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# CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS



**The  
Caribbean &  
The Bahamas**  
It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This  
PAGE 28

**Las Vegas**  
The Meetings Mecca Is Back  
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Rendering courtesy of Baha Mar Ltd.

Baha Mar, the largest single-phase luxury resort project in the history of the Caribbean, is slated to open in December 2014 in Nassau, The Bahamas.

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● **Motivating Top Performers**  
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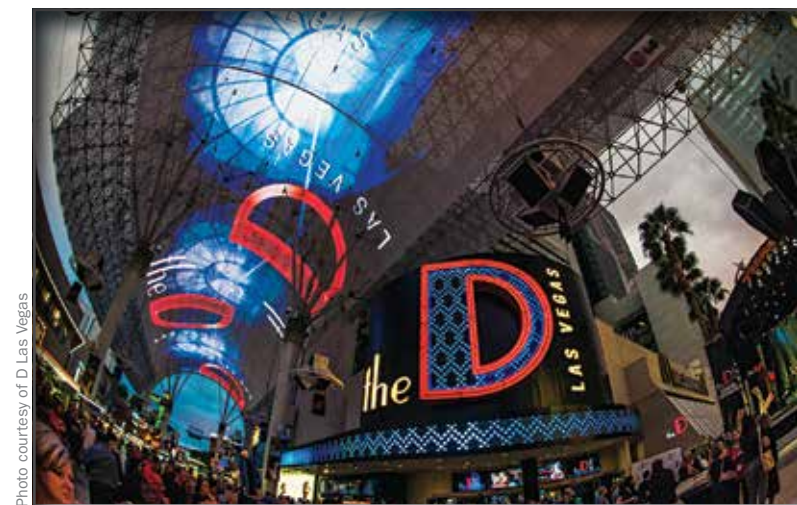
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An al fresco recognition dinner was enjoyed by 80 attendees at Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita, Mexico. **PAGE 22**



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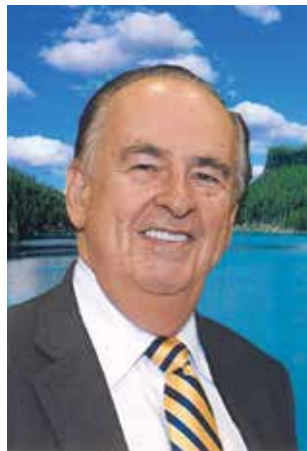
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# Publisher's Message

## Here's to a Prosperous Year

Many industry forecasts point to a very good year in 2014. According to the GBTA BTI Outlook – United States 2013 Q4, a report from the Global Business Travel Association, U.S. business travel spending is expected to advance 6.6 percent to \$289.8 billion in 2014, while total person-trip volume is expected to increase 1.7 percent to 461 million trips for the year. As the meetings business has been on an upward swing for the past two years, GBTA expects this trend to continue in 2014. Group travel spending is forecast to rise by 6.5 percent to \$124.5 billion. “This is the healthiest growth outlook for meetings activity since 2011,” said Michael W. McCormick, GBTA executive director and COO. “Meetings are typically larger investments that require advance planning, and companies only make these decisions when they have confidence in the longer-term outlook for the economy.”



And during the PCMA Convening Leaders event in Boston (see page 7), the Convention Industry Council released data from their 2014 Economic Significance of Meetings. Key findings from the study, which compared new data from 2012 to 2009 data, include: participant volume at meetings and events increased by 10 percent; meetings' contribution to GDP increased by almost 9 percent, providing more than \$115 billion to fuel the economy; the industry's contribution to federal, state and local tax dollars increased by 9.6 percent, providing more than \$28 billion in tax receipts; and the industry stimulated job growth with an 8.3 percent increase, providing jobs for more than 1.7 million Americans. More good news should be forthcoming when the full report is released next month.

With all this positive news, it's no wonder that incentive travel is back and better than ever. The prospect of a beachfront incentive program in the Caribbean and The Bahamas (page 28) is always a great motivator, and now that Baha Mar, the billion-dollar resort complex of four luxury lifestyle properties is set to open this year, planners have something new and exciting to check out. There will be something for everyone at this brand new meetings destination, much like Las Vegas (page 38) — the champion of corporate meeting and incentive programs. “I can't think of another place that has so much appeal to so many different kinds of people,” says Jodie Cadieux, director of marketing at Genelex in Seattle, WA.

Harvey Grotsky  
Publisher

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### WEBSITE

www.themeetingmagazines.com

### PUBLISHER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Harvey Grotsky  
cccpublisher@att.net

### CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Mitch D. Miller  
cccartdirector@att.net

### MANAGING EDITORS

Susan Wyckoff Fell  
ccceditor1@att.net

Susan S. Gregg  
ccceditor2@att.net

### CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Michael Bassett  
Karen Brost  
John Buchanan  
Stella Johnson  
Gabi Logan  
Derek Reveron  
Patrick Simms

### PRESIDENT & CEO

Harvey Grotsky

### VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS

David A. Middlebrook  
cccoperations@att.net

### ADVERTISING SALES OFFICES

cccadvertising@att.net  
2700 N. Military Trail, Suite 120  
Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394  
561-989-0600 • Fax: 561-989-9509

### NORTHEAST/MID-ATLANTIC

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

### FLORIDA/CARIBBEAN

561-989-0600, ext. 114 • 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

Marshall Rubin  
818-888-2407 • Fax: 818-888-4907  
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# News & Notes

## Group Travel Business Sees Largest Jump Since 2011

WASHINGTON, DC — According to the GBTA BTI Outlook – United States 2013 Q4, a report from the Global



MCCORMICK

Business Travel Association, business travel finished 2013 with stronger than expected growth and heads into 2014 with a robust outlook as all signs point to

an early indication of greater corporate confidence to invest in business travel in the coming year, including the fact that travel for meetings and events will see its largest jump since 2011. U.S. spending on international outbound travel should jump a hefty 12.5 percent in 2014 to \$36.7 billion.

Overall, U.S. business travel spending is expected to advance 6.6 percent to \$289.8 billion in 2014, while total person-trip volume is expected to increase 1.7 percent to 461 million trips for the year. GBTA expects group travel spending to rise by 6.5 percent to \$124.5 billion based on a volume increase of 1.7 percent. “This is the healthiest growth outlook for meetings activity since 2011,” said Michael W. McCormick, GBTA executive director and COO. “Meetings are typically larger investments that require advance planning, and companies only make these decisions when they have confidence in the longer-term outlook for the economy.” The report is available exclusively to GBTA members at [www.gbta.org](http://www.gbta.org), and non-members may purchase the report through the GBTA Foundation by emailing [pyachnes@gbtafoundation.org](mailto:pyachnes@gbtafoundation.org). [www.gbta.org](http://www.gbta.org)

## Hilton Worldwide Debuts Cloud-Based Interactive Planning Platform

MCCLEAN, VA — Hilton Worldwide announced the deployment of getplanning — an interactive planning platform created by experienced meeting professionals — to its portfolio of Connect+ properties globally. Using secure cloud-based technology, getplanning allows planners to connect with hotel staff, vendors and partners in real-time, making event management easier and keeping everyone on the same page. Participating hotels within the Hilton Hotels & Resorts, Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts, Conrad Hotels & Resorts, DoubleTree by Hilton and Embassy Suites Hotels brands are part of Hilton Worldwide’s Connect+ program, which provides a high level of event expertise and planning support. Each Connect+ hotel is located in a destination city with features including more than 450 guest rooms or more than 40,000 sf of meeting space. For more information on getplanning at Connect+ properties, visit [www.hiltonworldwide.com/connectplus](http://www.hiltonworldwide.com/connectplus) and join the Hilton Worldwide Meetings & Events group on LinkedIn.

## Marriott Hotels Launches Meetings Imagined

BETHESDA, MD — Marriott Hotels is launching Meetings Imagined, a unique concept, says Marriott, that reinvents how meetings are planned, making them more visual, social and purposeful. Using [meetingsimagined.com](http://meetingsimagined.com) customers can collaborate with hotels to design custom experiences or view signature experiences featured at the participating test hotels, as well as post favorite images on social media sites. After speaking with many of Marriott’s next generation customers and analyzing the more than 40,000 meetings hosted at Marriott’s hotels yearly, seven purposes for meetings emerged: celebrate, decide, educate, ideate, network, produce and promote. Five Marriott Hotels within the U.S. will be testing the new holistic Meetings Imagined concept: the Chicago Marriott O’Hare, Tysons Corner Marriott, Gaithersburg Marriott Washingtonian Center, Orlando World Center Marriott and the Atlanta Marriott Marquis. [www.meetingsimagined.com](http://www.meetingsimagined.com)

## Omni Hotels & Resorts Reflags Luxury Hotel as Omni Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Montelucia



The Omni Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Montelucia

DALLAS, TX — Omni Hotels & Resorts purchased the Montelucia Resort & Spa, which is located near Phoenix and Scottsdale, Arizona. The resort will be reflagged under the Omni brand as the Omni Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Montelucia, extending the Omni’s Resort Collection in the western United States. The Montelucia Resort & Spa is a luxury Scottsdale hotel that features 253 guest rooms, 38 suites and two presidential suites. In addition to 27,000 sf of meeting space and 70,000 sf of outdoor spaces, the property features the award-winning Joya Spa, three resort pools and five dining options. Nestled at the foot of the Camelback Mountain in Paradise Valley, the resort’s premier location offers easy access to golf, recreation, nightlife and entertainment. [www.omnihotels.com](http://www.omnihotels.com)

# Snapshots



Photos by Jacob Slaton Photography



A record-breaking number of attendees were “entertained, enthralled and educated” in Boston January 12–15 at the Professional Convention Management Association’s (PCMA) 2014 Convening Leaders Annual Meeting. The two previous years’ attendance records were held by Orlando and San Diego, each of which boasted 3,751 attendees. Registration for the digital hybrid event is expected to reach 1,000 participants. Events were held at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center and at the John B. Hynes Veterans Memorial Convention Center where Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick declared, “We’re delighted you’re here. ...We hope you come back with families, colleagues and lots and lots of conventioners.”



By Chuck Jones

## Content Marketing: Using It Effectively During and After Marketing Events

**C**ontent marketing is garnering a growing share of the marketing budget — and can make or break another big line item on the budget: a company's marketing events.

Content marketing is the practice of getting appropriate types and amounts of information to prospective buyers at appropriate times in their decision cycles. The right content gives buyers insights relevant to their business problems and potential solutions. The goal for sellers, of course, is to drive leads, and ultimately sales.

Content marketing should play a pivotal role in maximizing the effectiveness of a company's marketing events, the most powerful form of, and channel for, content marketing.

For events, I believe most marketers use content marketing too narrowly. They see an agenda with strong presenters as the promotional tactic used to draw attendees to an event. That's true — however, when you think of marketing events as the ultimate content channel, the value of content marketing multiplies. It is a powerful tool before, during and after the event.

### Pre-Event Content

There are numerous sources you can draw upon to hone your pre-event marketing tactics. I would simply advise marketers to see how every pre-event communication stacks up to these attributes of good content:

- It's relevant. It deals with the buyer's world, not yours.
- It's truly valuable. It doesn't dwell on what they already know. Value comes in three ways:
  1. New information the recipient didn't know before.
  2. Analytical insights that help buyers make sense of information from divergent sources and think of actions they can take.
  3. Advice on how to take advantage of an opportunity, avoid pitfalls, mitigate risks or survive a tough market.

LinkedIn VP Jonathan Lister summed it up neatly in his keynote address at Content Marketing World 2013: "Your audience doesn't need to be sold to — they need information. ... Think about changing the mantra from always be closing, to always be helping."

### Content During the Event

OK, let's say your pre-event promotions have delivered what you believe is the right audience to your event. Here's

where you need to watch out for a major pitfall: Shifting into sales mode too abruptly. And all too often, that's exactly what happens!

The seller assumes, "Aha! You came to my event; therefore, you must like my company and our products. Let me tell you all about them." That's too big of a leap, and much too soon! Remember the content that enticed attendees to the event. The content served to them at the event should be more of the same, with greater depth.

Use the content-rich event as a huge opportunity to nurture your prospect at this relatively early stage in the buying journey. Successful nurturing of mid- and long-term opportunities means helping prospects clarify the causes of their business challenges and understand ways to solve them.

Throughout the buying cycle, you want to engage prospects with a mix of tactics to maintain positive awareness of your offering until they are ready to buy. Always respect where they are and cultivate your position as a trusted advisor. That single strategy will differentiate your company significantly from marketers that instinctively go into heavy-selling mode during and after their events.

At the event, remember that communication is a two-way street. You want to seize opportunities to listen to your audience. Survey them using smartphone apps, publicize and monitor your event's Twitter hashtag, and use any available means to gather feedback such as sponsor panels, roundtable discussions and plenty of opportunities for peer interaction. Interview existing customers and gather information for case histories.

### Post-Event Content

As every event sponsor knows, a meeting's effectiveness depends largely on how well the meeting's sponsor follows up with attendees.

Too many of us fall into the trap of giving short shrift to post-event strategies to improve the event's ROI. That's like spending thousands of dollars on landscaping, and then neglecting to water the grounds.

Mitchell Beer of Smarter Shift, featured in an article at *PlanYourMeetings.com*, proposes an event communications model where conversations keep amplifying, and ideas and relationships continue to grow. He graphically depicts his model

of event communications as three circles — small, medium and large — indicating how the event conversation grows, starting before the meeting, and continuing to amplify during and after the meeting.

### Change the Equation.

Think of your attendees as producers of content, not just consumers of content. If you can encourage — and capture — their thoughts, ideas and opinions, you gain a powerful, dynamic new source of content. In doing so, you dramatically change attendees' perception of your followup activities. Instead of selling, you're listening and facilitating dialogue. At the same time, you're also strengthening your relationships with prospects, which will ultimately accelerate the conversion of leads into revenue.

### Try This Approach.

During or after an event, identify a group of the top prospects and invite them to something more elite and special. While it could be a webinar, a conference call or a Twitter chat, the ultimate would be to get the smaller group back together in a face-to-face meeting for an agenda that's clearly beneficial to them. In return, you cultivate more content. The content your special group generates lives on until the next big event — and can even be used in promoting that next event. More important, you magnify the engagement of those who agree to participate in the subsequent event or events.

Your company's role in the group should be first and foremost as a participant, not a seller. When it's time for selling, you'll know. It will probably happen offline in conversations initiated by your prospect.

Bottom line: You've parlayed a point-in-time event into an ongoing discussion group. Then, you turned the discussion

group into a highly engaged interest group that sees your firm as a partner, not a vendor.

I have personally seen this approach used successfully. The host of a national invitation-only CMO conference invited about 20 attendees to get together for more intimate, focused discussions in a much smaller, less structured event. Most of us jumped at the opportunity. The sponsor has since solidified its position (in our minds) as a thought leader and a consultative facilitator, while avoiding the temptation to indulge in over-selling us on its services.

That may raise a question: When is a good time to shift into selling mode? For complex sales, I submit that the best time is only when you receive "go" signals from the prospect. Make any selling an organic byproduct of a relationship that develops by exploring the prospect's issues, problems and search for solutions.

### Keep the Conversation Flowing!

When melding content marketing with marketing events, consider discarding the old model:

- Compelling content entices people to attend your marketing event.
  - The event generates leads.
  - Sales follows up on leads, presenting sales material and attempting to convert leads to sales.
- Instead, think of the new model as an event that never ends:
- Compelling content entices people to attend your marketing event.
  - The event leads to continuing discussions centered on the prospect's interests.
  - An ongoing "interest group" builds relationships that eventually convert the prospect/interest group member into a customer.

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“Use the **content-rich event** as a huge opportunity to nurture your prospect.”



### Chuck Jones

is the Chief Marketing Officer for Omnience, an Atlanta, GA-based company specializing in technology for maximizing the ROI of marketing events. [www.omnienceevents.com](http://www.omnienceevents.com)



# Perspective

By Terry Matthews-Lombardo, CMP

## All You *Still* Need to Know About RFPs But Were Afraid to Ask

**S**o, you think this topic has already been beaten to death? Well, think again because I'm here to tell you that both planners and suppliers have more to learn on this subject!

A few months ago, I participated as a panelist on a SPIN (Senior Planners Industry Network, [www.spinplanners.com](http://www.spinplanners.com)) webinar covering this very theme, and even I had some aha! moments (Did I mention before that I've got — ahem — 30+ years in this industry? Well there now, I've said it).

We mostly (sadly) learned that there are still many planners out there who need some education, or at least a refresher course, as to some important points in the RFP process, and also that suppliers could learn a thing or two by listening (maybe they should be asking us?) to what we want to see coming back from them. Here are some highlights from this panel discussion.



### Advice for Planners — From Suppliers

- **Narrow your search.** And stop sending RFPs to 100 properties, when you're pretty certain that only five will qualify. In other words, do your homework first. This applies even when you're using a search engine to do the sending. Hotels tell us they are inundated with RFPs, many of which don't even fit their properties to begin with, so why are you sending it out to so many?
- **Be honest.** If you must research far and wide, at least be honest with those properties that you're approaching.

Tell them this is the first pass at the city or property and/or at this time you're sending it out to other cities or regions. This is especially important if you're sending your RFP to a property within a national chain that is represented in multiple cities receiving your proposal. They talk to each other, okay? This is also why they have regional reps to source things on multiple levels. So, on that first pass with your research if all you need is date availability, approximate rates and meeting space options tell them that!

Why waste the hotel's time and yours on all that other information you include in a full proposal when the first big questions are "can we afford this city" and "do they have the dates and type of space that would work for us?"

- **Forget form letters.** If you send a form letter to whom it may concern in the sales department with no personal contact mentioned, then it's quite possible you will just get a form proposal back. A better method is to find the name of the appropriate salesperson or office assistant (be patient, eventually someone will answer the phone!) address your proposal directly to that person and either leave a voice mail message (yes, some people still use telephones) or send an email alerting them to the imminent arrival of your RFP. Make sure you also leave the best way for them to return the information to you, and specify the need-by date.

Tip: If you tell them not to personally contact you, it's quite possible they will follow your instructions and *not* answer your proposal.

Bonus tip: If you really don't want to talk to people then perhaps you should reconsider working in our service-oriented industry. Just sayin'.

- **Be specific about dates.** When it comes to dates, always list your preferred ones as well as any possible alternatives, assuming there are some. If you are locked in to one date only with no possibility of options, then clearly say that. No hotel wants to spin their wheels bidding on optional dates if you are not in a position to consider them. Enough said.

### Advice for Suppliers — From Planners

- **Full disclosure.** Planners are only reading the first one to

*Continued on page 12*

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MEETINGS & EVENTS

LOEWS HOTELS  
RESORTS



# Perspective

## Continued from page 10

two pages of your responses, so make those count! Answer the questions you've been asked, please. Get to the point and, in case you haven't figured it out by now, it's usually about dates, rates and space. After that, if you're in the running there will be time to dig deeper into contract issues and all those other details. One planner went so far as to say that rather than be totally ignored she'd prefer to get a quick email from the salesperson saying, "We're swamped, but can have full information to you by end of week. Meanwhile, I did a quick internal check, and we do have the dates and space available, so please stay tuned for full proposal to follow!" This honest approach gives the planner some idea of the hotel's position and expressed interest. It also gives the planner something to say to the boss when asked "Why the heck don't we have an answer yet?"

- **Be honest about rates.** And tell it like it is. Planners not only need room rates but also applicable taxes, service charges, resort fees, parking fees, occupancy fees, Wi-Fi charges, recycling/walking-through-our-lobby fees (don't laugh — hotels are learning from the airlines) and all those other creative add-on fees that make that initial attractive room rate (remember the one you put in bold letters on the first page?) over the top and out of the expressed price range. Even in the RFP phase, planners need the bottom line — and the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Just remember that planners respect honesty, and by the way, especially like answers quickly, too.
- **Stick to the facts.** Make sure that if you send attachments they are meaningful and not just stuff clogging the airwaves. If the proposal has specified two lunches, one reception and dinner in our program, we do not need to

see all 125 pages of your creative set menus including the 30+ pages of the breakfast spreads and wedding receptions. Continuing on this subject, please understand that referring us to your website for further details usually doesn't cut it. Your websites are designed for general, transient travelers and rarely do they show good pictures of your meeting spaces. If you don't believe me, take a gander at your property's website and see if it answers questions that planners are asking in their RFPs such as "Are there pillars in the main ballroom?" "Is the walkway to the conference center under cover?" "Is there a pre-set boardroom with executive amenities available for my VIPs?" You'd be surprised at how many hotel websites don't even give an actual address, direct phone number (not an 800 reservation one) or even reference how far it is to the airport, let alone whether or not shuttle service is provided. If you want to do the planning community a favor, enhance your websites by taking a look at the questions event organizers are asking in their proposals.

- **How can your proposal stand out among all others?**

The answer is simply to respond like you mean it. Be genuine, answer the questions on a more personal level, and do some research on the proposed group. Creativity is appreciated, but honesty and promptness rank even higher. In fact, if you're late in responding and haven't advised us that it's coming, then you might already be out of the running. Planners would rather hear something from you than nothing at all for the next two weeks. But if all of a sudden you send a big wonderful proposal you may find out that we've eliminated your city from the running due to lack of credible responses and interest from your region. End of story.

C&IT

“Even in the RFP phase, planners need the bottom line — and the **whole truth and nothing but the truth.**”



### Terry Matthews-Lombardo, CMP

is a case study in industry longevity, having held jobs on both the supplier and planner sides since graduating "a very long time ago" with a degree in hotel management. Terry has learned a lot during a lifetime of planning meetings and events in more than 40 countries around the globe, and says that contrary to popular opinion you mostly really do sweat the small stuff in this industry. Working out of Orlando, FL, as an independent trip director, meeting manager and freelance industry writer, she continues to attempt to solve world problems (or at least industry challenges) from one hotel lobby bar to the next. She can be reached at TML Services at [tml@cfl.rr.com](mailto:tml@cfl.rr.com).

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By Mary MacGregor

## Go Mobile to Engage Meeting and Event Attendees

It's no secret that it's all about mobile in today's fast-paced, global business environment. According to a survey conducted in June 2013 by Qualcomm:

- 76 percent of respondents said they are constantly connected to mobile technology.
- 29 percent said their mobile phone is the first and last thing they look at each day.
- 37 percent check their mobile device every 30 minutes or less.
- 34 percent believe they could only go a few hours without their mobile phone.



TATSIANAMA/WWW.SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

### Mobile Is Mandatory

It only makes sense then that you must communicate with your meeting and event participants in a mobile-friendly environment. While most business professionals still do have computers, they increasingly rely on — and actually prefer — to use mobile devices as their primary form of communication.

Busy businessmen and women need event information they can access in multiple ways: from their home or office computers, tablet devices and smartphones. Having everything needed to get ready for and participate in your event available in a mobile-friendly format is no longer a wish; it is a requirement.

Event attendees do not want to lug a file folder full of itineraries, reservation confirmations, travel instructions and destination maps with them when they travel on increasingly crowded flights. Nor do they want to stuff the requisite three-ring binder, guidebooks and product literature into their carry-ons for the flight home.

### Mobile Is the Only Way to Go

All of your important pre-event interactive communication and registration can be easily handled by a well-designed event planner's mobile-friendly Web-based platform. Good planners also will support onsite communication with a convenient app. A wide range of event planning logistics can be handled efficiently by mobile-friendly platforms. A best-in-class mobile-friendly platform will provide:

- » **Cross-platform functionality.** It must run on PCs, tablets and smartphones using Windows, Apple and Android operating systems.
- » **Communications tools.** Participants should be able to find everything they need to know about the event, hotel and host location from their preferred device. A good platform will let you display photos, show video, have a countdown clock and weather widget, and accept links to hotel, airline, destination and other related sites.
- » **Social networking.** You'll likely want to use social media sites for some of your event communications and give participants the ability to share the event with their networks.
- » **Registration tools.** Make sure you can create a registration questionnaire that can be tailored to your specific event requirements. Some platforms have

standard templates that don't necessarily give you flexibility to get the information you need for your event. Other important considerations may be the ability to make roommate assignments, accept credit card payments and pre-load data from previous events.

- » **Information exchange.** From their preferred device, participants should be able to respond to surveys, respond to requests for information, schedule themselves for meetings, meals and other activities, and ask specific questions of you.
- » **Data transfer.** If you'll be distributing content at your event, make sure your participants can download documents in a variety of formats including Word, PowerPoint and PDF. This functionality alone can save you a tremendous amount of money in printing costs and help your conference leave a smaller carbon footprint.
- » **Analytics.** As you plan your event and later look at post-event numbers, you'll want to be able to generate reports on attendance, participation, costs and other key metrics. Look for technology that gives you the reporting capabilities you need.

There are many event planning technology platforms and apps to choose from if you are doing everything on your own. A quick Google search or search in your device's app store will give you many options. If you are working with an event agency, they should have flexible and comprehensive mobile-friendly Web-based platforms and onsite apps available as part of their services to you.

BI Worldwide uses an exclusive EngageNGo™ mobile-

friendly Web-based platform for pre-event interaction communications and our Engaging Meetings™ app for onsite communications with our clients to help get maximum impact from their meetings and events.

### EngageNGo offers:

- Mobile-friendly functionality on multiple operating systems and devices;
- Secure access with single sign-on capabilities;
- Interactive and dynamic participant communication including video;
- Customizable registration portal with credit card payment capabilities;
- Ability to conduct surveys to facilitate event planning;
- Social-networking interfaces;
- Reporting and analytics to help with post-event debriefings.

### Engaging Meetings provides:

- Schedule information;
- Speaker bios;
- Attendee roster;
- Sponsor information and links;
- Event documents (go paperless!);
- Links to social networks.

It's certainly an understatement to say that planners have a challenging job meeting attendee expectations in the face of rapidly changing mobile technologies. But the right event technology platform not only will do all the heavy lifting, it will facilitate the optimum outcome for your meetings and events.

C&IT

“Having everything needed to get ready for and participate in your event available in a **mobile-friendly format** is no longer a wish; **it is a requirement.**”



### Mary MacGregor

joined BI Worldwide (BIW) in January of 2013 as corporate vice president – event solutions. She comes to BIW after serving as the leader of business development, events and marketing for other major third-party organizations. In her current role she is responsible for all operating areas of the BIW Event Solutions Group including purchasing, design, delivery, group air, individual incentive travel, onsite operations, technology, communications and merchandise. She leads a team of more than 175 industry professionals who deliver memorable experiences and measurable results for their customers. In 2011, Mary served as global president of Site (Society of Incentive & Travel Professionals). For more information, visit [BIWorldwide.com](http://BIWorldwide.com) or contact us at [info@biworldwide.com](mailto:info@biworldwide.com).



# Mobile Meeting Masters

Three Companies Tell How They Effectively Use Social Media and Mobile Tech Tools to Engage Attendees

Over the last year, the progressive use of mobile technology and social media to enhance the quality of meetings has become a cutting-edge best practice. For many companies and their meeting planners, however, the ever-expanding range of new options and often dauntingly complex decision-making process has become as much of a hindrance as it has a potential innovation.

To provide practical examples of the effective use of such capabilities, *Corporate & Incentive Travel* talked with three practitioners who are setting the standard for attendee engagement and feedback.

### Cisco Leading the Way

Cisco, based in San Jose, CA, is a global technology leader whose meeting-related innovations, such as Telepresence HD videoconferencing,

have had a profound impact on the evolution of the industry in recent years. It's no surprise, then, that Cisco is also a highly innovative creator of mobile technology and social media.

By John Buchanan

The company has a clear objective in mind when it comes to the increasingly complex deployment of technology, says Kathleen Mudge, who oversees the use of mobile technology and social media to support the company's major events, such as its annual Cisco Live user conference, which draws 20,000 in-person attendees and generates 135,000 qualified page views of meeting content online.

"Everything is based on the event's goal, on what we're trying to accomplish with the meeting or event," Mudge says. "And for us, that is to connect the Cisco brand with our attendees. We have found there is no better way than social media and mobile apps to do that. And that's largely because people have smartphones with them now at all times, everywhere they go.

And that means that what they use to find information is their fingers — from wherever they are, including at a meeting. So we want to make sure we use that knowledge to make the event as enjoyable and productive as we can for our attendees. The way we do that is with mobile apps and social media."

For Cisco, the key is attention to personal connectivity. For example, some attendees use Facebook as their go-to social media tool, Mudge says. Others use Twitter. Still others use LinkedIn. "So today, you have to make sure you are connected to all of those people by being integrated into the social media tool they prefer to use," she says. "The

basic reality is you have to make it very easy and simple for people to get quick answers to whatever questions they have about the event, or to communicate messages out to them."

Cisco uses mobile apps and social media to get out all information about its major meeting. However, it also uses such technologies in more sophisticated ways than most other companies.

For example, during Cisco Live, the meeting technology team reports up to executive management the attendee feedback they are getting, such as the hottest sessions or the most common questions or comments about the company. "And if management asks 'What



The 2013 Cisco Live user conference was held last June at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando. Attendees used customized mobile apps and social media to stay informed and communicate with peers as well as meeting organizers about meeting sessions and events.



are people saying about this or that?" I am able to quickly collect that data and tell them," Mudge says. "That means that management can get the information it needs to make quick adjustments to the meeting, even if that means changing something for the very next day, such as the content of

dividual words or phrases that you're most interested in as a way of monitoring what is going on in conversations. You just have to distill everything down to learn exactly what you want to know."

Social media also plays a key role in the overall effort. For Cisco Live, the company creates a dedicated Facebook page, and Twitter and LinkedIn accounts.

And last year, the company upped the ante when it comes to social media. "Before, we were just listening to the conversations taking place around the meeting and responding and connecting with attendees," Mudge says. "But last year, we made a really big change.

The social media staff that supports the meeting was increased from three or four people in prior years to 12 people at peak times. And what that enabled us to do was actually create content we could send out during the meeting, as well as monitor and respond to attendee comments and questions even more quickly."

Given the fact that ongoing communication with and feedback from attendees is among the company's core goals, the efforts have been a spectacular success, Mudge says. For example, thousands of attendees send out tweets that are often re-tweeted. "In effect, they go viral within the company and that really helps us foster communication around the Cisco Live event," she says.

Because their technology activity is so comprehensive, Cisco deploys a formal command center at Cisco Live.

And, Mudge says, she does not know of another company, in any industry, that has taken things to the level Cisco has.

"We like to think of ourselves as the gold standard," she says. "That's a very big part of the Cisco brand."

## Mattress Firm Teachable Moments

Mattress Firm, based in Houston, TX, is the world's largest bedding re-

tailer, with about 1,200 stores in the U.S. The company hosts more than 100 meetings each year, many of them training sessions.

For the last 18 months, Cory Ludens, vice president of learning and development, and his dedicated internal technology team, have been looking at and developing social media and mobile technology tools to support their meetings. "We have a relatively young work force," Ludens says. "And that means they are pretty tech-savvy and friendly. So we began to realize more and more that a way to reach that audience was to utilize some of the tools they were already used to using."

However, he says, he quickly learned that it's not just millennials who have become enthusiastic adopters of the latest technology. "Everybody has, really — even baby boomers," Ludens says. "Everybody wants to use technology now. And it's really changing the way business is conducted and meetings are held. And that's especially true of large events, such as our annual sales conference."

After extensive research and investigation, Mattress Firm teamed with San Francisco-based technology provider Taptera to create a customized version of its mobile meeting support platform. They introduced it at this year's BEDTalks annual sales and leadership conference.

"We utilized the app as a communication vehicle before, during and after the meeting," Ludens says. "So whereas before, if we had been sending things via email or uploading stuff to a website, whether it's learning material or one of the talks being given at the conference, or some kind of new procedure we're putting into place at the event, in the past much of that would just have been distributed via email."

The Taptera app has also reduced old-school meeting-related costs such as printing. "We have our annual leadership conference coming up in early 2014," Ludens says. "Based on our experience with the app at this year's meeting (2013), we made the strategic decision to not print attendee workbooks



During the 2013 Cisco Live conference, the social media monitoring team was able to instantly respond to attendee questions, as well as deliver real-time attendee feedback to the company's executives so that changes to meeting content could be made on the fly.

any more. In fact, we're not printing anything anymore for attendees to use onsite at our event. Everything is now being done within the app."

That will save more than \$20,000 at the 2014 conference, money that will be reinvested into things that make the meeting better, without increasing its total budget.

Ludens also integrated an innovative social media platform called Chatter, from Salesforce.com, into the Taptera app. "Out of the box, the app did not have an integration with Chatter, so we made the business case for doing that," Ludens says. "And then we worked with Taptera to have them build in connectivity with Chatter. And then one thing we saw right away was attendees using Chatter, within the Taptera app, to take notes during the meeting."

The app also allows attendees to directly link their Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn accounts to connect with each other. "And that's one of

the things from my perspective, as the planner of a growing event, that is most important," Ludens says. "We had fewer than 200 attendees at our annual conference three years ago. But our company is growing very, very

**Corey Ludens**  
V.P. Learning and Development  
Mattress Firm  
Houston, TX

*"Everybody wants to use technology now. And it's really changing the way business is conducted and meetings are held. And that's especially true of large events, such as our annual sales conference."*

rapidly. That meant that this year we had more than 650 attendees. So there are a lot of people now coming to this meeting who are new to the company, and they don't know a lot of our other people from around the country. The tool helps us get people to know each other and connect."

Ludens and his team have further improved their app by integrating with the information aggregation and distribution platform pioneered by Box.com. "We wanted to start using Box as a distribution point for content, background materials and so on," Ludens says. "So we also used the Taptera app to introduce Box to the rest of the company."

That capability also helps support the event down the road. As a matter of course, for some time Mattress Firm has repackaged and distributed all of the basic content and support materials from their conference after the event and distributed it to attendees as a way of reinforcing the educational



aspect of the meeting. That includes PowerPoint presentations and videos.

“The challenge to doing that, in the past, was that it took us a few weeks to get all of that stuff together and distributed,” Ludens says. “And that meant people would start to say, ‘Well the meeting was four weeks ago and I still don’t have the stuff from the meeting. I want it now.’ So this year, we loaded everything on to Box.com and then used the Taptera app to drive attendees to Box to get it. And that meant they had it immediately.”

And in turn, Ludens says, that broader, more sophisticated, capability helps its 350 field leaders do a better job of training throughout the year.

### Sonic Drive-In Smartphone as Meeting Hub

Sonic Drive-In, headquartered in Oklahoma City, has 3,500 franchisee-owned fast food restaurants in 44 states. Its annual sales conference, held each September to kick off the company’s new fiscal year, draws 2,500 owner-operator attendees.

By attending meetings hosted by other organizations, Christi Woodworth, veteran meeting planner turned director of digital communication and social media, learned that the capability existed to post an entire meeting agenda, and all related communication and attendee feedback to a smartphone. “We wanted to bring that capability to our own meeting, because we typically have three or four concurrent breakout sessions going on at any given time,” Woodworth says. “So we wanted to better understand, on the front end, before attendees even arrived for the meeting, what sessions they found most interesting and which ones they intended to attend.”

The capability also has helped the meeting planning team do a better job of creating sessions and content that is perceived as being worthwhile. In the past, meeting planners and hosts essentially imposed on attendees whatever they believed to be most important, Woodworth notes. Today, the

process is increasingly being democratized by interactivity and feedback — a trend that translates into more successful meetings and an enhanced planning process.

To help develop the capabilities the company wanted, Sonic Drive-In relied on BCD M&I, which has been their meeting management company for the past 11 years, to advise them on mobile technology options. For their 2011 and 2012 annual franchisee conventions, the company used the Zerista mobile platform. This year, they switched to QuickMobile, which bills itself as “the complete, paperless event guide.”

“Zerista was a good introduction for

**Christi Woodworth**  
Director, Digital Communications  
and Social Media  
Sonic Drive-In  
Oklahoma City, OK

*“We wanted to better understand, on the front end, before attendees even arrived for the meeting, what sessions they found most interesting and which ones they intended to attend.”*

us into mobile apps for the first couple of years,” Woodworth says. “But for this year, and going forward, we used QuickMobile because of its additional capabilities, such as so-called ‘gamification.’” That means the ability to integrate with tools such as FourSquare or even Facebook by engaging attendees in game-related content that will ultimately offer them the chance to win rewards. “We give away prizes on the last day of the meeting,” Woodworth explains. “And one of the ways to become eligible for the grand prize is to play one of our games. For example, we’ve taken things like scavenger hunts and turned them into virtual games through the mobile app. And in turn, that has helped us do things like track

traffic to specific vendor booths or how many came into a general session.”

Attendee engagement via QuickMobile and its gamification capabilities has meant that Sonic Drive-In can promote certain sessions they deem most important by giving them more weight in the gaming process. “We give people incentives via the games to motivate them to do what we’re most interested in having them do, such as attend a particular session,” Woodworth says.

She predicts that such gamification of corporate meetings will increase. “People already use their smartphones to play games all the time,” she says. “So why not add a level of game playing to a meeting or event that is supposed to be fun for attendees anyway? That just adds another element of fun to the event.”

Even more important than gamification, however, is the app’s ability to deliver a comprehensive and up-to-the-minute meeting agenda on a smartphone.

“Our franchisees love the fact they can just look at their smartphone and know where the next session is they want to attend,” Woodworth says. “They don’t have to look around for some printed agenda or booklet. And we don’t have to spend the money anymore to print those things.”

Another key benefit of the QuickMobile platform: It has allowed for better attendee-exhibitor engagement. “It makes it easier for attendees to find exhibitors and to set up appointments,” Woodworth says. “So since we do a trade show as part of our event, that was very popular with both exhibitors and attendees. It also allowed us to create more sponsorship opportunities.”

In the future, Woodworth thinks mobile technology will have more and more impact on the planning of meetings and the attendee experience. “Right now, I’d say the technology is still in its infancy,” she says. “I don’t think many people would say it’s mature. So that just means it’s going to get better and better going forward, because planners will be able to do more and more things that have a positive impact on the outcome of the meeting.” **C&IT**

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# Motivating Top Performers

By Gabi Logan

From an Attractive Destination to Creative Program Design, Planners Share Their Recipes for Success

**A**s hiring freezes thaw and companies are once again vying to hold on to top performers, incentive programs have become a paramount differentiating factor in a corporate environment where loyalty is more elusive than ever.

According to a study by Towers Watson on global talent management, 59 percent of the organizations surveyed are experiencing problems attracting top performing employees, and 50 percent of

companies are having trouble retaining those employees once they're in the door.

Research on incentive travel has consistently shown that it is one of the top employee performance motivators, but as of February 2009, a survey of 400 corporate executives by Oxford Economics found that 51 percent had decreased their business travel budgets by an average of 35 percent.

For companies today, incentive travel is a key way to increase loyalty without increasing compensation. In its examination of the ROI of business travel, Oxford Economics found that "Executives stated that in order to achieve the same effect of incentive travel, an employee's total base compensation would need to be increased by 8.5 percent." Forty percent of employees surveyed confirmed that they perceive a strong relationship between travel and staff retention.

### Destination Undiscovered

"I think incentive travel is getting better, and there is more activity with it. I've been in this industry for a while, and it slowed down dramatically for a while," shares Lisa Gracyalny, CMP, CMM, ex-

ecutive director of events and recognition at Phoenix, AZ-based Seacret Direct. "Now, we have so many competitors that we have to look at what they're booking so we're not doing the same place. Our competitor went to Cabo last year, so I can't go there because it will seem like we're copying them."

More than ever before, incentive travel planners are using destination selection to differentiate themselves and motivate employees. In its recent white paper on "Integration of Offsite Business Meetings and Incentive Group Travel," the Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) announced the results of a study conducted last fall polling 200 incentive program planners and 1,000 program participants. Its main finding on motivation? The attractiveness of

the destination is the single most important factor in motivating award earners.

A few decades ago, that would have meant a pristine beach somewhere with perfect weather, but "clients realize that there are only so many Florida beaches," notes Susan Adams, director of engagement for New Brunswick, NJ-based Dittman Incentive Marketing. "This year, for the first time since the recession, we're seeing much greater interest in

Sunset over the Dead Sea, which borders Jordan and Israel: Seacret Direct, which creates products using minerals from the Dead Sea, is planning a trip there this year for company leaders.



getting abroad and traveling internationally. During the economic downturn, programs were pulled back closer to home. After many years of choosing domestic locations, clients realize that for motivating and fresh programs, they may want to look farther afield. This new trend is great from a planning perspective because it gives us a lot more to work with."

Adams has found through her research for Dittman and being on the boards of the Incentive Marketing Association and the Performance Improvement Council that the shift towards international travel doesn't reflect a return to the same European destinations or outright luxury, but rather, a highlight on unique destinations that may not even be on an award winner's radar.

"Everyone is looking for the next thing. It's trending to who can be more creative and more exotic," agrees Gracyalny, who developed incentive programs for Freelif International and an independent firm before recently joining Seacret Direct. "People aren't afraid to go to different countries anymore. There was a huge shift from Mexico to the Dominican Republic. And now it's Costa Rica, Panama and more South America countries."

In many companies, attendees' willingness to explore unknown destinations underlies an implicit trust in the company reputation for incentive travel and its planners. "I've had district managers tell me that, 'We will love whatever destination you select, because wherever it is, it is not a trip we could take on our

me to hear that these trips are really, really motivating them to sell," Staley adds. "That increased motivation and output, and the fact that once they go, they feel like they have to go again, more than pays for the incentive trip. In our company the incentive trip is not just a trip that you win when you make your numbers. You make your numbers to go on the trip."



***"Everyone is looking for the next thing. It's trending to who can be more creative and more exotic. People aren't afraid to go to different countries anymore."***

**Lisa Gracyalny, CMP, CMM, Executive Director, Events and Recognition, Seacret Direct, Phoenix, AZ**

### The Aspiration Factor

"A trip we can't take on our own" is a refrain that successful incentive planners are hearing again and again from repeat attendees.

The need to create a unique experience — different both from what planners at other companies are doing and from the trips award winners take during their own leisure time — is driving planners to think outside the box, not just of exotic destinations, such as Thailand or Bora Bora, but often of new ways of experiencing places closer to home.

"I know for me, I love to take my group somewhere they wouldn't go on their own," says Gracyalny. "They strive harder to get on that incentive when you do something different. We did a trip in Alaska two years

for it, and we had to turn people away because we could only take the top 50.

"After that, they thought it was the best trip they'd ever been on," adds Gracyalny. "If you're taking a vacation, you probably won't look at Alaska, but people were so excited and happy that they did go on it. They said, 'This is magical, and I never would have picked this destination on my

own.' That's the key: to come up with really good places that they wouldn't choose on their own and can go for free."

Some of Staley's most successful trips have relied upon reintroducing people to places they thought they knew — with a new take sure to motivate attendees. "People love the beach. They love Hawaii and the Caribbean, but I wanted to take them to Europe, and we did Italy in 2007, and people loved it. They didn't know what they were missing," Staley explains. "To be able to take people on a private tour of the Vatican or to have dinner in the Eiffel tower or rent our own yacht on the sea in Greece isn't something they could do on their own, and that's the Europe I want to give them.

"Our incentive trip in May was to Paris, and we had announced the Barcelona trip for 2014 in February," Staley continues. "I was talking to one of our district managers before we even got to Paris, and all he could concentrate on was Barcelona. He was thrilled about making the trip to Paris, but he was focused on the next year at work, selling!"

### Culture Is King

No matter how interesting the destination, if it's at odds with company culture, it doesn't ring true and motivate employees. "Increasingly organizations are branding internally, in communications and events targeted to their own

employees," Adams explains. "Every decision, from pre-trip materials to the color of beach towels, is all driven by the organization's brand and message. This is to ensure that there is the greatest possible alignment between the employee experience and the brand values.

"Program design is something we work on with a client year to year," Adams continues. "Feedback covers a wide range: meeting content, speakers or no speakers, more beach time, more family time, more face-to-face time with senior leaders. It depends greatly on the audience and the program. We have to balance those individual needs with the goals of the organization, so I don't see a solitary trend emerging from that, as it can be radically different from one corporate culture to another."

At Smith & Nephew, incentive trips are so integrated into company culture that Staley brings a professional photographer who is a published author and illustrator on all of their trips to create a coffee table book celebrating the experience. "It's a gift and a keepsake of the trip, and it's also something our human resources department and management use when they're in the hiring process," she says. "It's a high-end book, top quality, and attendees keep

***"Every decision, from pre-trip materials to the color of beach towels, is all driven by the organization's brand and message."***

**Susan Adams, Director of Engagement Dittman Incentive Marketing, New Brunswick, NJ**



it in their homes and their offices and are proud to show potential new hires and other people in their network just what type of company we are and how well our salespeople are rewarded."

Beyond integrating trips into organization culture, some companies are centering their trips on it. Seacret Direct creates bath and facial products using minerals from the Dead Sea, so Gracyalny decided to create an incentive trip aligned with the company's roots. "My company is an Israeli company, so we're taking our



Photo courtesy of Lisa Gracyalny, CMP, CMM

Top distributors were recognized during Maytag's 50th Anniversary at the Fred Maytag award night held at The Phoenician in Scottsdale, AZ. Lisa Gracyalny, CMP, CMM, who helped to plan the event when she was with Meetings & Incentives Worldwide, noted that the Maytag man was there working the crowd — a fun way to advance the company's internal branding.

top 10 leaders to Israel this year, which is a different kind of place to go," she says. "Our products are from the Dead Sea, and we're going to take them to go float in the Dead Sea. This whole trip is geared towards our company."

In some cases, however, staying true to your culture and your attendees' interests can mean staying closer to home. "Having worked in different industries, working in agriculture is a little bit different," says Tanya Zuckerman, CMM, CMP,

corporate their corporate culture into incentives is through a meeting element, whether casual networking with executives, formal training or strategic summits. However, it's unclear whether meetings have a role in incentives from the attendee viewpoint. "There is a debate around whether or not to hold meetings during incentive programs. Some think it's a great idea to communicate a strong message to the organization's top employees. Others are concerned that it's not really a reward if you're in a meeting all day," says Adams.

IRF examined the combination of meetings with incentives this year and found that only 10 percent of respondents combine meetings and incentives for perception or fiscal reasons, and more than four times as many are doing so to maximize the advantage of having high performers and executives in the same place at the same time.

For Smith & Nephew, this is the primary motivation behind combining meetings with incentives. "We conduct an intensive business meeting on the first morning of the trip for all sales reps, district managers, regional directors and our attending executives, because this is an opportune time to tap into the best practices of our top performers. This meeting is critical to our business, because our top performers know that they can speak candidly about issues — both good and bad — that are affecting their business

***"In our company the incentive trip is not just a trip that you win when you make your numbers. You make your numbers to go on the trip."***

**Gia Staley, Manager, Meetings and Events Smith & Nephew, Fort Worth, TX**



own," says Gia Staley, manager of meetings and events at Fort Worth, TX-based Smith & Nephew (Biotherapeutics).

"These people already go on vacations of their own that are nice, so it's exciting for

ago and, at first, nobody was excited about it, so we took the leaders there for a site inspection and had them talk about it. It just built and built the excitement, and then we had a huge group who qualified



and that they will be addressed with a formal action plan by executive management. Most groups I know of dread the business meeting on an incentive trip. Our attendees look forward to it."

However, IRF's white paper also uncovered a startling difference of perception between attendees and planners in terms of the amount of time spent in meetings. According to the study, "Meeting planners overall noted that they restricted meetings to less than 20 percent of the combined event. However, award earners felt a considerably higher percentage of their total trip was spent in meetings. Almost as many award earners reported spending 40 percent or more of their time in meetings as those who said they spent 20 percent or less. This finding could either mean the award earners perceive the time

## The Freedom Paradox

An attendee's desire for casual interaction extends beyond the meeting segment of incentive trips. Planners are finding themselves re-evaluating the activities of their entire itineraries based on award-winner feedback. "We did a scavenger hunt one time, and someone said, 'Never do that again,'" Gracyalny says. "And some people just want to do nothing, so we certainly make that an option. They can skip the tours, they only have to go to the meeting part."

However, as attendees clamor for more free time and choice in their itineraries, planners struggle to come up with activities for times that the whole group comes together that suit diverse interests. "One challenge we face is finding new, dynamic networking activities for

Through all these changes — a need to research new destinations, re-evaluating program design and refocusing activities based on attendee feedback—many planners are facing relatively static budgets despite rising costs.

Zuckerman sees the pricing issues, particularly in the hotel industry, as an effect not only of a post-recession rebound, but changes in the meeting industry. "I think that peak times are becoming more similar throughout the industry, if not slowly disappearing," she says. "There used to be ups and downs in our industry where you'd see people not booking as much, but I think hotels are seeing more opportunities and multiple requests over the same dates."

Adams says that to compensate, planners are doing more legwork to zero in

*"We focus more on second- and third-tier cities, just because of who we are as a company. It makes more sense because it brings us closer to our attendees, and we're able to get more of them there on less of a budget."*

**Tanya Zuckerman, CMM, CMP, Manager, Meetings & Events**  
Bayer CropScience LP, Research Triangle Park, NC



spent in meetings to be longer (because they are not experiencing value) or that planners underestimate meeting times."

Adams has found that how much time is spent in meetings during an incentive matters less than the meetings' purpose. "When meetings are valuable and advance program winners' careers or their understanding of the organization, they are happy to have them," she says. "When they are just meetings for the sake of meeting, that don't tie-in to improvement of one's work life, they fall flat. Content really matters here. Onsite, I personally don't see a lot of grouching about meetings if there's purpose behind them."

Zuckerman concurs. "What I'm seeing more and more of is collaborative discussion; it's not necessarily a speaker speaking at someone," she says. "We've had greater success with the response rate if the audience feels like they were part of the conversation. It's about collaborative learning vs. lecture learning."

attendees to participate in," Zuckerman shares. "We don't want activities that look fluffy. We want activities that really help us achieve our business objectives — activities have to allow for networking and business rather than just have a theme. Our attendees don't respond to themed nights. You need some activity that lets them come and go as they please. I haven't seen anything new and exciting that has worked, which is why we keep going back to casino nights."

"It's become more challenging to stay creative and provide attendees with a new experience within existing budgets," she continues. "We use a lot of internal resources, and our team is very crafty. We will often organize a lot of things on our own going directly with the wholesaler rather than through a DMC. Ultimately, it's harder and more time consuming on our end, but the only way to do the things we want to do is to go out of the box."

on a destination before putting out bids, as well as nailing down blocks the day dates are confirmed, and Zuckerman agrees. "We try not to flood the system with requests," she says. "We're not over-bidding with 400 requests. We're really looking at the market we're going to to find out what really makes sense for our business and ourselves. Otherwise we would be looking at thousands of hotels, and we have very tight turn around."

As planners today strive to create incentives that top the previous year — whether that means a bigger and better destination, a trip that allows attendees more time with their loved ones or a climate that allows more casual interaction with fellow top performers and executives — one thing remains constant. "The most important tools for planners today are thoughtful strategies on how to best inspire the participant audience while remaining aligned to the organizational goals," says Adams. **C&IT**

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## Destination

# The Caribbean & The Bahamas

It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This

By Derek Reveron

Whoever said that all “sun and sand” destinations are the same surely is not familiar with the variety of distinct islands of the Caribbean and the Bahamas — one of the world’s most popular incentive destinations. While there are some similarities, each island within this region offers unique cultures, landscapes and venues. Each island also has its own collection of resorts and hotels and seeks to further set itself apart by improving existing properties and adding new ones.

Photo courtesy of Horizon Yacht USA

In the Bahamas, Baha Mar, a resort complex that will include four luxury lifestyle properties, is scheduled to open in Nassau by the end of 2014. The beachfront destination will include the Grand Hyatt at Baha Mar, The Baha Mar Casino & Hotel, Mondrian at Baha Mar and Rosewood at Baha Mar. There will be a total of more than 2,900 guest rooms, a 100,000-sf casino and an 18-hole Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course. Baha Mar also will include an upscale shopping and entertainment district comprised of 60 restaurants, retail outlets, bars and lounges.

In addition, Melia Hotels International has taken over the

nearby 694-room Melia Nassau Beach Resort and will rename it the Melia at Baha Mar after completing renovations scheduled for completion by the end of 2014. The property will remain open during the makeover.

### Bigger Is Better in the Bahamas

Baha Mar also will be home to a state-of-the-art convention center with 200,000 sf of meeting and exhibit space. “The convention center is designed to do multiple meetings and keep them segregated into their own spaces,” says Greg Saunders, general manager of the Grand Hyatt at Baha Mar,

which will operate the convention center. “We will be able to move people in and out without creating an intrusive environment for those who may already be in the convention center.”

Saunders says that another key to Baha Mar’s success will be the distinct differences among the four properties. “There is very little overlap between the way they segment their customers and the experiences they provide,” says Saunders. “The lifestyle brand of Mondrian is different from that of Rosewood, the Hyatt or The Baha Mar Casino & Hotel. Planners can select the experience they want.”

Baha Mar will step up the Bahamas’ ability to compete for bookings. “We look at our competitive set as being more than the Bahamas,” says Saunders. “We think we are providing an alternative to many facilities in the Caribbean, depending on the segment you look at. On the meetings and convention side, our event space and rooms put us in a position to deal with a market that has excluded many competitors due to the size of their properties.”

Large groups are among those already showing interest in booking Baha Mar. According to Saunders, “A good 20 percent of meetings we are seeing push 700 to 1,000 rooms and

Guests of Horizon Yacht USA enjoy a sun-filled day onboard a Horizon yacht during an incentive program in the Bahamas.





Baha Mar, a resort complex of four luxury lifestyle properties, is scheduled to open in Nassau by the end of 2014.



Yvette Edwards, director of sales and marketing, Hyatt at Baha Mar, explains the Baha Mar architectural model to a guest at an event for the travel and media industry held in October 2013.

for the Hybrid Group LLC, a Chicago meeting and convention management company, about 2,100 direct sales company distributors from more than eight countries enjoyed a four-day meeting and incentive at Atlantis in October 2012. Nearly 100 of the top distributors arrived a day early for special activities and enjoyed the best that the Bahamas offers. Half of the group of 100 participated in a jeep excursion, which included a tour of a rum factory and exploration of the island. Meanwhile, the other 50 attendees went on a snorkeling excursion. Later in the day, the two groups met back at the beach, Devine says.

The group of 100 participated in teambuilding activities on the beach including a balancing challenge and an obstacle course competition, says Devine. Team and individual winners received prizes. Later that evening, the group of 100 attended a private reception and dinner at Atlantis, using outdoor function space near a pool deck. A Cuban cigar roller and native Bahamian dancers greeted guests.

The day after the top tier of 100 enjoyed their incentive program, about 2,000 distributors arrived at Atlantis for a general session, training and other activities. The highlight was a gala dinner. "We hired Junkanoo dancers to greet attendees as they entered the ballroom. A small Caribbean band entertained on stage during dinner," says Devine. "After dinner, we brought in a marching band that parad-

ed around the room with the dancers and guests. They paraded through the hotel and then went to a different ballroom to hear a motivational speaker."

The direct sales company held its meeting and incentive program at Atlantis Paradise Island in 2011 and 2012. Attendance nearly doubled during the second year. "Every person who went in 2011 came back and told someone else about it," says Devine. "This group loves networking, and they liked all of the different areas outside and inside for just hanging out with each other. We go to environments that are designed to encourage that like the Atlantis."

Value is another reason why the direct sales company chose Atlantis. "We are very price sensitive, and resort fees are almost always built into prices," says Devine. "We always look for rates that are under \$189 including resort fees. October is not the peak season so you can get a lower rate. Plus, the Bahamas offers a rebate system, depending on how big your group is. It makes it very enticing. It was a good value."

Good service also was a deciding factor. The Atlantis staff went above and beyond the call of duty to get registration supplies, branding items and other materials that were stuck in customs. The supplies arrived in the Bahamas on the Monday before the meeting, and Devine had hoped to get the materials that day, but was not successful. "An Atlantis staffer fought tooth and nail to get the stuff out of customs," says Devine. "She was on the phone for two days solid, talking to customs as she walked the property doing other things with us. We got it out of customs early Wednesday, just in time to set up for the meeting, only because of her." Devine says the direct sales company plans to return to Atlantis again in the future.

### Smooth Sailing

The Bahamas' worldwide reputation as a paradise for boat owners also attracts groups. Horizon Yacht USA, a yacht building company based in North Palm Beach, FL, held an incentive reward for 50 customers and their guests earlier this year at the 542-room Grand Lucayan Beach & Golf Resort on Grand Bahama Island, only 55 miles from Florida.

The Grand Lucayan's yachting facilities were a huge attraction because some attendees wanted to bring their boats. The Port Lucaya Marina, known as "Home of the Big Yachts," is a full-service, 106-berth facility. One berthing wing features the Marketplace with restaurants, bars and entertainment. The other berthing wing offers the Port Lucaya Resort & Yacht Club, tropical gardens and an Olympic-size swimming pool. Elise Moffitt, the marketing coordinator for North Palm Beach, FL-Horizon Yacht USA, planned the



The Grand Lucayan Beach & Golf Resort on Grand Bahama Island has something for every size and type of group.



Photos courtesy of The Grand Lucayan Beach & Golf Resort

event. "We wanted a different location that's well-known among boaters," says Moffitt. "We polled our group beforehand about what they thought of the hotel and marina, and they loved it. I did a site visit and found that the hotel offers a lot with the marina being centrally located with restaurants nearby."

Moffitt was very satisfied with the hotel and marina packages. "They gave us good value," she says. "They worked with us on blocking the number of rooms we needed and giving us a really good rate. The marina did the same thing. Because we booked so many slips, they worked with us to place boats together and make sure everybody got a good rate. They understood what we needed in both areas, and that was a big factor for us."

Placing the boats near each other was a key to one of the group's activities. "We did a 'docktail party,' which is a cocktail party on the dock, renting out a space just above the captain's office," says Moffitt. "We had live music with a one-man band. He sang and played steel drums. Then we

"The convention center is designed to do multiple meetings and keep them segregated into their own spaces."

**Greg Saunders**  
General Manager  
Grand Hyatt at Baha Mar  
Nassau, Bahamas



"We did a 'docktail party,' ...a cocktail party on the dock, renting out a space just above the captain's office."

**Elise Moffitt**  
Marketing Coordinator  
Horizon Yacht USA  
North Palm Beach, FL





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# ON THE AGENDA



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The beach in Port Lucaya in Freeport, Bahamas, was an ideal spot for a private barbeque, swim and games for the Horizon Yacht USA group.

Photo courtesy of Horizon Yacht USA

went to the Flying Fish restaurant in Port Lucaya for dinner. The next day, we rented a ferry that took us to a private beach for a barbecue, swimming and games.” The incentive was a hit, so much so, that many attendees stayed over for an extended vacation.

In addition to the endless amenities for incentive groups, The Grand Lucayan Beach & Golf Resort boasts a conference center equipped with cutting-edge audio-visual equipment, and indoor and outdoor event spaces for all size groups.

Seeking to attract more meetings and incentives, the Grand Bahama Island Tourism Board is offering meeting planners generous rebates for bookings from June 1, 2014, through December 19, 2014.

## Puerto Rico Attracting New Business

Puerto Rico also is reaching out to planners, touting its 1.3



Formerly known as Conrad San Juan Condado Plaza, the hotel has been renamed and rebranded as The Condado Plaza Hilton — Hilton Hotels & Resorts brand’s fourth hotel in Puerto Rico.

Photo courtesy of The Condado Plaza Hilton

million sf of meeting space, more than 14,000 guest rooms and world-class Puerto Rico Convention Center. In December, Meet Puerto Rico, the island’s CVB, welcomed 86 planners to its second annual four-day Puerto Rico Showcase & Travel Expo. The event included site visits to several properties and an educational seminar on using social media to promote meetings.

Meet Puerto Rico hopes to attract more first-time meetings as well as repeat business from companies such as Atlanta-based BMW North America, Southern Region. In May 2013, the company held a four-day meeting for 75 sales managers at the Caribe Hilton San Juan. It was the second consecutive year that the company used the property.

Airfare cost was a major reason for choosing Puerto Rico. “Our southern region covers a huge area of the United States and flights can be expensive,” says Robin Holsonback, meeting planner based in Atlanta, GA, for BMW North America, Southern Region. “For instance, flying from Atlanta to Little Rock, Arkansas, costs about \$1,000 round trip, but you can fly from Atlanta to San Juan for less than \$300. It’s very reasonable.”

Puerto Rico’s tropical weather was absolutely perfect during the group’s 2012 meeting. However, it rained every day during the 2013 meeting. To keep her meeting humming during the inclement weather, Holsonback juggled activities on the fly. “We had planned an outdoor welcome dinner and reception by the pool, so we moved it inside the hotel. We had three different teambuilding activities planned. Tuesday was supposed to be our teambuilding beach Olympics, and Wednesday was supposed to be the tour of the Bacardi rum factory and dinner at the Parrot Club restaurant,” says Holsonback. “But it rained Tuesday so we moved the rum factory and parrot club to that day because they were indoor activities, hoping that

it wouldn’t rain Wednesday and we could do the beach team-building then. But Wednesday was a complete washout.”

Still, the meeting turned out to be a success. “However, it was a real stressor for me,” says Holsonback. “When you go to someplace like that, you want to embrace the weather and beautiful surroundings. But everybody wants to go back to Puerto Rico. They love it.”

Puerto Rico is improving several of its brand-name properties and adding others.

The San Juan Marriott Resort & Stellar Casino is undergoing an \$8 million renovation that includes all 525 guest rooms. The refurbished rooms will feature new furnishings, tropical color tones and artwork. The property offers 10,783 sf of space in 13 meeting rooms. The property formerly known as the Conrad San Juan Condado Plaza hotel has been reflagged as the Condado Plaza Hilton. The property features 571 rooms and 41,000 sf of meeting space.

The Sheraton Old San Juan Hotel & Casino is renovating its 240 guest rooms, air conditioning system and Wi-Fi service. The largest of the hotel’s 10 meeting spaces is 2,695 sf.

The historic 232-room Condado Vanderbilt Hotel, which has completed several years of renovations, was scheduled to reopen every guest room by the end of 2013. The Vanderbilt features more than 15,000 sf of meeting space and 19 restaurants, lounges and bars.

Along the southern shore of Puerto Rico, the 225-room Hilton Ponce Golf & Casino Resort celebrated its 20th anni-

## Amie Devine, CMP

Director of Operations  
Hybrid Group LLC  
Westmont, IL

**“We are very price sensitive. October is not the peak season so you can get a lower rate. Plus, the Bahamas offers a rebate system, depending on how big your group is. It makes it very enticing. It was a good value.”**

versary recently by completing a multimillion-dollar makeover. The property offers 60,000 sf of indoor and outdoor function and exhibit space.

Among other properties outside of San Juan, the Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve property, premiered with 130 three-, four- and five-bedroom villa residences.

The Hyatt Place Manati and Casino is scheduled to open in January 2014 with 2,075 sf of meeting space and 10,000 sf of gaming space.



The iconic Fort San Gerónimo in Puerta de Tierra adjacent to the Caribe Hilton, located in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Photo courtesy of Caribe Hilton





Photo courtesy of Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve

Spectacular views from the Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve.

## Island Options Are Endless

Like Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) are popular in part due to the fact that U.S. citizens don't need a passport to enter these U.S. territories. The most well-known USVI destination is the island of St. John, known for its elegant beach resorts such as the 450-room Frenchman's Reef and Morning Star Marriott Beach Resort, which features 60,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space. The hotel recently completed a \$48 million renovation. The Westin St. John Resort and Villas is undergoing a \$12 million makeover that will be completed in October 2014. The property offers six meeting spaces, the largest of which is 3,500 sf.

An enticing range of other islands offers a variety of excellent meeting and incentive properties. Companies can inspire, entertain or educate their attendees at any one or more of the nine properties in the Sandals Luxury Meetings and Incentives Collection, which includes Sandals Grande Antigua, St. Johns, Antigua; Sandals Grande St. Lucian, Castries, St. Lucia; Sandals La Source, St. George's, Grenada; Sandals Grande Riviera, Ocho Rios, Jamaica; Sandals Whitehouse, Whitehouse, Jamaica; Sandals Royal Plantation, Ocho Rios, Jamaica; Sandals Royal Bahamian, Nassau, Bahamas; Sandals Emerald Bay, Great Exuma, Bahamas; Beaches Turks & Caicos; Providenciales, Turks & Caicos.

Corporate meetings and incentive programs conducted

### Robin Holsonback

Meeting Planner  
BMW North America  
Atlanta, GA

"For instance, flying from Atlanta to Little Rock, Arkansas, costs about \$1,000 round trip, but you can fly from Atlanta to San Juan for less than \$300. It's very reasonable."

in the lap of luxury are a specialty at Sandals Emerald Bay in Great Exuma, Bahamas. This 245-unit oceanfront resort, lined by a mile-long stretch of white-sand beach and only 10 minutes from the airport, features nearly 20,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meetings facilities including the 5,500-sf Nautilus Ballroom. Other services and amenities include Wi-Fi Internet access, a Red Lane Spa and Greg Norman-designed golf course, seven restaurants and six bars, three pools including a half-acre infinity pool and three whirlpools. In addition, water sports such as scuba diving, snorkeling, sailing, sea kayaking, windsurfing and stand-up paddleboarding abound.

Sandals LaSource, Sandals' newest resort, which opened in December, is located along the pristine Pink Gin Beach in Grenada. LaSource features 225 elegant rooms and suites and meeting facilities. Lavish amenities include custom-built, contemporary furniture and marble floors. Top-tier



Photo courtesy of Sandals Resorts International

Sandals Emerald Bay, Great Exuma, Bahamas, features unique event spaces for cocktail receptions.

accommodations include private infinity-edge plunge pools on the balcony. Additionally, the resort offers land and water sports including scuba diving, snorkeling and stand-up paddleboarding as well as optional pampering treatments at the Red Lane Spa.

## Final Thoughts

There are many reasons why the Bahamas and Caribbean should be considered by meeting planners. The choice of popular islands is almost endless and includes Curacao, Aruba, Grand Cayman, St. Kitts and the Dominican Republic. The region is relatively close to the U.S. yet provides a chance to get away to a foreign destination, and it offers some of the world's most luxurious resorts with more on the way. It has properties with significant meeting space and special venues as well as spectacular weather, fine dining and exotic outdoor activities. It's no wonder there are so many satisfied attendees who want to return time and time again to the Bahamas, Puerto Rico and the many other islands of the Caribbean.

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Destination

# Las Vegas

## The Meetings Mecca Is Back

By John Buchanan

The city that ruled the roost when it came to meetings and conventions before the Great Recession has successfully defended its title as the undisputed heavyweight champion of meeting destinations.

And the essential reasons are remarkably simple, say its longtime meeting planner loyalists.

“Las Vegas is literally designed for meetings and conventions,” says Jodie Cadieux, director of marketing at DNA testing and analytics provider Genelex in Seattle. “And that means it has something for everyone. It’s interesting to me that it has a reputation based on being a gambling destination. But you also have world-class restaurants and entertainment and shopping. I can’t think of any place, except New York City, that has a better entertainment scene in terms of major productions.”

In 2014, the Las Vegas skyline will have a new look when the Linq’s High Roller, the largest observation wheel in the world, opens.

Photo courtesy of Caesars Entertainment





Photo courtesy of Life is Beautiful

The inaugural Life is Beautiful Festival took place in Downtown Las Vegas last fall and made history with 60,000 attendees and an action-packed weekend of performances.

In addition, says Cadieux, who has been using Las Vegas regularly for 13 years, just outside the city limits are breathtaking natural landscapes and historical locations that further expand the list of planner options for an interesting and exciting meeting. “And based on all of that,” Cadieux says, “I can’t think of another place that has so much appeal to so many different kinds of people.”

And, she adds, a planner gets all of that appeal at a very cost-effective price. “It’s become a very affordable destination,” Cadieux says. “If you look at other places, there just aren’t any that offer as many options and also are as affordable.”

Kim Payne, assistant to the CEO of Eden Prairie, MN-based data center service provider Datalink, is another planner with a long history of loyalty to and enthusiasm for Las Vegas.

“It’s an economical destination,” says Payne, who has hosted Datalink’s annual national sales and engineering meeting in Las Vegas each January for the last six years — the last four at the AAA Five Diamond Bellagio. “I think it’s a matter of fact that Las Vegas just knows how to do tourism and meetings. And when it comes to value, I feel that the dollars I spend in Las Vegas are better spent than anywhere else in the country.”

The other big advantage Payne cites is the extraordinary meeting infrastructure Las Vegas has and its experience in doing major meetings. “When you go to Las Vegas with 500 attendees, you’re not the only meeting of that size in the hotel,” she says. “The staffs have a lot of experience doing major meetings on a regular basis.” And that shows in the delivery of day-to-day meeting services, she said. “And to me as a planner, the level of service we get is as important as the cost.”

#### Airlift and Convenience

Although Las Vegas is best known for the

*“I think it’s a matter of fact that Las Vegas just knows how to do tourism and meetings. And when it comes to value, I feel that the dollars I spend in Las Vegas are better spent than anywhere else in the country.”*

**Kim Payne**, Assistant to CEO  
Datalink  
Eden Prairie, MN

extravagant big-box hotels that line its fabled Strip and its globally celebrated dining and entertainment scene, one pleasant surprise for planners and attendees who experience it for the first time is its almost unparalleled ease of access and convenience.

“One of the main reasons we like Las Vegas so much is the airlift, which makes it nice and easy for our attendees to get there,” says Jean Walsh, meeting and event planning manager at private label food company Federated Group in Arlington Heights, IL. “And the proximity of the airport to the major hotels along The Strip makes it very convenient to get to the hotels, which are just a short cab ride.”

That’s especially important now and into the future, Walsh says, since convenience for attendees is a growing factor in the meetings industry. And in that increasingly important sense, Las Vegas sets itself apart from most destinations in the U.S.

Walsh also points out that airlift — both the availability and cost-effectiveness of flights from across the country and around the world — is becoming an ever more important factor in planning meetings.

“That is a big factor for us,” she says. “For any trade show in any industry, people are giving up their time and spending their money to attend. And if a whole day is wasted on travel in



Photo courtesy of Datalink

The main stage session at Bellagio during Datalink’s annual national sales and engineering meeting, which has been held in Las Vegas for the last six years.



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Photo courtesy of SLS Las Vegas

When it opens this year on The Strip on the former site of the Sahara, the new SLS Las Vegas will have more than 1,600 guest rooms and 30,000 sf of meeting space.

each direction, that is not considered a productive use of time for many people. So that is more and more a consideration that people look at when they're deciding whether to attend a show or not. And on the other hand, when they know the airlift is easy, and it's just going to be a half day of travel so they can still get a half day of work in before they leave or when they get home, that just makes them more comfortable about coming to your show."

Chris Collinson, president of Norcross, GA-based Collinson Media & Events, which stages trade shows in the travel industry, agrees that its formidable airlift is a major factor in the popularity of Las Vegas. "The airport has a number of direct flights from all over the world," he says. "And a lot of those are low-cost flights. That means it's affordable for any attendee on any budget. The combination of those two things just makes it a very appealing destination, because the cost of getting to the meeting is a major consideration for a significant number of our attendees who pay their own way to get to the meeting."

Payne puts it even more succinctly. "For us," she says, "Las Vegas is the most convenient destination in the country when it comes to getting people there easily and cost-effectively."

## Hotel Product

Although convenience and cost-effectiveness are important attributes for any destination — and Las Vegas famously delivers on both counts — it is the city's awe-inspiring hotel inventory that makes it a popular choice for so many planners.

The city's hotel room inventory earlier this year was 150,454, according to the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority. Now, thanks to a total investment of \$2 billion in new and

renovated properties over the last year, that number is headed toward 153,373 with the addition of new hotels, such as the \$100 million Downtown Grand Las Vegas, formerly the Lady Luck Hotel & Casino. The 634-room Downtown Grand made its debut in October as the first new hotel in historic downtown Las Vegas in nearly three decades — and now serves as a symbol of the reinvention of downtown Las Vegas, especially along Fremont Street, as a new alternative away from The Strip.

Meanwhile, Caesars Entertainment Inc. has completed the 181-room and suite Nobu Hotel at Caesars Palace, a \$30 million renovation and rebranding of the former Centurion Tower at local landmark Caesars Palace — and the first hotel branded with Nobu Matsuhisa, the king of exclusive sushi emporiums. The Nobu Hotel is a boutique hotel within a hotel and its high-profile partners, along with Caesars Palace, include actor Robert De Niro.

Meanwhile, Caesars Entertainment is now putting the finishing touches on The Strip's first standalone boutique hotel, a \$185 million, 188-room project that will occupy the site of the old Bill's Gamblin' Hall & Saloon. The property will feature the first Las Vegas restaurant from celebrity chef Giada De



Photo courtesy of MGM Resorts International

The Seascapes Ballroom, the new meeting space at Shark Reef Aquarium at Mandalay Bay, highlights the 30 sharks and other creatures in the 1.3-million-gallon exhibit.

Laurentiis and will house three of Victor Drai's party venues, which are rumored to include a beach club, a huge nightclub and an updated version of Drai's After Hours lounge. The property name has not been announced as of this writing.

Next fall, the new SLS Las Vegas, a 1,600-room property with 30,000 sf of meeting space, on the site of the former Sahara Hotel, will make its much-anticipated debut.

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Photo courtesy of MGM Resorts International

MGM Grand Hotel & Casino was announced for the fourth time as the World's Leading Casino Resort for 2013 at the 20th World Travel Awards through votes cast by travel experts worldwide.

And MGM Resorts will introduce its new Delano Las Vegas, a local outpost of the super-chic South Beach Miami celebrity hideaway, where THEhotel at Mandalay Bay used to be.

## Dining and Entertainment

A natural outgrowth of the city's mega-casino hotels has been a long list of celebrity chef restaurants and other exclusive eateries that generate critical acclaim around the world.

"The dining and entertainment scene is another example of the things that make Las Vegas a special experience," Collinson says. "We always leave a free night for attendees so they can take advantage of all that the city has to offer and also do individual entertaining."

Cadieux seconds the opinion that the dining scene in Las Vegas truly sets it apart as a place that guarantees a spectacular experience for meeting attendees. "There is no other place I can think of, except New York or London, where you can find so many celebrity chef restaurants and top dining establishments," she says. "So when you're looking at a high-end group or a very important meeting, Las Vegas has the facilities to make that happen. But they also offer a complete range of options. So

***"The dining and entertainment scene is another example of the things that make Las Vegas a special experience. We always leave a free night for attendees so they can take advantage of all that the city has to offer and also do individual entertaining."***

**Chris Collinson, President**  
Collinson Media & Events  
Norcross, GA

if you're looking at a conference that is more driven toward (lower costs), there are also a lot of good options there, as well. There is something for everyone. So in terms of diversity of options, you also can't find a better destination."

And, she notes, Las Vegas restaurants are also relentlessly zeroed in on making an event special. "They are focused on helping me, as the planner, pull off a fantastic event," she says. "And they really pull it all together to do whatever it takes to make that happen."

Because vendors and suppliers do a lot of entertaining at her meetings, Walsh says that the dining scene in Las Vegas is always a key to the success of her events. "A lot of networking takes place at our shows," Walsh says. "For example, vendors and suppliers entertain customers over dinner. And again, there are just so many options within each of the major hotels, or just down the street, that there is something for everyone. And you're also not wasting a lot of time getting from one place to another. Everything is in close proximity, which is another convenience factor."



Photo courtesy of MGM Resorts International

The popular "Beatles Love" by Cirque du Soleil and Terry Fator, named one of the best entertainers in Las Vegas, attract attendees to The Mirage Hotel & Casino year after year.

"We have some suppliers that want to go more high-end when they're entertaining," Walsh continues. "And we're often asked to help set up their dinner appointments with those preferences in mind. But at the same time, vendors that are more on a budget, or our staff members, who don't get to enjoy those expensive dinners, also have a lot of great options."

And attendees, in particular, appreciate the broad array of options. "It's very unusual to find such a range," Walsh says. "And it's something our attendees appreciate, because there is something in each of the major hotels that will please everyone, whether that's high end, low end or in between. And today, that even includes options when it comes to (ethnic foods), which is another thing attendees appreciate these days."

Likewise, the entertainment scene is another major benefit of the destination. "One of the key drivers for us in using Las Vegas is that in a two-mile stretch (of The Strip) you have 15 or 20 different shows happening at the same time," Collinson says. "And

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Las Vegas' Richard Petty Driving Experience offers groups a chance to drive modified trucks on an off-road course at the speedway.

Photo courtesy of Richard Petty Driving Experience

they all offer something different, so that no matter what your taste or preference is, you're going to be able to find something you enjoy. I don't think there's any other city that can say that."

Moreover, he says, there is always something new and exciting in Las Vegas, no matter how often you go. "If you go there this year, by the time you come back next year, there are going to be

rectors and choreographers in the world, will work hand-in-hand with the cast and crew of Jubilee! to bring a bold, fresh new twist to the production in 2014.

### Offsite Venues

Like its roster of dining and entertainment options, Las Vegas offers an almost endless list of offsite venues.

The big news for 2014, says Stephanie Arone, owner of Activity Planners Inc., a destination management company, is the huge project being developed by Caesars Entertainment on a site that includes its former Imperial Palace Hotel. The Quad Casino & Resort is replacing the old property, and a new multi-purpose, non-gaming attraction and venue known as The Linq will make its debut in 2014. In addition to dining, shopping and entertainment options, The Linq will feature the High Roller, a 550-foot observation wheel that rises above The Strip for spectacular views. The High Roller will include 28 individual pods that each hold 40 passengers, making it a unique option for meeting planners who want to exploit the sizzle of Las Vegas in a brand new way. The Linq's cabins can be booked individually or in any quantity, up to and including a complete buyout. And the adjacent High Roller building features 2,500 sf of meeting space divisible into as many as three rooms and perfect for up to 500 guests. "The entire complex is just magnificent," Arone says.

However, her top three "hottest offsite venues of the moment" are all located in downtown Las Vegas, which has undergone a renaissance since footwear purveyor Zappos moved



The Venetian and Sands Expo.

Photo courtesy of Las Vegas Sands Corp.

new restaurants and shows," Collinson says. "And not just any restaurant or shows, but the best you're going to find anywhere."

For example, the longest-running show on the Las Vegas Strip — Jubilee! at Bally's Las Vegas — will undergo a major transformation. Frank Gatson Jr., one of the most celebrated creative di-



*"I can't think of another place that has so much appeal to so many different kinds of people. It's become a very affordable destination. If you look at other places, there just aren't any that offer as many options and also are as affordable."*

**Jodie Cadieux**, Director of Marketing  
Genelex  
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Photo courtesy of MGM Resorts International

The Viñoly Grand Ballroom at Vdara Hotel & Spa seats 300 for a banquet.

its headquarters there and undertook a major urban revitalization business center project just a stone's throw from Fremont Street hotels and casinos.

In fact, Arone says, Fremont Street itself is her No. 1 choice as a venue for offsite events. Planners can close off an entire city block and host a major outdoor event for large groups.

For medium-sized groups, Arone favors the relatively new Mob Museum, a passion project of former Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman, a defense attorney who represented more than the occasional Mafia figure over the years.

And for small groups looking for something different, Arone suggests the Neon Boneyard, a dedicated, specialized space within The Neon Museum that is home to some of the most treasured and world-famous signs of Las Vegas — Caesars



Photos courtesy of Las Vegas News Bureau

Executives unveil the first electric vehicle charging stations at the Las Vegas Convention Center.

Palace, Binion's Horseshoe, the Golden Nugget and the Stardust. "They took a lot of the old neon signs that made Las Vegas famous and restored them to a degree and put them on display," she says. "But the space itself is also very dynamic. And you're looking at the ex-

hibits from an 'art' standpoint, where you learn about the history of Las Vegas and the culture of the destination."

New offsite venues winning rave reviews include the new Havana Room and outdoor, poolside Beach Club, featuring fountains, palm trees and luxurious cabanas, at the fully renovated Tropicana Las Vegas, yet another historic property that has been resurrected for the 21st century.

A stylish and unique new offsite venue for meetings and events is Silk Road at Vdara Hotel & Spa, one of the hotels in MGM Resort's City Center complex at the heart of The Strip. The 6,700-sf facility includes individual spaces of 3,700 sf and 900 sf that are illuminated by beautiful natural light.

In order to be in-the-know and get the best results from the venues she uses, Cadieux has worked with Activity Planners as her DMC for the last 13 years. And she highly recommends Arone and her team to other planners who aspire to the best possible Las Vegas meetings.

"The reason I've been so loyal is that I just tell Stephanie, 'I

*"When they know the airlift is easy, and it's just going to be a half day of travel so they can still get a half day of work in before they leave or when they get home, that just makes them more comfortable about coming to your show."*

**Jean Wash**, Meeting and Event Planning Manager  
Federated Group  
Arlington Heights, IL

need to do this' and she says, 'When do you need it done by? What's your budget? And I'll make it happen.' It really is that simple. But also, the other thing that sets her apart is the level of her staff. They really are very, very focused on making your event a success, so they are in constant communication. And they turn on a dime when I change my plans. And in addition to all that, they are incredibly well connected."

And it's not just Arone and Activity Planners who are completely committed to the success of meetings, Collinson says. In fact, he has been surprised by the ferocious sense of responsibility displayed by just about everyone in town.

"People really care about the success of your meeting and about whether your attendees have a good time," he says. "And that's because so much of their economy is built on tourism and meetings. And that shows in everything they do. They take meetings very seriously. And that's why they host more meetings each year than any other destination." **C&IT**

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# On The Move



RENAUD

**Christel Renaud** was named account director for the meeting, incentive and corporate event markets for Club Med. She most recently served as account director for group sales at W Hollywood, Hollywood, CA.

Kiawah Island Golf Resort, Kiawah Island, SC, has promoted **Nicole Decocq** to director of mid-Atlantic sales, responsible for West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland and Delaware, as well as the District of Columbia. She most recently served as small meetings manager for the resort.



HUTCHCRAFT

**Mary Hutchcraft** was named director of sales and marketing at the B Resort, located in the Walt Disney World Resort, Lake Buena Vista, FL. Most recently, she served as taskforce director of sales and marketing for the Hospitality Ventures Management Group at the International Palms Resort and Conference Center, Orlando, FL.

**William McBroom** was named director of sales and marketing at The Renaissance World Golf Village Resort and Convention Center, Jacksonville/



McBROOM

St. Augustine, FL. He formerly served as director of sales at The Renaissance Charlotte Suites Hotel in Charlotte, NC.

**Gus Tejada** was named director of resort sales for The Omni Grove Park Inn, Asheville, NC. He most recently was the vice president of group sales for Atlantis, Paradise Island, Bahamas.

**Colleen Brzozowski** was named Midwest regional director of sales for KSL Resorts. She formerly served as director of sales at Grand Traverse Resort and Spa, Traverse City, MI. **C&IT**



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