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Renovation ROI

New & Renovated Hotels Can Offer More for Less, Even in a Seller's Market
Page 10



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THE EXECUTIVE SOURCE FOR PLANNING MEETINGS & INCENTIVES
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2015 Vol. 22 No. 1



Credit: Shows In a Box

Page 18

David Thomas, chief executive producer of Shows In a Box, creates entertaining and magical illusions to match the meeting objectives of corporate clients.

FEATURES

10 Renovation ROI

New & Renovated Hotels Can Offer More for Less, Even in a Seller's Market

By Patrick Simms

14 Attention-Getting eRFPs

Prepare a Strategy That Yields a High Response Rate

By Derek Reveron

18 That's Entertainment!

Using Performers to Inspire Performance

By Karen Brost

22 Incentive Travel Trends

New Program Design Strategies to Meet Renewed Demand

By Gabi Logan



Credit: Loews Hotels

Page 10

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 PUBLISHER'S MESSAGE
- 6 INDUSTRY NEWS
- 9 SNAPSHOTS
- 34 CORPORATE LADDER
- 34 READER SERVICES

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel (c) and Jonathan Tisch (r), chairman of Loews Hotels, break ground for the Loews Chicago Hotel.



Credit: Ocean Reef Club

DESTINATION

26 Florida

Planners Shed New Light on Meeting in the Sunshine State

By Sara Churchville

Key Largo's exclusive Ocean Reef Club affords al fresco dining options with sweeping waterviews.

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Publisher's Message

More for Less

We all know how meeting professionals are charged with finding more for less at every opportunity. This challenge remains the same in good times and not-so-good times; in a buyer's market or a seller's market. In this issue, we discover myriad ways that meeting and incentive travel planners can get more for less and improve their ROI at the same time. For instance, in the cover story on



page 10, "Renovation ROI," Gary M. Pearson, director, corporate meetings & events for the Aon Service Corporation in Chicago, says service in new hotels is improving, which is making the lower rate benefits of booking a brand new hotel more appealing. However, planners need to act fast as "the demand is still greater than the supply, but the supply is slowly creeping up, so when these new hotels come online, people are just jumping on them," adds Pearson.

"You're able to get some really good rates (at new properties), although within two years you won't be able to touch that rate again," notes Pearson.

Another place to find more for less is in the area of eRFPs, where on page 14, Cynthia Tomei, CMP, CMM, FAHM, senior meeting planner for Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, explains how she gets great results from her eRFP strategy. "We get a significantly high response rate from hotels — 90 percent or better. There are a few properties here and there that we want and don't get. But we do well because we are selective and the hotels are used to that. We tend to work with the same cities over and over," she says.

You will find more timely ideas as you review "That's Entertainment: Using Performers to Inspire Performance" on page 18 and "Incentive Travel Trends" on page 22.

Finally, there's no better destination to find more for less than in Florida — especially when the snow is falling in the Northeast and Midwest. In "Planners Shed New Light on Meeting in the Sunshine State" on page 26, meeting pros tout the fabulous climate and abundance of first-class meeting hotels. As BI Worldwide's Mary Ann Grovak, who arranged meeting rooms with ocean views accompanied by open-air breaks much to the delight of her attendees, said, "It created a buzz; Miami was the cornerstone in a lot of ways in making this successful."

Harvey Grotsky

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PUBLISHER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Harvey Grotsky
 harvey.grotsky@themeetingmagazines.com

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Mitch D. Miller
 mitch.miller@themeetingmagazines.com

MANAGING EDITORS

Susan W. Fell
 susan.fell@themeetingmagazines.com

Susan S. Gregg

sue.gregg@themeetingmagazines.com

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Karen Brost
John Buchanan
Sara Churchville
Gabi Logan
Christine Loomis
Derek Reveron
Patrick Simms

PRESIDENT & CEO

Harvey Grotsky

VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS

David A. Middlebrook
 david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

ADVERTISING SALES OFFICES

2700 N. Military Trail, Suite 120
 Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394
 561-989-0600 Fax: 561-989-9509
 advertising@themeetingmagazines.com

CT, DC, DE, MA, MD, ME

NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VA, VT

David Middlebrook
 561-989-0600, ext. 109 • Fax: 561-989-9509
 david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

FLORIDA/CARIBBEAN/BAHAMAS

David Middlebrook
 561-989-0600, ext. 109 • Fax: 561-989-9509
 david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

AL, GA, MS, NC, OK, SC

David Middlebrook
 561-989-0600, ext. 114 • Fax: 561-989-9509
 david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

AR, IA, IL, IN, KS, KY, MI, MN, MO

ND, NE, OH, SD, WI, WV

David Middlebrook
 561-989-0600, ext. 114 • Fax: 561-989-9509
 david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

CO, LA, TN, TX

David Middlebrook
 561-989-0600, ext. 114 • Fax: 561-989-9509
 david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

AZ, CA, HI, ID, MT, NM, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY

Marshall Rubin

818-888-2407 • Fax: 818-888-4907
 marshall.rubin@themeetingmagazines.com

ALASKA/CANADA/MEXICO/INTERNATIONAL

David Middlebrook
 561-989-0600, ext. 114 • Fax: 561-989-9509
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DoubleTree by Hilton Expands Presence in Jacksonville

JACKSONVILLE, FL — DoubleTree by Hilton recently announced the opening of DoubleTree by Hilton Jacksonville Airport, located just 200 yards from the main terminal of Jacksonville International Airport. Formerly an independent hotel, the property reopens following a multimillion-dollar renovation that includes modern design updates throughout the lobby, guest rooms, meeting spaces and restaurant.

The contemporary 201-room hotel creates a comfortable oasis for business and leisure travelers. The property-wide design updates reflect the region's contemporary coastal flair, complemented by bright color themes and dark wood accents. In-room and lobby artwork is all custom-made and highlights the area's beaches and attractions. Unique views of the nearby airport's runways may also be seen throughout the property.

Amenities include LCD HDTVs, the Sweet Dreams bed experience, and complimentary Wi-Fi throughout the hotel's public areas and guest rooms. Additional compli-



DoubleTree by Hilton Jacksonville Airport.

mentary offerings include a heated outdoor pool and hot tub, 24-hour fitness center with state-of-the-art Precor equipment, 24-hour business center, onsite parking and 24-hour shuttle service to and from the airport.

With 11,000 sf of function space covering three levels of the hotel, DoubleTree by Hilton Jacksonville Airport boasts two ballrooms, two

boardrooms and four breakout rooms. For smaller group meetings, the hotel offers the Meetings Simplified by DoubleTree by Hilton package from \$15.00 per person, which includes the meeting room, basic meeting Wi-Fi, meeting room supplies including a flipchart, markers, extension and power cord, and all day non-alcoholic beverage service.

www.jacksonvilleairport.doubletree.com

U.S. Business Travel Spending to Top \$310 Billion in 2015

WASHINGTON, DC — U.S. business travel ended 2014 on a high note, with record spending expected to reach \$292.2 billion. The projection for 2015 also remains strong, as lower oil prices are expected to lead to increased consumer spending, boosting economic projects. This strong domestic economic news comes despite an overall weak global economic outlook, with trouble in Europe, Asia and Russia.

Overall, U.S. business travel spending is expected to advance 6.2 percent to \$310.2 billion in 2015, while total person-trip volume is expected to increase 1.7 percent to 490.4 million trips for the year, according to the GBTA BTI Outlook – United States 2014 Q4, a report from the GBTA Foundation, the education and research arm of the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), and sponsored by Visa Inc.

"2014 was a stabilizing year for U.S. business travel, with continuous, sustained growth, despite a plethora of external issues internationally that have weighted down economies in Europe, Russia and Asia," said Michael W. McCormick, GBTA executive director and COO. "This is a significant and encouraging sign of confidence in the strength of the U.S. economy."

The GBTA BTI, a proprietary index of business travel activity, is estimated to reach 137 to round out 2014, bolstered by a strengthening domestic economy and an increase in spending. This represents a six-point year-over-year gain.

The BTI is expected to continue rising in 2015, reaching 146 by the end of next year. Momentum should continue into 2016 as the index gains another seven points on its way to 153. www.gbta.org, www.gbta.org/foundation



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Hawks Cay Resort Adds New Meeting Space

DUCK KEY, FL — For the first time, Hawks Cay Resort can accommodate large groups of up to 600 people and provide the option of the entire group being able to meet in one room and dine in another. Technology has also been upgraded to ensure desired connectivity outside and in. “We already have the largest meeting and conference space in the Florida Keys,” said Hawks Cay Managing Director Sheldon Suga. “While we have added additional square footage to bring our conference footprint to 20,000 sf, the renovation we just completed is more about removing the barriers, both emotional and physical. We’re merging the beautiful Instagram moments of waterfront life and activity and the formerly traditional meeting space to create an inspiring space that is as beautiful as



Hawks Cay Resort Tranquility Pool.

it is intriguing.” Upgrades to Hawks Cay Resort have been completed with the exception of the Marina Walk and new restaurant, which are scheduled to debut in 2015. Bookable now for events start-

ing in fall 2015, the new restaurant will feature flexible indoor and outdoor function space for groups large and small. To learn more, email meetings@hawkscay.com. www.hawkscay.com

French Lick Resort Expands Meeting Space

FRENCH LICK, IN — For more than 125 years, French Lick Springs Hotel (and West Baden Springs Hotel) has hosted countless meetings, annual conferences and executive retreats. French Lick Resort is continuing to build on that reputation with the addition of a 58,000-sf expansion, which totals \$20 million. The expanded Meeting and Event Center has more than 101,000 sf of meeting space, including a new 22,000-sf adjustable ballroom. With a total of 163,000 sf of customizable meeting and event space resort-wide, French Lick Resort is the largest privately owned meeting space in the state of Indiana.

The French Lick Resort is a \$560 million historic restoration and casino development project that includes the West Baden Springs Hotel, French Lick Springs Hotel and French Lick Casino. The resort features 689 guest rooms and suites; a 51,000-sf, single-level casino; 63 holes of golf, including the fully restored 1917-designed Donald Ross Course at French Lick and the 18-hole Pete Dye Course at French Lick; two full-service spas; 163,000 sf of meeting space and an array of dining and entertainment options. www.frenchlick.com

The Westin Cincinnati Announces Multimillion-Dollar Renovation

CINCINNATI, OH — The Westin Cincinnati announced that it has begun work on a multimillion-dollar renovation that includes significant upgrades and contemporary enhancements to its 456 guest rooms. Additionally, the hotel has completed construction on an innovative meeting space — Tangent at Westin.

Embracing the Westin brand’s promise For a Better You, the renovations will include a refresh of the 456 guest rooms featuring the Westin Heavenly Bed and Westin Heavenly Shower, new guest corridors, an enhanced ADA-compliant hotel entrance and Tangent. Designed to facilitate collaboration among small groups, Tangent is ideal for impromptu meetings, brainstorming or interviews and comes equipped with smart technology to enhance productivity.

Starting from the core frame of each guest room, nearly 2,500 gallons of paint, 7,500 square yards of carpet and 51,200 yards of wall vinyl will be utilized to transform the décor. The palette of harmonious, nature-inspired colors and subtle mood lighting are intended to enhance guests’ moods from check-in to checkout. www.westin.com



Credits: 1-4, FICP; 5-8, Jacob Station Photography

1-4 Hilton Waikoloa Village in Waikoloa Hawaii was the site last fall for the 2014 FICP Annual Conference, which attracted nearly 600 attendees. Participants enjoyed more than 30 education sessions, networking with colleagues and partners, and an impressive array of keynote speakers. The FICP Annual Conference Silent Auction resulted in a \$48,243 check to Junior Achievement International and Junior Achievement of Hawaii. The 2015 FICP Annual Conference is set for Atlantis, Paradise Island, Bahamas, November 15-18. Additional FICP events for 2015 include: FICP Education Forum, June 24-26, Washington, DC; FICP Summer Symposium, August 20-22, Montréal, Canada, and the FICP Fall Symposium, September 30-October 2, Santa Barbara, California. **5-8** PCMA’s Convening Leaders 2015 in Chicago in January welcomed a record-setting 4,128 meeting planners and suppliers and celebrated the theme “Make No Little Plans” — a phrase coined by Daniel Burnham, the architect and urban planner who was one of the driving creative forces of the 1893 Columbian World’s Exposition in Chicago. PCMA debuted five big, innovative plans at Convening Leaders — each designed to leave participants inspired to find their next big idea. **5** (L to r) Sherrif Karamat, Gary Schirmacher, Chris Wehking, Deborah Sexton, Dave Lutz, Johnnie White. **6-7** PCMA’s Hospitality Helping Hands program, sponsored by Experient, Marriott’s Convention and Resort Network and Global Experience Specialist, took place on Sunday, January 11. Nearly 120 attendees repackaged more than 33,000 pounds of food at the Greater Chicago Food Depository (GCFD) — a \$5 credit for every hour worked by an attendee at the GCFD is being donated to Mercy Home for Boys and Girls (estimating \$1,800). “This year’s program was designed to challenge the most respected leaders in the industry to embrace the spirit of innovation and risk-taking,” said Deborah Sexton, president and CEO, PCMA. “Our audience showed that, without a doubt, they are ready to accept that challenge and elevate the next generation of meetings, conferences and events.” Convening Leaders 2016 is set for January 10-13 in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Renovation ROI



The Mayflower's General Manager John Montano was given the honor of breaking down the first room, officially marking the launch of the Washington, DC, hotel's \$20 million room renovation.

New & Renovated Hotels Can Offer More for Less, Even in a Seller's Market

By Patrick Simms

Recent studies on meeting budgets and hotel room rates together imply that cost control may become a little more challenging for meeting planners this year. One strategy to offset rising rates is to book a new or newly renovated hotel, which often will offer lots of bang for fewer bucks.

The North American planners who participated in a survey conducted for American Express Meetings & Events' 2015 Global Meetings & Events Forecast indicated flat budgets, with fewer than 7 percent of respondents predicting changes of 10 percent or more to their program spend or meeting bud-

gets. Compounded with flat budgets is an expected increase in lodging costs, according to PwC's Hospitality Directions US (November). Higher demand during the first nine months of 2014, particularly from group clients, has driven up room rates to the point where hoteliers will see an 8.2 percent increase in RevPAR in 2014, and a 7.4 percent RevPAR increase in 2015, PwC US predicted.

Budget-Beaters

There are many scenarios that can ease the challenge posed by rising room rates. The planner may happen to be at a company where the meet-

ings budget is not remaining flat, but increasing. He or she may have strong relationships with certain hoteliers and be able to negotiate more concessions. And in some cases, a planner may be able to book a newly opened hotel or resort, which often comes along with a deal on room rates.

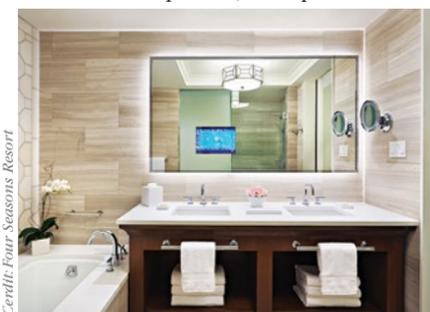
"They're trying to get the hotel well known and trying to get large groups there, so more people can see it," notes Brett Pugh, Institutional Placements, with Syracuse, New York-based Bankers Healthcare Group Inc., which met at the Four Seasons Resort Orlando at Walt Disney World Resort shortly after its debut this summer. "I

think we got a very good deal and don't know if we'll ever get that again."

Gary M. Pearson, director, corporate meetings and events, with Chicago, Illinois-based Aon Service Corporation, generalizes the point: "You're able to get some really good rates (at new properties), although within two years you won't be able to touch that rate again." Unfortunately, the opportunities to get those good rates have been relatively infrequent in recent years, Pearson observes. "In the U.S. I haven't seen that many new hotels come online until the last year or so, because it took a few years (after recession) before money opened up and they were able to build. The demand is still greater than the supply, but the supply is slowly creeping up, so when these new hotels come online, people are just jumping on them."

Supply Pipeline Expanding

Pearson's analysis dovetails with the PwC report, which notes that "the supply pipeline continues to expand, with hotels under construction increasing approximately 40 percent in the third quarter, compared to the



The new Four Seasons Resort Orlando features high-tech bathrooms, and bedside tablets to control lighting and more.

same period last year. As a result, our outlook anticipates supply growth to accelerate to 1.4 percent in 2015."

In particular, Pearson looks forward to the March opening of the Loews Chicago Hotel, offering 400 guest rooms and 29,000 sf of indoor and outdoor function space. The brand's new properties, Pearson feels, exemplify another benefit of meeting at new hotels, apart from the reduced rates that are common. The hoteliers often

will incorporate the latest and greatest in hospitality technology and facility design, representing "things they've learned from other hotel builds. They have the ability to (add those features) from scratch, whereas existing hotels may not be able to do that."

Such features can be pleasant surprises for attendees. At the Four Seasons Resort Orlando, Bankers Healthcare Group hosted about 145 community bankers and about 40 employees for an educational seminar for current and potential customers. In spring 2014, the firm held a similar event at the Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas.

"One of Four Seasons Resort Orlando's tech amenities, which the Las Vegas property didn't have, was a TV in the guest room bathrooms through the mirror. Many people didn't expect that, and nearly every attendee I talked to brought it up," Pugh says. "They also had these tablets at your bedside where you could control the heating and lighting, schedule wake-up calls, order room service, and so on, instead of calling a department or the operator."

Overall "it was definitely one of our selling points that it was a brand new property," Pugh says. "I think people like something new that they are among the first to experience." According to Pugh, attendees "loved the design, décor and the whole layout" of the 443-room hotel, which houses 37,750 sf of function space. The proximity to Walt Disney World Resort's attractions was a plus: "We had a few attendees bring their families, arrive a couple of days early, and stay a couple of days late. So it made it more desirable to our customers having it so close to Disney and part of their property."

Staffing Issues

The various benefits of booking a new hotel come with a cautionary note that many planners are familiar with: A new operation is oftentimes

not as cohesive as a staff that has been working together for years. Pearson, a longtime insurance industry meeting planner, has seen better performance by new hotel staffs than in the past. "The hotels now know that because of

"The demand is still greater than the supply, but the supply is slowly creeping up, so when these new hotels come online, people are just jumping on them."



Gary M. Pearson
Director, Corporate Meetings & Events
Aon Service Corporation
Chicago, IL

the competitive nature of the industry, they can't open up and have disasters or problems, and they're oftentimes bringing in teams from other hotels within their chain to help get the operation going," he observes. "A bad review can knock you down for a while; it may take a while to regain the trust of the planners and companies. So you can't risk starting off poorly."

While the presence of seasoned



The 400-room Loews Chicago Hotel opens in March 2015 with 29,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space.

staff from the same chain will likely prevent serious problems, it may be that service is still less than optimal while the staff improves its coordination. It is thus sensible to “play it safe” by giving the new operation a little time to become entrenched before bringing in a group. “I don’t have any problems going to new properties, I just don’t want to be the first customer,” Pearson says.

It’s a takeaway from a bad service experience he had with a property that opened in the Chicago suburbs in the 1980s. “We were the first customer, and the opening kept getting pushed back. It was not a good experience, and they just weren’t ready. I learned from that, and if a property announces an opening date, I usually try not to (hold a meeting) until three to four months afterwards, at the minimum.”

Bankers Healthcare Group met at the Four Seasons Resort Orlando after several other group clients, arriving about a month after the resort’s debut, and Pugh says that hosting groups beforehand “definitely helped” the property to prepare logistically to host his group.

Brand Confidence

Brand confidence also can come into play when booking with new hotels. Bankers Healthcare Group’s positive experience with the Four Seasons brand in Las Vegas motivated the site choice for the Orlando seminar, which was the company’s first time using a new property and first time meeting in Orlando. That scenario can create quite a bit of stress for a meeting planner. “No event ever happens without a hiccup, but having already com-

pleted an event with Four Seasons, I felt pretty confident that if something came up they would make it right, and we really didn’t have any major issues,” Pugh relates. “They were very well organized. Our attendees liked the general feel from the employees, how everybody was treated, and the staff seemed to definitely enjoy their jobs.” Pugh adds that his sales representative took it upon herself to send him pictures of the meeting setups from a prior event, which made him feel more comfortable about his upcoming meeting at the new resort.

Site Visits

If a picture is worth a thousand words, a site visit is worth even more. Mary Dier, executive assistant to J. Powell Brown, president and CEO of Brown & Brown Insurance, was one

of the invitees to the open house for The Shores Resort & Spa’s recently completed property-wide transformation. The four-diamond, Daytona Beach Shores, Florida, resort now features enhancements to all 212 guest rooms and its 20,000-sf of indoor and outdoor function space, including the 6,895-sf Grand Ballroom.

The locally based insurance firm is a longtime client of The Shores, and Dier states that board members are “really looking forward” to the shareholders meeting on January 20. “I brought two of my colleagues (to the open house), and they were impressed with the changes,” she says. The group utilizes essentially all of the top-floor meeting rooms, which have been redesigned with a beach-themed color palette. “I thought the colors they chose made it richer looking and updated it quite a bit,” Dier says. “One of the other things that they did that I thought was very important was the cabanas. They have rooms that face the pool and basically put up full-size walls so you have more of a cabana feel and privacy, while still being able to see the ocean and the pool area.”

The resort’s 14 lanai rooms are now Cabana Suites that include flat-screen TVs, ceiling fans, private lounge chairs and comfortable seating areas. Other improvements include: a new private dining room, increased 100 mbps wireless bandwidth throughout the property, a new 80-inch flat screen monitor with a built-in AV package in the Surf Boardroom, an additional check-in area, new furniture in the Indulge Spa and more.

Renovation Timeline

The work involved in finalizing a new property or a property-wide renovation can be so extensive that there may well be delays. If the meeting dates cannot be set months after the completion date, as Pearson advises, it’s best to stay clearly informed on the status of the work and whether any of it will extend into the meeting dates.



The 212-room, oceanfront Shores Resort & Spa in Daytona Beach Shores just completed a property-wide renovation.

“For the most part, renovations, especially at the larger hotels, are seldom finished on time, so it can be a little nerve-wracking,” says Pugh, and the same point applies to the work on new properties. “We were about six weeks out from their finish date for the Four Seasons, but I know that they were constantly still working on things when we were there. So I think it’s definitely difficult for hotels to finish everything (on time).”

However, Pugh had discussed the nature of the ongoing work with the Four Seasons beforehand. “It was going to be more landscaping work, so I wasn’t as worried about that because I had already seen a lot of pictures of the property; they were just (doing touchups). If they were doing landscaping with big machinery we might have had some noise issues, but we knew that part of the construction was going to be done by the end of August.”

Communication Is Key

Pearson recalls a RIMS (Risk Management Society) conference booked at a hotel that did not advise the group about its ongoing renovations. Ultimately the meeting was not adversely affected, but a very stressful situation was created. “We started the conference on Sunday, and on Saturday night they were still wallpapering and putting down carpet,” he relates. “Some execs got there early, and one of the levels that we were going to be using was still torn up, and people got on the phone saying, ‘What’s going on here?’ We were on the phone with the GM and my national contact from the chain. It

all ended up fine, but I went through the ringer on that one.”

The group’s reaction was the main cause of stress, he explains. “As a planner, once I found out what they were doing, I trusted they were going to be finished. But a non-meetings person (can overreact and think) it’s not going to work, we’re going to sue

them, etc. It’s tough to tell some big execs who think the event is going to be a failure that you know it’s going to be done.”

Such a predicament can be avoided with better communication upfront about the status of the project, and, if possible, holding the meeting further out from the project’s scheduled completion date.

Memorable Experience

If a group is able to see the results of a major renovation at a familiar property, the “before and after” effect can help to create a more memorable meeting. Pearson’s group had such an experience when walking into the lobby of the Hyatt Regency Chicago, which has completed a \$168 million renovation over the last few years. “I think that if you would have brought somebody to the property who hadn’t been there in a while, blindfolded them, put them in lobby and took off blindfold, they wouldn’t have known where they were. It’s that drastic of a change. It gives a new spark to the property,” he maintains. And a good impression can be the start of a business relationship.

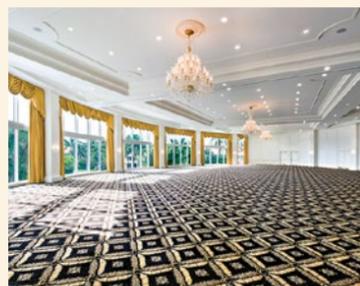
Bankers Healthcare Group, for example, will be returning in April to the 424-room Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas, which had completed a guest room renovation prior to the group’s spring 2014 meeting. “Our owners and customers really liked the feel of (the refurbished rooms), so we suggested going back there,” says Pugh. That kind of outcome certainly means ROI for the renovated property, and the renovation itself means a stronger ROI for the group. **I&FMM**

Properties to Watch

- **JW Marriott Austin** is set to open in February with 1,012 rooms and suites, and 112,000+ sf of meeting space.
- **The Westin Austin Downtown** is expected to debut in July with 366 rooms and 19,000+ sf of meeting space.
- The new \$3.5 billion **Baha Mar** development in Nassau will incorporate four separate but adjoining luxury resorts, including the Baha Mar Casino & Hotel, with 1,000 guest rooms and suites, 23 private residences and a 100,000-sf casino. Second in size, but in many ways more intriguing for meeting planners, the Grand Hyatt includes 700 guest rooms and a 200,000-sf convention center.
- **Trump National Doral Miami** debuted its \$250 million transformation this fall. The centerpiece is a completely redesigned clubhouse with an open-air veranda embracing the resort. The new Trump National Doral boasts more than 100,000 sf of function space.
- **The Knickerbocker** hotel in Manhattan has undergone a \$240 million renovation and will open in February. The 330-room property’s meeting space includes the 2,200-sf Salon as well as 7,800 sf of indoor and outdoor function space.
- **Westgate Las Vegas Resort & Casino** renovated 1,200 of the Central Tower’s guest rooms in December, and is currently working on enhancements to its 200,000 sf of convention space, pool area, spa and more.
- **The Mayflower Renaissance Hotel** in Washington, DC, is set to finish renovating its 583 rooms and 74 suites by February. The property houses 43,000 sf of recently updated meeting space.
- The 564-room **Omni Providence Hotel** in Rhode Island completed a multimillion-dollar public space renovation in December. The project included the lobby, 22,877 sf of meeting space, indoor pool and coffee shop. — PS



Nassau’s Baha Mar development.



The Ivanka Ballroom at the Trump National Doral Miami.



Westgate Las Vegas Resort & Casino.



JW Marriott Austin Downtown.

Attention-Getting

★ eRFPs ★

Prepare a Strategy That Yields a High Response Rate

By Derek Reveron

Technology is supposed to make all of us more efficient and productive, but it's a different story when it comes to the electronic request for proposal. The efficiency is certainly there, as planners can easily send homogenous eRFPs to multiple properties at the touch of a button, but in reality, this spam-like exercise is often counterproductive. The time and effort it used to take to prepare and submit targeted, detailed proposals before the online RFP revolution, actually produced far better results.

From the hotel's perspective, demand is up, it's a seller's market, so an avalanche of indiscriminately sent eRFPs is easily dismissed. Most of the electronic requests aren't read at all or, at the very least, receive a cursory review. Planners are frustrated because hotels don't reply or they return generic, non-competitive responses that don't address a planner's meeting needs. That's why experts advise that planners send detailed eRFPs to a more narrowly targeted list of properties.

That's the approach taken by Cynthia Tomei, CMP, CMM, FAHM, senior meeting planner for Blue Cross Blue Shield

Association. She is planning a two-day meeting for 75 Blue Cross employees in San Diego next year. "I'm not familiar with San Diego hotels," she says. "So I called a local CVB rep and gave him key information such as the group's demographics, type of property and amount of space needed, and the distance from the airport required. He gave me about eight hotels that fit. Then I sent an email with a detailed eRFP attached to the CVB and national hotel sales reps, asking to check only the hotels listed."

All of the hotels responded. "A few asked if they could check another property within their chain that might be appropriate," says Tomei. "I said okay. I compared the costs and made a selection."

Tomei's eRFP strategy yields results. "We get a significantly high response rate from hotels — 90 percent or better," she says. "There are few properties here and there that we want and don't get. But we do well because we are selective and the hotels are used to that."



"People realize that we take a serious approach to RFPs and that we don't waste anyone's time. We never send eRFPs shotgun-style to properties that we really don't want."

Cynthia Tomei, CMP, CMM, FAHM, Senior Meeting Planner, Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, Chicago, IL



We tend to work with the same cities over and over."

Avoid the Shotgun Approach

Researching and pre-selecting properties before sending eRFPs is efficient for planners as well as hoteliers. "People realize that we take a serious approach to RFPs and that we don't waste anyone's time," says Tomei. "We never send eRFPs shotgun-style to properties that we really don't want. If nothing comes back then we decide who else to send it to. We have a better chance of getting the business than somebody who checks many hotels in each city."

Another key part of Tomei's approach involves giving properties ample lead time to respond to eRFPs. "I give them plenty of time when I can and don't ask for a quick response for the sake of it," she says. "If you are realistic about giving them time to respond, then it's effective. If not, then hotels learn to ignore you because they don't want to jump through hoops to respond and then get an answer months later or not at all."

Properties can't keep up with the deluge of eRFPs from corporate planners, online meeting management platforms and independent planners. During a recent webinar on eRFP issues, a salesperson with a major hotel chain said they are able to respond to only about one-third of eRFPs.

Many eRFPs are redundant or represent groups that don't actually end up having meetings suggests Christine Shimasaki, CMP, CDME, managing director

of Destination Marketing Association International's empowerMINT. Shimasaki conducts education sessions on eRFP best practices for meeting industry organizations.

Shimasaki observes that properties often receive slightly different eRFPs from different independent planners competing for the same company meeting. "They often send out eRFPs to demonstrate buying power to a client without first securing the meeting business," says Shimasaki. An important point that hotels want to know is whether an independent is in bid for it or has secured the meeting business. In the corporate world, they sometimes anticipate that the meeting will be held and send out eRFPs, but the meeting stakeholder hasn't decided whether to actually hold the meeting yet."

Incomplete eRFPs Are a No-no

Planners also contribute to the problem by sending incomplete eRFPs. The practice is all too common, according to Shimasaki. During her educational sessions, Shimasaki reminds planners that properties have a tendency to skip over poorly prepared eRFPs. "While they may be responding

in low percentages, they respond to ones that completely paint the picture about a business opportunity," she says. "If a hotel looks at an RFP with 70 hotels on it, they see it as a 1 in 70 chance of winning that business. They look at conversion likelihood. Hotel salespeople are busy, so they pick opportunities they have a greater likelihood of closing. They do triage."

Shimasaki notes that the triage may be handled by an individual hotel salesperson or a group of decision-makers. "They may have an event strategy or team and take the business to a meeting for discussion," she says. "When that happens, the worst thing a salesperson can say when asked about information in the eRFP is, 'I don't know.' That diminishes the value of the meeting."

That's why Shimasaki advises planners to create thorough proposals when critiquing eRFPs during her educational sessions. "I get some seasoned planners in those sessions and the eRFPs range greatly in how well they are constructed," she says. "Areas that are lacking the most are a detailed meeting history for at least three years; day-by-day room pick-up history; food and beverage spending; AV needs; hotel room rate history; an event description; and group demographics."

Show Date Flexibility

Shimasaki also reminds planners that a big complaint from properties is the lack of flexibility on meeting dates in eRFPs. "Flexibility is extremely important," notes Shimasaki. "Hotel

"If a hotel looks at an RFP with 70 hotels on it, they see it as a 1 in 70 chance of winning that business. Hotel salespeople are busy so they pick opportunities they have a greater likelihood of closing."



Christine Shimasaki, CMP, CDME, Managing Director
Destination Marketing Association International, Washington, DC

books are busy, and they are trying to fit new business in with existing business. Planners often might have a Tuesday arrival pattern, which in some destinations is a deal-breaker. If they can't demonstrate flexibility like coming in on Monday or Wednesday, then many properties will pass on the RFP because it would deter the hotel from maximizing on its inventory."

Some planners would like to show meeting date flexibility in their eRFPs but don't have the final word on doing so. "Usually a group wants to do it on a certain date," says Marti Fox, CMP, CMM, CPECP, owner of Global Goals Inc., a corporate meeting and incentive travel firm located in Dallas, Texas. "When discussing a group's needs, my question back to the client is, 'Do you have any flexibility?'" They may say no, or they may say yes, but I want to keep the same days of the week, or we need to do it before or after a certain date."

Lack of meeting date flexibility in the eRFP can actually hurt a client. "Recently, a group was turned down by five hotels that met the physical needs of the client, but could not meet the exact date pattern," says Fox. "Do not assume a hotel will take time to counter with alternate dates, as many times they are busy and/or read your request literally. In this case, it was the hotel's prime season and they were booked for our requested dates. It is good to share flexibility up front when asking a property for space. It saves everyone's time and may result in better alternatives for your group."

Most of all, planners are putting themselves at a competitive disadvantage by failing to submit complete eRFPs. "Hotel occupancy and room demand is very high. It's clear we are in a seller's market," says Shimasaki. "In such times, it behooves planners to make sure they have a well-constructed RFP."

Some planners turn to third-party eRFP online services to produce more

effective eRFPs, track results and cut work time and costs.

Jennifer Vecchi, director, meetings, incentives, conventions and events, for Atlas Travel Meetings & Incentives, located in Milford, Massachusetts, has been gradually transitioning her meeting staff to include online eRFP services. "One of the tasks I've put out to my team is to have some people use (two different online providers) and see if there is a different response rate from hotels."

Planner Teamwork

She believes that eRFP tools used correctly make a planning team more efficient. "If a meeting planner sends out seven eRFPs on a Tuesday, and is in meetings all day on Wednesday, some-



"If a meeting planner sends out seven eRFPs on a Tuesday, and is in meetings all day on Wednesday, somebody else on the team can be looking in the system to see if the hotels have responded."

Jennifer Vecchi, Director, Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Events, Atlas Travel Meetings & Incentives, Milford, MA

body else on the team can be looking in the system to see if the hotels have responded," says Vecchi. "They can send out reminders, if the hotels haven't answered. They can download the RFPs received and scrub them for missing information."

Sending out individual emails manually is more time-consuming. "Planners send an email to a hotel rep," says Vecchi. "If the planner is out of the office on meetings or busy when the email comes back, then it isn't answered right away. Furthermore, they have to take a Word document proposal that a hotel sends and start typing important information into an Excel chart to compare them apples-to-apples to other hotels."

Automated eRFPs also can provide data and performance metrics more efficiently. "We can see how many hours

we spend on RFPs and what the response rate is from the hotels," says Vecchi. "We can track how many RFPs we send to hotels and hotel chains domestically and internationally, and the number of hotels versus resorts, which is important when we're negotiating contracts on our client's behalf."

Here is some additional advice.

- **Compile a list of hotels that may meet the meeting's needs.** Contact the local CVB to help target the right hotels and get tips on customizing eRFPs to local properties. Narrow the list of hotels and send proposals to the top three to five properties that best fit a meeting's needs.
- **Don't ask too many questions.** Some planners ask up to 100

questions. "Do you really need to find out if they will comp you a certain number of guest rooms or meeting space?" says Shimasaki. "Include the deal-breakers, and the rest of it can be negotiated in the contract."

- **Make a list of "must haves."** Address areas such as the number of sleeping and meeting rooms, breakouts, seating format, meals, technology requirements and amenities.
- **Provide at least three years of meeting history.** Include the properties, number of attendees and rooms used, and total spending by the group. "Let's say you provide three years of history and leave one out, or don't give a history at all," says Shimasaki. "That plants doubts in a hotel's mind."

Avoid Cookie-cutter eRFPs

Don't mass-produce generic eRFPs. This signals to properties that planners aren't sure what they are really looking for in a hotel. However, avoiding the practice altogether can be difficult when planning a meeting on a few days' turnaround, especially in popular destinations, says one planner. The problem is compounded when the meeting stakeholder insists on a particular hotel, she adds. In such cases, "planners almost have to send out many RFPs to get at least a few viable options."

Tomei makes sure that she identifies her must-haves. "Be very specific about your hot topics or deal-breakers," she says. "In my case, I want my meeting space to be as condensed as possible. I don't want to be spread across a variety of rooms."

Tomei also informs hotels upfront that she wants an agreement not to change the meeting rooms she has selected. "That's a huge one for us," says Tomei. "We've had too many instances where a hotel has promised something that fit and then wants to change it."

International eRFPs

Sending eRFPs to foreign destinations requires patience and careful attention to how words may be interpreted. "Don't assume that some of our U.S. business lingo carries through to different languages," advises Fox. "Allow more time for responses. I would say give up to a minimum of five days for a response. They don't necessarily work at the same speed we do, and they may be translating your RFP. That's important especially if it's not a United States-based hotel chain that is used to meeting the same requirements as their stateside counterparts."

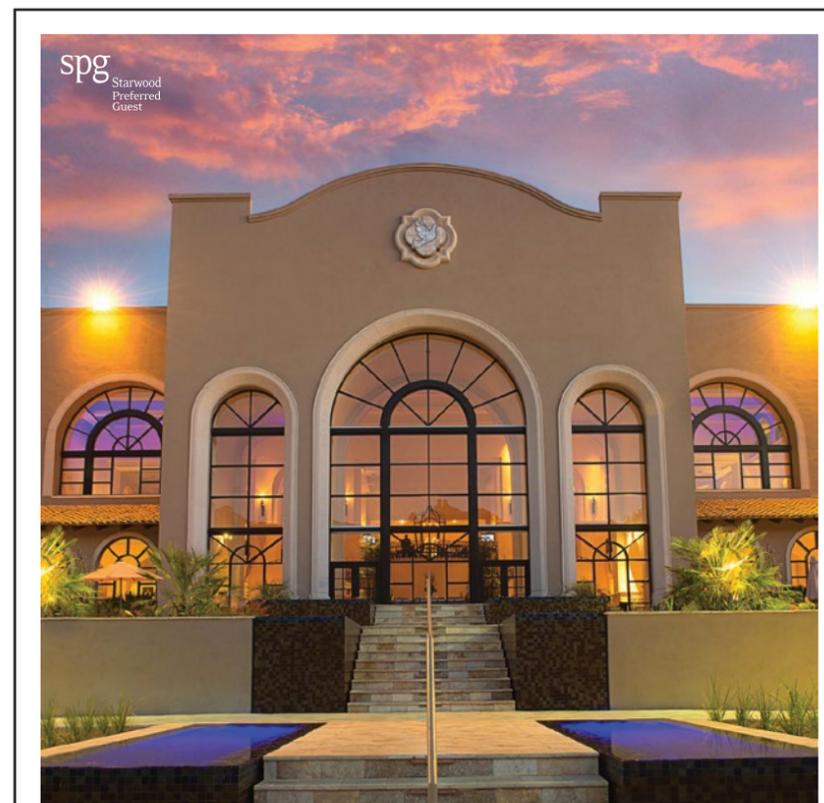
Follow-up with a phone call after 24 hours. This is especially important for unique requirements. "Everything doesn't fit neatly into an online eRFP format," says Fox. "A meeting I'm planning now wants a U-shaped setup for 40 people with an additional 100 in a theater-style around them. I've found few eRFP formats that allow you space

to further explain the details. For this situation, I will include in the RFP how much square footage the format will take, maybe include a diagram and follow with details in a phone call. A picture is worth 10,000 words, even a hand drawing."

Fox cites another example: "I just received a client request on Wednesday," says Fox. "The room set was missing for the general session for 250 people. I

didn't know whether he wanted it theater-style, classroom-style or crescent-style. Needless to say, I garnered a lot more information on the subsequent phone call with my client before I sent an RFP to the hotels."

The experts suggest that planners should continue to educate themselves on how to improve the eRFP process to yield a high response rate and successful outcome. **I&FMM**



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Magician and event producer David Thomas' Shows in a Box customizes entertaining stage shows for corporate groups.

Credit: David Thomas/Shows in a Box

That's Entertainment

Using Performers to Inspire Performance

By Karen Brost

It's no secret that people love to be entertained, but when that entertainment can be used to further a company's goals, everyone wins, including the planner.

When the officials at LPL Financial wanted the trade show at its Focus 2014 conference at the San Diego Convention Center to be a little more innovative and to drive more traffic, LPL's vice president of conference services, Cheryl Trinidad, rose

to the challenge. The San Diego native came up with an innovative block party concept that recreated six iconic San Diego neighborhoods that were staged throughout the trade show floor.

"I love the block party concept with different bands and different foods and kind of a community feel," she explains, "and I thought, 'why don't we recreate that on the convention floor?' We have nine or 10 full-

time planners on our event planning team, and we rebranded ourselves as 'Client Experience,' so it's all about engagement. Certain people on our team are in charge of certain aspects. I was in charge of overall concept and strategy." The six San Diego neighborhoods she chose to portray were Coronado, Balboa Park, Old Town, La Jolla, Little Italy and Ocean Beach.

"We have a person on our team who knows entertainment," Trinidad

continues. "She'll either work with a DMC directly, or she'll have connections in the entertainment industry. We're trying to showcase local talent. It's all about San Diego, the food, the culture, the entertainment. We wanted to show the San Diego hospitality and showcase our six neighborhoods and hope (the attendees) would come back."

Trinidad shared a few examples of how the neighborhoods worked. "Coronado has a big military influence, so we wanted to showcase our veterans and our tie to our country, so in Coronado, for example, it was all Americana. We had red, white and blue, we had flags, and we had Americana kind of food like corn on the cob and cotton candy. For our entertainment we chose a local country rock band called the Jonathan Lee Band to showcase that genre of San Diego. Little Italy speaks for itself. We had pizza and cannoli. We had Frank Sinatra/Rat Pack kind of entertainment, and then in Balboa Park, we actually hired some urban street dancers that came in and a deejay, so that showed the cultural influence. We also had some painters come in and paint the iconic Balboa Park building from scratch on a blank canvas. It was really cool.

"For Ocean Beach, we had a singer-songwriter," she continues. "It was a little more granola and natural, a farmer's market type (of atmosphere). We have all ages, over 6,000 people attend, so we wanted to make sure that from the kids to those 60 and over, there was something at their pace available.

"It was fun," she continues. "We had the Padres stilt-walker. I think his name was Stretch. We wanted to give tribute to the Padres. We had face painters and balloon artists, roaming entertainment because I wanted it to be kind of lively. There was entertainment in every single neighborhood, as well as the food. You could only get pizza in



LPL Financial's Focus 2014 conference in San Diego featured a block party concept with six local neighborhood themes, such as Balboa Park, and a Padres stilt-walker.

Little Italy; you could only get chips and guacamole in Old Town, for example, so it really drove traffic."

She also noted that it was a group effort. "In order to make this neighborhood concept work, I needed everyone to be uniform. Even the booths looked like storefronts with awnings. It was a really big paradigm shift. I didn't make every exhibitor or sponsor do it, but I created this package with GES, our exhibitor services company, and said, 'We want it to look like a neighborhood.' I think probably 60 percent of the exhibitors bought into it and they loved it."

The block party con-

cept also helped with logistics on the trade show floor. "It was easier to navigate," Trinidad says. "If someone was looking for a specific sponsor, we could say 'Go to La Jolla,' and

it was a smaller space to navigate. There were maybe 20 booths in the neighborhood." The block party was a hit with attendees and exhibitors alike. "It was a three-hour event," Trinidad notes. "Our sponsors came up to me and said 'We've never had so much traffic during this reception before, and I got 100 more leads than I probably would have had if it wasn't for this (event).'"

Trinidad explains that LPL is big on client feedback, so they'll wait for the hardcore data to come in before they decide if they will repeat the block party concept at next year's conference in Boston. But she says



Cheryl Trinidad, V.P. Conference Services
LPL Financial, San Diego, CA

"Our sponsors said 'We've never had so much traffic during this reception before, and I got 100 more leads than I probably would have had if it wasn't for this (event).'"

that the anecdotal feedback was very strong. "I think it was a good experiment and I think it was successful," she states. As a result, she's already thinking about other ways she could

use the block party concept, including the possibility of showcasing regions of the U.S. or the world instead of a single city.

Active Engagement

Scottsdale Insurance Company, headquartered in Scottsdale, Arizona, includes a variety of entertainment options into its events in order to create memorable experiences for attendees and to deepen its relationships with its customers. The company's recent "Family Reunion '14 Underwriting Conference" was no exception.

The program was held at the Scottsdale Resort & Conference Center in two waves of 450–500 people each. Events Consultant Cindi Brown described a creative way that the company incorporated a local comedy improv troupe called the Jester'Z into the program.

"It was a blast," she says. "Their troupe is fantastic. We love using local talent." She explains how the program worked. "For the first day of every conference, we pull everybody into a huge assembly hall and we have an opening session. That's when our president and all of our leaders get up and speak. During this particular opening session, we had prearranged for the members of the Jester'Z to be scattered randomly among the audience. Nobody would know who they were. At one point, our V.P. of marketing is up covering some housekeeping items. All of a sudden a phone rang. Everybody looks around (in disbelief). Of course, it was one of the Jester'Z. Then another one of the Jester'Z across the room says 'Turn it off!' Then another cellphone goes off." She explains that this situation repeated until all four members of the troupe suddenly stood up and started singing a parody of the Bonnie Tyler song, "Total Eclipse of the Heart," only this one used the lyrics "Turn it Off" instead of "Turn Around." "It was all about social media and how people are glued to their phones, and it was so funny! They all stood up singing the song, and they went to the front



The Tell-a-Vision performance art group, which was featured on "America's Got Talent," offers a truly innovative way to communicate a company's message.

and went onto the stage. It was fantastic. The room just broke apart!"

After dinner, the group had a choice of going to see the Jester'Z perform again, playing casino games, dancing to a dance band or listening to a singing cowboy in a lounge area outdoors. Or, they could opt to make a music video. "Dance Heads was one of the most popular things," Brown explains. "It's hysterical. There are typically three little dancers in the video that are singing and dancing. The participants will sit down, and they have a green blanket wrapped around them with a green screen behind them, and you can choose the song you want to do. You sit there and lip-sync to the song with two of your buddies, and you're bobbing your head. The woman brought in two recording areas, having both of them running simultaneously. She had these big screens on the back, so as people are being recorded it's being shown up on the big screen, and it's the funniest thing. Each of them gets a DVD. You can watch it on TV." She adds that sometimes, even more people would crash the performance, resulting in a few extra "disembodied heads" floating around in the video, which made it even funnier.

She commented that people also love the casino games because they can earn tickets to enter into a raffle for prizes. "If we didn't have it, we would hear about it!"

Matching the Message

David Thomas, chief executive producer for the Oklahoma City-based company Shows in a Box, is an Emmy Award-winning event producer who has been in the business for more than 20 years. His company offers full-service entertainment planning. "With the economy uptick, the corporate environment seems to be energized and doing incentive and general session work," he explains. "There are two types of entertainment. One is entertainment just for entertainment's sake, and that's usually after a dinner or during a cocktail hour. Then the thing that we as a company do is mainly general session work. Usually, at (the company's) big opening kick-off, entertainment is utilized to help reinforce their message, whatever that may be. It's a way to draw attention to the stage through the use of entertainment, video content and audio. If you do entertainment in the general session, and it's strategically created to reinforce what

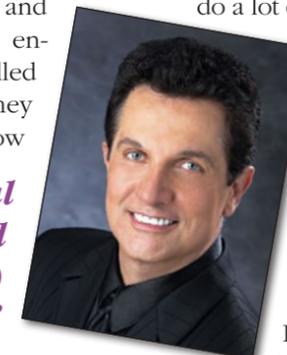
(the company is) trying to do, then it really works."

Thomas says that one way to accomplish this goal is by creating an illusion where the master of ceremonies or VIP is "magically" produced on stage. "This is where the VIP would bring (the message) in by saying, 'What you just saw was an illusionist doing what seems to be the impossible, but every day, folks, we ask you to do the impossible. We ask you to not only balance your family life but balance all of the things that have happened with the company. It's a situation where you're doing the impossible because you're stepping up and creating real magic in our world.' Magic in the corporate world translates into stronger sales or stronger profits, hitting their goals or numbers," he adds.

One of his clients, a Fortune 500 company, recently had a theme of "transformation." They were transforming the way they did business. "Transformation" was their buzz word. In

"If you do entertainment in the general session, and it's strategically created to reinforce what (the company is) trying to do, then it really works."

David Thomas, Chief Executive Producer Shows in a Box, Oklahoma City, OK



that situation, we opened with a magic illusion and one thing was transformed into another." He says he's also used Cirque-style performers to communicate the same message. "It's just using their key buzzwords. They usually have one main point that they're trying to really build their whole conference about."

Projecting the Vision

Dorene Collier, owner and president of Event Show Productions (ESP) based in Tampa, shared her perspective on today's corporate market. "Audiences are getting more savvy and more technologically advanced, and the typical song and dance and feel good type of entertainment, although still good, needs to be married with

technology to keep the interest of the people in the audience. The baby boomers and CEOs are now transitioning into retirement and Generation X is moving into their positions and the Zs and whoever else are being the audience members. So if you notice how entertainment has been through the years and the way our culture is, people's attention spans are so short that you really have to capture them right away. That's why I feel that you really have to try to find that line where you still get the message across and get the heart of the message to somebody. But you also have to do it in a medium that they will respond to and quickly, because you'll lose their attention very fast."

To fill this need, Collier and ESP's technical director A.J. LeBlanc spent two years researching and creating an innovative entertainment product called Tell-a-Vision, which they debuted on the TV show

message. According to Collier, ESP has several stock versions that can be modified by adding the corporate logo to the beginning and end. These can be produced in about a week's time, and a completely customized performance requires about one month of production time.

That's Entertainment

Sometimes, entertainment is designed to simply entertain the group, possibly at an awards dinner or other event. Thomas says there are many options available for this type of entertainment. "There's name entertainment, bands or artists that have name recognition. Once you get into name entertainment, the budget kind of skyrocket, of course. You go to the 'A' acts and the sky's the limit. Personally, we do a lot of our shows called 'Tribute to

the Stars,' which is done by tribute artists. We're able to provide top-notch quality entertainment that is much more moderately priced than bringing in a star." "Tribute to the Stars" features performers who pay tribute to Prince, Madonna, Elvis and other stars and are backed by a team of dancers.

Shows in a Box also produces other types of shows. They offer an "Industrial Movement" show for groups that like the performance styles of Stomp, Tap Dogs or the Blue Man Group. The company also offers Cirque-style entertainment, Chinese acrobats, and a variety of options for a show called "The World of Magic," which is performed by Thomas himself who is a master magician.

Entertainment Works

Whether they're used to communicate a corporate message or deployed as a means to encourage camaraderie and teambuilding, the right entertainment choices can have a powerful impact on an event. Plus, they can have an added benefit. As Brown of Scottsdale Insurance says, "People love our meetings!"

I&FMM

Incentive Travel Trends

America

Europe

Asia

Africa

Australia

By Gabi Logan

New Program Design Strategies to Meet Renewed Demand

During the downturn and its immediate aftermath, rewarding and motivating top performers in the insurance and financial industries entered a limbo period. Companies were torn between pushing programs to drive up sales and holding off on putting money down until it was clear that the worst was past. But in recent years, as the economy stabilizes, planners see incentive travel programs morphing in response.

“Things are definitely picking up, and moods are a lot more optimistic than they’ve been in the past several years. It’s great to see, because incentive trips are so important, and it was unfortunate that they were scaled back or completely cut,” says Sarah Whitlock, CMP, meeting and event manager at Boston, Massachusetts-based Pioneer Investments.

Though the U.S. Travel Foundation calculates that incentive travel and business meetings and events account for \$92 billion of the annual American business travel spend, it’s unclear how much of that pie belongs to financial and insurance companies. In these industries, the incentive travel situation is still mixed. Some companies have ostensibly shut their down, while others have used them to fuel growth. And as companies in many cases look to rehire positions that were downsized during the recession, reward programs can be a key differentiator.

“The economic impact of a recession is always going to be closer to home in some industries,” notes Susan Adams, director of engagement at New Brunswick, New Jersey-based Dittman Incentives. “There are some industries that are more conservative than others. Many organizations will want people to be out of the office for less time than a distant destina-

tion allows. And there is sensitivity to the image of spending ‘other people’s money’ in some industries. That doesn’t mean there is reluctance to invest in incentives, but there is increased emphasis on ROI. Across the board, whatever position people took during the recession, they’re taking two or three steps out from there as things improve.”

Budgets Creep Up, But Not in Line With Increased Prices

The bottom line — incentive travel budgets — points clearly to the renewed importance of rewarding and motivating top performers. Companies are continuing to invest in their programs, and slightly increasing budgets, but changes in the travel industry are quickly eating into planners’ funds.

“Our budget per attendee is relatively flat, but hotel prices are continuing to rise due to demand — especially February through April

“Things are definitely picking up, and moods are a lot more optimistic than they’ve been in the past several years. It’s great to see, because incentive trips are so important.”

Sarah Whitlock, CMP
Meeting and Event Manager
Pioneer Investments
Boston, MA



in warmer weather destinations where we typically hold our

incentive,” Whitlock says. “The demand for these properties is incredibly high. Between finding the pattern we’re looking for and working around non-compete clauses, it’s getting a lot more difficult to find space. As a planner, it can be frustrating because the accountants don’t realize it’s quickly becoming a seller’s market in the hotel industry.”

“At this point hotel and air costs

are outstripping people’s expectations, and I don’t think some clients are braced for that,” Adams notes. “Everyone expects an inflationary bump from year to year, but clearly airlines and hoteliers have found that there is a lot more room (for corporate rates) to rise than that in the transient marketplace. This makes it difficult for corporate programs, as budgets are set with room for inflation, but not in anticipation of a surge like the one we are seeing now.”

“For planners, it can be a tough battle to find the right location at the right price in this environment,” she continues. “I really don’t know how long that upward trend can continue before some destinations become unaffordable for most travelers — corporate or individual. At the same time, travel is consistently appealing and a dynamic driver for top performers, who are motivated by travel far and above anything else.”

“We have seen a large increase in demand based on Forethought Financial Group being acquired by Global Atlantic Financial Group Limited in early 2014,” says Kelli Livers, CMP, CTE, assistant vice president at Hamilton, Bermuda-based Global Atlantic Financial Group Limited. “We are growing, and that is clearly reflected in our meeting volume.”

“Consequently we are running into availability issues with hotels, venues and restaurants,” she continues. “We are developing processes and procedures to educate our internal stakeholders and to allow us to conduct the appropriate RFP and negotiation process to ensure best pricing and meeting placement.”

“When I’m sending leads, I’ve got to review and select the hotel much quicker than in prior years. They can’t hold the space, because they’ve got people knocking on their door. When you reach out to these smaller boutique resorts, they’re busy. It used to be that you could plan a short-term trip in three or four months, but that’s not the case anymore.”

"I'm looking at 2015 and 2016 for city destinations and encouraging my stakeholders to look at 2017 for the larger programs. I'm hearing 'I might be able to accommodate the meeting if you come in on a Saturday and you're out on a Tuesday.' It makes you struggle from a resource perspective, because you're taking on more through all the searching and RFPing. I'm trying to get internal stakeholders to really focus on where they want to look so I'm not going out to 10 cities. Hoteliers know when you do that, so they're not giving you their focus and best offering upfront."

"When I'm sending leads, I've got to review and select the hotel much quicker than in prior years. They can't hold the space, because they've got people knocking on their doors."



Kelli Livers, CMP, CTE
Assistant Vice President
Global Atlantic Financial Group Ltd.
Hamilton, Bermuda

Domestic or International?

Static budgets and rapidly rising hotel costs have, surprisingly, not had a significant impact on the destinations planners are targeting. Restraints on location more often come from corporate mandate. We're limited to the continental U.S. as a company policy, and I've worked for other financial companies that also have this policy," says Whitlock.

"In addition to budget, optics play a very large part," she explains. "Taking a group to South Florida looks a lot different than taking your group to the South Pacific or the south of France, even if you end up spending the same amount in the long run."

"My attendees from the North are definitely more excited about warm weather beach destinations. Florida is always a top place for groups that need to stay within the continental U.S. We've been to Naples, and this past year we were in Key Biscayne. The South Carolina and Georgia islands, like Sea Island and Hilton Head Island, as well as Scottsdale are always popular, too."

Within the continental U.S., planners are uncovering "new" destina-

tions that still surprise and excite award winners. "We took our group to Lake Tahoe in March of 2013. At first people weren't very excited because it's a cold weather destination," says Whitlock.

"They said, 'We have snow here. We can ski here.' I had to convince them that it's warm and you can ski in a turtleneck and ski pants, and it's very different than skiing in the Northeast. My attendees ended up raving about the trip, it was such a beautiful place and a location where most people hadn't been before."

"During the recession, we saw many more regional incentives," Adams agrees. "We operated an incentive program in Cleveland, which is not typically known as an incentive destination, but it was a very successful gathering for our clients."

At the 2013 FICP Annual Conference, which Livers chaired, the topic of incentive destinations came front and center during the Planner Exchange. "We started with domestic locations," she says. "Everybody is obviously still doing domestic, but I asked, 'are you going international on your incentives?' and I didn't do a count of hands, but it was a pretty strong response that most people are doing international. To me, that's big to go from doing nothing to international."

"It seems like a lot of people who are doing international trips tap into cruises, because it's a good segue

from the international perspective," Livers explains. "When you're trying to do Vienna and Budapest, it makes it more reasonable from a cost perspective. But there are a couple people that are doing the African safari, Australia and Costa Rica, which is certainly on my own bucket list. When I talk to my peers, there are even people doing Vienna five nights, six days."

Even within her own company, Livers admits that the shift has not yet happened, but due to market forces, it's on its way. "We still do North America, Caribbean and Canada, but I could foresee in the next year that we do something more exotic, because I pulled some reports on our competition, and they are going international, especially on the independent producer side."

Companies that stayed especially close to home in recent years — opting to explore second-tier cities domestically — are looking to more affordable destinations abroad. "Now, organizations are more willing to look further out. There's no Abu Dhabi on our schedule right now, but there is interest in looking outside of North America," says Livers. Spain and Ireland, where their own recessions have kept prices down compared to other destinations in Western Europe, and Mediterranean cruise itineraries are also increasingly attractive for planners looking to move abroad at the right price point.

Like those opting for cruises, Amy Ingalls, senior meeting and event planner for Cedar Rapids, Iowa-based Transamerica Life & Protection, tries to stick to all-inclusives to keep costs under control, and this often brings her incentive trips abroad. "Our budgets have remained flat for incentive programs, so with rising lodging and travel costs, all-inclusives have helped us remain more budget-conscious," she explains. "This means that we're looking more toward the Caribbean, since there aren't really any true all-inclusives in the U.S. We'd like to think that we're pretty similar to other insurance carriers, but we do hear of

others offering Europe and the real exotic destinations."

Program Design Is One of the Few Places With Wiggle Room

When it comes to program design, planners in the financial and insurance industries are experimenting with a wide variety of strategies to stay within budget while making sure incentive travel programs achieve their intended purpose: motivating employees to exceed their goals.

To stretch static budgets, some planners are opting for smaller programs that allow for a higher budget per attendee. "I'm a member of FICP, and I see a lot of my meeting planner colleagues doing an elite trip," explains Ingalls. "They raise the expectations quite a bit and take the top tier — the top 20 or 30 or 50 — to far-flung destinations, like Australia and Taiwan. I would love to try that in the future, but our mandate is to include as many people as possible, and I'm constrained by a static budget."

Livers also has found that constraining attendee numbers allows planners to maintain the higher end trips award-winners are accustomed to. "You have to increase your qualifications. We're still doing higher end, but we keep them smaller, compared to prior to 2008, when they used to do an incentive for 800. We're actually adding programs, and we've seen a little bit of an uptick in our budget for these smaller, higher end programs."

At Transamerica, Ingalls runs incentive programs for nine different distribution groups and experiments with different approaches to program design from one group to the next. "For one group, we're going to try shorter qualification periods of six months rather than 12," she says. "The thought process is that an agent with us in month seven, if they're nowhere near their production requirements, will just give up and not try anymore. We're going to try the six-month quali-

fication to try to create more excitement and not lose people. But each distribution group is different. For some, there's a minimum. For others, they have to meet a specific production level. We have an agent base of 3,000 and we take the top 135."

At the opposite end, Livers has seen some companies extend their qualification period. "Some companies went to 18 months to help from a cost perspective," she says. "We have not done that, but everyone felt very strongly that the sales force needs to be rewarded. Qualifications still successfully run on a yearly basis."

Itineraries Change Slowly to Reflect Demographic Changes

One of the biggest changes facing planners today revolves around demographic changes in the industry. As a new, younger generation concerned more with experiential travel and connecting with locals rises in the ranks, the type of travel that award-winners desire is morphing in response.

"We want to hit as many producers as we can," Ingalls



Amy Ingalls
Senior Meeting and Event Planner
Transamerica Life & Protection
Cedar Rapids, IA

says. "Our feeling has always been that once we get them on a trip, they're always going. I have looked at our program design in terms of the wide variety of ages: we have 20-somethings and we had an attendee who turned 80 in Jamaica this year. When you read about the different generations, the older generations like the structured meetings, whereas

"For one group, we're going to try shorter qualification periods. We're going to try the six-month qualification to try to create more excitement and not lose people."

Gen Y likes more time to explore and swim with dolphins."

To try to touch as many preferences as she can, Ingalls offers more freedom — not more choices. "We have given them one more extra free night, rather than having group dinners every night," she says. "And we've given them more free time to go out and explore a destination on their own, see the property, or hang with their friends. Currently, we do not host family programs, but we're going to start offering them in 2015. Quite a few of our attendees consider our incentive program their vacation during the year, and we're trying to reach that mid-level agent. Since they consider this their vacation, they want to include their families."

For some planners, demographic changes are unlocking new activities that can even appeal to the wider group. Whitlock has found that "a lot of my attendees are big golfers. Because of the age shift, last year in Miami we had a group that went jet-skiing, which is something that I've never done in the past. Even in Lake Tahoe, we went snowmobiling."

Though the incentive travel picture in the financial and insurance industries has certainly improved, it also has changed. "Incentive travel business is strongly up throughout the industry, and I'm hopeful this will continue as the economy gets healthier and healthier," says Adams. "I don't think, however, we'll ever see a return to the real no-holds-barred incentive trips of the '90s."

With new destinations to delight award-winners, with new demographics shaking up group activities and new types of program design to experiment with to increase employee motivation, incentive travel planners don't need a return to the past: There's something better on the horizon.

IFMM

The Fontainebleau Miami Beach features 1,504 guest rooms, 107,000 sf of indoor meeting space and the 12,000-sf BleauLive Stage on the Ocean Lawn.



Credit: Fontainebleau Miami Beach

Florida

Planners Shed New Light on Meeting in the Sunshine State

By Sara Churchville

One of the New World's first financial services incentive group meeting planners, Juan Ponce de León, was so struck by the greenery around him when he arrived that he thought "Whoa, Look at All These Flowers" might be a suitable name. Several heated committee meetings later, the name was of course changed, but today's planners are still drawn to Florida by both a climate that allows them to hold events outdoors and by many hotels' efforts to keep their lawns and their upkeep of those lawns "green."

Miami

'The Destination Had to Work for Everybody'

"The most wasteful thing a company can do is a low-budget meeting," says Mary Ann Grovak, design and purchasing manager, event solutions, for BI Worldwide, an industry leader in event planning. "It's not going to resonate. If you're going to invest in bringing people out of their offices and to a destination, you need to make an impact. Go big, or stay home."

To put that philosophy into practice for a group from a Fortune 100 company that does comprehensive financial services internationally, Grovak needed a game plan that would shake the 400 attendees up a little, defy their expectations and ultimately bring them closer together as an organization.

Her task was complicated by the diffuse nature of the group: two distinct business units with separate agendas, and a mix of established management, independent te-

chies and ambitious millennials who traditionally tend to be mutually wary. "There was a broad spectrum of expectations, and the destination had to work for everybody," Grovak says.

First salvo: an unexpected venue. The attendees were surprised to discover they would be spending several days together in Miami, and still more surprised and thrilled to find themselves at the Fontainebleau Miami Beach. "It created a buzz; Miami was the cornerstone in a lot of ways in making this successful," Grovak says.

Her team took advantage of the location to cater to the group's various needs. They set up meeting rooms anywhere they could with an ocean view and provided numerous open-air breaks, including one nightly ritual that went over especially well with attendees: the "afterglow" — a nightcap either poolside or with the aural accompaniment of the nearby ocean.

The attendees kayaked, tried out a floating trampoline, played golf and indulged in spa treatments. "Taking this group from the financial industry and getting them into beach attire proved to be very popular. We carved out an afternoon to really experience Florida, and that melted away a lot of boundaries and borders these groups had with each other," she says.

One evening event involved a dinner cruise on a yacht that pulled up at the Fontainebleau Marina; another was an awards dinner in the Sparkle ballroom.

But the real catalyst for solidifying the group was the Build-a-Bike charity teambuilding event. "This didn't feel

like the same old, same old," Grovak says, "because we infused it with competition geared to their industry — they earned extra bling for the bikes by answering tough financial services trivia questions."

To keep intact teams specially constructed to include people who would otherwise rarely interact, Grovak provided different-colored T-shirts. "That probably was the wild card. People said, "Why am I on this team?" and it

"If you're going to invest in bringing people out of their offices and to a destination, you need to make an impact. Go big, or stay home."

Mary Ann Grovak, Design and Purchasing Manager
Event Solutions, BI Worldwide, Minneapolis, MN

made them uncomfortable initially, but they made deep personal connections while participating."

Grovak's team set up a special green room for the children with food and games, and once the bikes were built, the children rode them around the perimeter of the ballroom. Even the high-level execs were very emotionally moved, she says. "The client was over the moon excited with the results of the event. It exceeded their expectations."

The Fontainebleau Miami Beach has 1,504 guest rooms and 107,000 sf of indoor meeting space.

What's New in Miami

Miami is no slouch when it comes to exceeding expectations. The city is exploding with new projects: the **Miami Worldcenter**, 28 acres of hospitality, retail and residential that will include a new 1,800-room **Marriott Marquis Hotel & Convention Center** with 600,000 sf of meeting and convention space, slated to open in late 2016; **Brickell City Centre**, a \$1 billion, 8.3 million-sf project to be anchored by Saks Fifth Avenue and poised to give Bal Harbour Shops a well-heeled run for its money — the first phase to come to fruition in late 2015; and the new **Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science** currently underway in downtown Miami and set to open in 2016, are among the massive projects in the works.

The **Miami Beach Convention Center** began a \$500 million renovation in January 2015 that, when completed in late 2018, will include the addition of 60,000 sf of ballroom space. The renovation will offer more flexible meeting spaces and, with a glass façade, more natural light for conventions. A nearly 2-acre park will replace what is now the 21st St. Recreation Center, and the current parking lot will be transformed into a nearly 6-acre park. The project also may eventually include an 800-room hotel.

What attendees can do now: visit the **Pérez Art Museum Miami**, with its collection of 20th century and

later artwork. The Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau's initiative **Miami Temptations** showcases what the city has to offer via monthly themes such as cruise, film, spa and restaurant. Among Miami's **celebrity chefs** are Michelle Bernstein of Michy's; Daniel Boulud of db Bistro Moderne at the JW Marriott Marquis Miami; and Michael Schwartz, who opened an eponymous restaurant in 2013 at the Raleigh Hotel.

The Trump National Doral Miami is ready to show off the latest of its newly renovated golf courses, the Golden Palm. The redesign is courtesy of Gil Hanse, who also reconfigured the Blue Monster — just in time to welcome the PGA tournament as it has done for the past 50 years. The property has five courses in total. Also part of a \$250 million facelift are three renovated and three new ballrooms. It should surprise no one that The Donald J. Trump Grand Ballroom, at 24,000 sf, is the property's largest. A BLT Prime restaurant that seats 350 also opened its doors, and the lobby, spa and fitness center have been updated.

Orlando

Large Group? No Problem

For the last 14 years, Marilyn E. O'Brien, claim service consultant for Southeast Coast SIU, Allstate Insurance Company, has used the Caribe Royale All Suite Hotel & Convention Center for the Florida Insurance Fraud Education Committee's annual June conference.

The group's 2014 event saw record attendance, with 1,000 people registering for classes, information on the latest trends in insurance law and the chance to network. "Our biggest hitch is our growing pains; every year we're



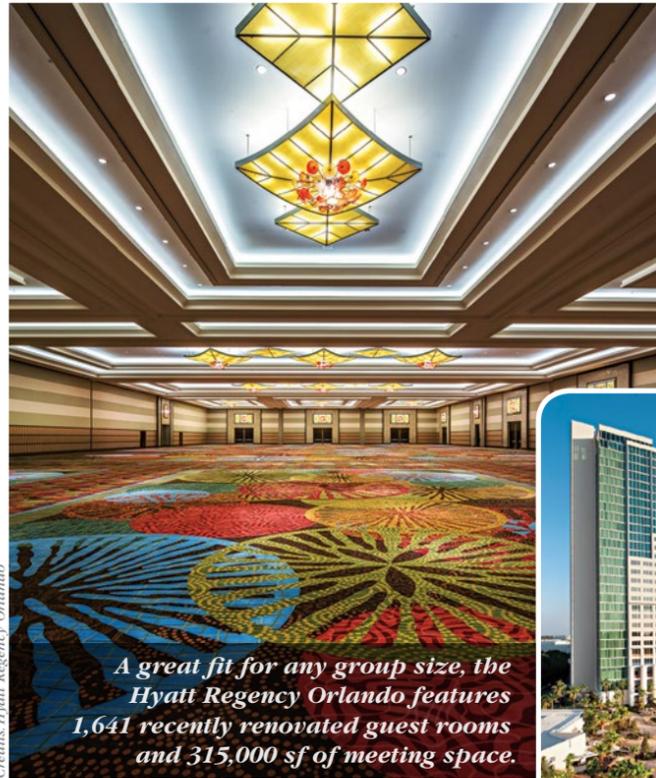
"Caribe is far enough away from the parks and entertainment that people will go to the meetings, but close enough that they can go later if they want to."

Marilyn E. O'Brien, Claim Service Consultant
Southeast Coast SIU, Allstate Insurance, Jacksonville, FL

trying to conquer that," she says. The hotel is perfect for her group's size, not so big that attendees get swallowed up. And it's meeting-friendly in more ways than one. "Caribe is far enough away from the parks and entertainment that people will go to the meetings, but close enough that they can go later if they want to."

The Caribe Royal, located a mile and a half from Walt Disney World Resort, boasts an impressive 150,000 sf of meeting space along with 1,218 one-bedroom suites and 120 two-bedroom villas.

O'Brien appreciates that all the rooms are suites, that



Credits: Hyatt Regency Orlando



A great fit for any group size, the Hyatt Regency Orlando features 1,641 recently renovated guest rooms and 315,000 sf of meeting space.

the conference area is separate from the living area, and that reservations and registration are seamless — even when attendees register at the last minute, as many with demanding, unpredictable schedules do.

As a pointed example of smooth operation at the conference, she points to the awards luncheon. After a 20-minute ceremony recognizing standouts in the industry, she gave a nod, and a plated lunch for all appeared at once. Unusually, the attendees took pains to compliment the meal.

As for all planners, food is also top of mind for Joanna Munjack, vice president, corporate events for Pershing LLC, a BNY Mellon company. She's traditionally held her annual conference for financial professionals at what is now the Hilton-owned Diplomat Resort & Spa. This June, given expected attendance of 2,300, she wanted a larger location and decided on the Hyatt Regency Orlando for its capacity, proximity to restaurants, nightlife and the Orlando Convention Center — and care. "The staff at the Hyatt Regency Orlando knows that it is a big change for a firm to move its annual conference to a new venue after hosting it at the same location for 12 consecutive years and has been extremely accommodating and receptive to all of our requests." Visit Orlando also has been a critical part of their planning process, she says, providing marketing and promotions to attendees and suggesting venues and contacts for evening and CSR activities.

The Hyatt Regency Orlando, which connects to the Orange County Convention Center, features 1,641 recently renovated guest rooms and 315,000 sf of meeting space.

This will be the first year the conference hosts an evening event, and Munjack plans to reserve three venues in Pointe Orlando, a shopping, dining and entertainment district that is within walking distance of the hotel.

The planner admits she's been spoiled by more than a decade of excellent food at the former Westin Diplomat. "Our attendees have become accustomed to a first-rate culinary experience when they attend our conference, and we are working hand-in-hand with the Hyatt Regency Orlando convention services and culinary team to make sure that we surpass the expectations." For the 2014 conference, she partnered with the hunger-fighting Feed Foundation and hopes to do so again this year.

This also will be Munjack's first year trying a new sustainable practice — no individual plastic water bottles. Instead, the attendees will use water-cooler stations.

What's New in Orlando

The Westgate Lakes Resort & Spa broke ground in December 2014 on a new meeting space and retail development that will include 32,000 sf of flexible banquet and meeting space, a bowling alley and restaurants. The space is expected to be ready by the end of 2015.

When it opens in Orlando in the summer of 2016, the new **Loews Sapphire Falls Resort at Universal Orlando** will feature a colorful, Caribbean atmosphere along with more than 131,000 sf of meeting space. The new hotel will be located between Cabana Bay Beach Resort and **Loews Royal Pacific Resort**, which will complete its own meeting space expansion from 85,000 sf to more than 140,000 sf this fall. An air-conditioned, covered bridge will connect Loews Sapphire Falls and Loews Royal Pacific. Together, the two resorts will have 272,000 sf of combined meeting space and 2,000 rooms.

I-Drive 360 near the Orange County Convention Center will bring a bit of Las Vegas-style spectacle to Orlando when it opens in spring 2015 with a million-dollar light and music water show as well as food, shows, shopping and attractions including a Madame Tussaud's and a Sea Life Orlando Aquarium. Plans also include a 400-foot-tall Orlando Eye observation wheel, a 570-foot-tall roller coaster and 420-foot-tall swing attraction.

The **Disney catering and culinary team** offers hands-on teambuilding sessions in the kitchen for groups of five to 1,000. Attendees can get either the ride or the drive of a life at the **Walt Disney World Speedway's Richard Petty Driving Experience**, designed for meeting group members to get behind the wheel of a specialty Ferrari, Lamborghini, Porsche, Audi and Nissan for several high-speed laps with an instructor.

The area of the re-imagined **Disney Springs** known

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Credits: Streamsong Resort



Streamsong Resort is set on 16,000 acres in Central Florida. (Inset) The Leaf Lounge welcomes in the serene surroundings.

Other outdoor group activities include guided bass fishing excursions, sporting clay shooting range, and trails for hiking and birdwatching. Attendees in need of some pampering can head to the 7,000-sf grotto-style spa featuring seven water treatments.

Hollywood
A Smooth Transition

The Diplomat Resort & Spa, a Curio Collection by Hilton, South Florida's largest convention resort with its 200,000 sf of meeting space — including a 50,000-sf Great Hall, four ballrooms, 39 breakout rooms and nearly 1,000 guest rooms — underwent a \$100 million rebranding in fall 2014, from a Westin to a Hilton. The actual brand change happened literally overnight, as Kate Walsh, account manager for Maritz Travel Company, remembers it.

She has a 3,000-attendee incentive program planned for March 2015 for her Southern California-based client, independent financial advisers subsumed under one name. The plan is for meetings in the morning, afternoons and evenings at leisure. "For our attendees in Florida, a big deal is being able to bring families in before and after," she notes.

At first, she was mildly concerned about what kind of disruptions the changeover might precipitate. "Thus far, we have not had any issues," she says. "I have the utmost respect for Hilton and how they've managed this transition, everyone from the front desk to high-level management." She says the hotel took part in weekly conference calls to ensure the process was completely seamless. The fact that "95 percent of employees remained and are still there" suggests to her that "it wasn't brand allegiance; it was loving the property."

As part of the change, the sales and marketing team has all been certified through Cvent's Supplier Professional

as The Landing is scheduled to open in 2015 with Morimoto Asia in the former Mannequins Dance Palace; The Boathouse, which will serve steak and seafood; and a bi-level STK Steakhouse that will offer rooftop dining.

Streamsong
Naturally Situated and Suited for Meetings

While not an instantly recognizable Florida destination, Streamsong, located in Central Florida between Orlando and Tampa, is making a name for itself among planners looking for an upscale, secluded executive retreat or incentive program oasis. Streamsong Resort, situated amidst 16,000 acres naturally reclaimed from a former phosphate mine, features a 216-room main lodge, 24,600 sf of meeting space and 40,000 sf of outdoor venues that showcase the property's soothing natural surroundings. Streamsong is home to two nationally ranked golf courses, Streamsong Red and Streamsong Blue, which have been named to *Golfweek's* list of Best Resort Courses for 2015.

Streamsong recently announced plans to build a third course, Streamsong Black, which will open in autumn 2017. The resort plans to add a second practice facility, clubhouse and restaurant to serve guests playing Streamsong Black. Streamsong also indicated that it is assessing various alternatives for a fourth course, the details of which will be provided at a later date.

Certification Program in an effort to help them speed up the RFP response process. (See related story on page 14.)

The Diplomat's convention center is LEED-certified, and the hotels' in-room recycling bins and rewards for declining housekeeping help reduce waste.

In other news, the 349-room, 17-story Margaritaville Hollywood Beach Resort is still on track to open in summer 2015, and planners can set up their dates now. The resort will offer 30,000 sf of meeting space, including a 10,000-sf ballroom, as well as an 8,800-sf waterfront venue with floor-to-ceiling windows, and the 1,600-sf Landshark Bar and Grill on the Intracoastal Waterway. A spa and a two-lane wave rider also will open in time to welcome summer.



Credits: Diplomat Resort & Spa

Hollywood's 998-room Diplomat Resort & Spa, with 200,000 sf of meeting space, is undergoing a \$100 million renovation.

Daytona Beach
Eat Like a Vegan...or Not

For those who prefer their greens edible, recently added vegan options in Daytona Beach include Kale Café and Juice Bar, which offers the likes of brown stew tofu, tabbouleh made with gluten-free millet and Ethiopian tomato salad; and Dancing Avocado Kitchen, with rainbow kale salad tossed with walnuts and raisins, several avocado dishes with multiple types of hummus, and vegan burgers on the menu. For omnivores, Fusion 43 at the Rose Villa in nearby Ormond Beach offers items such as Southern Fried Rabbit, Fried Veal Sweet Breads and Waffles, and Baked Duck Breast and foie gras in a Victorian setting; speak-easy The Library, serving old-school mixologist cocktails, also is onsite.

In December 2014, The Shores Resort & Spa rolled out its new look, with new carpeting, paint and decor throughout the 20,000 sf of function space, higher-bandwidth wireless throughout the property, an 80-inch flat-screen monitor with a built-in AV

package in the Surf Boardroom, new banquet equipment and an additional check-in area in the lobby.

New beds, furniture, HDTVs, drapes and balcony patio furniture have been added to all 212 guest rooms and suites. Outdoors, the resort has added eco-friendly lighting for nesting turtles, an upgraded sound system for the Outdoor Terrace, new seating areas around the fire pits and the pool, and life-sized games to the pool deck. The Azure Restaurant and Lounge now has communal bar tables and new furniture.

The Museum of Arts & Sciences has expanded to include the 26,000-sf Cici and Hyatt Brown Museum of Art, a repository of more than 2,500 Florida-themed paintings from the Browns' collection, which dates from the 19th century. Open in February 2015, the space includes conference and education rooms and a café with outdoor seating.

Palm Beach County
New Space in Jupiter

The Wyndham Grand Jupiter at Harbourside Place, just 20 minutes north of Palm Beach in the scenic coastal town known for its historic lighthouse and spectacular bluewater sportfishing and diving, opened in October 2014 with 179 guest rooms and 15,000 sf of event space, including a 5,000-sf ballroom. The newly opened, 360,000-sf entertainment hub Harbourside Place, which includes a 600-seat amphitheater and midmarket retail shops, celebrated its grand opening in December 2014; Jupiter resident Tiger Woods expects his first restaurant, The Woods Jupiter: Sports and Dining Club, to open there in March 2015.

Incentives are available to planners who book before the opening of the 400-room Palm Beach County Convention Center Hilton Hotel next to the Palm Beach County Convention Center, scheduled for spring 2016.

All Aboard Florida, a \$2.5 billion project to provide private express rail service between Miami and Orlando with stops in Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, will be up and running from Miami to West Palm Beach by the end of 2016, and from Orlando in early 2017. The Miami to Orlando trip will take about three hours, one hour less than by car.



"The staff at the Hyatt Regency Orlando knows that it is a big change for a firm to move its annual conference to a new venue after hosting it at the same location for 12 consecutive years."

Joanna Munjack, Vice President, Corporate Events
Pershing LLC, Jersey City, NJ



Come by land, sea or air to the exclusive Ocean Reef Club, situated on 2,500 tropical acres in Key Largo. The resort, an hour south of Miami, has a 175-slip marina and private airstrip.

Credits: Ocean Reef Club

Key Largo

Unlocking Paradise

2014 was a big year for Key Largo's exclusive Ocean Reef Club, situated on 2,500 tropical acres in the uppermost of Florida's chain of islands south of Miami. The private, full-service resort, whose guest accommodations include 175 inn rooms, 100 spacious one-, two- and three-bedroom villas, and private homes, updated its 30,000 sf of meeting space with new carpet and wall finishings along with new in-ceiling AV. Newly added are a 12,000-sf spa, the new Beach Grill casual lunch spot on Buccaneer Island serving ceviche and conch fritters, and a golf academy with digital coaching software. The 36-hole golf course got some touch-ups including new Bermuda grass and an expanded chipping/putting practice area. Attendees can enjoy deep-sea, flats, reef or backcountry fishing off the shores of the resort, as well as a 175-slip marina and private airstrip. Group activities can include chartered yacht dinners, beachside events, eco-tours and teambuilding programs such as cooking school, golf cart scavenger hunts, cardboard boat regattas and beach olympics to name a few.

Opening in summer 2015 is the Playa Largo Resort, whose 14 acres of beachfront will offer 144 rooms and suites, a beach house for functions, pools, fire pits, tiki bars, water sports, a marina with a restaurant and bar, spa, ballroom with private courtyard, and a business and productivity center. It will take advantage of the Marriott reservation and points system.

Tampa

Candied Duck Bacon?

Lufthansa will commence flights from Frankfurt, Ger-

many, to Tampa International Airport in September 2015, the culmination of the airport's efforts in recent years to court Swiss and German airlines — a nod to the dozens of European firms, such as Credit Suisse Group AG and Zurich Financial Services, that have subsidiaries in the Tampa area.

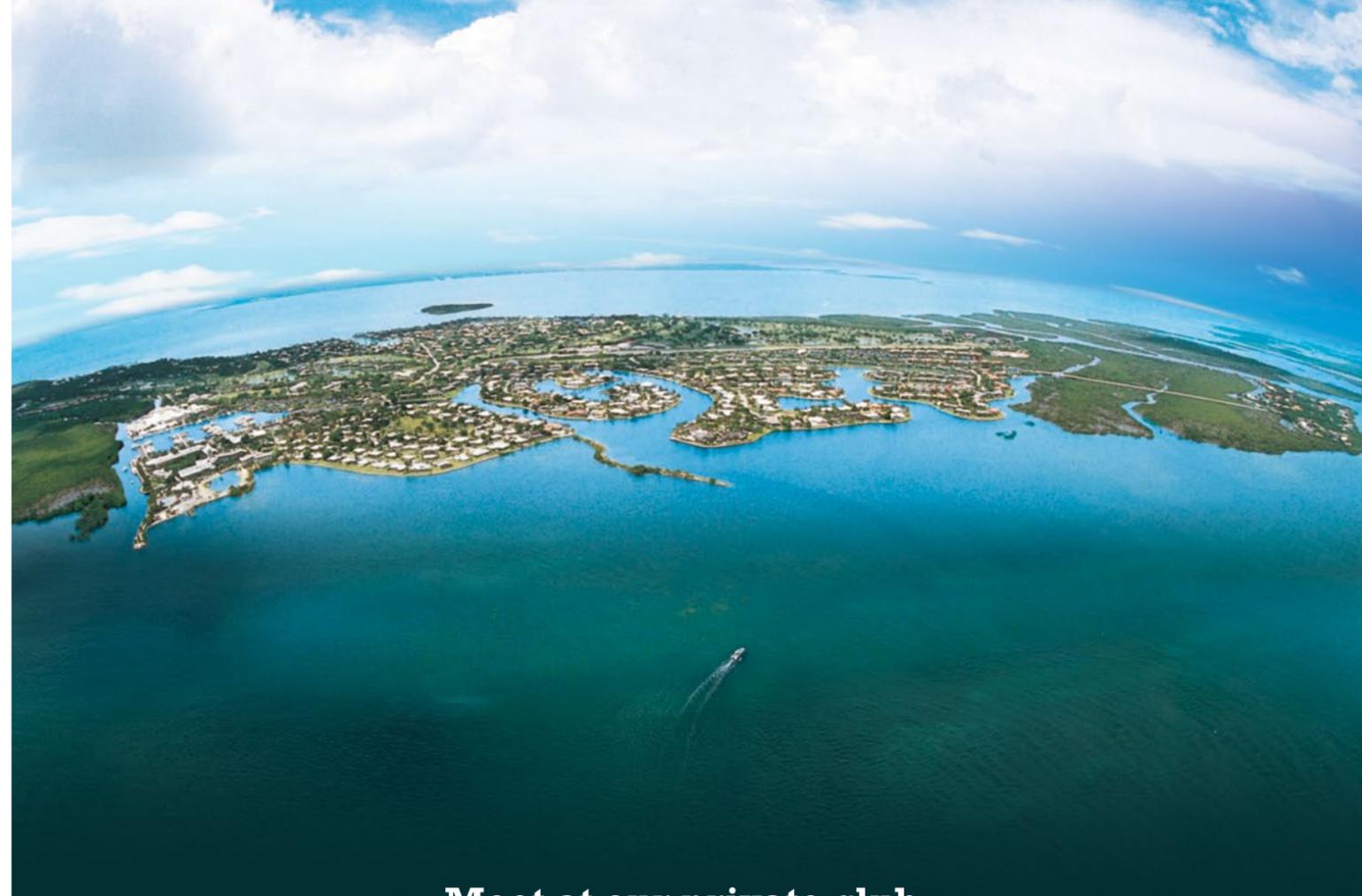
Ulele, Tampa's latest buzzed-about restaurant featuring Florida frog legs, gator hushpuppies, fried ice cream, candied duck bacon and house-craft brews in the remodeled Water Works building on Tampa's Riverwalk, collected some accolades in late 2014. Open Table diners named it one of the Top 100 Restaurants in America, and *Florida Trend* magazine awarded it Best New Restaurant of 2014.

Jacksonville Area

History Lives Here

St. Augustine celebrates its 450th year during 2015, and planners can summon the spirit of Juan Ponce de León by holding special events at any number of St. Augustine's historic hotels, museums and sites, including the Spanish explorer's eponymous Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park. Attendees staying on "Florida's Historic Coast" can access St. Augustine from top-rated meeting hotels and resorts such as the Ponte Vedra Inn & Club on Ponte Vedra Beach, which has 25,000 sf of function space and 17 meeting rooms; the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront, with 110,000 sf of meeting space; the Renaissance World Golf Village Resort, Convention Center and Beach Club, with its 101,000 sf of function space and two golf courses — one co-designed by Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer; and Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa, which has refurbished its 56,000 sf of function space, guest rooms and villas.

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BULLOCK



BALAGURAS



MISSNER



NEE



MARASCO

Jim Bullock was named director of sales and marketing for Streamsong Resort in Streamsong, Florida. He formerly served as vice president of group sales for Sandals and Beaches Resorts locations in The Bahamas, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Antigua, Grenada, Barbados and Turks & Caicos.

Barbara Balaguras was named senior national account executive for Visit Orlando. She most recently served as director of corporate sales at Choose Chicago.

Aaron Missner was appointed regional director of accounts, Northeast region, for Wynn Las Vegas and Encore. He formerly served as account director in the Northeast territory for the Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board.

Delano Las Vegas has announced the appointments of **Sarah Lantzer** and **Nick Taylor** as sales managers. Lantzer, responsible for the East Coast, Midwest, Canada and Europe markets, most recently served as sales manager at MGM Grand in Las Vegas. Taylor, responsible for the West Coast, Mexico and South America markets, was executive meetings manager for Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas.

Lake Arrowhead Resort & Spa, Lake Arrowhead, California, has named **Steve Tremewan** as director of sales and marketing. He was complex director of sales, based in Dallas, for Wyndham Hotels & Resorts.

The Wigwam, Phoenix, Arizona, has named **Bob Nee** as vice president of resort sales and marketing. He was

regional director of sales and marketing for 12 hotels within the TPG Hospitality portfolio in the mid-Atlantic and Southeast regions.

Gino Marasco was promoted to director of sales and marketing at the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel in Orlando, Florida. He joined the Swan and Dolphin as director of sales in May 2014.

Cheyenne Mountain Resort, Colorado Springs, Colorado, has named **Curtis T. Bova** as director of sales and marketing and **Thomas J. Walker** as director of sales. Bova was vice president of sales and vice president, national sales for Destination Hotels & Resorts. Walker was director of sales for the Antlers Hilton Hotel in Colorado Springs. **I&FMM**

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