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THE SOURCE FOR ASSOCIATION MEETING PLANNING MANAGEMENT

Government Meeting Planners Rule!

A Tough Job Gets Tougher

PAGE 28

Michelle A. Milligan, MSW, LMSW, CGMP, National President of the Society of Government Meeting Professionals.

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Convention Cities on the Move

PAGE 14

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THE SOURCE FOR ASSOCIATION MEETING PLANNING MANAGEMENT

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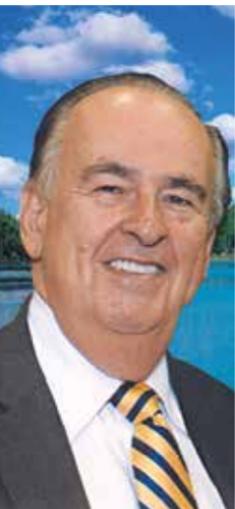
Credit: Sundial Beach Resort & Spa



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Credit: SPA

A Salute to Government Meeting Planners



I don't know what George Washington would think about the state of our government's politics today, but I do know he would approve of its meeting planners. The Society of Government Meeting Professionals (SGMP) once declared the father of our country "America's first famous government meeting planner" as he presided over the Philadelphia Convention that signed the U.S. Constitution in 1787. George would be gratified to know that today's government meeting planners continue to be standard bearers of fighting government waste and are held to the strictest ethics standards in our industry. SGMP's first big success story was their first annual conference in 1983, with the education theme "Spending Government Money Powerfully." As they note on their website, "That theme is as relevant today as it was then."

Easier said than done, with per diem caps and other strict spending rules and restrictions, as well as restrictions on fam trips, supplier gifts and other ethics issues in a market-oriented society. It's a tough row to hoe, to be sure, made even tougher in the current seller's market, which requires special negotiation skills to establish a value proposition for hoteliers. "When we were in the recession years, government (meetings business) was really helping the hotels because businesses had cut back significantly on travel and conferences," says Michelle Milligan, MSW, LMSW, CGMP, the new national president of SGMP, who graces our cover. "Now that it's a seller's market again, we have kind of taken a back seat."

Lucky planners who work for private industries and the more well-heeled associations have a much easier job, by comparison, and can learn from — or at least appreciate — the government planner's plight. One big thing all planners do have in common is the importance of relationship-building: "Our Society is based on both planners and suppliers, and they develop relationships," says Milligan, who also is deputy administrator/clinic director for the Third Circuit Court, Clinic for Child Study in Detroit. "Oftentimes, because they do have that relationship, they are able to figure out how to reach an agreement that benefits everyone. When the other industries are not planning meetings as much and using as much hotel space, hotels can tap government members to bring meetings to their location." Unlike some workings in government, this quasi quid pro quo is a good thing. Learn — and appreciate — more about this unique world of planning in our salute on page 28, "Government Planners Rule!"

Harvey Grotsky
Publisher

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Jacob K. Javits Convention Center to Add Event Space

NEW YORK, NY — The Jacob K. Javits Convention Center will expand by 1.2 million sf, resulting in a fivefold increase in meeting space, including the largest ballroom in the Northeast. The proposal's total projected cost is approximately \$1 billion, and construction is expected to begin in late 2016. Fred Dixon, president and CEO, NYC & Company, stated, "We are pleased to hear about the plan to expand the Javits Center on Manhattan's Far West Side. This robust plan to add more convention and meetings space capacity is welcoming news for the more than 6 million meetings delegates that convene in New York City each year. This addition will ensure NYC continues to lead in the convention and exhibition industry." www.nycgo.com

Las Vegas Convention Center and Stadium Projects Approved

LAS VEGAS, NV — Nevada state legislators voted to move forward with two projects, the expansion and renovation



Ralenkotter

of the Las Vegas Convention Center and the development of a domed football stadium. "Tourism is Nevada's No. 1 economic driver, employing nearly half of the people who call Southern Nevada home, and this decision represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Southern Nevada," said Rossi Ralenkotter, Las Vegas Convention

and Visitors Association president and CEO. "Our destination thrives on evolution and reinvention, and we commend the bold decision by the Nevada Legislature and Governor Sandoval to approve these two monumental projects that position our destination to remain a leading tourism destination for decades to come."

The bill also included provisions for the development of a \$1.9 billion, 65,000-seat stadium that could house the University of Nevada, Las Vegas football team as well as a potential professional football franchise and a variety of special events. www.lvcva.com, www.lasvegas.com

Al Hutchinson to Lead Visit Baltimore

BALTIMORE, MD — Al Hutchinson will become Visit Baltimore's new president and CEO November 14. Hutchinson brings



Hutchinson

more than 24 years of experience in the hospitality and destination marketing industry to Baltimore, most recently serving as president and CEO of Visit Mobile, where he was recognized as the 2016 Alabama Restaurant and Hospitality Alliance's "Tourism Promoter of the Year." As president and CEO of Visit Baltimore, Hutchinson will

be responsible for leading the growth of the convention and tourism industry in Baltimore.

"I look forward to leading Baltimore's tourism efforts and to working with the Visit Baltimore team, convention and tourism board of directors, the city's elected officials and the citizens of Baltimore to lead the city to new heights," said Hutchinson. "I'm excited by the opportunity to take the helm of such a strong organization."

Prior to joining Visit Mobile, Hutchinson served as the vice president of convention sales and services at the Virginia Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau. www.baltimore.org

New GBTA Study Reveals Technology's Role in Event Planning

ALEXANDRIA, VA — A new GBTA Foundation study indicates the most valued and most desired features when it comes to site sourcing technology, according to a blog by Kate Vasiloff, GBTA research manager.

A majority of planners (57 percent) use events or meeting management technology or software when planning events and nearly all who do (96 percent) find value in using technology to manage their meetings and events. Additionally, almost six in 10 (58 percent) of those who do not currently use it see the potential for technology to improve their processes and programs.

Location (27 percent) and cost (26 percent) are the top factors for choosing a property to host a meeting or event. How does technology play a role in selecting a location? Currently only two in five planners (43 percent) have access to technology that automatically populates city specs including everything from proximity of the venue to other hotels, restaurants and airports along with hotel rates to food and beverage pricing or even a city's crime rates. Half of the planners who use this type of technology find it very valuable to make more informed decisions as would 45 percent of those who don't have access to it.

The planning and communication does not stop after choosing the venue. Two-thirds of planners use (63 percent) and value (67 percent) meeting and event planning technology that allows for two-way communication with vendors. Additionally, seven in 10 planners use meetings and event technology to help them load and track budget info along the way, and while only one-third (33 percent) currently have technology that allows planners to survey their venue and vendors post-event, many express interest in having this option as a part of their meeting and event management technology. www.gbta.org



Credits: 1-4 IMEX America; 5 The New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center; 6-8 Questex Travel Group

1-4 The sixth IMEX America set new records, reported IMEX Group Chairman Ray Bloom. Exhibiting companies representing 139 countries totaled 3,250, which represents a 4.8 percent increase over 2015. More than 3,000 hosted buyers attended the show this year — also a new record. A series of event tech, innovation and sustainability tours were among the many new initiatives on the show floor education program, which this year offered a record 269 sessions, of which 86 percent were assigned with CEs for CMP certification. **2** This year's IMEXrun attracted more than 800 runners. **3,4** More than 1,000 delegates attended educational events on Smart Monday, powered by MPI. **5** The New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center and the New Orleans CVB partnered to host Sam Lippman's Large Show Roundtable. Participants attended to brainstorm ideas, explore proprietary research, exchange best practices and make new connections with the goal of making their trade shows more effective and profitable. **6-8** A record number of attendees at MEET National in Washington, DC, participated in more than 20 sessions for CE credits developed in partnership with CIC, MPI, DMAI, SGMP, and IAEE; two keynote addresses, two certificate programs by MPI and an interactive town hall. MEET National is organized by Questex Travel Group in partnership with MPI and HSMIA.

Keeping Your Conference a Safe Harbor

Phelps R. Hope, CMP



Have the Right Emergency Response Plans in Place

Virtually every region of the globe knows its share of threats and potential disruptions — as has been evidenced multiple times in the last year alone. Threats of terrorism, actual attacks, destabilized governments or natural disasters — if the dangers themselves aren't on the rise, then the public awareness certainly is.

Regardless, business must get done. You've planned meetings years in advance, and your attendees are banking on their annual gathering to reel in a year's worth of deals, education and networking. They are counting on you to assure that they are safe and that unexpected disruptions will have a minimal impact on their event. It's crucial to be informed and have the right emergency response plans in place.

WHAT ARE THE DANGERS?

A meeting organizer must be able to take a step back and view the whole scope of threats for a destination. The most high-profile threat of late is terrorism, but you must also consider natural disasters (hurricanes), disease (Zika, influenza), wildlife (animal attacks) and personal danger (active shooter, muggings, ID theft).

WHAT SHOULD YOU BE DOING?

The pressure on a professional meeting planner has evolved in recent years. A successful planner has needed to adapt and take actions specific to these new challenges. Here are several planning steps you can take to better plan for an onsite emergency.

Know the region. Many incidents are tough to anticipate because they can happen anywhere; but if you understand regional nuances, you can make informed decisions and reduce the risk to your attendees. For example, countries that rank higher in terrorism rates will have drastically different security measures — both required and optional for your attendees. If mosquito-borne illnesses are an issue in another region, alert your attendees to plan accordingly and take additional precautions such as having plenty of bug repellent on hand.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website is an excellent resource for information on local outbreaks. The Central Intelligence Agency's website (CIA.gov) provides a general overview of a country's government and cultural mores. State.gov, the website of the U.S. Department of State, offers a "traveler's checklist" of safety and security information on worldwide destinations and updates on potential and existing health conditions in a specific destination.

Build the right relationships. Develop relationships with key resources at your destination. Conduct a site assessment as part of your planning and become acquainted with local CVBs and tourism offices. These groups will provide you the right information to mitigate regional threats. Conduct a joint meeting with the venue and local authorities to hammer out a clear emergency plan. Paris, for example, has a detailed "Vigipirate" plan in place to detect terror threats and alert the public as to next steps. The local tourism office can help guide you so that you can develop an effective communication plan for your attendees.

Collect attendee information. Attendee emergency contacts and cell phone numbers are mandatory. They allow you to better communicate with attendees or their family members in case of an emergency. As association and event management software has become more advanced, you can add more fields to your registration form, including asking for social media profile information such as Twitter handles. Additional communication avenues provide you options in an emergency. International event managers can make attendees aware of security resources they can pursue on their own, such as STEP (The Smart Traveler Enrollment Program). Provide the link to the STEP website as part of registration. This free service through the U.S. Department of State enables U.S. citizens traveling internationally to enroll their trip with the nearest U.S. Embassy or U.S. Consulate and receive information on safety conditions in the destination country. Make sure you and your staff are enrolled as well.

Pay Attention. Global political situations are constantly evolving (think Istanbul or Brussels). Monitor signs of instability and advise clients to avoid complications related to rescheduling, relocating or actually responding to an emergency onsite. Set up Google alerts so that even obscure global outlets are on your radar. As part of your site inspection, walk the areas where your attendees are most likely to go and evaluate potential risks personally.

Consider evacuation insurance. Increasingly a popular option, personal evacuation insurance can be a lifesaver in the event of a medical emergency in a remote region. Costs vary by company, but attendees can find reason-

ers, convention centers and offsite properties — with contact information for each at your fingertips. Ensure that your staff has this information as well and keeps it with them at all times. Know the location(s) of the nearest medical facilities.

Create a sense of safe haven. Your attendees should feel safe at your event, so let them know that safety measures are in place. A transparent security plan will accomplish this goal. Pre-event communications should outline the precautions you've taken, including some from this list. Remind attendees of the obvious — don't wear their name tags outside of the meeting venues, make sure that

Countries that rank higher in terrorism rates will have drastically different security measures — both required and optional for your attendees.

able rates for a year's worth of protection or pay even less for a single trip. Product offerings vary based on personal needs. Research the options and advise attendees that added protection is available to them.

Budget accordingly. Budget for extra security onsite with a company that is fully licensed to provide complete security services. Make sure to bring the security company into the planning process at the beginning.

Develop your plan. Whether it's a fire, an active shooter or an incoming storm, have your messaging for attendees prepared and ready to send out. Advance preparation is key to proactively managing an onsite emergency. Plan elements should include immediate communications, such as text alerts describing what's happening and what to do and also a way for attendees to check in as safe with you and your team. In some cases, a reactive plan should include event cancellation procedures.

Know your venues and suppliers. Know the emergency procedures already in place with your meeting venues and suppliers — hotels, transportation provid-

their families at home know exactly where they are staying, etc. If you can demonstrate that you've done your homework and put in place every possible measure, your attendees will breathe a little easier and enjoy a more successful event.

Here are some additional resources:

- www.state.gov
- www.step.state.gov/step/
- wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/
- www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook
- www.travelguard.com
- Search "travel safety tips" at www.cntraveler.com
- Search "vigipirate" at en.parisinfo.com

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

Cameron Curtis and Perry Juliano



Bring Value & Engagement to Health Care Conventions

The face-value reason health care professionals attend their association's annual event is to earn continuing medical education (CME or CE) credits. But health care conventions also are providing the necessary forums where professionals are exchanging ideas, innovations and leading practices so they can improve patient outcomes and help evolve their industry or profession.

Such collaborations don't occur in a vacuum. Exchanges happen in the conference's hallways, during dinner and over coffee or cocktails. They also can happen on the bus heading to a rock-climbing excursion, at the recharge station in the exhibit hall or during a competitive game of "Family Feud" in a study session.

These forums can be as fun and creative as your imagination allows, and you won't need to go over budget. Following are some tips for creating unique experiences that will have your audience talking about them long after they return home.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Before you jump in with a teambuilding exercise, you'll need to understand your whole audience, including attendees, sponsors, exhibitors and other stakeholders. What are their goals for participating in the event? Since health care events cover a broad spectrum — from pharmaceutical conferences to medical association annual meetings — identifying your specific audience's wants and needs will help you develop a thorough engagement strategy for the event.

It's important to make sure your team is educated on the state and federal regulations such as the PhRMA Code on Interactions with Health Care Professionals and the Sunshine Act. These regulations specify rules of engagement for health care professionals, so that a giveaway of branded portable speakers, which seemed like a great idea at one time, actually could jeopardize your attendees' licenses because the gift exceeds monetary value limits.

Having all the information in advance will help you navigate the challenges of a health care convention while still delivering the engagement your attendees crave.

ADD VALUE TO THEIR JOBS

Offering specific information and activities that health care professionals cannot get anywhere else is a huge draw for your event. A learning opportunity that an attendee can apply directly to his or her job not only will be memorable and valuable, but also will set up your association as a knowledge center.

At the American Society of ExtraCorporeal Technology International Conference, attendees participated in interactive workshops that demonstrated the use of various pieces of equipment necessary for perfusionists — health care professionals who operate the machine that does the work of a patient's heart and lungs during surgical procedures in which the heart is stopped. These sessions were intentionally small so more participants could receive one-to-one training.

MAKE THEM FEEL SPECIAL

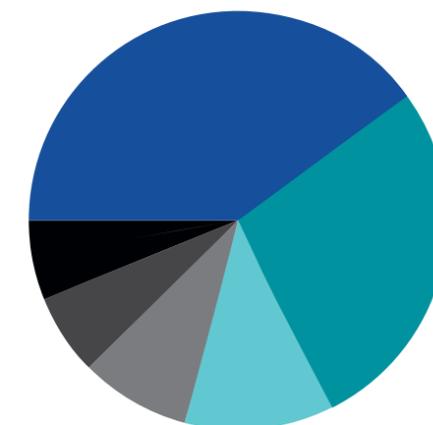
Many health care professionals, such as nurses, technicians and lab assistants, are the unsung heroes of the medical profession. Offering VIP treatment will make them feel welcomed from the first point of contact through the closing event. Not only will the special attention generate excitement, but it also will foster loyalty for your organization and event.

For example, assemble a group of event ambassadors (we called ours The Welcome Committee) at the registration area during peak arrival times to help make the check-in process go as smoothly as possible. Complete the "red carpet" experience with light refreshments and local hospitality to make a memorable first impression. Don't forget to include your vendors in The Welcome Committee, giving them the opportunity to initiate relationships immediately.

BORGATA. MORE THAN MEETINGS.

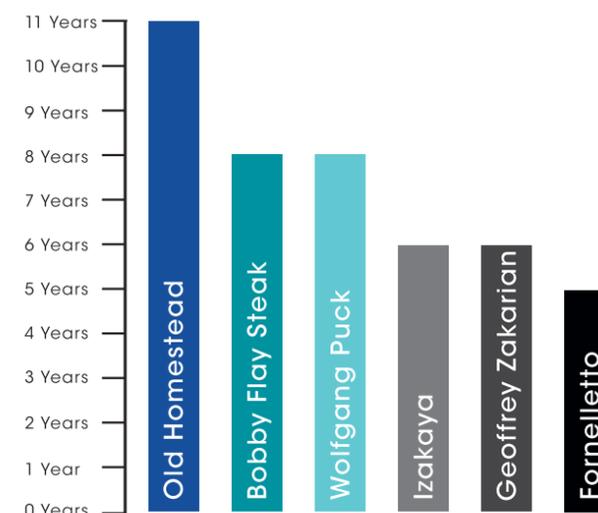


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Go LOCAL

During a health care convention, attendees are busy learning from early morning to late evening with little time to explore the location of the event. Because of this, consider the location and how to work with local business owners, destination management companies, celebrity chefs and athletes, or even musicians, dancers, artists and other types of entertainers to deliver memorable experiences that complement the region, local culture, food or well-renowned area attractions.

For example, to celebrate the rich cultural diversity of host city Seattle, the Society of Gastroenterology Nurses and Associates worked with a local talent agency to secure actual street musicians to perform for the closing celebration. An electric violinist greeted attendees at the entrance,

and once they had a card in each category attendees turned in their "whodunit" for a raffle.

At its Annual Congress, the National Association of Orthopaedic Nurses team holds an Ortho Olympics on the show floor in a central lounge area called The Joint Connection. Early-career orthopaedic nurses compete in team challenges to see who is the fastest to build skeletons and put casts on each other. The event brings nearly all attendees to the show floor to cheer for their teams.

HAVE FUN

Attendees often can experience a sense of "burn out" after the second 15-hour day of nonstop education programs and networking. Plan to break up the schedule with a game that will re-energize attendees while testing

A learning opportunity that an attendee can apply directly to his or her job not only will be memorable and valuable, but also will set up your association as a knowledge center.

and throughout the venue were coffee shop-style guitarists and roaming flutists. Underground DJs inspired (and challenged!) everyone to get on their feet and dance to alternative club remixes and progressive house music. The team also brought in some humorous fish mongers from the Public Market who entertained the attendees. The evening was exciting and edgy — and under budget!

OFFER AN INCLUSIVE EXHIBIT HALL

Create a space and activities that encourage vendors and attendees to interact in ways that won't violate health care regulations. For instance, you can offer educational programs on your show floor — usually a big DO NOT — by providing a walkway with well-placed draperies that won't require attendees to walk by vendor booths. This simple solution enables those in attendance who aren't restricted to still access the exhibit hall, while shielding those who are restricted.

Also, ditch the old passport-to-prizes trade show game and create a new one. One association commemorated its anniversary celebration with a spinoff of the game Clue called "Who Stole the Anniversary Diamonds?" Participating exhibitors were the "rooms," and each exhibitor had a card with one of three categories: items, places and people. Attendees went to exhibitors to collect cards,

their knowledge. Make the games easy to play, without complicated instructions or questions that are too difficult to answer.

With the goal of involving more students in its organization, the Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association created Spirit Day, complete with college comfort food, music and activities tailored for teaching students. The day culminates in the Praxis Bowl, a trivia contest based on the Praxis Test, which is part of the certification process for speech language pathologists. Praxis Bowl winners receive waivers for exam fees. Just before the Praxis Bowl begins, event organizers stage a pep rally outside the ballroom doors. When the doors open, 600 students race to get the best seats to watch their friends compete in the bowl.

Regardless of the method of delivery — games, general sessions, breakouts, excursions, learning lounges, lightning rounds or teambuilding exercises — find the right mix that will engage health care professionals, provide unique ideas for patient care and create memorable experiences. AC&F

Cameron Curtis, an executive director, and Perry Juliano, an event director, both serve the Healthcare + Scientific Industry Practice at SmithBucklin, the association management and services company more associations turn to than any other. Contact Cameron at CCurtis@smithbucklin.com and Perry at PJuliano@smithbucklin.com, or visit www.smithbucklin.com.



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Convention Cities on the Move

By Sophia Bennett

Where Expanding Convention Districts and Meetings Infrastructure Are Getting Planners' Attention

While there's something to be said for sticking with the predictability of an established convention city, it can be exciting to take a risk on a hot new destination. With that thought in mind, we looked around the country for the most exciting up-and-coming convention cities in the country.

Some of the cities that made our list have completed major convention center upgrades or made major gains in hotel inventory. A few are garnering headlines after landing major sporting or political events. But all of these communities have one important thing in common: They're about to become major movers and shakers in the convention scene.

NASHVILLE

Nashville has long been known as Music City, and they're looking to add a second title: the Silicon Valley of health care. Both aspects made Nashville an ideal place for America's Health Insurance Plans' (AHIP) 2015 Institute and Expo.

Lisa Shreve, MPP, senior vice president of professional education and public affairs, says she and her colleagues had an opportunity to tour the new Music City Center (MCC) before it even opened. They were very impressed by the convention center's sustainability features, natural light, effective flow and helpful staff. "We had a lot of confidence in their ability to help us execute a great event," she reports.

As the convention approached, Shreve did encounter one

serious snag at the MCC. Two months prior to the event, she found out her plans for theming and branding the event could no longer be executed. She had to make an emergency trip to Nashville to work out a new plan.

Even though the change was stressful, she says the MCC handled it as well as possible. They paid for her extra trip to Nashville, and the center's CEO flew to Washington after the event to discuss onsite hiccups. "That spoke volumes," she says. "It was important that he listened to some of the challenges we had and wanted to provide good customer service."

Overall, AHIP's experience was extremely positive. "We wanted to play off Nashville being Music City, so we had an opening night reception with Martina McBride," Shreve says.



Lisa Shreve, MPP
Senior V.P. Professional Education and Public Affairs
America's Health Insurance Plans
Washington, DC

"We had a lot of confidence in their ability to help us execute a great event."



The George R. Brown Convention Center, overlooking Discovery Green, is connected to the new Marriott Marquis (left) and Hilton Americas-Houston.

Credit: Greater Houston CVB



Credit: Music City Center

Nashville's Music City Center.

"It was just a phenomenal success. It put everyone in a great frame of mind." Switching from a meeting format to a concert format requires a quick room change, but the convention center staff pulled it off without a hitch.

AHIP also brought in several high-profile speakers, including Bill Clinton and Mitt Romney. MCC coordinated with the Secret Service to meet the necessary security protocols.

Shreve says she got great feedback from many of the event's 4,000 attendees. They loved the city's walkability, restaurants and numerous free music venues. AHIP saw an increase in registrations for their Nashville event, which is one reason they're planning to return in 2019.

"Nashville is an ideal location for meetings and conferences because it is both authentic and accessible," says Kay Witt, chief sales officer for the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corporation. It also now has the infrastructure to host major events: The \$635 million, LEED Gold-certified MCC is attracting both people and new development. In addition to the already-completed Omni Nashville Hotel, Hyatt Place Downtown and, most recently, The Westin Nashville — adjacent to Music City Center — Davidson County expects to open 3,200 hotel rooms in the next two years.

"Whether by plane, train or automobile, Nashville is easily accessible by all modes of transportation," Witt says. "Once you've arrived, Nashville's entertainment district is highly walkable. It's surrounded by attractions, restaurants and live music venues, many of which you can enjoy free of charge." Put all these things together, and it's easy to see why Nashville is a must-visit location.

CLEVELAND

The Republican National Convention drew an estimated 50,000 people to Cleveland. "It brought a tremendous amount of worldwide media attention that was overwhelmingly positive," says Mike Burns, CMP, senior vice president of convention sales and services for Destination Cleveland. "People told us they want to come back with their families."

And meeting planners who didn't think Cleveland had the chops to host a major event are now taking a look.

Cleveland is home to the Huntington Convention Center of Cleveland (which opened in 2013 as the Cleveland Convention Center and was rebranded last summer). It has 225,000 sf of class A exhibit space, 35 meeting rooms and a 32,000-sf ballroom with views of the city's lakefront. Among the sustainability features at the LEED Silver building is an onsite garden with vegetables, herbs, chickens and bees. The majority of the eggs consumed at the center come from the garden, as does all of the honey.

The community has 19 hotels downtown, including the new 600-room Hilton Cleveland Downtown, which is attached to the convention center. "Our restaurant scene is probably the most significant in the Midwest and as good as any in the country," Burns says. The city also has several



Credit: thisiscleveland.com

The Huntington Convention Center of Cleveland.

new or renovated public gathering spaces, including a new plaza adjoining the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. These and other amenities are within walking distance of the convention center, which makes it easier for visitors to get out and see them.

Cleveland has invested \$3.5 billion in visitor-related infrastructure since 2011. It shows in every aspect of the city. "All the things we've talked about over the last four years are now in place," Burns says. "It's no longer, 'We're going to build it.' It's already done."

AUSTIN

Events such as Austin City Limits and South by Southwest have put Austin on the map in recent years. That's what got Chris Mahaffey, CAE, thinking about hosting the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons' (ACFAS) 2016 scientific conference in the Texas city.

His experience in Austin surpassed all of his expectations.



Credit: Austin CVB

The Austin Convention Center.

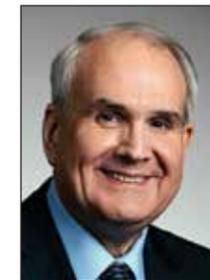
"Austin just fit us like a glove," Mahaffey says. "All of the hotels we needed were within walking distance. There were tons of restaurants nearby. The airport was superb. The convention center and CVB were great to work with. They're genuinely very nice people." Plus, members were excited to have an excuse to visit Austin.

ACFAS' annual conference is a fairly standard mix of lectures, discussions and exhibits, Mahaffey says, and the convention center was a great fit. ACFAS hosted two events off-site: an opening reception at Brazos Hall, a warehouse turned special event space; and a party at Buffalo Billiards, which Mahaffey describes as a giant old-school pool hall.

Attendees had very positive feedback about all of the physical spaces as well as the community. "They liked the feel," he says. "Austin does have tall buildings, but the area we were in was still very much of a human scale."

Attendance at the Austin meeting climbed a whopping 17 percent, which Mahaffey attributes to the host city. He shares this advice: "Book more space than you think you'll need because your attendance will probably skyrocket."

"Austin is a new destination that people have heard about and want to come to," says Steve Genovesi, senior vice president of sales for the Austin Convention & Visitors Bureau.



Chris Mahaffey, CAE
Executive Director
American College of Foot
and Ankle Surgeons
Chicago, IL

"Austin just fit us like a glove. All of the hotels we needed were within walking distance. There were tons of restaurants nearby. The airport was superb. The convention center and CVB were great to work with. They're genuinely very nice people."

"With the new hotel inventory that's coming in, we can now attract groups we were never able to accommodate before."

White Lodging plans to break ground in 2017 on a 615-room Marriott with 65,000 sf of meeting space. The hotel, downtown near the Austin Convention Center (ACC), will open in 2019. The Fairmont Austin, which is set to open in 2017, will add 1,048 hotel rooms and 106,000 sf of meeting space. A pedestrian bridge will connect the Fairmont to the ACC.

Austin has a lot to offer besides sleeping and meeting rooms. "If you walk out any door of the convention center you'll be going toward a different entertainment district," Genovesi says. "Sixth Street is like Bourbon Street and has lots of live music. Second Street has shopping and high-end restaurants, much like Rodeo Drive. The South Congress area is like Greenwich Village." Everything is walkable or accessible by public transportation or pedicab.

"Our airport has dramatically increased its flights," Genovesi adds. "It's a top-tier airport with 10 different airlines." The website Cheapflights put Austin-Bergstrom International 16th on their 2015 Airport Affordability Index. Whether they're coming from the West Coast, East Coast or an international destination, attendees will easily and happily find their way.

MIAMI BEACH

Associations seeking warm weather and beautiful beaches for meetings should think Miami Beach, one of two Florida destinations that made our movers-and-shakers list.



Credit: Miami Beach Convention Center

Rendering of the Miami Beach Convention Center renovation.

"Miami Beach is a great city because it's compact and cosmopolitan, but it also has all of the amenities of a resort," says Daniel Sacerio, spokesperson for the Miami Beach Visitor & Convention Authority. "It has the beach, it has top culinary options and it has the famous nightlife." But it also has options you don't normally see in a beach town, including three

major museums: The Bass, a contemporary art museum; Wolfsonian, a modern art museum; and the Jewish Museum.

The Miami Beach Convention Center is in the midst of a \$615 million renovation that's expected to wrap up in 2018. The LEED-certified facility will have more than 500,000 sf of exhibit space, a 60,000-sf mixed-use ballroom and 81 new breakout rooms.

Complementing the convention center expansion is the development of several new hotels. 1 Hotel South Beach is described as a "mission-driven luxury hotel" that will feature organic foods, hemp-blend mattresses and a fleet of electric Teslas. The Fasano Hotel, a Brazilian luxury hotel, is opening its first U.S. hotel in Miami Beach in 2017.

"Miami Beach is a place where you can be single and mingle, but it's also very family-friendly," Sacerio says. "If you have a conference and people want to bring their spouse and children, they can have a great family vacation too."

NATIONAL HARBOR, MARYLAND

If you've never heard of National Harbor, you're not alone. This planned community on the outskirts of Washington, DC, has only existed for eight years. But it's developed a robust infrastructure in that relatively short period of time.

"The Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center is our crown jewel in terms of meetings and conventions," says Bruce Gudenberg, executive director of Visit National Harbor. The venue has 500,000 sf of meeting space and a full-service convention hotel with 2,000 rooms. The brand new, \$1.3 billion MGM National Harbor, which opens in December, will add 50,000 sf of meeting space and 308 rooms, as well as amenities such as gaming and dining.

National Harbor has several other benefits for convention attendees. Washington is less than a mile away. That means people can travel into the city for meetings, lobbying trips or cultural opportunities without having to stay inside the city. The community has more than 30 restaurants, and a



Gaylord National Resort and Capital Wheel in National Harbor, Maryland.

Tanger Outlets center provides outstanding shopping. Guests can ride the National Harbor Carousel or take a spin on the 180-foot-high Capital Wheel.

Although National Harbor isn't the standard convention destination, Gudenberg says all its service providers are very willing to pull together to deliver quality events for attendees. "As a planned city, we've been very focused on transportation, green spaces and making things environmentally friendly." Benefits such as these are already drawing big events such as the Scripps National Spelling Bee and Conservative Political Action Conference on an annual basis.

HOUSTON

Houston will host Super Bowl LI in 2017. That's bringing big changes to many parts of the city, including the convention district, which recently was rebranded as the Avenida Houston. The area is adding 10 new restaurants, including a Mexican establishment from local celebrity restaurant team Hugo Ortega and Tracy Vaught. Ten new art installations from local creatives are going up. The city recently shrank the Avenida de las Americas, the road that runs past the convention center, from six lanes to two to provide better pedestrian access to the area's many amenities.

People who haven't traveled to Houston for a while will notice one of the biggest changes immediately upon arriving at the George R. Brown Convention Center: Discovery Green is a new 12-acre urban park that abuts the building. According to Peter McStravick, chief development officer for Houston First, it provides a nice place for conventioners and draws locals who provide that sought-after slice of community culture.

Houston also has made two major additions to the hotel inventory and both are connected to the convention center: The new Marriott Marquis, scheduled to open in December, will offer 1,000 rooms and 100,000 sf of meeting space. The existing Hilton Americas-Houston has 1,200 rooms and more than 90,000 sf of meeting space. More hotels planned for 2017 and 2018 will add an additional 1,700 rooms.

The convention center itself is wrapping up a \$250 million renovation. One of the most notable new features is the clear glass front doors that look out on Discovery Green. "People didn't feel there was a park outside that they could go out

and enjoy," McStravick says. "Now those who are inside the building can see the skyline in the background and Discovery Green in the foreground. The people outside can look in and see what's going on."

WEST PALM BEACH

The second Florida destination on our list owes much of its up-and-coming status to the new Hilton West Palm Beach, a 12-story hotel that is attached to the 350,000-sf Palm Beach County Convention Center. With 400 guest rooms and 43 suites, the hotel has helped the city make major gains in accommodation. The property has 24,000 sf of interior gathering spaces and 4,800 sf of outdoor space.



The new Hilton West Palm Beach is connected to the Palm Beach County Convention Center, South Florida's only center with an attached hotel.

Steve Crist, associate vice president of meeting and convention sales for Discover the Palm Beaches, says West Palm Beach has many other features that make it a great place for meetings. "We are a very popular destination for clients looking at South Florida, as we have all the diversity without the density." West Palm Beach is a great jumping-off point for the 38 communities in Palm Beach County, including Boca Raton and Delray Beach. And getting around the region getting easier.

"Brightline, a new high-speed train, is coming on board next year," Crist says. "It will connect Miami and Fort Lauderdale to downtown West Palm Beach, and is only blocks from the new Hilton and convention center. That will make it much easier for international customers to arrive here. Once the attendees are here, there is no need for a car. Everything is walkable, and you're less than two miles from the beach."

NEW ORLEANS

For decades the Big Easy was one of the top convention destinations in the country. When Hurricane Katrina dev-

asted the city in 2005, its meetings business came to a screeching halt.

Eleven years later, New Orleans is back, and it's better than ever. "The city has grown really well since Katrina," says Pam Ballinger, CMP, senior director of meeting and exhibits for the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR). "It used to be just the French Quarter. Following Hurricane Katrina, the city really developed and raised up the whole Warehouse District, which is closer to the convention center, anyway. That's been a good development for convention attendees."

2016 marked the first time AACR had been back to the city. They chose New Orleans because it's one of few places in the country that can accommodate groups of their size (this year's event drew 19,500 people).

Ballinger says their experience was very positive. "The convention center staff was amazing, and the CVB was wonderful to work with," she says. "They offered the quintessential Southern hospitality. They really want your experience to be good."

When AACR announced that vice president Joe Biden would be the event's closing speaker, staff at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center did a great job of coordinating with the advance team to implement safety measures. "They had experience with VIPs at that level, so they know the ropes, which was very helpful," Ballinger says.

For their part, the CVB was a great help as well. Their staff know the city really well, Ballinger says, so they were able to suggest great venues for offsite events such as a Friday night gala. When AACR ran out of hotel rooms, the CVB diligently reached out to every hotel in the city to check their availability. In the end, they were able to secure rooms for all of the event's attendees.

Ballinger says the main thing she'll do differently when AACR returns to New Orleans in 2022 is reserve backup hotel rooms earlier. "If you're not taking the whole convention center, ask what's on the other end," she advises. New Orleans'



Rendering of the New Orleans convention district redevelopment project.



Pam Ballinger, CMP
Senior Director
Meetings and Exhibits
AACR
Philadelphia, PA

"The (New Orleans) convention center staff was amazing, and the CVB was wonderful to work with. They offered the quintessential Southern hospitality. They really want your experience to be good."

conference space is large enough to accommodate two sizeable groups, and a second convention can easily gobble up a large portion of the community's accommodations.

It's hard to believe that with 22,000 hotel rooms, there would ever be a time when planners couldn't find enough space. But New Orleans is regaining its place as a hot destination, both for conventions and leisure travel.

"New Orleans is an all-encompassing destination with something to offer every visitor, including 1,400+ restaurants and a countless number of amazing attractions, tours and experiences," says Cara Banasch, MBA, senior vice president of business development and strategy for the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau (NOCVB). "Attendees will instantly hear, see, smell and taste what makes New Orleans so unique. The NOCVB offers great tools to help planners fold the rich culture of the city into their programming."

Since Katrina, the convention center has been extensively renovated. It now includes a 60,000-sf Great Hall and 25,000 sf of prefunction space. The city envisions eventually transforming the convention district to make it even better. Plans for



The Indiana Convention Center and Lucas Oil Stadium.

el of development near the Georgia World Congress Center, Atlanta's convention center. The building is being expanded to create an area with 1 million sf of contiguous exhibit space. The convention center's overseeing body is working on a convention hotel that will provide up to 1,100 rooms and additional meeting space. By 2020, Georgia will have finished building Mercedes-Benz Stadium and adapting the Centennial Olympic Park so it's more event- and pedestrian-friendly. All of these changes will give meeting planners more great options for onsite and offsite events.

St. Louis. The iconic St. Louis Arch celebrated its 50th birthday in 2015. To mark this momentous event, the city embarked on a three-year effort to make the area surrounding the Arch (and nearby convention center) more enjoyable for residents and visitors. One of the main parts in the CityArchRiver project is creating a continuous walkway from the America's Center Convention Complex and surrounding hotels to the redeveloped riverfront park. The city is expanding attractions such as the historic Old Courthouse and Mu-



Rendering of St. Louis' new CityArchRiver project.



Rendering of Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium, coming in 2020.

the \$700 million redevelopment include a 1,200-room convention hotel, a linear park to connect several neighborhoods to the Mississippi River, new dining and shopping options, better lighting and new streetscapes. Although plans for the transformation are on hold for now, this is yet another improvement that would ensure New Orleans remains one of the hottest convention cities in the country.

NOTEWORTHY

Atlanta. The Georgia capital is already a major destination for conventions, sporting events and entertainment. The community recently embarked on several major projects to keep the community at the top of everyone's list of must-visit destinations. Atlanta's 2020 Vision calls for a tremendous lev-



Credit: Cobo Center

The Cobo Center on the Detroit River.

lection Showplace, a privately owned exposition, conference and banquet center. A major expansion, to be completed in 2017, will add a 200,000-sf addition on the event and exposition center's west side. Once the expansion is complete, the facility will span 600,000 sf. AC&F

seum of Westward Expansion, and adding amenities such as outdoor performance spaces and bicycling trails. New or remodeled hotels around the convention center have added or improved 1,750 rooms in the past few years. This facelift is making St. Louis worth a serious look for conventions of all sizes.

Indianapolis. It's hard to call a destination that was recently named *USA Today's* No. 1 convention city "up-and-coming." But there's enough happening in the Indiana capital to give it a closer look. This year and next, Indianapolis will open six new hotels that will add 1,100 rooms. One of the most exciting is a boutique hotel in the 21c Museum brand. The hotel will be adjacent to a new art museum the company is creating in the town's Old City Hall. *Condé Nast* recently called Indy "The Most Underrated Food City in the U.S." Indianapolis International Airport now offers nonstop service to 43 destinations and has the fastest Wi-Fi service of any airport in the country.

Detroit. The Cobo Center, offering 723,000 sf of exhibit space, completed a three-phase, \$279 million improvement project in July 2015 that included enhanced technology offerings, such as a broadcast studio, digital signage, internet and Wi-Fi upgrades, and an extensive fiber network. Cobo recently debuted an outdoor terrace called Cobo Square as part of the center's 45,000 sf of outdoor flex space. Since the renovation, the Cobo Center, which overlooks the Detroit River, has doubled its annual number of event days.

About 25 miles south of Detroit in Novi, Michigan, is the Suburban Col-

With 320,000 square feet of versatile space, Suburban Collection Showplace features the size, latest amenities and location that enticed Connected Car Technology Conference and Exhibition, TU-Automotive Detroit, to commit to return for a 16th time in 2017. Ever the magnet for innovators, The D is now home to the first-ever U.S. Patent & Trademark satellite office. By connecting our nation's innovation agency to Michigan's inventors and entrepreneurs, Detroit is helping spur new growth and opportunities by quickly moving ideas to reality. After all, innovation and a can-do attitude are what the comeback city has always been about.

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D visitdetroit.com

TU-Automotive Detroit at Suburban Collection Showplace and Dr. Cristal Sheppard, Director, Midwest Regional United States Patent and Trademark Office, Detroit.

Safety & Security at Conventions and Exhibitions

A Comprehensive, Well-Communicated Risk-Assessment Plan Makes All the Difference

By Christine Loomis

Large conventions, whether in the United States or abroad, can complicate safety and security programs. These days, one of the biggest fears for attendees and organizers is that a convention, especially one on foreign soil, might attract terrorist activity. Yet the likelihood of that is negligible.

There are, however, a host of potential problems that do pose more realistic threats.

"While one might immediately think terrorism is the primary concern for large conventions, in reality the likelihood that a terrorist incident will take place is minimal," says Joan Morgan, director, analytic personnel at Annapolis-based iJet International, which provides integrated risk-management solutions to help multinational organizations operate safely in global locations. "Other concerns that should be taken into consideration, depending on the location and theme of the convention, might be protests outside of the venue, a fire, power outage or petty crime at the venue or on the street."

Attendees also may face identity theft or cyber hacking, become ill or be involved in a car accident, all issues compounded in a foreign destination. There might be political instability in the area, or even a natural disaster.

While such risks may make attendees hesitant to take part in a large convention, the truth is that thousands of conventions take place every year across the globe without major incident. And there's something even more important: Almost all potential problems can be mitigated, maybe even eliminated, in one critical step: developing a comprehensive security and safety plan. Thankfully, many convention centers already have one in place, and most organizations and industry leaders are well aware of what must be done.

EVENT & TRAVELER SAFETY

"We're facing a new normal in the travel industry, and the challenges of this new normal carry over to conventions, conferences and business events," says Deborah Sexton, president and CEO of the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA). "Regardless of where a convention is being hosted, organizers are facing the reality that bringing people together in public spaces can elevate risks. As an industry, we must work together to address these concerns. Hoteliers, convention centers, shuttle bus companies, convention organizers and more — we all need to collaborate to make sure we are using appropriate onsite security measures to keep our attendees safe. When necessary, we should also consider enhanced measures such as metal detectors, K-9 patrol units, baggage limitations, additional personnel and more.

"In addition to the physical safety of attendees," Sexton adds, "convention organizers must place an emphasis on cyber security to protect data. Large events with open Wi-Fi networks represent easy targets for hackers and online criminals, and all organizers must do everything possible to prevent confidential information from falling into malicious hands."

Like others, Sexton notes that specific factors influence the protocols to put in place. "At PCMA, we recommend using a number of factors to evaluate an event to determine the level of risk including the number of attendees, the type of attendees, the host destination, the kind of material being discussed, the size of the venue and a range of other pieces of information. When it comes to our events, we are constantly in contact with the teams at our host venues and in our host cities to make sure that everyone understands our risk management procedures and make any updates necessary based on a comprehensive risk assessment."

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Phelps R. Hope, CMP, senior vice president of meetings and expositions for Kellen Company, an association management company with offices and representation in the United States, Europe, China, the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia, says communication is key. In addition to providing pre-conference information and advice related to personal safety, travel, local foods and more, he says, "We provide basic information such as registering at the local U.S. Embassy, which then keeps attendees apprised of safety conditions while also providing a communications channel in case of emergency." He adds, "We ensure that we have access to attendees while onsite at the convention in the event of an emergency." (See more on page 8.)

Also emphasizing communication, Morgan says, "Attendees should be advised to avoid crowds, heed all instructions from authorities and practice good situational awareness at all times."

Details of the security plan should be clearly communicated to attendees as well. "A security lead for the convention should be appointed," Morgan says. "All attendees should know who that individual is. The security lead should have a prearranged communication plan with attendees in the event of an emergency. Attendees should program an emergency contact number into their phone and understand in advance when and under what circumstances they should do a safety check-in with their company's security lead for the convention. A buddy system could also be used to have attendees check on each other in the event of an emergency."

While it's hard to anticipate all potential security hazards at a large gathering, Morgan says, "Knowing in advance who to contact will ease apprehension and minimize panic should an incident occur."

Saul Shanagher, former officer in the British Army and director at beTravelwise, a United Kingdom-based company that provides a range of training courses to aid professional organizations with their travel risk-management programs, says any approach to risk for conventions has two elements to address: event security and attendee/traveler safety.

In terms of the event, location is a factor. "Is the convention in a higher-risk destination? Normally conventions are held in locations that are international business centers and should be relatively safe," Shanagher says. "Even in slightly higher risk locations, conventions are usually an important part of the local economy, and the security services will be keen to ensure that they go without a hitch and that their reputation remains intact."

A bit trickier are conference and speaker themes, and changing situations. "Prior to November 2015, Western European cities were considered low risk," Shanagher notes. "While this risk has not significantly changed, there is a perception that an attack may be more likely. It is worth considering the

"It is worth considering the subject of the convention and those issues being addressed by keynote speakers. Is there anything on the program that is contentious, that may draw unwelcome attention?"



Saul Shanagher
Director
beTravelwise
London, England

subject of the convention and those issues being addressed by keynote speakers. Is there anything on the program that is contentious, that may draw unwelcome attention? Normally in developed countries, security will be increased to counter this likelihood, and if an at-risk person is speaking, their security detail will be enhanced for the event."

Then there's the convention center itself. "Most modern convention centers have excellent security," Shanagher says. "CCTV, guards, access control (badging and checks) all keep the center, stands (many stands cost huge sums of money and are well secured) and people safe. Generally, conventions will have a good level of security."

Organizers, he adds, should conduct their own risk assessment and put measures in place for any perceived weaknesses in the plan. "If you are concerned," he adds, "speak to (the security team) and ask them to put your mind at ease over any issues or worries you have."

Attendee and employee safety are equally important, and communication plays a major role in this arena.

"As for any international business trip," Shanagher says, "travel risk-management policies and processes should ensure that all delegates and employees are kept safe." He recommends that association managers do the following:

- **Brief or train attendees about the location and risks they might face.** If there is a threat to the convention, they should be aware of this, and budget should be set aside to increase the support they receive on the ground — if it is essential they attend.
- **Educate attendees to keep a low profile.** Because petty crime is often the greatest risk attendees face, not associating themselves with the convention outside of the convention center can help reduce that risk. Attendees should remove badges outside the convention center and avoid displaying convention bags or materials so they don't draw unnecessary attention to themselves. They should also use taxis where appropriate to reduce time spent in public.
- **Advise attendees to modify personal behavior as necessary.** This may include spending less time with

How to Respond to a Major Safety Incident or Disaster

According to The British Standards Institution, business travelers, including conference attendees, should follow these protocols in event of a major emergency:

- Never head toward an incident or disturbance. Immediately depart the scene by a direct route in the opposite direction of any threat.
- Find a safe location, such as a major international hotel, diplomatic

mission, hospital or a secure business premise. Move only if necessary to gain a more secure location.

- Immediately attempt to communicate out. SMS texts have a longer latency and stand a better chance of reaching any recipient in an affected area. However mobile (cellular) communications networks might be unworkable as the volume of traffic increases or emergency responders reserve the network for their own purposes. Landline services are an alternative.
- In the immediate aftermath, make reasonable attempts to account for other members of your party. If you are in a group, stay together.
- If necessary, medical assistance should be sought immediately. Any injured people should be

accompanied to the hospital, and you should find out where any injured people will be taken. If you can, seek advice on private medical facilities.

- Once at a place of safety, continue to communicate. Even when telephone lines are down, email and broadband links sometimes stay in operation. If communications have failed altogether, take whatever steps you can to get a message to the nearest diplomatic mission.
- Do not leave the secure location without notifying someone of your plans. Attempt to identify other foreigners similarly affected, stay together and pool resources. In general, avoid the temptation to relocate, certainly without ensuring that the route is clear and informing someone outside of your plans. — CL



large convention groups as well as controlling alcohol consumption. "There are often many drinks at receptions, and alcohol should be taken in moderation," Shanagher says. "It is preferable that one member of the group remain sober so he or she can make sensible and safe decisions for the group."

Ultimately, he adds, the background risks at the destination are more likely to affect attendees than risks associated with the convention itself. "Health, security and travel risks should all be identified, and the travel risk-management program should put measures in place to address these. Attendees will therefore be better prepared and protected, minimizing any risk associated with the convention through greater awareness and confidence."



"Most convention attendees are out-of-towners and, as such, their risk of becoming a victim of identity theft rises along with their chance of having personally identifiable information (PII) compromised."

Paige Schaffer
President and COO, Identity and Digital Protection Services Global Unit, Generali Global Assistance
New York, NY

CYBER SECURITY & IDENTITY THEFT PROTECTION

According to Javelin, a research-based consulting firm with offices in the United States and abroad, 13.1 million people were victims of identity fraud in 2015, and fraudster criminals got away with approximately \$15 billion. That means that in about three minutes, identity thieves can steal enough to pay for the average mortgage for two years, groceries for the average family for eight years and college fees for one year.

Here and abroad, cyber security and protection against identity theft are major concerns. Unfortunately, large conventions provide an opportunistic setting for hackers and thieves.

Paige Schaffer, president and COO of the identity and digital protection services global unit at NYC-based Generali Global Assistance (GGA), which provides comprehensive identity theft services including a \$1 million policy for reimbursement of expenses through global insurance giant Generali Group, says there are many reasons convention delegates are particularly at risk.

"Most convention attendees are out-of-towners and, as such, their risk of becoming a victim of identity theft rises along with their chance of having personally identifiable information (PII) compromised," Schaffer says. "Not only is one in 10 travelers affected by identity theft, but twice that number of people — one in five — have had sensitive information lost or stolen while traveling, according to the 2015 Experian Summer Travel and Budgeting Survey Report."

Schaffer says the latter statistic is one that should be especially concerning to association managers organizing conven-

tions and conferences because of the increased sharing of information that occurs at them.

"Throughout the event, attendees are constantly exchanging information with each other via business cards and scanner devices, as well as with convention and facility organizers," she says. "The data shared typically includes details we consider less sensitive, such as phone numbers, email addresses, names, dietary preferences and other information that may not be sufficient enough to be used to steal one's identity, but could be used in personalized, very-convincing phishing attacks aimed at extracting more sensitive data from individuals — also known as spearphishing."

All that information is being grouped together by attendees and/or convention organizers, making the convention an attractive place for identity thieves and cyber hackers. "They may set up a predatory Wi-Fi network, attempt to steal data from Bluetooth-enabled devices such as Fitbits, pose as attendees and collect business cards or even pick-pocket convention-goers to get information," Schaffer says.

And conventions attract large enough groups to give thieves a statistically high chance of being successful at committing a spearphishing scam. "With spearphishing accounting for 91 percent of hacker attacks," Schaffer points out, "attendees and convention organizers alike should be concerned about this risk."

A big problem, of course, is that networking and sharing information is a primary reason for attending conventions in the first place. The challenge for both attendees and organizers, Schaffer says, "is being able to exchange information with other industry professionals and focus on the quality content of the show without worrying about having their PII or identity compromised."

To that end, she encourages convention and association managers to:

"We are constantly in contact with the teams at our host venues and in our host cities to make sure that everyone understands our risk management procedures and make any updates necessary based on a comprehensive risk assessment."



Deborah Sexton, President and CEO, Professional Convention Management Association, Chicago, IL

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Special Risks for Women Travelers

Women face added risks when traveling. Sophie Harwood, specialist in travel risk-mitigation strategies for women and LGBT travelers for beTravelwise, advises women to:

- Research your destination before leaving home. Understand local culture, dress codes (should knees, shoulders, arms or hair be covered?), festivals/holidays, laws and customs.
- Because women are perceived as easier targets for petty crime such as pickpocketing, handbag theft and mobile phone theft, be discreet with high-value items. Keep them in a zipped compartment and take them out only in safe and secure places — not on the street or in public transportation terminals.
- Write down and store on your devices a list of emergency contacts including local contacts for the embassy, hotel, office, law enforcement and convention management. Also keep home contacts including friends and family.
- Give a friend or relative a copy of your itinerary, including flight details and hotel name(s), and agree to check



in once a day. It's important that someone knows where you are, where you should be and when.

- Carry sunglasses or a brimmed hat. These can help avoid unwanted eye contact, which in some destinations is considered an invitation.
- Be bling-savvy. In certain locations, including Europe, North America and South Africa, wear a "wedding" band, even if you're single, to discourage unwanted male attention. In less economically developed countries, leave prominent jewelry home to avoid being targeted by opportunists.
- Arm yourself. Statistics show that carrying a personal alarm gives you a 97 percent higher chance of warding off an attack.

— CL

- Offer free, secure Wi-Fi to ensure attendees don't try to connect to alternative free networks that may not be secure. Make clear which network is the secure one offered by the hosting organization, as criminals have been known to use convincing network names.
- Recommend attendees isolate IoT (Internet of Things) devices to protected, known networks.
- Encourage attendees to share their information only with those they want as a business connection and share only as much information as they have to.
- Inform attendees about the increased risk of identity theft while traveling and share the following tips with them on how to mitigate that risk while on the road.
- Before traveling, consider deleting sensitive apps, such as banking apps, social networks, etc. These are easy to reinstall when you get home.
- Log out of all apps after you're done. As with some websites, many apps keep you logged in by default

(Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) even after you close your browser or turn off your device, giving thieves easy access to your closest friends and other personal information.

- Remain wary of suspicious emails and websites. Studies indicate people are more likely to click on malware links on their cell phone than on their computer.
- Be aware of your surroundings. If you do use your mobile device in a public area, pay attention to people around you; take precautions to ensure that no one can see you type passwords or sensitive information on your screen.
- Turn on your phone's GPS locator and "wipe" function (if available). Many phones have a setting you can turn on that helps locate the phone via GPS if it's stolen. The "wipe" feature lets you wipe your data clean if it's stolen.
- Back up files. It's bad enough when your device is stolen; don't lose personal pictures or videos as well. Make a backup of important information and store it in a secure location.
- Properly dispose of all trip confirmation emails and boarding passes. This means shredding them before tossing them into the recycling bin.
- Consider offering identity protection to your association members as an added benefit. It's a great way to build loyalty by demonstrating your commitment to members and to differentiate yourself from competing associations.

Concern about identity theft, especially at large conventions, is well founded. The question is how to deal with it. "Associations can either be ahead of that trend or behind it," Schaffer says. "I encourage all forward-thinking ones to be ahead of the curve."

AC&F



Joan Morgan
Director, Analytic Personnel
iJet International
Annapolis, MD

"A security lead for the convention should be appointed. All attendees should know who that individual is. The security lead should have a prearranged communication plan with attendees in the event of an emergency."

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MARRIOTT RESORTS



Government Planners Rule!



By Patrick Simms

The stress level for government meeting planners can run high. Whether their event convenes federal or state employees, a political figure of prominence may choose to attend, along with his or her security entourage and special requests from the venue and planning team. Such was the case in 2005 for Maggie McGowan, CGMP, CMP, event coordinator for the Center for Public Management at the University of Oklahoma, when First Lady Laura Bush addressed 3,000 of Oklahoma's K-3 teachers.

"She came in to do a middle-of-the-day session, and we couldn't have anyone in the general session room leading up to that because they had to sweep it and have the bomb-sniffing dogs come in," McGowan recalls. "So we had to rearrange the schedule." The Center does contract work for various state agencies, and Oklahoma Attorney General Mary Fallin sometimes participates in meetings related to foster care, as she is a proponent of that cause. Similar to the first lady, she brings her own security, requires special entrance/exit arrangements with the hotel, as well as bomb-sniffing dogs for the larger venues.

SITE SOURCING STRESS

For the average government meeting, however, most of the stress these days probably comes from site sourcing. Unless the meeting site choice is restricted to government facilities, the planner will need to go out and find a hotel or conference center partner that is interested in government meetings business, which can be a difficult task in the current seller's market. Such meetings must abide by several restrictions that can make the business less than attractive to hoteliers receiving RFPs from corporate groups with more to offer.

"When we were in the recession years, government (meetings business) was really helping the hotels because businesses had cut back significantly on travel and conferences," notes Michelle A. Milligan, MSW, LMSW, CGMP. Milligan is both deputy administrator/clinic director for the Third Circuit Court, Clinic for Child Study in Detroit, Michigan, and the new national president (since July) of the Society of Government Meeting Professionals (SGMP).

"Now that it is a seller's market again, we have kind of taken a back seat. Obviously, if they can get twice the room rate than we can afford, then those private industries are going to get preference." That challenge compounds with a

higher workload in some cases, as many of those individuals charged with planning meetings for municipality employees have been faced with more site selection duties. "I think the number of government meetings has been on the rise again," observes Milligan.

A case in point is National Center Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning (NCECDTL), whose training meetings, annual conference and other events are planned by Tecumseh Deloney, CMP, CGMP, senior manager confer-

Rising to the Challenge of a Seller's Market That Makes a Tough Job Even Tougher

ences and meetings, with Washington, DC-based Zero to Three. According to Deloney, "We just began year two of a new five-year contract. I came off of

a contract we had for 20 years in five-year intervals. When I compare that contract to this new contract, our meetings have increased somewhat. The majority of the meetings that DTL has planned are held in the DC area. However, for some of our 2017 (meetings) we're going to go to the West Coast, as well as southern (destinations) like Atlanta or Texas. So we are beginning to branch out."

Of course, there are exceptions to the upward trend, and meeting budgets at some government agencies are actually more constrained than what they have been in the past. For example, meetings for several Oklahoma state agencies (including the Departments of Human Services, Energy and Health) are currently restricted to training events, McGowan notes. "The budget doesn't allow us to do major conferences at the moment. We had a 30 percent cut this year on top of a 20 percent cut last year. But there is mandatory training that has to get done."

SPENDING RESTRICTIONS

Planners of state agency meetings must observe both federal- and state-imposed spending restrictions. "There are guidelines the GSA (General Services Administration) puts out, and then each state has its own guidelines. Even each county could have some additional guidelines," Milligan points out. "They really do monitor how much you spend for conference meals and even the breaks. They also look at per diems for overnight rates. For the state of Michigan, only \$75 is an acceptable overnight rate, which is pretty low. And obviously when you're planning a conference you can usually have a higher rate, but it all depends on what your regulations are."

Some per diem relief is provided by the latest GSA guide-



Tecumseh Deloney, CMP, CGMP
Senior Manager
Conferences & Meetings
Zero to Three
Washington, DC

“When I reach out and send my RFP to hoteliers I specify ‘government per diem required’....They only have so many rooms at a particular rate. It all depends on the revenue manager and how many rooms are allocated at that per diem.”

lines, however. “The new rates have reflected moderate lodging per diem increases, and that’s pretty much across the country,” says Milligan. “Usually if the federal government or the GSA raises per diem in particular cities, then states follow suit. They’re never going to be as high as the federal rate, but they may increase it a little bit.” The higher GSA per diem caps, she adds, are meant to help groups afford rising hotel rates, “but the rates are always cheaper than what a business would be able to pay for those same rooms.”

While finding meeting hotels accommodating such rates can be challenging in today’s market, the bidding process itself is fairly straightforward. “When I reach out and send my RFP to hoteliers, I specify ‘government per diem required,’” says Deloney. “It’s just like an airline (with regard to seats); they only have so many rooms at a particular rate. It all depends on the revenue manager and how many rooms are allocated at that per diem.” The number of bids to be sought is also regulated. “If it’s over a certain dollar amount, we have to go to a bid process — to at least three suppliers, in some cases five,” says McGowan. “Then once we analyze the bids and can compare everything we choose the best option, not necessarily the cheapest, but the best bang for our buck.”

Apart from per diem caps, government meeting planners also face the restriction of not being able to pay attrition or cancellation fees, which also may be a sticking point in hotel contracting. “As a state agency we cannot pay attrition (or cancellation) because that’s considered paying for services not rendered,” McGowan explains. “It’s in our contract so they have to agree to it upfront. It can make negotiation difficult.”

Neither can many government groups make F&B guarantees, and often have to pay meeting room rental fees as a result. For example, the meeting may be based on a grant contract that specifies that F&B will not be paid for. “There are federal agencies out there issuing grants, and they write into the grant ‘we will not fund food and beverage,’” McGowan notes. The NCECDL does not pay for F&B either, so with the hotel’s F&B revenue needs in mind, Deloney encourages the hotels “to have a per diem menu so that the attendees can

eat in their establishment, a grab-and-go such as a continental breakfast and boxed lunch.”

PLANNER RESTRICTIONS

Planners themselves, not only their meetings, are under certain restrictions from the municipalities they serve. They cannot accept gifts over a certain dollar amount, and cannot go on fam trips — at least those that involve lots of “extras” that are not directly relevant to their business at the destination. With regard to gifts from suppliers, “on the federal side the limit is \$25 per instance, on the state side it’s \$50 a year flat in Oklahoma,” McGowan notes. “So if one of the hotel partners, and they do this all the time, drop us off food, we just put it in the break room and share it with everybody.”

For planners who work as contractors for the government, attending fam trips is up to their discretion. But for planners who are government employees, the trips are subject to federal and state regulation. “On some trips, they just take you to see all the different properties and you’re not getting all the extra items. So a trip like that is OK; you’re really just learning about the properties available,” Milligan explains. “But fam trips become problematic for government employees when, for example, a CVB gets together with local hotels and take you to the opera house, and then you’re staying overnight in

“When the supplier partner understands those government regulations pertaining to attrition, pertaining to per diem and room rate, they understand better where I’m coming from when I say, ‘Hey, this is all I can pay due to the rules.’”

Maggie McGowan, CGMP, CMP, Event Coordinator
Center for Public Management at the University of Oklahoma

the hotel and having these fancy dinners.” Thus, site inspections, which are typically more “strictly business,” are more acceptable. “State departments may allow different dollars in your budget for site inspections. Sometimes you can build those into the contract, and as long as it’s part of the contract, then a site inspection is perfectly fine,” says Milligan.

NEGOTIATION FLEXIBILITY

Given the spending caps and the inability to pay attrition/cancellation penalties or attendee F&B, government planners’ negotiation skills are often tested, particularly in today’s seller’s market. Any flexibility that will improve the value proposition for the hotelier must be considered. “What government planners have to do is either plan way out in advance, which

can be difficult, because some state governments will not sign things too far out, or be flexible and look at off-peak times,” Milligan advises. “They can also look at lower tier cities depending on how big the conference is.”

McGowan finds that site searching in Oklahoma’s smaller cities and suburban areas can be worthwhile. “Especially now that Oklahoma City has a pro basketball team, we rarely use downtown hotels during basketball season. We will bid to those properties if our client wants us to, but getting a competitive bid from them is hard,” she explains. However, date flexibility increases the chances of success with a property of any tier. “If you pick the right date when there’s nothing going on at the hotel, they’d rather have a meeting they’re not going to make a ton of money on than nothing at all.”

An additional challenge to McGowan’s negotiations is that the state agency training events she plans (ranging from 25-400 participants) tend to use an amount of meeting space that is disproportionate to guest room usage — from the hotel’s viewpoint, at least. “My people like to spread out, and nobody likes to sit right next to somebody else even though they’ve been working together for five years,” she says. “So I like to have more room than technically I need or that the hotel believes I need. Either they can or can’t give it to me, and then we start the negotiation process.” In many cases, government planners will need to bring both date and space flexibility to the table, however.

BUSINESS REFERRALS

They also can offer hoteliers the promise of more business down the line, either from their group or other parties via connections. As to the first possibility, “you have buying power if you are holding numerous conferences on a regular basis and you can do multiyear contracts, which is guaranteed revenue for suppliers,” Milligan observes. As to the second, planners do well to consider any business referrals they can extend to the hotelier, which amounts to leverage in future negotiations. “I’ve had a lot of (attendees) come to me and ask, ‘Would this hotel accept a private party?’ And I say, ‘Absolutely, contact this person,’” McGowan relates. “So I get a lot of questions about individual retirement parties, wedding parties and so on. Normally I will send the email between the two, hooking the individual up with the correct salesperson: ‘This is my brother planning a bachelor party for his best friend, he needs four to five rooms on this weekend, can you help him out?’ That way the hotel knows I’m the one who initiated the contact.”

SUPPLIER RELATIONSHIPS

McGowan also recommends SGMP colleagues to her hotel partners, and such industry relations are a major benefit of

“When we were in the recession years, government (meetings business) was really helping the hotels. ... Now that it is a seller’s market again, we have kind of taken a back seat.”



Michelle A. Milligan, MSW, LMSW, CGMP
SGMP National President
Deputy Administrator/Clinic Director
Third Circuit Court, Clinic for Child Study
Detroit, MI

membership. “Our Society is based on both planners and suppliers, and they develop relationships,” says Milligan. “Often-times, because they do have that relationship, they are able to figure out how to reach an agreement that benefits everyone.” And while in a seller’s market many hoteliers are not so needy for planner referrals, any industry-savvy hotel rep knows that the pendulum swings and that needs can change. “When the other industries are not planning meetings as much and using as much hotel space, hotels can tap government members to bring meetings to their location,” Milligan adds.

Many supplier members of SGMP have obtained the Certified Government Meeting Professional (CGMP) designation, offered by the Society. That’s “absolutely” reassuring, says McGowan, “because then we’re all speaking the same language. When the supplier partner understands those government regulations pertaining to attrition, pertaining to per diem and room rate, they understand better where I’m coming from when I say, ‘Hey, this is all I can pay due to the rules.’”

Of the SGMP’s 1,800-plus members, 500–600 have their CGMP certification, according to Milligan. Individuals who wish to take the CGMP class and exam must be current members with at least six months in good standing (the requirement may be waived with documentation of at least one year of experience in the hospitality industry). Participants complete three full days of training and take the test on the fourth day. Recertification is required every three years. While there is some overlap in course content with the CMP, that’s mainly on the logistical side of planning, says Milligan. “Where the government part comes into play is on the protocol items, ethics items, GSA regulations and so on.”

Planners who work with or within state government agencies must learn and come to terms with their particular restrictions, which are more stringent in some states than others. “In Texas they can’t travel at all (for meetings), in or out of state,” McGowan relates. “So if the meeting is not in their hometown, they don’t get to go. That restriction has been in place for about five years.” Fortunately, McGowan does not have to deal with that limitation in Oklahoma. “Not yet,” she cautions. AC&F



Find Your Perfect Florida... ...Like These Meeting Planners Did!

Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa in Bonita Springs on the Gulf Coast hosted PRISM's sunset beach party.

By Christine Loomis

Florida holds enormous appeal for groups with its sweeping white beaches and alluring Atlantic and Gulf coasts. While much about Florida is the same throughout — sun, sand, water, sports, entertainment and incredible ease of access — its regions and towns are happily dissimilar, giving planners and associations a huge choice in where to meet. Large city, beach town, golf resort, theme-park resort, big-brand hotel, upscale, sultry, Latin, sophisticated — it's all available. What's your pleasure?



Southern Atlantic Coast

From the Florida Keys and Miami north to Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach, Port St. Lucie and Melbourne, Florida's southern Atlantic Coast encompasses many of the state's most storied cities and beaches. Sophisticated and eclectic, this coastline is no one-size-fits-all meeting destination. It's diverse, and the biggest problem for planners wanting to meet here may be which city to choose.

For Kate Battiste, CMP, senior meeting planner with the American Nurses Credentialing Center, part of the American

"We like the destination feel, the intimacy of (West Palm Beach) and that it is very female-attendee friendly. It's also beautiful and very easy to access."

Kate Bashore-Battiste, CMP, Senior Meeting Planner
American Nurses Credentialing Center, American Nurses Association, Silver Spring, MD

Nurses Association, the choice landed on one of the state's newest hotels, the 400-room Hilton West Palm Beach, the only hotel in South Florida connected to a convention center — The Palm Beach County Convention Center. Although the group's ANCC Pathway to Excellence Conference will not take place until April 2018, planning is already well underway.

Battiste notes that the conference, which typically draws about 1,200 attendees, has a large number of female attendees, and that fact impacts the destination choice. "We have a mostly female audience, and the city seems perfect for our demographic," she says. "We like the destination feel, the intimacy of the city and that it is very female-attendee friendly. It's also beautiful and very easy to access. With the new trains coming online soon, it will be even easier.

"The city isn't huge, and our conference won't be one small fish in a sea of many," she adds. "We feel we can get the attention we need to make the conference great."

In terms of the planning thus far, Battiste says site visits have been very helpful. "We were invited to visit the location twice, and that has helped us visualize the flow of our meeting. Dori Jensen with Discover the Palm Beaches, Maria Walker DOSM



The Hilton West Palm Beach, next to the Palm Beach County Convention Center, opened in March.

Palm Beach County Convention Bureau and Brooks Atwater, senior sales manager at the Hilton have been very responsive to any questions I have had. It was great to see how convenient the airport is and how walkable the city is. Also, seeing how short the distance is for the connection between the Hilton and the convention center was great. You can't judge that on a map. The two properties really flow together well. The site visit is so valuable in getting a realistic picture of the convention center and the city."

Northern Atlantic Coast

The northern half of Florida's Atlantic coast is dominated by two distinctly different destinations: Jacksonville and Daytona Beach.

Jacksonville, set where the St. Johns River and the Atlantic Ocean meet, is a modern, sophisticated metropolitan area. It's

"Our attendees were able to enjoy the amenities offered by the hotel during a 'sanctioned' recess time. They came back refreshed and relaxed and ready to learn."



Darlene W. Somers, CMP
Senior Meetings Manager
PRISM
Chicago, IL

the 12th most populous city in the United States and offers everything you expect from a big city — plus fabulous beaches just a short distance from the thriving downtown riverfront area. It provided an ideal setting for the annual meeting of United States Aquatic Sports, the national federation representing USA swimming, diving, syncro and other aquatic sports.

Ellaine Cox, convention coordinator for the organization, which meets annually in September, says the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront is a favorite hotel for the group and a great fit. "We chose Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront because we knew that the staff would do whatever it takes to make each and every convention a very positive experience, not only for our delegation but for the entire convention committee.

"Laura Kowalski in sales and the Convention Services Manager Diane Liberty were both outstanding. From the GM to the servers in the restaurants, to the sales folks in the gift shop, everyone at Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront went above and beyond to make everything a good experience. Amazing staff!"

Cox says that the group had "minimally 30 concurrent breakouts changing in time and setups all day long, and Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront was always ready for the next meeting regardless of necessary changes. From small meetings to House of Delegates to 1,000 for the banquet, nothing was impossible. It is an attractive hotel, and we have never had AV is-

The Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront offers outdoor event spaces overlooking the St. Johns River.





Marsha Kiner, MS, CAE
Associate Executive Director
Association of Florida Colleges
Tallahassee, FL

“The hotels offer affordable rates and provide outstanding service. We also like that there are numerous restaurant options in the area beachside. ...Our members love to visit Daytona Beach.”

and at different times of year. “Daytona’s location makes it an ideal beach site for conferences. If you’re looking for a hotel that will cater to your specific needs, you’ll find it in Daytona Beach,” she says.

The Shores Resort & Spa is one such hotel. “It’s a great hotel for a large meeting or a small retreat,” Kiner says. “I’ve held both at this property and they were both successful. It’s a property that I return to over and over again. You can’t beat the location’s beauty and central location.”

Kiner describes The Shores as “an understated upscale beach resort” with great customer service and meeting facilities. “It’s affordable luxury at its best,” she adds. “From the moment you enter the property you are met with welcoming smiles and excellent service. The catering staff is great and the bar staff is excellent as well. The property is not so large that your attendees will get lost. You have options for outdoor events and the ambience is breathtaking.”

Kiner says she has not taken advantage of what the CVB offers but adds, “I would reach out to them for additional information and items for my attendees if I were unfamiliar with the area.”



The oceanfront Shores Resort & Spa in Daytona Beach Shores offers 212 guest rooms and 20,000 sf of event space.

Credit: Shores Resort & Spa

Her only other suggestion for those who might meet in Daytona Beach or at The Shores is, “Be clear about your needs upfront, and ask for what you need to make your meeting successful. The Daytona Beach area has great hoteliers who will gladly assist you in creating a successful meeting experience for your clients.”

Gulf Coast

Florida’s laid-back Gulf Coast, with Fort Myers, Sanibel Island, Naples and Sarasota among its well-known destinations, draws many meetings. The Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa in Bonita Springs, just south of Cape Coral and Fort Myers Beach, is one of the area’s primary meeting resorts. With 454 guest rooms and more than 75,000 sf of flexible indoor and outdoor space, it offers planners lots of choices.

Darlene W. Somers, CMP, with Association Management

sues of any kind. We had several social functions, luncheons and receptions with broad menu choices. The food was outstanding. The hotel was also very willing to work within our budgets for food and beverage.”

The city, too, is a good destination for this group. “Jacksonville is a good fit for our association in terms of the location, airlift, ease of access, cost and quality of lodging entertainment. On top of that, Visit Jacksonville went above and beyond to help us in any way possible to make the visit a good one,” Cox says.

The hotel provided everything the group needed in terms of event and function space, and Cox says she relied on Visit Jacksonville and the hotel to make recommendations and assist with local entertainment, which they did. She also notes that the hotel’s location was a big plus when delegates wanted to get outdoors in free time. “Our delegation loved to run along the waterfront.”

To other planners considering the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront, Cox advises, “Plan big and plan for fun! Whatever you can’t think of, the hotel staff and Visit Jacksonville will make sure you’re covered!”

About 90 miles south of Jacksonville, Daytona Beach is best known for its annual NASCAR race. But the city offers more than that, including 23 miles of beach, and a boardwalk and pier with oceanfront dining and amusement rides. It’s also a place where business is taken seriously.

Daytona is an ideal meeting destination for the Association of Florida Colleges (AFC), which has gathered there on more than one occasion. “We like Daytona because it is in the central part of the state and near one of our colleges,” says Marsha Kiner, associate executive director, MS, CAE. “It is also close — about 45 minutes to an hour — to the Orlando International Airport. The hotels offer affordable rates and provide outstanding service. We also like that there are numerous restaurant options in the area beachside. The seafood is fresh and the atmosphere is inviting. Our members love to visit Daytona Beach.”

Kiner says AFC has held large meetings with 200-plus attendees as well as smaller meetings of 12 to 30 in Daytona,

Center and senior meetings manager for PRISM (Professional Records & Information Systems Management), the nonprofit trade association for information management companies, brought the organization’s annual meeting with 300 attendees to the hotel in May. She notes that the hotel is a short distance (about 25 minutes) from Southwest Florida International Airport, which “offers a hassle-free travel experience due to its smaller size.”

PRISM previously had held a meeting at this Hyatt with excellent results. “Our attendees were eager to return,” Somers says. “The Hyatt is large enough to offer all the amenities we need, but small enough that our group of 300 can ‘own’ the hotel. Pretty much everyone our attendees meet in the hotel is with our group, so networking is effortless.”

Additionally, the meeting space works well. “The meeting space is just steps away from the lobby,” Somers notes. “The footprint of the meeting space feels small, but it has everything we need for exhibits, general session and multiple breakout rooms.”

And then there’s the service. Somers calls the service at the Hyatt “phenomenal,” adding, “Our attendees are seasoned travelers, and we always get compliments on the service when we are at the Coconut Point property.”

In 2016, the group changed up the agenda a bit, giving at-

“Visit Jacksonville went above and beyond to help us in any way possible to make the visit a good one.”

Ellaine Cox, Convention Coordinator
United States Aquatic Sports, South Bend, IN

tendees time to enjoy all that is offered at the resort, with excellent results, and Somers recommends it as a possibility for other planners. “This year we tried something new,” she says. “We added a ‘white space’ to our agenda. This was a three-hour time frame one afternoon with no conference events planned. Because of the plethora of activities at the Hyatt (spa, golf, tennis, fishing, beach, pool) our attendees were able to enjoy the amenities offered by the hotel during a ‘sanctioned’ recess time. They came back refreshed and relaxed and ready to learn.”

Florida Panhandle

The Panhandle in Northwest Florida offers an ambience both similar to and entirely different from the rest of Florida. Its weather patterns and proximity to Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi make it feel more like what we think of as “the South,” and, unlike the rest of Florida, it’s a summer destination — especially for residents of the Southern states. Region III of the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA)



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“We meet at beach locations regularly because we find we have excellent attendance when we do.”

Kay Gilstrap, Chair-Elect Region III

National Council of University Research Administrators, Douglasville, GA

met in Sandestin along Miramar Beach in May, drawing 274 attendees. Kay Gilstrap, a member and chair-elect for Region III, helped plan the meeting.

“Region III of NCURA is the Southeastern Region (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands),” she says “Our annual spring meetings are known for excellent professional development and networking opportunities; however, we’re also known for outstanding locations for our meetings. We meet at beach locations regularly because we find we have excellent attendance when we do.”

The group comes almost entirely from universities, educational institutions and non-profit hospitals, meaning budgets for members to travel are limited. “Having our meetings in locations that are desirable and easy to travel to, whether by driving or flying, is very important,” Gilstrap says. “Even more important is to have our meetings in locations where the guest-room rates are reasonable and where we can keep the registration at a low rate. We are a nonprofit group, so we price our registration to cover the cost of food, beverage, AV and other essential services



Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa in Destin on Northwest Florida's Gulf Coast offers 40,000 sf of meeting space.

Credit: Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa

for the meeting. Miramar Beach met all of those requirements.”

The group was based at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, which offers more than 600 guest rooms, 40,000 sf of meeting space and easy access to all that Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort offers. “The price of the guest rooms, the ease in getting to the location and the ability to keep our registration costs down, all made the Hilton a good choice,” Gilstrap says. “Additionally, the fact that everything is connected so you do not have to go outside to get from the guest rooms to the meeting rooms was very important. We received many positive comments about it from our attendees.”

Among the staff, Gilstrap says, “Terri Marsh and Jennifer Cat-

ani were great to work with. They truly cared that the meeting was a success. Martin Manley also made everything so easy during the meeting! The people that work with you on your meeting truly care that it is a success.”

Almost everything went very well. “The décor was modern and comfortable, and everything was very clean,” Gilstrap says. “The AV guys were great to work with. Any issues that popped up during the meeting were addressed quickly and efficiently, AV and otherwise.”

There were some concerns related to the food, particularly the vegetarian meals. “There was not enough variety offered in general, but the vegetarians basically had the same lunch each meal,” Gilstrap says, but adds that the restaurants on the hotel grounds were excellent, so attendees had options. “We had a good number of people elect to eat at the restaurants. I would take that into consideration in the future when determining food selection for the meetings.”

One thing she wishes she had done differently relates to rooms. “I wish I had known to block more rooms for Friday and Saturday nights for our workshops. We ended up with folks staying about a mile away on those two nights and then moving to the meeting hotel on Sunday. We lost some room nights because several people elected to stay in the other hotel. We have workshops on Saturday and Sunday. The regular meeting is Sunday evening to Wednesday at noon.”

Gilstrap notes that each chair-elect in the organization writes a summary of their meeting and provides a recommendation as to whether or not to return. “Because of the ease of working with Terri and Jennifer, along with the positive survey results from attendees,” she says, “I recommended that we have a future meeting at this location.”

The bottom line for groups considering Florida for a meeting is that the state is big enough and diverse enough to meet the needs of any group in terms of budget, rooms, meeting space, ambiance, access and location.

NEW & NOTEWORTHY

MIAMI

The opening this summer of ME by Melia in downtown Miami marks Melia Hotels International's first-ever U.S. property. The sleek, uber contemporary hotel has 129 rooms and 14,000 sf of event space and prime outdoor areas. The 14th floor Sun Deck with two pools and a bar, plus a new interpretation of famed STK Miami steakhouse, add to the compelling mix. The hotel is located near American Airlines Arena and Miami Worldcenter.

The mid-century modern oceanfront Confidante debuted in April in Miami's mid-beach neighborhood. Offering 363 guest rooms and 16 suites, along with two heated swimming pools, private cabanas and bungalows, two restaurants and a spa and salon, the hotel has everything guests could want — includ-



Destin's new Henderson Beach Resort, managed by Salamander Hotels & Resorts, is set to open November 17.

ing 35,000 sf of flexible indoor and outdoor function space. The hotel is located on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach and is part of The Unbound Collection by Hyatt.

The acclaimed Nobu brand and singular Eden Roc Miami Beach will come together as Nobu Hotel Eden Roc, another hotel-within-a-hotel from partners Chef Nobu Matsuhisa, Academy Award-winner Robert De Niro and Hollywood producer Meir Teper. Following an extensive renovation and landmark restoration, the new hotel opens this fall. Among its amenities: restaurant Nobu Miami at Eden Roc. The hotel will feature 214 guest rooms and 35 suites, four penthouse event spaces and



Sundial Beach Resort & Spa on Sanibel Island offers waterview event spaces.

Credit: Sundial Beach Resort & Spa

four pools. A 22,000-sf spa and fitness facility, a farm-to-fork restaurant and more than 70,000 sf of stylish meeting and event space should impress attendees.

Trump National Doral Miami completed a \$250 million renovation aimed at restoring the hotel to its former glory. The resort now features 643 refreshed guest rooms and suites

in eight villas. Eight food and beverage outlets give guests plenty of choices and, of course, the legendary Blue Monster and three additional courses are still waiting to test the mettle of golfers, who now also can take advantage of a new True Spec Club Fitting Center Lab and a Jim McLean golf school. The resort also offers 100,000-plus sf of meeting space, including indoor and outdoor venues.

JACKSONVILLE

Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront, Northeast Florida's largest convention hotel with more than 116,000 sf of meeting space, has completed its multimillion-dollar renovation of all 951 guest rooms while adding six hard-walled meeting rooms on the fourth level of the property's Terrace Building. The renovation also included corridors, the rooftop fitness center and Regency Club Lounge, which now provides additional space for

small meetings, networking areas and workstations overlooking the city skyline.

DAYTONA BEACH

The Shores Resort & Spa has an all-new oceanfront Tiki Hut that's available for groups of up to 20. One fun way to kick off an event: A sunrise breakfast at the Tiki Hut, complete with live music.

SANIBEL ISLAND

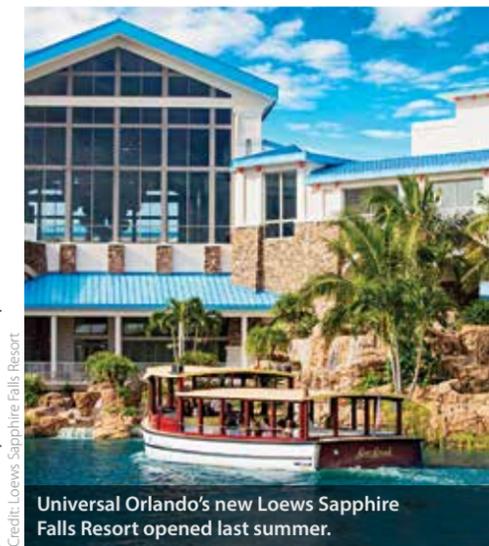
Across the Sanibel Causeway off the Southwest Florida Gulf Coast near Fort Myers is Sundial Beach Resort and Spa on the barrier island of Sanibel, a slice of authentic, laidback Florida. Sundial offers unique outdoor event space with water views as well as the new Resort Centre, which is the largest meeting venue on Sanibel Island, boasting 12,000 sf of flexible space that accommodates up to 300 guests.

DESTIN

Opening November 17 in Destin on Florida's Panhandle is the brand new Henderson Beach Resort, managed by Salamander Hotels & Resorts. Overlooking the Gulf Coast's emerald green waters and celebrated sugar sand beaches and adjacent to a coastal nature preserve, Henderson Beach Resort offers 30,000 sf of indoor-outdoor meeting and beach event space.

ORLANDO

Loews Sapphire Falls Resort opened at Universal Orlando in July. This fall, the hotel adds 115,000 sf of meeting space to Universal Orlando, including a 41,000-sf ballroom and 30,000-sf hall. The space connects by air-conditioned bridge to Loews Royal Pacific Resort, providing a combined 247,000 sf of meeting space in the Loews Meeting Complex at Universal Orlando. AC&F



Universal Orlando's new Loews Sapphire Falls Resort opened last summer.

Credit: Loews Sapphire Falls Resort



Aria Resort & Casino is a "perfect base hotel" for the Marketing Association of Credit Unions.

Credit: Marketing Association of Credit Unions

The Appeal of Nevada

Associations Love Meeting in Las Vegas and Reno Year After Year

Las Vegas has long been among the top U.S. cities for meetings. In 2016, Cvent ranked it the No. 3 meeting city in the country, behind Orlando and Chicago. According to Cvent's analysis, Las Vegas is home to three of the 10 largest convention centers in the country and its applicable stats are impressive: 168 hotels, 140,000 total sleeping rooms and 3,200,000 sf of convention center space. The city's largest exhibit space is 2,182,167 sf, and its largest ballroom 100,014 sf — plenty of space for the largest association conventions and exhibitions.

While Reno and Lake Tahoe did not make that list, they hold enormous appeal for associations, including the fact that this area offers costs averaging 30 percent less than competing destinations. Additionally, there are some 20,000 hotel rooms available, and the Reno-Sparks Convention Center provides over half a million sf of meeting space, not to mention a location just 15 minutes from the Reno-Tahoe International Airport. And there are complimentary shuttles to many area properties, saving budget-conscious planners even more.

For Julie Dunn, owner/founder of San Francisco-based JBD

Events, who organized the May conference of the Marketing Association of Credit Unions, Las Vegas was an excellent fit. "Our attendees love Las Vegas. We rotate the conference every year, and just about every three years we land in Las Vegas. It's easy to get to with lots of flight options, and the hotels are fun and interesting."

Dunn says that one key to making a Las Vegas meeting work for a group is to plan early and strategically. "We are a small conference, about 150 attendees, that needs lots of space so our room-to-space ratio is high," she says. "However, we tend to find a week during the year (after Memorial Day) where we can fill a void for some hotels. This is key for our organization."

Aria Resort & Casino is a perfect base hotel for this group and Dunn has no hesitation recommending it to others. "I loved the openness of the Aria hotel," she says. "It has the space and the right flow of meeting rooms. I especially appreciated the short distance from the guest room elevators to the meeting rooms. In Las Vegas, this can be miles! And I like that the meeting rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows, which allows for fabulous natural light, a bonus in Las Vegas."

By Christine Loomis

"I also loved the free Wi-Fi in the meeting space, and I appreciated the upgraded setup of the meeting rooms with built-in projectors and screens," she adds. "It felt modern and techy."

Dunn also notes that the food at Aria was top-notch. "Many people don't expect much from hotel food, but all of our attendees raved about it," she says. "The dining outlets in the hotel are amazing, one restaurant is better than the last. We hosted an outdoor poolside reception the first night and it was a hit, too — no one wanted to leave!"

Aria was the setting for the meeting rooms, exhibit hall and guest rooms, and the staff definitely added to the positive experience. "Our attendees loved the hotel rooms and the high touch/tech feel of the touch screens and the amenities in the room. The business center was amazing with our group," Dunn adds. "We had 35 vendors, many shipments and nothing was lost or misplaced. The Aria staff was top of the line. They were available always, even on a holiday weekend. They are attentive with high attention to detail and so kind and patient."

Equally impressive was the staff with MGM Productions, which Dunn used to help transform the ballroom for the awards dinner. "Everyone loved how it felt totally different than the room they were in all week," she says. "It was a two-hour transformation and it was amazing — and I have photos to prove it!"

The group also went out into the city's downtown for a tour at Zappos, the online shoe and clothing company. "We did a Zappos tour for our attendees, and they loved it. It was a huge hit, and then we did a workshop afterwards at the hotel to debrief. I highly recommend it," Dunn says.

All in all, the meeting went very well. Las Vegas and Aria provided exactly what the group needed with ease. Challenges? "None," says Dunn, and what planner doesn't want that scenario?

MEETING YEAR AFTER YEAR REAPS REWARDS

Kay Granath, CMP, CAE, with Chicago-based Association Management Center, brought the international expo for the Awards and Personalization Association to Las Vegas in March, a group of 2,500. "The group has held this expo in Las Vegas for many years. Many of the members and attendees are located in the Southwest and welcome this opportunity to make their annual trip to Las Vegas to see new products and renew acquaintances," Granath says. "While in Las Vegas, they take advantage of all the new attractions and visit ones that they have discovered on past trips. While we have offered other site options for this meeting, the group feels they are best served by Las Vegas and all it has to offer."

From Granath's perspective, the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Association also is integral to the success of the meeting. "The Las Vegas CVA is always a tremendous help to us with this meeting. They have a local office here in Chicago,

"Our attendees love Las Vegas. We rotate the conference every year, and just about every three years we land in Las Vegas. It's easy to get to with lots of flight options, and the hotels are fun and interesting."



Julie Dunn
Owner/Founder
JBD Events
San Francisco, CA

and we work with them frequently as well as the Las Vegas office," she says. "They know where to find anything in the city and make a concentrated effort to keep on top of all the new things coming into and going on in the city. They are very responsive, and we have a great relationship with them. No question is too obscure.

"For many years, we have worked with the LVCVA to find the appropriate space and price point for this group," Granath adds. "The group's attendance has fluctuated at times due to economic factors, but with the great variety of space available in the city, we have been able to consider different options based on the size of the show. For several years we were able to utilize space in the Las Vegas Convention Center, but with the postponement of the expansion several years back, we needed to find alternative space. Through the efforts of the LVCVA we were able to find space at the Rio. By being flexible and signing for multiple years, we have found a venue that works for this event."

The group has been based at the Rio All Suite Hotel and Casino, a Caesars property, since 2013. "The Rio has all the meeting space that we need for this program, and the group can be contained in one location. The meeting space isn't so large that attendees feel lost and lose the interactions with others," Granath says. "The price point of this location and services that the hotel has to offer work very nicely for this program. The hotel offers free parking, for example, which is a huge benefit for those attending the trade show only. Many members attend for one day only and the free parking, conveniently located just outside the meeting space, is a huge asset. Some of the attendees travel with larger vehicles and are able to do so with little inconvenience because of this amenity."

Granath likes that the meeting space is contained on one floor, and that there are several large spaces adjacent to one another, which makes for ideal traffic flow. She says the meeting and exhibit space is exactly right for this group, and she says the group appreciates the spacious sleeping rooms as well. And the off-Strip location is an advantage, not a problem.



Lynne McNees
President
International Spa Association
Lexington, KY

"It's always important to fully understand all the costs associated with planning an event in Las Vegas. Costs can vary significantly from one venue to another in terms of labor rates, exclusive service contracts the venue may have in place and F&B pricing."

hidden charges. Try to address some of these fees and practices when negotiating the contract with the hotel."

ALWAYS A GOOD FIT

Las Vegas has long been a draw for the International SPA Association (ISPA) annual conference and expo, which has alternated between the Venetian Las Vegas and Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino. For 2016, the conference, with 2,600 attendees, is set at the Venetian, with the hotel and Sands Expo providing the primary meeting venues.

"Las Vegas is a good fit for our organization for a number of reasons," says Lynne McNees, ISPA president. "One of the main points of focus when selecting a destination for our annual conference and expo is ease of access and the number of direct flight options into the host city as the conference attracts both domestic and international attendees. Another key objective is to find a venue that can (accommodate) the entire



The 50th anniversary celebration at Caesars Palace Las Vegas.

room block and required expo space under one roof, and Las Vegas has several options to choose from."

This year, the Venetian delivered what was needed. "We chose the host hotel based on several factors," McNees says. "Our annual conference and expo takes place in September or October each year and must avoid overlapping any major international holidays. This can present challenges in finding availability as the demand throughout the city in these peak time frames continues to grow. Coupled with finding the right dates/pattern, we must also find a venue that can accommodate the room block, large expo space required, general session and several breakout rooms, all within close proximity to one another and under one roof. Additionally, room rates, food and beverage pricing and onsite evening venue options also play a role in the decision-making process. The Venetian

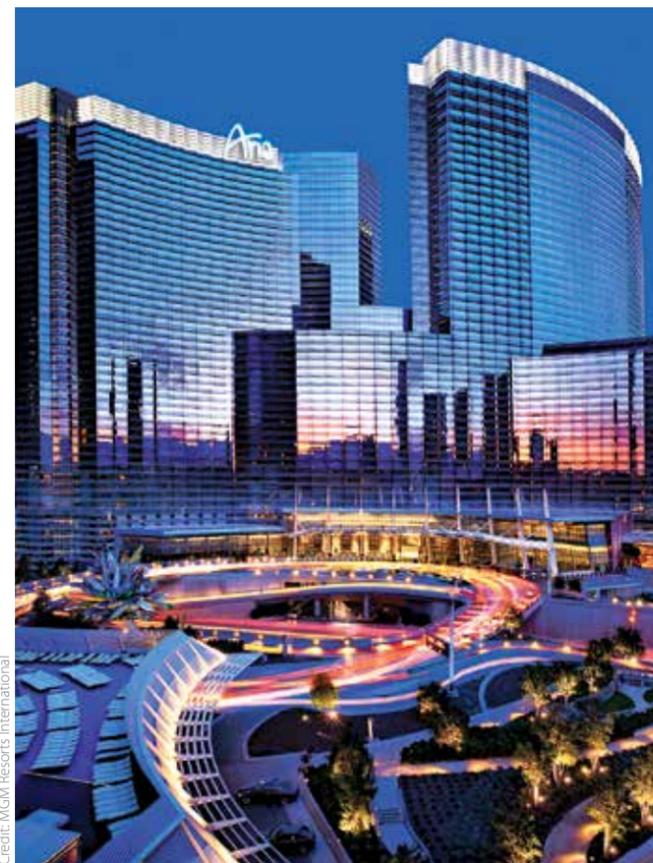
provided solutions to each of these key areas of focus and aligned with our vision for the conference."

There are other factors as well. McNees notes that Canyon Ranch SpaClub, a longtime member of ISPA, is located within the property. And she says Venetian's sales and catering team has played a major role throughout the planning process, "forging a partnership and supporting the ever-evolving needs of our conference. The team's responsiveness," she adds, "as well as flexibility and desire to ensure the conference is a success for everyone has showcased their level of dedication to our partnership."

ISPA hosts a Farewell Party on the final night, which this year is located at the Venetian's popular nightclub Tao. "It's important to host this event at a venue located on property," McNees says, "as it makes the planning easier and saves on logistical costs."

McNees notes that Las Vegas has always drawn strong attendance for ISPA's annual event thanks to ease of access and all that the city offers. "However," she says, "it's always important to fully understand all the costs associated with planning an event in Las Vegas. Costs can vary significantly from one venue to another in terms of labor rates, exclusive service contracts the venue may have in place and F&B pricing."

If there is one thing she might do differently in the future,



Aria Resort & Casino.

"Overall it was a great event. The Peppermill was easy to work with and passionate about making the experience positive for attendees. Most of our guests had rooms in Tuscany Tower, which were beautifully and recently renovated. ...The resort was very easy to navigate."



Leslie Wiernik, CSRP
Executive Director
National Association of
Subrogation Professionals
Pittsburgh, PA

it's call on the Las Vegas CVA. "The LVCVA is a resource we have underutilized," she says, "and something we should explore in the future."

Reno, Nevada

When the National Association of Subrogation Professionals (NASP) met last November, they chose Peppermill Resort Spa Casino in Reno. Leslie Wiernik, CSRP, executive director of the association, says Peppermill was a new venue for the group, which was one draw. She also points to "Peppermill's willingness to work with us on needed concessions." The resort was, in fact, one of three possible venues for the event, but Peppermill's staff, owners and features made it a winner for the conference, which drew 950 attendees.

Wiernik says the entire sales staff was wonderful but Carrie Ann Sattler and Chris Alex, "who remained involved throughout the entire program," stood out. There also were Convention Services Manager Travis O'Donnell, Corporate Communications Manager Katie Silva and Peppermill owner Nat Carasali, "who personally met with NASP leadership, interacted with attendees and participated in a conference education session to highlight the hotel's green initiatives."

Because of the above-mentioned reasons, Wiernik says, "NASP made the decision to contract with the Peppermill. Overall it was a great event. The hotel was easy to work with and passionate about making the experience positive for attendees. Most of our guests had rooms in Tuscany Tower, which were beautifully and recently renovated. Guest room elevators were across the foyer from the large ballroom used for the exhibit hall, and the resort was very easy to navigate."

Wiernik appreciated that the casino is separate so as not to be a distraction to the conference.

Wiernik says Reno "is not necessarily an easy city to get to but Peppermill worked with us on room rates, transportation, etc., to offset any additional expense that attendees might incur by coming to Reno."



Credits: The National Association of Subrogation Professionals

And the Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority, notes Wiernik, "was very helpful. They met with NASP staff on several occasions and created a microsite to help market the city and the conference."

In the end, Wiernik says, one thing that really stood out for her and the attendees was the "rebirth of downtown Reno."

NEW AND NOTEWORTHY

Still awaiting board approval is Steve Wynn's plan for the Paradise Park expansion at **Wynn Las Vegas**, slated to stand on approximately 130 acres currently occupied by Wynn Golf Club. If it goes through, Paradise Park will add 260,000 sf of meeting space. In February, Wynn Las Vegas announced a major expansion with development of Wynn Plaza, more than 75,000 sf of luxury retail space. It's inspired by elegant Avenue Matignon in the Right Bank of Paris and scheduled to debut fall 2017. W Las Vegas is slated to open on the Las Vegas Strip in December, replacing the 289-room SLS Lux property. As a W it will become part of Starwood's Tribute Portfolio, which was launched in 2015.

Aria Resort & Casino announced a major expansion of its award-winning LEED Gold-certified convention center. The \$154 million project will deliver an additional 200,000 sf of technologically advanced, flexible meeting space across four stories, highlighted by stunning indoor/open-air spaces and a glass-enclosed venue with dramatic views of The Park and spectacular new T-Mobile Arena. With the completion of the

expansion, in 2018, Aria will feature more than 500,000 sf of meeting space for its luxury clientele.

At **Caesars Palace**, the renovated Julius Tower welcomed its first guests last January. By the end of 2016, the Caesars group will have renovated and upgraded more than 4,800 rooms at four properties, including Planet Hollywood, Paris Las Vegas and Harrah's Las Vegas. Rio, another Caesars property, celebrated the opening of Guy Fieri's El Burro Burrito this year, and in June, Caesars started offering personal yoga sessions inside a cabin on High Roller, the world's largest observation wheel. Later this year, The Linq promenade will see new dining options including In-N-Out Burger, Gordon Ramsay Fish & Chips, Canter's Deli, Virgil's Real Barbecue and Amorino.

In Reno, owners of the Siena announced that the property would be rebranded and newly opened as a non-gaming **Renaissance Hotel** in early 2017. Siena's casino, which closed in 2015, has been replaced with a recreation area featuring indoor and outdoor bocce ball courts.

In recognition of the 100th anniversary of the U.S. National Park system, the **Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority** has developed a website, *findyourpark.vegas*, to encourage visitors to use the city as a base from which to explore many of the recreation and conservation areas, state and national parks close to Las Vegas.

The National Association of Subrogation Professionals (NASP) met last November at the Peppermill Resort Spa Casino in Reno.

THE GOLD STANDARD FOR MEETINGS



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By Derek Reveron

From Austin to San Antonio, the Booming Lone Star State Is More Popular Than Ever for Association Meetings

Texas is so big and its destinations are so diverse that the state could be its own country. The Lone Star State boasts distinct cultures and a history shaped by influences from bordering neighbors Mexico, Louisiana, New Mexico and Arkansas. There's also a stunning array of entertainment options, regional culinary choices and premier meeting hotels, resorts and extraordinary venues.

No wonder *Forbes* ranks Austin as the No. 1 boom town for 2016 and also places Texas' three largest metro areas: Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth and San Antonio among the top 10 boom towns. "The most vital parts of urban America can be encapsulated largely in one five-letter word: Texas," says *Forbes*.

To keep pace, the number and variety of meeting properties and resorts are multiplying rapidly. Texas is busily upgrading and expanding existing properties while building new ones. A range of unique venues are available, many of which are steeped in the state's cowboy and Hispanic cultures.

Austin

Austin continues to rack up accolades. Most recently, *Travel + Leisure* designated Austin No. 9 among the 2016 best cities in the United States.

Austin continues to grow in popularity as a meeting destination because of its attractions, array of hotel properties and, of course, music. As the self-proclaimed "Live Music Capital of the World," Austin boasts more than 250 live music venues.

Meeting space is headlined by the LEED Gold-certified Austin Convention Center (ACC) with 881,400 sf of meeting space and scenic downtown views.

Proximity to the ACC is a main reason why the Texas Food & Fuel Association (TFFA) selected the Hilton Austin, which has been undergoing a renovation, for its annual three-day meeting. Annette Hicks, CMP, vice president of meetings and exhibitions, TFFA, wanted to be close to the ACC for a very practical reason. "Parking is one of our biggest issues," she says. "I have exhibitors delivering products and materials to the convention center, and they have to figure out if they will park there and how far it is from the hotel. It's a big deal for us."

PERFECT LAYOUT

The configuration of the Hilton Austin's meeting space was a good match for the TFFA. "There were six concurrent breakout sessions, and people didn't have to spend a lot of time getting from one session to another," says Hicks. "The six breakouts were located a floor below the ballroom space where the general session took place. Folks could flow easily from the general session to the breakouts."

The Hilton's ballroom also was the site of a welcome reception and casino night. "We brought in a vendor who did the setup for a three-hour casino party," says Hicks. "We had about

15 different gaming tables, including roulette and card games — everything you see at a real casino. We also had several food stations and recorded music."

Attendees also enjoyed a golf tournament at Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort and Spa. "The foursomes were prearranged to have a nice mix of members and suppliers," says Hicks. "It was a good opportunity for supplier members and marketing members to get to know each other. We awarded cash prizes."

Hicks also was impressed by the early notice she received from the Hilton Austin about its renovation. The hotel notified Hicks about four weeks before the meeting date that the lobby bar and fine dining restaurant would be closed. "They provided great communication about it," she says. "There was no chance for me to arrive, be surprised and say, 'what the heck is going on here?'"

Hicks informed TFAA members about the renovation and told them they would have a new bar and dining restaurant that would remain open late. "They didn't do renovations during our meeting, but had the area cordoned off with a sign explaining the inconvenience," says Hicks.

In addition, the Austin-based Texas Association of Free-standing Emergency Centers (TAFEC) used the Hyatt Regency Austin for one of their meetings. According to Alisa Keltner, manager of membership operations, they were attracted to the property partly because it recently completed a \$15 million renovation of its 448 guest rooms and meeting space. The project included the brand new Zilker Ballroom, which is divisible into four separate meeting spaces. The AAA Four Diamond property offers more than 45,000 sf of flexible meeting space, including four additional ballrooms that include the Foothills Ballroom located on the 17th floor with views of the skyline.

The Foothills Ballroom was the site of a TAFEC reception. "It was great to be in a new-looking ballroom," says Keltner. "The space was set off in a separate, private section of the hotel. We had a nice view of Austin. Then we left and got on a yacht next door for a reception ride on Lady Bird Lake with a band and great view of downtown. We had dinner along with chocolate shakes and cookies with our logo on them."

NEW & NEWLY RENOVATED

In May 2017, White Lodging will break ground on a new Marriott downtown hotel near the Austin Convention Center (ACC). The 615-room full-service Marriott will offer 65,000 sf of meeting, exhibit and entertainment space, three bars and a street-level restaurant. The hotel is scheduled to open in summer 2019.

Hilton Austin is undergoing a multimillion-dollar renovation of its 80,000-sf meeting space that includes The Reverby, a cozy banquet hall with flexible indoor-outdoor meeting space. A redesigned lobby will include intimate social zones,

designated work space and a new digital media wall. Cannon + Belle, a multistation open kitchen, will offer a Texas-fresh menu. In addition, Austin Taco Project, a street-front fusion taco bar, will serve tacos and custom cocktails. The project will continue through the end of this year.

The brand new 37-story Fairmont Austin downtown plans to build a \$6 million pedestrian bridge to connect the hotel to the ACC. The Fairmont Austin features 1,048 guest rooms and 42 suites, including the exclusive Fairmont Gold rooms and lounge, with views of Lady Bird Lake and the city. Guests also can enjoy two heated pools, a full-service salon and spa and 106,000 sf of meeting space.

Also downtown, the 1,012-room JW Marriott Convention Center Hotel is one of the largest properties in Austin. The hotel provides 120,000 sf of meeting space, including four dining options highlighted by the Osteria Pronto restaurant.

Dallas

Dallas is the No. 1 destination in Texas with more than 24 million visitors annually, including small and large groups attracted by the city's 30,000 hotel rooms, more than 200 golf courses and cosmopolitan feel.

Loyal groups return year after year. In November, The American Association of Knee & Hip Surgeons (AAKHS) will hold its annual meeting at the Hilton Anatole for the 25th time in 26 years. They also will return in 2017.

This year's three-day AAKHS annual meeting is expected to attract approximately 2,500 attendees who come for primarily one purpose — career education. "Our members are surgeons who are all business," says Michael Zarski, executive director, AAKHS. "They are not looking for gaming, golf or tennis, and many things people typically do at conferences. They go out for a nice dinner at the most, so that focuses us on the practicalities of the property and destination."

Geographic location played a big role in originally choosing Dallas. "It is convenient for groups like us with nationwide attendees because the city is located in the central time zone within a four-hour flight from most major North American destinations," says Zarski.

Another major factor was the size and configuration of the Hilton Anatole's meeting spaces. "We want to keep everything as close together as possible," says Zarski. "We love the size and proximity of the exhibition area to a large ballroom where we have our meetings. The fact that everything is all on the same floor is very important to us so that people aren't running all over the place."

This year, Zarski will put the Hilton Anatole's ballroom and other meetings spaces to good use. The group will hold two receptions, a board meeting and a dinner for past presidents highlighted by a harpist performance.



Renovation of the Governor's Ballroom at the Hilton Austin was completed in September.

The group also will use a ballroom for a charity event. "It's called 'Docs Night Out,'" says Zarski. "It will be fun and games. We will have tables set up to play poker, a golf simulator and golf pro to teach people shots. We will have a giant version of the board game Operation, as well as games such as foosball and a pool table."

The AAKHS plans to return to the Hilton Anatole in 2018. The group's long-term relationship with the property pays dividends in several areas, including scheduling. "This year, they shuffled around some other smaller events that would have made our meeting more challenging," says Zarski. "They had something scheduled in one of the ballrooms that was going to be near our registration area. But they arranged things so that we had exclusive use of the hotel in our area."

Four Seasons Resort and Club Dallas at Las Colinas redesigned its 34,000-sf conference center. The redesign includes new stone flooring in the common areas, custom carpet and pendant. The project also added the new 4,400-sf Lantana Room and deck that is divisible into two equal sections that accommodate up to 400 guests. In addition, the Pecos Rooms will offer about 600 sf of new breakout space. Another downtown property, the Sheraton Dallas Hotel, has 1,840 rooms and 230,000 sf of meeting space. Guests can enjoy three restaurants and bars; a fitness center; and an outdoor patio with fire pits.

The Kay Bailey Hutchinson Convention Center recently invested \$26.5 million in infrastructure improvements. The 2-million-sf facility plans to invest in an additional \$6.6 million upgrade of its meeting space and three ballrooms.

Irving

As the self-described gateway to the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex, Irving offers several advantages for meeting planners.

For example, Irving can handily accommodate meetings from 10 people to several thousand. Home to a large arts district and several top-rated golf courses, it is adjacent to the DFW International Airport. Irving boasts more than 12,000 rooms and 200,000 sf of total meeting space, including the LEED-certified Irving Convention Center at Las Colinas (ICC),

which hosted 300 events last year and offers 100,000 sf of event space, including a column-free exhibit hall, breakout rooms, ballrooms and prefunction areas.

The ICC is part of a mixed-use urban center that will include a hotel, an entertainment venue and 100,000 sf of meeting space. The city of Irving has chosen the Westin Hotels & Resorts brand for a 350-room convention center headquarters hotel that will showcase a dining/entertainment destination called The Music Factory with an 8,000-seat indoor-outdoor amphitheater. The hotel is expected to be completed by summer 2017.

Arlington

As part of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Arlington is an attractive destination in its own right while offering convenient access to all that its larger neighbors offer.

Meeting facilities are anchored by the Arlington Convention Center, which offers 85,000 sf of meeting space, free Wi-Fi and an award-winning chef. The center is adjacent to the 311-room Sheraton Arlington Hotel, which provides 26,000 sf of meeting space.

More meeting space is on the way. The city of Arlington has approved a \$200 million public-private economic development project that will include a 100,000-sf complex near Globe Life Park that will offer entertainment venues, retail and meeting space, and multiple restaurants. The project also will include a hotel with a least 300 rooms and 35,000 sf of meeting space. The facility is expected to open by the end of 2017.

According to Ronnie Price, president and CEO of the Arlington Convention & Visitors Bureau, the new facility "gives our city the ability to host larger events and more visitors. This development enhances our destination by providing the type of entertainment and facilities that attendees look for."

The Sheraton Arlington Hotel has completed the first phase of a multimillion-dollar renovation that includes all 311 guest rooms and suites. Phase two of the project will include all 26,000 sf of meeting space, most of which is on the second floor. Phase three, which begins in 2017, will include remodeling of the lobby, bar and restaurants.

Houston

Houston, the nation's fourth largest city and soon-to-be host of Super Bowl LI on February 5, 2017, is more popular than ever. According to the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau, its destination sales team booked 732,967 room nights in 2015, a 29 percent increase over 2014. Houston hosted 17.5 million visitors in 2015, up from 14.8 million in 2014.

This year's visitors included a three-day annual meeting of 350 physicians, health administrators and managers with the Austin-based TAFEC, which was held at the Omni Houston Hotel.

The association chose the Omni Houston after working closely with the brand's national sales office following a meeting at the Omni Dallas last year. "There were a lot of compliments from members after the meeting in Dallas," explains meeting planner Keltner. "I had established a good relationship with the national sales director who works out of Dallas. When I need to turn in an RFP, I go to her, and she makes the connection for me. They give us good deals on meeting packages."

Keltner lauds the Omni Houston's service. "The food and beverage staff was very attentive and made sure that everything stayed full," she says. "The guy in charge was always checking on me and my staff to make sure everything was okay."

Service excelled even after Keltner discovered that she underestimated how many people would attend a luncheon. "We had a lot of walk-ups," she says. "But they made sure there was plenty of food. Some places might have said they didn't have enough to feed the extra people, but they were very accommodating. I have been at hotels where that wasn't the case."

The layout of the meeting spaces perfectly fit the group's needs. "All of the spaces we needed were close together, says Keltner. "A big ballroom was on the second level. A smaller ballroom was just to the left, and a big prefunction space was nearby. We had a reception at the nightclub on the lower level that was just remodeled, and we used the entire space. We had an open bar, DJ, food and cigar-rolling stations."

FAVORITE HOTEL

Another group, the Southwest Louisiana Bar Association (SLBA), also has a favorite hotel in Houston — the Houstonian Hotel Club & Spa. The SLBA first met at the Houstonian in 2006 and has returned each year since. This year, the two-day meeting attracted 55 attendees and their guests.

The SLBA also will hold its two-day meeting at the Houstonian in 2017. "We do surveys every year at the end of the

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Attendees at the Texas Association of Freestanding Emergency Centers event at the Hyatt Regency Austin.

Credit: Texas Association of Freestanding Emergency Centers

event," says Shayna Sonnier, president, SLBA. "We always ask if they enjoyed the Houstonian and if they would like us to look elsewhere. Overwhelmingly they say no."

Value and service are the main reasons for the SLBA's repeat visits. "The Houstonian has worked well with us on the rates to keep it where we haven't really felt the need to go anywhere else," says Sonnier. "We have been going there so long that they are great at anticipating our needs and making changes as our needs change. Leading up to the event, they work very closely with us."

Once the conference starts, the Houstonian goes above and beyond. Sonnier cites an example: "Last year, a few days before our meeting, there was flooding in East Texas and Western Louisiana," says Sonnier. "Portions of the main highway to Houston were closed, and it took people longer to drive there. Some didn't go at all. The Houstonian was very quick to say they wouldn't penalize us for the people who didn't show up."

Service excels in other areas as well. "They anticipate our technology needs," she says. "If a speaker shows up with technology requirements that we didn't anticipate, they handle it quickly. They also work with our floor plans. If they suggest something, and we don't like it, they are very quick to accommodate us another way."

In other Houston news, the Marriott Houston Airport finished a multimillion-dollar renovation that added new furnishings, carpet and wall coverings for its 573 guest rooms, 34 meeting rooms and 30,000 sf of meeting space. The project added a new all-day restaurant, Flights Lounge & Grill, as well as a full-service lounge bar. Upgrades included the business center, new pool decking and high-speed wireless internet.

Westin in the Woodlands opened about 30 miles from downtown Houston. The 13-story luxury hotel sits along The Woodlands Waterway, a tree-lined canal that runs through downtown. The 302-room hotel will anchor Waterway Square, a mixed-use district. Westin in the Woodlands offers 15,000 sf of waterfront meeting and event space, including the 6,000-sf Edgewater Ballroom and outdoor terrace.

The Marriott Marquis Houston is scheduled to open in December 2016 on the north side of the George R. Brown Convention Center (GRBCC) opposite the 1,200-room Hilton Americas-Houston on the south side. The 1,000-room Marriott Marquis, which along with the Hilton Americas-Houston will

be connected by skywalk to the GRBCC, will offer 100,000 sf of meeting space that includes 52 meeting rooms and ballrooms of 39,000 sf and 21,729 sf. In addition, the hotel will provide six dining concepts, several event lawns, an outdoor infinity-edge pool and Texas-shaped lazy river.

The GRBCC will increase its 1.2 million sf of meeting space in 2017 after completing a \$250 million modernization project that includes skybridges, art, new restaurants and other additions. Improvements in the convention district, newly dubbed Avenida Houston, will include The Wharf, a special event area; and Avenida Plaza, a pedestrian-friendly outdoor space featuring restaurants.

Galveston

Groups seeking a laidback and affordable getaway with a tropical vibe need look no further than Galveston Island, located about 50 minutes from Houston.

The island offers a variety of spaces to meet the needs of large and small meetings.

South Shore Harbour Resort and Conference Center, the largest full-service waterfront resort hotel and conference center in Southeast Texas, recently completed a multimillion-dollar renovation that includes all 1,438 guest rooms and suites; 25,000 sf of conference space; and public spaces including hotel, restaurant, pool area, lobby and lobby bar.

The Woodlands, a small city with entertainment, retail and recreational facilities, is a growing meetings center. The area features 14 hotels, 200 restaurants and the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion with 21,000 sf of meeting space.

Meetings flock to the 406-room, IACC-certified Woodlands Resort & Conference Center, which sits on 28,000 acres of scenic woodland and features a 60,000 sf of meeting space. The property recently underwent a \$60 million expansion and renovation that included conference center upgrades. The property boasts two championship golf courses, four top restaurants and The Spa.

Attractions include Space Center Houston as well as Moody Gardens, featuring educational and family-friendly attractions. Exhibitions that accommodate groups include the Rainforest Pyramid's endangered animals, the Discovery Museum and the MG 3-D and 4-D theaters. The Aquarium Pyramid is currently undergoing a renovation to be completed in May 2017.

Grapevine

Grapevine, located midway between Dallas and Fort Worth, offers about 20 hotels within a 10-minute drive of Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport.

The star of Grapevine properties is the 1,511-guest room Gaylord Texan Resort & Convention Center with its 407,489 sf of event space. The Gaylord is undertaking a \$120 million

expansion that will add 300 guest rooms and an additional 86,000 sf of meeting space.

Upon completion of the project in 2018, the Gaylord will offer 1,811 rooms and 490,000 sf of meeting space, including a new 30,000-sf ballroom, 30,000 sf of breakout space and 26,000 sf of prefunction space.

San Antonio

The nation's seventh-largest city, which is steeped in Spanish colonial history, welcomes more than 31 million visitors annually, including a growing number of meeting attendees.

Looking to attract larger meetings, San Antonio is aggressively increasing meeting space, starting with the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center, located on the River Walk downtown within walking distance of thousands of hotel rooms.

The convention center completed a \$325 expansion that increased total meeting space to 1.6 million sf. The center now provides 514,000 sf of contiguous exhibit space, 86,500 sf of multipurpose space and 70 meeting spaces, including a 54,000-sf ballroom.

The convention center is adjacent to the upcoming HemisFair site, which will be an 18-acre multipurpose park with visitor amenities when the project is completed in 2018. Another facility, the 65,000-seat Alamodome, is undergoing a \$43 million upgrade prior to hosting the NCAA Final Four in 2018.

One of the San Antonio area's top meeting properties, the

1,002-room JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa, introduced its \$16 million expansion of the property's River Bluff Water Experience, which includes new meeting and convention space. The project added the new River Bend pavilion, which offers 13,000 sf of indoor and outdoor customizable venues, including a 5,000-sf pavilion and 4,200-sf covered deck.

Other notable properties include the 500-room Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort and Spa, located a 20-minute drive from downtown. The scenic Hill Country property offers 54,000 sf of modern meeting space, 27 holes of golf, a five-acre water park and eight restaurants.

The popular La Cantera Resort & Spa recently opened its 25,000-sf Loma de Vida Spa and Wellness, which boasts 15 treatment rooms. The resort offers more than 115,000 sf of flexible indoor-outdoor event space including

"It was great to be in a new-looking ballroom. The space was set off in a separate, private section of the hotel. We had a nice view of Austin. Then we left and got on a yacht next door for a reception ride on Lady Bird Lake with a band and great view of downtown."



Alisa Keltner
Manager of Membership Operations
Texas Association of Freestanding Emergency Centers
Austin, TX

the 17,000-sf San Antonio Grand Ballroom, divisible into nine individual meeting rooms. Additionally, the ballroom offers a 6,500-sf prefunction foyer and terrace, with panoramic views of the resort's two golf courses. Also available are eight separate meeting rooms and three executive boardrooms. The 3,100-sf Palo Duro, adjacent to the Resort Clubhouse, offers stunning views of the city lights and the breathtaking Texas Hill Country.

Texas is the ultimate destination because of its central location, immense destination variety and abundance of top meeting properties. Planners also will find a growing number of sophisticated culinary options and endless entertainment choices, all delivered with unique Texas hospitality.

AC&F

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MOORE

Experience Kissimmee, Kissimmee, Florida, has appointed **Michelle Moore**, CMP, as director of sales. She was destination services senior manager for Visit Orlando.



GABRIEL

The Omni Homestead Resort in Hot Springs, Virginia, has named **Alex Gregory** as director of sales and marketing. He was director of sales and marketing for the Royal Palms Resort and Spa in Phoenix/Scottsdale, and director of sales and marketing at Wild Dunes Resort on the Isle of Palms in Charleston, South Carolina. **Maritza Gabriel** was promoted to senior

sales manager responsible for associations, corporations and nonprofits. She was wedding and catering sales manager at The Omni Homestead.

The Monterey County Convention and Visitors Bureau, Monterey, California, has appointed **Mark McMinn** as vice president of sales. He was director of sales and destination services at Team San Jose.

David Powell has joined the San Francisco Travel Association as director, international meetings and incentive sales. He most



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POWELL

recently was regional director of international sales, West Coast, for Kimpton Hotels & Resort.

Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center in National Harbor, Maryland, has named **Brad Mettler** as director of sales and marketing. He was director of sales and marketing for the Grand Hyatt New York.

Visit Spokane has named **Jeff Poole** as senior director of sales and national accounts, mid-Atlantic and Eastern regions. He was director of sales at Visit Albuquerque. AC&F



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Attendees of the Natural Products Expo West welcomed the warm Southern California morning with a sun salutation during a yoga class on March 11, 2016, in the Grand Plaza in front of the Anaheim Convention Center.

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