promotional opportunities; an online restaurant reservation system; attendee discounts; and letters from government officials to welcome attendees.

San Jose CVB

www.sanjose.org/plan-a-meeting-event/home

- Offers a “Hot and Happening” section on its planners’ Web page for instant access to the latest in dining, arts and culture, sports and recreation, and more.

Photo courtesy of Greater Miami CVB





The Las Vegas Strip/Las Vegas News Bureau

& Visitors Authority (LVCVA) describes itself as an ambassador of knowledge that corporate planners can rely on. One such planner is Sherri K. Lindenberg, senior vice president, marketing, for Roseland, NJ-based Crump Life Insurance Services, who looks to the LVCVA to “find out if there are other big events at the time that we would go there and get referrals to vendors.”

Brainstorming Unique Venues

The trend in customized service has seen some CVBs becoming a little DMC-like in consulting clients on offsite event possibilities, while being careful not to compete with DMCs. Lindenberg finds the LVCVA especially valuable in that regard “because they are so familiar with the variety of programs that take place in the city. We brainstorm with them on unique function spaces, getting ideas similar to what we would get from a DMC. And we would then work with a DMC to deliver the services.”

Crump has held its national sales meeting in Las Vegas for five years, and the last event included no gaming at all, Lindenberg relates. The LVCVA does a great job, she says, in demonstrating that Las Vegas is about much

more than “gaming and glitz,” which is a concern for some meeting groups. “This year we said we should experience what

Las Vegas has to offer besides gaming, which everyone seems to find on their own at night. With the help of the LVCVA, we were able to come up with a variety of ideas, from rock climbing to golf lessons to jewelry making.”

The Denver CVB also focuses on showcasing the lesser-known side of its city, which is not generally seen as a bastion for the arts. “But our cultural scene is pretty amazing, and for example right now at our Denver Art Museum we have an Yves Saint Laurent exhibit that was only seen in Paris, Madrid and Denver,” Benedick comments. While Denver’s hotels offer prime meeting facilities that support clients’ content delivery, the city’s viable leisure side shouldn’t be ignored. “Some of our groups focus so much on education and content, which is great, but let’s face it: Many people want to go to a meeting in a place they want to visit,” Benedick adds. “Corporate groups often don’t have a choice (about attending), but in those cases our mission is to make sure they

“We brainstorm with (LVCVA) on unique function spaces, getting ideas similar to what we would get from a DMC.



And we would then work with a DMC to deliver the services.”

Sherri K. Lindenberg
S.V.P., Marketing
Crump Life Insurance
Services
Roseland, NJ

become a Denver ambassador when they leave.”

The Nashville CVB has been proactively focused on ensuring that planners themselves become Music City ambassadors by staging road shows each year with recognizable artists, such as Michael McDonald at an event in Chicago. The artists perform at trendy clubs in select cities across the country to promote Nashville to various markets, including corporate groups, with decision-makers invited to attend. “We’ve been fortunate that the music community has been very supportive of our sales efforts,” Spyridon says. “We also have a monthly brand champion recognition program for groups that really use our brand well in their meeting aspects.”

Websites and Mobile Apps

Nashville’s Music City brand is also quite prominent in cyberspace, and the CVB is currently redeveloping its website to become, among other things, more planner-friendly. “We’ve

had the company that’s building it spend time with planners on how it can best service them,” Spyridon says. “We’re taking all of that data in and incorporating it into our new website in September. The key is that we want the clients to tell us what they need.” And many have. According to the CVB, the following are some of the comments: “It’s very important for your site to be accessed cross-platform (on smartphones and iPads).” “I like the Web tools that help me compare across different things — like Zagat for restaurants.” “Need a way to get your bearings on a city before you get there...thinking interactive maps but with lots of detail.”

The San Diego CVB just recently launched its new site (www.sandiego.org), which is also “very interactive,” according to Sitton. “It’s also very visual and spells out all the different neighborhoods we have so that the customer can take a look at it. We’ve asked the hotels to put their profiles in so they will show up in the meeting planners section.”

The planner’s section of the LVCVA’s “Vegas Means Business” site (www.vegasmmeansbusiness.com/planning-tools) is also quite robust, including a convention calendar to let planners know who’s in town; a transportation database and a map to plan routes; FAQs for attendees with disabilities; a “What’s Your Event?” that allows groups to be matched with venues; information on the LVCVA’s sustainability initiatives; and attendance-boosting tools such as promotional copy, photography and email banners.

Event-marketing assistance is an area that CVBs are always keen on developing, and many are offering mobile apps for that purpose. “We have an app now called Denver Dares with more than 130 activities loaded on there,” Benedick explains. “Attendees are encouraged to go check in and learn about Denver, and they can earn a series of those very cool badges that they can post to their Facebook timeline.” The app includes maps, photos and listings of events and attractions.

Meanwhile, Visit Orlando boasts what may be the first meetings and conventions marketing executive employed by a CVB: Tina Jones, who has a background as a meeting planner, hotel manager and sales executive, is available to work directly with corporate clients to promote their Orlando meeting to attendees.

Visit Orlando is clearly just one of many excellent organizations of its

kind. For Tomei, it exemplifies a top CVB because “they are consistent and their customer service is excellent; they seem to know their clients very well. And consistency and customer service are the two top bullet points in my personal opinion as to what makes a good CVB,” she explains. As more CVBs are realizing these days, the best customer service is customized service.

I&FMM

“They (Visit Orlando) are consistent and their customer service is excellent; they seem to know their clients very well.”

Cynthia Tomei CMP, CMM
Meeting Manager
Blue Cross Blue Shield Association
Chicago, IL



Downtown Orlando and Lake Eola/Visit Orlando

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Contract Negotiations

How to Get the Best Deal and Forge a Win-Win Partnership



By John Buchanan

Three years after the worst meltdown in the history of the meetings industry precipitated the most advantageous buyer's market ever, the proverbial pendulum is swinging the other way. And while that means that effective contract negotiation is once again a critical factor in the overall success of a meeting or incentive program, fundamental changes in the business climate have created both new opportunities and challenges.

"Lately, I have been seeing hotel rates creeping up beyond our budgets," says Dan Young, CMP, director of event planning and recognition at Thrivent Financial in Minneapolis and a past chairman of Financial & Insurance Conference Planners (FICP). "And that's because meetings are coming back strong. And especially incentive events."

Steadily increasing demand has begun to impact basic market dynamics, says Todd Zint, CMP, CMM, head of meetings and event strategy at insurance and financial services com-

pany NFP in Austin, TX, a leading provider of benefits, insurance and wealth management services. "Meetings are back," says Zint, who followed Young as FICP chairman in 2010-2011. "Domestically, planners will continue to see short-term value because of 'need' dates, which hotels welcome in any market, while long-term booking windows will close more quickly because of the increased demand," says Zint. "In the long term, planners will gradually see room rates rise, concessions minimize and shorter booking



Dan Young, CMP, Director of Event Planning and Recognition
Thrivent Financial, Minneapolis, MN

"Lately, I have been seeing hotel rates creeping up beyond our budgets. And that's because meetings are coming back strong. And especially incentive events."

windows because of limited supply and the urgency to make decisions because of demand."

However, notes Kateri Harried, principal of independent meeting and event planning firm Klover Events in Laurel, MD, the ability to leverage overall buying power will continue to mitigate rising costs, as it always has.

For planners with polished negotiating skills and smart buying habits, such as choosing the most cost-effective time of year in a particular destination, the market will remain favorable to buyers for another two years, Harried says. "While there is an upswing in the economy, the market is still recovering from what happened in 2009," she says. "So, we're seeing a lot more flexibility on everything,

from the contracts themselves to room rates or F&B minimums or concessions in general. And that flexibility

even includes attrition and cancellation clauses. Pretty much everybody is willing to negotiate now, even for small meetings. In general, hotels are willing to negotiate on everything."

The Fee Phenomenon

Reading the tea leaves and recog-

"Domestically, planners will continue to see short-term value because of 'need' dates, which hotels welcome in any market, while long-term booking windows will close more quickly because of the increased demand."

Todd Zint, CMP, CMM, Head of Meetings and Events Strategy
NFP, Austin, TX

nizing that many planners still enjoy an overall market advantage, hotels are finding new ways to fatten their bottom lines. As a result, in order to get the best deal, planners must know where and when to attack.

"As the pendulum slowly swings back to a seller's market, concessions are diminishing and hotels are capturing ancillary revenue in various ways," Zint says. "Besides the usual suspects related to negotiating sleeping rooms, suites, pre- and post-event days and so on, planners really need to pay attention to service fees."

Young agrees — and notes that he finds escalating service charges for F&B particularly irritating. "When I started in the business 20 years ago, hotel service charges for F&B were 18 percent," he says. "Now, I've seen them be as high as 24 percent."

As a result, less sophisticated planners, such as administrative assistants, are being tricked into believing they're getting a good deal when in fact they are not. For example, if a hotel offers a 5 percent discount on F&B costs, but collects a 24 percent service charge, in reality the property is reaping a one percent premium, based on time-honored fees of 18 percent.

"The hotels say that it's because of union rules that they're doing that," Young says. "But my message is, keep it at 18 percent. I understand that the hotel needs to meet its profitability goals. But do that by increasing your F&B rates. Don't do it by increasing

your service charge on top of your rates. That's driving me nuts, and it's crushing our budgets."

As a countermeasure in negotiations, Young now asks for concessions, one way or the other. "We have a provision in our concessions list that says that service fees will not exceed 20 percent," he says. If they do, Young requests a corresponding discount that will offset the increased service charge. "For example," he says, "if the service charge is higher than 20 percent, we will want a four percent discount on our F&B expenditures." In practice, that empowers him with a way to have the arithmetic



Kateri Harried, Principal
Klover Events, Laurel, MD

"What I'm seeing more and more is that companies are not agreeing to go with the hotel's standard contract. Instead, they're developing their own, so that they can cater everything to their own specific needs."

work out to a net service charge of 20 percent or less. And he's finding that hotels are open to the provision. "That's partly because we always meet our F&B minimums," he says.

Zint also sees the service charge

gambit being applied to other services. "Sometimes a hotel will apply a 20 percent service charge to in-house AV charges," he says. "That means the 20 percent negotiated in the contract as a concession is actually negated by the fee."

Another incremental charge that attracts Zint's attention is electrical and production charges. "Those charges are normally hidden," he says. "And if a planner doesn't negotiate up front in the contract to use their own preferred vendors, hotels could 'estimate' the cost of the production and apply a 20 percent surcharge. You also

need to find out how electrical is billed. On occasion, it is not outlined in the contract because a third-party vendor is managing it. It's no fun to receive a bill where you are 5-15 percent over budget because it wasn't transparent."

Yet another tip from Zint is to pay careful attention to costs related to mobile devices. "Their use in meetings is on the rise, so Internet charges need to be negotiated up front," he says. "Most hotels will negotiate Internet fees as a concession, which is definitely favorable. After the fact, however, negotiation will become awkward because your leverage is gone, and hotels will charge higher fees."

Although Internet charges in sleep-

ing rooms are now typically free or offered at a nominal charge, their price is "ridiculously elevated" for use in meeting space. "The per-user price," Zint says, "can range from \$45 to \$150, which can chew into your bud-

get quickly, especially if individuals are using tablets with meeting mobile apps which rely on Wi-Fi."

Negotiating Room Rates

Although room rates are rising across the country, especially in first-tier destinations, one lasting advantage of the long buyer's market is the ability to negotiate what is, in effect, a discount.

"What we're doing," Young says, "and we're finding that hotels are actually willing to work with us on it because they're being pressured by revenue managers to max out the room rate, is that we're asking for a credit back to the master invoice, based on meeting or exceeding our room night requirements."

That formula represents a win-win for the planner and property, because it allows the hotel to protect the integrity of their room rate, while the corresponding credit amounts to a net discount.

"We'd never done it before," Young says. "But it's something we've been able to do in a couple of recent major contracts. It was actually something that was originally proposed to us by a hotel sales rep, because they had to meet a certain room rate level. But now that we've learned about doing it, we've been asking for it. And we're finding that hotels are open to it, especially if we outperform our contract requirements for room nights."

Another tactic Young has used successfully is a "lowest room rate" guarantee.

"An irritating thing for us is when we sign a contract and then when we open up registration and attendees want to bring their families in, they find out they can get a room rate that's lower than our contracted rate," he says. "And that's usually because of a 'fire sale' that's going on at the last minute. So now we use a lowest rate guarantee that says that if our attendees are asking for extra room nights and find through the Internet that they

can get a lower rate, then the hotel has to honor that for the meeting."

Sometimes, hotels that liquidate unsold room inventory through discount brokers decline the request. But in general, Young says, it is yet another negotiating strategy that is often effective.



Karen Shackman, President
Shackman Associates, New York, NY

"If you negotiate for 1,800 attendees, rather than two meetings of 900...you can achieve significant net savings on F&B or other shared services such as AV. And those savings can be as much as 5-7 percent."

And it can work even in A-list destinations such

as New York, says Karen Shackman, president of New York City destination management company Shackman Associates. "Although a lot of planners are now aware of that and are including it in their negotiations," she says, "many are still unaware of that opportunity."

The Best Leverage

Even as meetings return to a seller's market, there are still two time-honored advantages that planners can exploit, says Zint. One is multiyear contracts with chains or individual properties. The other is strong, carefully nurtured relationships with vendors.

"For a mid-sized company," Zint says, "we have strong relationships with our industry partners, which have been mutually beneficial in this cyclical industry."

During the recession, Harried learned to leverage those relationships in new, creative ways.

"As an example," she says, "you can negotiate a multiyear deal, even if the hotels themselves are in two different states. There is the opportunity to do that now. And it's exponentially larger than it was before the industry slowed down in 2009. And by doing that recently, we were able

to get an insane deal on behalf of the client. And it even included extremely low attrition terms."

The idea is to negotiate two or more individual meetings as a single piece of business with a national hotel sales rep, who in turn takes it to the individual properties. And, Harried says, it represents a new and innovative way to gain maximum leverage

from a planner's total buying power.

Shackman has recently used a similar tactic by working with two different companies to leverage their shared F&B buying power for large, concurrent meetings in the same hotel at the same time. "If you negotiate for 1,800 attendees, rather than two meetings of 900 attendees each, you can achieve significant net savings on F&B or other shared services such as AV. And those savings can be as much as 5-7 percent."

Not every company or hotel is open to the idea, Shackman says. "But it's something that more companies should be looking at. And it's something that we should see happening more in the future. It's just a matter of more planners and more hotels becoming aware of the opportunity. And it's not something that can be accomplished in every hotel. The property has to have the space and capabilities to host two fairly large meetings concurrently."

A related tactic that Shackman has used is to leverage the AV setup from a meeting held immediately prior to a client's to reduce the vendor's labor costs and therefore the price tag for the planner. "It means piggybacking your meeting's AV onto a meeting that was concluded a day or two before

yours and used a setup similar to what you need," she says. "So instead of being dismantled and then reconfigured for your event, it can be re-used with minimal labor cost to the hotel or vendor. It has to be planned in advance and involve minimal changes to the setup you're going to inherit and use, but that's another way to be creative and save money."

Buyer-Side Contracts

Yet another result of the unprecedented buying power planners enjoyed during the recession is the increasing use of client-side contracts rather than standard hotel contracts.

"What I'm seeing more and more is that companies are not agreeing to go with the hotel's standard contract," Harried says. "Instead, they're developing their own, so that they can cater everything to their own specific needs."

In practice, she says, that means negotiating based on the planner's terms rather than the hotel's terms. "There are a few brands that still won't do it," Harried says. "But a number of properties that never would have considered using your contract instead of theirs before are now absolutely willing to do it."

However, Zint has not found that to be true. "The most significant obstacle, especially for small and mid-size companies, is creating a standardized contract with a parent company with several brands," he says. "Because of individual ownership, contracts vary from hotel to hotel and the procurement process tends to take longer than ever before."

But, says Young, given a market significantly changed by a terrible downturn, although the pendulum is indeed swinging back to a seller's market, it's not there yet. And even after it is, planners will still be the beneficiaries of strong buying power.

"Demand, especially for high-end incentive programs, has not recovered fully," he says. "A lot of companies are still being very cautious with their spending on conferences and incen-

tive programs. And as a result of that, hotels are not dramatically increasing their rates, because they realize that our events are under scrutiny. And I think it's going to be that way for a long time. And hotels have to understand that we're under that kind of pressure. So if we're going to be booking conferences and incentive events at high-end properties, they're going to have to be sensitive to our budgets."

For years, he notes, hotels and other vendors have touted "partnerships" with planners. Now, that claim is being put to the test. "That's the real bottom line," Young says. "It does have to be a partnership. It has to be a win-win situation for the hotel and the planner. And in our case, if it becomes a win-lose situation, we do not do business with that entity ever again."

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Think **BIG** The Lone Star State's Expanding Meetings Options Deliver Texas-Sized ROI

By George Seli

They say everything's bigger in Texas, and given recent developments, insurance and financial meetings can be bigger in the Lone Star State. From new 1,000-room JW Marriott hotels in Austin and San Antonio, to Houston's Master Plan to expand its convention center and hotel rooms inventory, Texas' meeting industry is "thinking big" and inviting planners to once again experience a state that is both easily accessible and relatively affordable.

Complementing those practical features is a balance between rustic Western character and an avant-garde attitude. The latter is exemplified by convention centers such as Irving's striking copper-clad facility and Austin's LEED Gold-certified convention center. Both show that the meeting industry in Texas is still reaching new frontiers.

Austin

Austin is one of the state's most dynamic, forward-thinking cities. Eco-consciousness, for example, is a priority for the community, and one testament to that cultural aspect is the Austin Convention Center (ACC), one of only two convention centers in the U.S. and the only one in Texas to achieve LEED Gold certification for Existing Buildings. The facility earned LEED points for energy conservation, sustainable purchases and innovation credits. The ACC houses a 43,000-sf Grand



Big Tex celebrates his 60th year as the iconic mascot of the State Fair of Texas this September 28–October 21.

Photo courtesy of Dallas CVB

Ballroom and 54 meeting rooms and show offices spanning 61,440 sf on all four levels.

Nonetheless, some insurance and financial firms wanting to stage big sales meetings in Austin have been challenged by its relatively modest-sized hotel properties.

But that will change in 2015, when Austin's largest hotel, the JW Marriott Austin, is scheduled to open. The 1,012-room property will be located just two blocks from the ACC and offer 114,000 sf of function space. That same year, the 1,000-room Fairmont Austin is set to open east of the ACC with more than 70,000 sf of meeting space.

"In the past we may have had to turn away some of the insurance meetings that are planned nationally," says Cindy Lo, owner and event strategist for Austin-based Red Velvet Events Inc. "So now that we're getting the JW Marriott in 2015, we're able to sell them on why they can actually do their entire program here at one hotel, instead of telling them they have to be in all these different hotels. There's a very loyal group of JW Marriott folks, and we're very excited to have them here in Austin."

Planners also can look forward to the 296-room Hyatt Place Austin/Downtown debuting near the ACC next year. The city's newest downtown hotel is the 251-room W Austin, with 10,050 sf of meeting space. It is located in the heart of the trendy 2nd Street District. The W complex, known as "Block 21," also includes the new Austin City Limits Live at



The Stevie Ray Vaughan SRV Memorial on Town Lake in Austin honors the late blues-revival singer-songwriter.

The Moody Theater studio and music venue, the Away Spa and the high-end restaurant, Trace.

Austin's diversions appeal to an age bracket that many corporate groups fall into, Lo observes. "One nice thing that we have found about Austin, especially for the financial services area, is that because we are especially attractive to those in their 30s, 40s and 50s, it's a very easy sell. There isn't one genre (of entertainment) that's meant for really older folks or young kids."

One example is the city's extensive list of venues offering live music, many of which are appropriate for a corporate outing. "If insurance board members are coming into town, I would highly recommend for their more casual night to check out Rattle Inn," Lo suggests. "It has a very chic Austin feel, and they have live music on a majority of the nights. It also has an open-air patio on the second floor that overlooks the downtown skyline. And

"One nice thing that we have found about Austin, especially for the financial services area, is that because we are especially attractive to those in their 30s, 40s and 50s, it's a very easy sell."



Cindy Lo, Owner and Event Strategist Red Velvet Events Inc., Austin, TX

downstairs, besides the built-in stage for the band, it has a bar with high-back chairs made out of rattlesnake skin."

Lo relates that she has also taken insurance groups to everything from a gun-shooting range to a cooking challenge, where attendees went on a tour of South Congress (SoCo), well-known for shopping and food. "They taste-tested items at food trailers and then had to recreate the items, whether crepes, cupcakes, or fried chicken wings and waffles," explains Lo, adding that "we have had a huge growth in the food market, and a lot of people love supporting local food. The farm-to-table concept has become very popular here in Austin."

Attendees who are motorsports fans can look forward to the debut of Circuit of The Americas (CoTA) in November. The track is the only purpose-built facility in the country designed for Formula One racing and is the host circuit

for the United States Grand Prix from 2012–2021. Features include a 40,000-sf Conference/Media Center, luxury suites for VIP meetings and a stage for live music.

Dallas

Meeting in Texas may conjure up images of group excursions to rodeos and barbecues, but major metropolises like Dallas also have much in the way of fine arts and culture. For example, the city's AT&T Performing Arts Center will debut in October, and one of the city's top hotels, the Hilton Anatole, boasts more than 1,000 fine-art pieces and antiques dating back as early as 500 B.C. The hotel is also near art galleries and museums, including The Sixth Floor Museum, which captures the legacy of John F. Kennedy through film, artifacts and photography.

Fresh off a \$100 million renovation, the Hilton Anatole offers 1,608 rooms and 349,000 sf of function space that was a good fit for Women in Primerica, an event that brought in more than 2,000 female employees of the Duluth, GA-based financial services company. "We used their ballroom as a 'major theatrical set' with staging, lighting etc., where we featured a comedienne who studies the company and sways her comic relief against the theme of the company," says Jim Sharpton, vice president for meetings and conventions. "We also used adjacent meeting and breakout space, and set up a 'bookstore' with prep materials and

logo items related to Primerica. The space's size and scale was first and foremost because our meetings tend to be pretty big. And it's actually pretty easy to get around the space, with two atrium sections, if you will, that all came down to a central point, the meeting space. The Anatole



Living up to Texas' reputation for all things "big" is the 31,733-sf Dallas Ballroom at the new Omni Dallas Hotel.

Photo courtesy of Omni Dallas Hotel

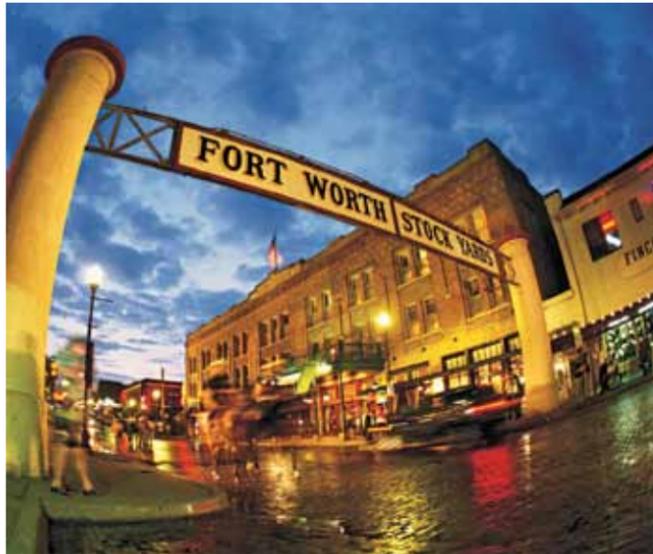


Photo courtesy of the Fort Worth CVB

The Stockyards Historic District in Fort Worth features the Fort Worth Herd daily cattle drive and Western-themed venues.

also has good proximity to midtown without being right in the middle of town, so you don't necessarily have to worry about losing people."

Another sizable Dallas property is the 1,001-room Omni Dallas Hotel, which is connected via skybridge to the Dallas Convention Center. The Omni offers more than 110,000 sf of function space, including the Dallas and Trinity Ballrooms, which encompass 31,733 and 15,000 sf, respectively. Having opened on 11/11/11, the Omni is already making strides with its newly awarded LEED Gold New Construction certification, making it the first and only LEED Gold hotel in Texas and the largest LEED Gold hotel in the U.S. outside of Las Vegas.



"The Anatole also has good proximity to midtown without being right in the middle of town, so you don't necessarily have to worry about losing people."

Jim Sharpton, V.P. for Meetings and Conventions
Primerica, Duluth, GA

city's attractions include the Mustangs of Las Colinas Sculpture and Exhibit, and gondola excursions on the European-styled Mandalay Canal.

Plano

A quaint, 19th century downtown district can be found in Plano, about 20 miles north of Dallas. The city welcomes corporate groups with modern venues such as the 122,500-sf Plano Centre, which offers 21,600 sf of exhibit space and 17 breakout rooms, and the 404-room Marriott Dallas/Plano at Legacy Town Center, with 32,000 sf of meeting space. In addition, the Southfork Ranch Event & Conference Center, well-known as the filming location for the television series "Dallas," offers more than 63,000 sf of indoor function space. Southfork is also a three-time winner of the "Facility of the Year" award from the DFW Chapter of Meeting Professionals International. On the side of diversion, it's worth noting

"For the most part, when I do book meetings into the Fort Worth area I am specifically looking at proximity to the airport and maybe shorter meetings that are in and out in two or three days." Great options for meetings in that category include the 291-room DFW Airport Marriott South, with 14,000 sf of banquet space, and the recently renovated 811-room Hyatt Regency DFW, with 92,000 sf of function space.

Irving

Also served by the DFW International Airport is Irving, whose 14 full-service hotels provide more than 200,000 sf of meeting space, with an additional 200,000 sf of offsite meeting space. The copper-clad Irving Convention Center at Las Colinas opened in January of last year. The 275,000-sf building houses a 50,000-sf column-free exhibit hall, a 20,000-sf ballroom and 20,000 sf of breakout meeting space. The copper exterior is not just a design element: as a no-maintenance material, it eliminates the need for repainting and reduces costs for the center.

Irving is home to the PGA Tour's Byron Nelson Championship, held annually at the AAA Five Diamond, 431-room Four Seasons Resort and Club Dallas at Las Colinas (34,000 sf of meeting space), as well as the world-class Las Colinas Equestrian Center and Polo Club. The

"When I do book meetings into the Fort Worth area I am specifically looking at proximity to the airport and maybe shorter meetings that are in and out in two or three days."



Deborah Borak, CDS, SMMC, Director of Global Accounts, ConferenceDirect, Littleton, CO

that Plano is the Hot Air Balloon Capital of Texas; the festival takes place in September.

Grapevine

"Vintage Texas" also can be experienced in Grapevine. The city offers 18 hotels within 10 minutes of the DFW Airport, including stellar properties such as the 1,511-room Gaylord Texan Resort and Convention Center (more than 400,000 sf of function space) and the 393-room Hilton DFW Lakes Executive Conference Center (63,000 sf of IACC-certified function space). Also available is the 23,500-sf Grapevine Convention Center, located five minutes from DFW International Airport.



Photo by Jim Oltze/courtesy of Greater Houston CVB

Canoeists drift along Buffalo Bayou in the shadow of downtown Houston's skyline.

During their free time attendees can explore the historic downtown area, which is home to a variety of shops, artisans, restaurants and wineries. In fact, Texas is the fifth-largest wine-producing state in the U.S., and Grapevine is among the leaders in that industry. The downtown also offers a bit of 19th century transportation with the Grapevine Vintage Railroad, which makes round-trip excursions from Grapevine's Cotton Belt Railroad Depot to Fort Worth's Stockyards Historic District. Attendees who are outdoor enthusiasts can enjoy more than 8,000 acres of recreation on Lake Grapevine, and golfers have at their disposal three courses ranked among the top 50 public courses in the U.S.

Houston

Along with Austin, Houston is one of the state's most developing cities, with the George R. Brown Convention Center's (GRB) 2025 Master Plan calling for more downtown hotel rooms, expanded retail and residential projects in the GRB district, and the eventual expansion of the GRB on its south end.

Already-begun projects include a regional tourism center near the GRB, the redesign of Avenida de las Americas (the boulevard which fronts the GRB) and the forthcom-

ing addition of outdoor dining features at the 1,200-room Hilton-Americas, Houston (91,500 sf of meeting space). In addition, the 200-room Inn at the Ballpark (5,850 sf of meeting space) will rebrand as The Westin Houston Downtown in December and undergo renovations.

Major new hotel developments last year include the new 262-room Embassy Suites, Houston Downtown offering 6,000 sf of meeting space; the new 267-room Westin Houston, Memorial City, with 30,000 sf of meeting space; and \$6.2 million in enhancements to the 343-room Woodlands Waterway Marriott Hotel & Convention Center, which offers 125,000 sf of meeting space.

Groups looking to experience the latest in Houston's offsite venues might pay a visit to the Houston Museum of Natural Science Hall of Paleontology, which just opened in June. Featuring captivating displays of predator-prey confrontations, the 30,000-sf hall is the largest expansion in the museum's history, along with additional exhibit space and classrooms.

San Antonio

The iconic Alamo and popular River Walk are guaranteed to leave an impression on meeting attendees. And



Photo courtesy of Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center

San Antonio's Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center on the banks of River Walk debuted the new Western-themed Lonesome Dove venue (inset) last year.



with the new 1,002-room JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa (265,000 sf of meeting space) joining the 1,003-room Grand Hyatt San Antonio (more than 115,000 sf), the city can definitely accommodate larger corporate groups.

In addition, The Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center offers groups 440,000 sf of exhibition space, 192,000 sf of meeting space, a 2,400-seat theater and three hotel-quality ballrooms. Starting in 2013, the facility will undergo a \$325 million expansion that will increase the exhibition space to more than 500,000 sf and add a 50,000-sf ballroom, the largest in the state of Texas.

Understandably, many groups will opt for a home base close to River Walk, which is in the midst of a \$358.3 million project that will lengthen the shopping, dining and entertainment corridor from three to 15 miles. The 1.33-mile long Museum Reach segment, added in May 2009, connected downtown with museums, cultural districts and the historic Pearl Brewery to the north. The Mission Reach will join the original River Walk to four of the city's Spanish colonial missions to the south in 2013, though sections are being opened as completed.

As the name "River Walk" suggests, the entire downtown area is quite walkable, remarks Della Guidry, president of San Antonio-based DMC AlliedPRA. Guidry's work with corporate groups has evinced an increased interest



"San Antonio is being considered for incentive programs more so now than before because it's kind of under the radar."

Della Guidry, President
AlliedPRA, San Antonio, TX

city are Biga on the Banks and The Fig Tree Restaurant, which owns the Dashiell House, a private venue. "It has a beautiful patio facing the River Walk, and the food is excellent," Guidry says. "We also work a lot with the McNay Art Museum, which has a beautiful courtyard and an auditorium that works well for corporate events. If they want a real Texas experience, we take them to Rio Cibolo Ranch."

New offsite options include SeaWorld San Antonio's just-opened Aquatica, an 18-acre water park; and The Witte Museum's 20,000-sf South Texas Heritage Center, along the banks of the River Walk. In addition, Casa Navarro, a State Historic Site, reopened to the public in February. It was the 1850s homestead of Texas hero José Antonio Navarro, one of only two native-born Texans to sign the Texas Declaration of Independence. In 2013, San Antonio will welcome the Briscoe Western Art Museum and the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts.

Galveston Island

Galveston Island in the Gulf of Mexico, just 50 miles from Houston, is home to one of the country's largest concentrations of Victorian architecture, 32 miles of beaches and popular theme parks such as Moody Gardens and Schlitterbahn Galveston Island Waterpark. Newly opened is the \$60 million Historic Pleasure Pier amusement park, reminiscent of the pleasure pier that was built on the island in the 1940s.

In addition, the Galveston Island Convention Center (GICC) is completing IT upgrades, including adding significantly more bandwidth and increasing the number of access points. The 140,000-sf GICC is surrounded by 2,100 hotel guest rooms within two miles. Part of that figure is The Moody Gardens Hotel, Spa & Convention Center, which welcomes groups with \$20 million worth of renovations, covering its 428 guest rooms and more than 100,000 sf of function space.

In many respects, Galveston is like Texas' mainland meeting destinations: 19th century historical sites, outdoor recreation, a state-of-the-art convention center and upscale hotel renovations. These are all reasons for insurance and financial planners to look to the Lone Star State, and with the state's expanding meetings infrastructure and relative affordability of its meeting suppliers, they might just generate a Texas-sized ROI.

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The Alamo complex — the Shrine, Long Barrack Museum and Gift Museum — provides an historic backdrop for events.

in San Antonio as an incentive destination. "With all that has happened in the meetings industry with regard to transparency, San Antonio is being considered for incentive programs more so now than before because it's kind of under the radar (compared to, say, Las Vegas or New York), and that helps corporate groups to do a little bit more during their trip without being way out in the spotlight," Guidry feels. "Within the last year and a half we've had more incentive groups than before, and I think the JW Marriott has contributed to that."

Among AlliedPRA's favored group dining spots in the

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HILL



RUDDER



CARTER



MUSTAFA



BOWMAN

Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront, Jacksonville, FL, has named **Brent Hill** as associate director of sales. He most recently was director of group sales for The Westin Book Cadillac Detroit.

The Omni Bedford Springs Resort & Spa, Bedford Springs, PA, has named **Jeffery Rudder** as director of sales and marketing. He previously served as director of sales at Turning Stone Resort & Casino in Verona, NY.

Maureen Carter was named sales manager at The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, CO, responsible for the U.S. Western region including Alaska and Hawaii. She most

recently served as The Broadmoor's executive meeting manager.

Michael J. Mustafa was named director of sales and marketing for the Hilton Anaheim, Anaheim, CA. He most recently served as director of sales and marketing at the Hilton Orange County/Costa Mesa, Costa Mesa, CA.

Grand Traverse Resort and Spa, Traverse City, MI, has named **Kelly Jo Bowman** as national sales manager responsible for association and corporate markets. She was corporate sales manager at Pheasant Run Resort, St. Charles, IL.

Paramount Hotel, New York, NY, has named 20-year hospitality veteran **Jeanette Stancato** as director of sales and marketing. She most recently was director of sales with The Leading Hotels of the World.

John G. Oakley was named director of sales and marketing for Swissôtel Chicago. He formerly served as director of sales at The Westin Galleria & Westin Oaks, Houston, TX.

Lorna Kirwan was named director of sales and marketing at The Madison, Washington, DC. She was vice president of sales and marketing, U.S., for the Doyle Collection. **I&FMM**

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“ I attribute the success and productivity of the [IGS 2011] conference to the professional service and hospitality of the Live Aqua staff, as well as to the outstanding facilities and services. ”

-Jose L., Ph.D.
International Graphonomics Society

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