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# ASSOCIATION CONVENTION FACILITIES

JUNE/JULY  
2017

THE SOURCE FOR ASSOCIATION MEETING MANAGEMENT

## Safety & Security in a Volatile World

Attendee Safety Is Job No. 1 for Planners

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## Meeting Tech Trends

Enhancing the Attendee Experience

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ISSN 21628831

USPS 003500

A COASTAL COMMUNICATIONS CORPORATION PUBLICATION

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# ASSOCIATION CONVENTIONS & FACILITIES

THE SOURCE FOR ASSOCIATION MEETING PLANNING MANAGEMENT

June / July 2017

Volume 10 • Number 3

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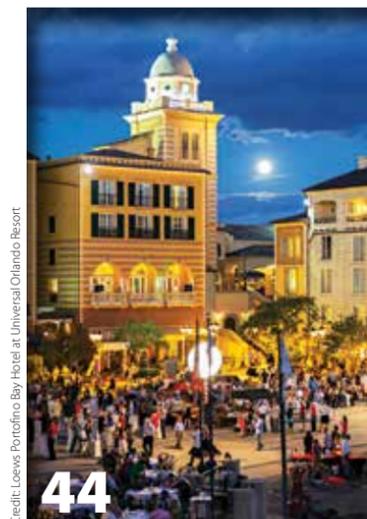
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By David Swanson

## Planners' No. 1 Role



The world, it seems, is in a chronic, heightened state of alert for all manner of potential risks these days, from extreme weather events to acts of terrorism. Needless to say, I've found the topic to be front and center at all the industry events I've attended this summer. As the Events Industry Council puts it, risk management is a topic that weighs heavily on the minds of many — in particular, meeting and convention planners who are responsible for the well-being of attendees. Indeed, when the EIC released its top five trends shaping the events industry in May, safety and security ranked No. 1. The International Association for Venue Managers, an EIC member, is currently developing a safety and security designation and guidelines for convention centers to meet Department of Homeland Security accreditation; and the EIC's APEX initiative is developing additional safety education and resources for meeting professionals. Other industry organizations are bringing emergency preparedness to the forefront. For example, in collaboration with MSA Security, the Association of Destination Management Executives International is offering the Emergency Preparedness Certificate Program, a comprehensive event emergency preparedness and risk management training course customized for meeting, event and destination management professionals.

Our feature on page 32 "Safety & Security in a Volatile World" offers both expert and planner perspectives on current risk management issues. Ray Suppe, featured on our cover, is both an association executive and a security expert. He's president of the International Tourism Safety Association and the executive director of customer safety for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. As the nation's No. 1 trade show destination, it follows that Las Vegas would be a leader in preparedness as well. "Las Vegas is among the safest travel destinations in the world," Suppe says, "and uses the most advanced training and technology to maintain a secure environment." He advises planners to "understand the lifecycle of an event from the security perspective" and encourages them "to consider heightened security measures such as photo ID requirements, explosive detection dogs or increased law enforcement as appropriate." And, he adds, planners should promote See Something, Say Something awareness among convention attendees.

Kari Messenger, CMP, meetings manager with Association Management Center, emphasizes the importance of planners taking the lead. "While emergencies are not always life and death circumstances, staff and attendees look to the meeting planner as to how to react to a situation."

Harvey Grotzky  
Publisher

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**ASSOCIATION**  
CONVENTIONS & FACILITIES  
THE SOURCE FOR ASSOCIATION MEETING PLANNING MANAGEMENT  
A COASTAL COMMUNICATIONS CORPORATION PUBLICATION

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Association Conventions & Facilities is published bi-monthly by Coastal Communications Corporation, 2700 North Military Trail — Suite 120, Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394; 561-989-0600. Single copies \$13.00 U.S.A. only. Yearly subscription price is \$65.00 in the U.S.A. Canada and foreign is \$135.00. Back copies \$14.00 plus shipping and handling, U.S.A. only. Distributed without charge to qualified personnel. Periodicals Postage Paid at Boca Raton, FL, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Please send Form 3579 address changes to Association Conventions & Facilities, 2700 North Military Trail — Suite 120, Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394. Nothing contained in this publication shall constitute an endorsement by Coastal Communications Corporation (Association Conventions & Facilities), and the publication disclaims any liability with respect to the use of or reliance on any such information. The information contained in this publication is in no way to be construed as a recommendation by AC&F of any industry standard, or as a recommendation of any kind to be adopted by or to be binding upon any advertiser or subscriber. Reproduction of any portion of this publication by any means is strictly forbidden. Editorial contributions must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care. However, the publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited photographs or manuscripts. Subscribers: Send subscription inquiries and address changes to: Circulation Department, Association Conventions & Facilities, 2700 North Military Trail — Suite 120, Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394. Provide old and new addresses including zip code. Enclose address label from most recent issue and please allow five weeks for the change to become effective. Printed in U.S.A. © 2017.



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## Visit Sacramento Names New Leader

**SACRAMENTO, CA** — Visit Sacramento, the region's destination marketing organization, announced the appoint-



Testa

ment of current Chief Operating Officer Mike Testa as its next president and CEO.

Testa began serving as Visit Sacramento's president and CEO on July 1,

2017. He will oversee the organization's role in booking conventions, meetings and trade shows for the Sacramento Convention Center and local hotels, promoting Sacramento's farm-to-fork identity nationally to consumers and charting the course for the Sacramento Sports Commission. He succeeds Steve Hammond, who is retiring after serving as its president and CEO since 1999.

"I am honored to help lead our region's efforts to leverage Sacramento's many great assets to make our region more competitive as a visitor destination," said Testa.

[www.visitsacramento.com](http://www.visitsacramento.com)

## EIC Announces Hall of Leaders Inductees, Pacesetter Award Winners

**WASHINGTON, DC** — The Events Industry Council will honor the 2017 Hall of Leaders Inductees at the Hall of Leaders and Pacesetter Awards Gala on October 10, 2017 at IMEX America in Las Vegas.

Hall of Leaders Inductees:

**David Peckinpugh, CMP**, Maritz Global Events, nominated by the Events Industry Council Board; **Patricia "Patti" Roscoe, CITE**, founder Allied/PRA Destination Management, submitted by Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE); **Janet Sperstad, CMP**, Madison



Kotowski

College, submitted by International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE).

Additionally, the gala will celebrate emerging talent and leadership by honoring the winners of the 2017 Events Industry Council Pacesetter Awards. Recipients are:

**Dan Berger**, Social Tables, nominated by Meeting Professionals International (MPI) (Innovation); **Guy Bigwood**, MCI Group, nominated by MCI (Sustainability); **Mac Campbell**, Baltimore Convention Center, nominated by International Association of Venue Managers (IAVM) (Young Professional).

"The recipients this year truly reflect the best and brightest stars of the events industry," said Karen Kotowski, CMP, CAE, CEO of the Events Industry Council. "Honoring where the events industry comes from, as well as the exciting future we have ahead of us, is what makes this award celebration so special." [www.eventscouncil.org](http://www.eventscouncil.org)

## Las Vegas Convention Center District Plan Approved



Conceptual rendering of the new LVCCD convention center building.

**LAS VEGAS, NV** — The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority's (LVCVA) Board of Directors has given final approval for the expansion and renovation of the Las Vegas Convention Center. Prior to being presented to the full LVCVA Board, the plan recently met the approval of both the Oversight Panel for Convention Centers in Clark County and the Las Vegas Convention Center District (LVCCD) Committee, a sub-committee of the LVCVA Board of Directors.

The \$1.4 billion project will ensure Las Vegas remains the No. 1 trade show destination for decades to come. The LVCCD expansion and renovation will be completed in a phased approach with a projected completion date of 2023. Phase one will be the construction of the new 1.4 million-sf expansion with 600,000 sf of exhibit space and the accompanying meeting rooms and support space. This phase is projected to be complete by 2021. The second phase will be the complete renovation of the existing 3.2-million-sf facility. The phased approach will ensure that no business will be displaced during the construction and renovation. [www.lvccd.com](http://www.lvccd.com)

## Christine Loomis Wins Silver Award for AC&F Feature

**CHARLESTON, SC** — The Western Chapter of the Society of American Travel Writers held its annual writing awards competi-



Loomis

tion in May, receiving 144 entries from 34 professional travel journalists. The awards were announced at the annual chapter meeting in Charleston, South Carolina, in June. The University of Missouri School of Journalism faculty gave awards in nine categories, including Service Articles, which should provide a combination of solid information and tips or action steps. *Association Conventions & Facilities* Contributing Editor Christine Loomis won the Silver Award in this category for her article "Safety & Security at Conventions & Exhibitions," which appeared in the October/November 2016 issue of AC&F.

[www.themeetingmagazines.com/acf/safety-and-security/](http://www.themeetingmagazines.com/acf/safety-and-security/)

(Read Christine's related cover story in this issue on page 32.)

## Marriott's Convention & Resort Network Soars to 100 Properties



Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center near Orlando, Florida.

**BETHESDA, MD** — The Marriott International Convention & Resort Network (CRN) announces growth of its collection to 100 hotels and resorts throughout the USA, Mexico, Caribbean and now also in Canada. The spectacular selection of large hotels is now the most comprehensive to provide valued meeting planners with additional options in highly sought-after meeting destinations such as Orlando, Seattle, Dallas, Charlotte, The Bahamas, Montreal, Vancouver and beyond.

The network's portfolio is comprised of properties from world-class brands such as Westin Hotels & Resorts, Sheraton Hotels & Resorts, The Luxury Collection Hotels & Resorts, JW Marriott, Autograph Collection Hotels, Renaissance Hotels, Marriott Hotels and Gaylord Hotels.

CRN also has unveiled a new website to introduce stronger tools for planners. Through preselected hotel search groupings, narrated site videos and the MeetingsImagined platform, CRN delivers the essential components that planners want access to quickly and effortlessly. [www.conventionresortnetwork.com/starwood](http://www.conventionresortnetwork.com/starwood)

## Universal Orlando Offering New Meeting Enhancements

**ORLANDO, FL** — Universal Orlando Resort has announced its newest Meetings & Events offering — Meeting Enhancements. Now, when planners host meetings at Universal Orlando onsite hotels they can utilize Meeting Enhancements to create compelling experiences that connect attendees to their organization's message in impactful ways that engage, inspire and entertain.

Options include character interruptions, customizable performers and unique entertainment elements.

In the **Branded Character Moments**, powerful characters such as Optimus Prime can open a meeting or introduce a CEO. Picture a meeting interruption by the Minions to excite and engage attendees, reminding them to have some fun.

**Custom Character Options** offer customizable character moments — such as an adventure guide, sports broadcaster or movie director — to help deliver specific messages and reinforce conference theming.

**Inspirational Atmosphere.** Add another layer of enthusiasm with atmospheric elements taken right from Universal Orlando's three theme parks. From stilt walkers to signature Mardi Gras entertainers and other specialty acts, these performers allow planners to meet attendees' high expectations with a boost of energy. [www.uomeetingsandevents.com](http://www.uomeetingsandevents.com)

### Caesars Entertainment Reveals New Amenities at Atlantic City Resorts

**ATLANTIC CITY, NJ** — Caesars Entertainment Corporation — which owns Bally's, Caesars and Harrah's Resort in Atlantic City — recently completed over \$30 million in enhancements to Harrah's Resort in Atlantic City's sophisticated Marina District — bringing Caesars' total reinvestment into its Atlantic City resorts to \$200 million over the last three years.

"Building on the highly successful openings of the Wild Wild West at Bally's and our \$125 million Waterfront Conference Center at Harrah's Resort, we are excited to complete our master-plan enhancement project just in time for summer, and debut our finely appointed Bayview rooms and suites, three world-class dining experiences and an upgraded nightlife experience at Harrah's Resort," said president of Bally's and Caesars, Kevin Ortzman, and Rick Mazer, regional president for Harrah's Resort, in a joint statement.

New casual dining options now include A.C. Burger Co., Coastal Craft Kitchen + Bar, Veracruz, inspired by Mexican and Spanish street fare, and Guy's Sammich Joint, a first-of-its-kind quick service concept created by Food



The new Veracruz restaurant.

Network personality, restaurateur and author Guy Fieri.

The multimillion-dollar overhaul of the nightclub The Pool After Dark features a glass-enclosed heated dome, upgraded cabanas and bungalows, a new elevated stage and DJ area, dance floor and massive LED walls for celebrity performances.

In Harrah's Resorts' Bayview Tower, 450 guest rooms and suites have a fresh redesign. Bayview rooms boast approximately 600 sf of space. [www.caesarsmeansbusiness.com](http://www.caesarsmeansbusiness.com)

### CEIR Releases Attendee Floor Engagement Tactics Report

**DALLAS, TX** — The Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR) announced the release of "Exhibitor In-booth Tactics – Methods Used to Evaluate Outcomes," the third report in its newest series on attendee floor engagement.

The report says 94 percent of exhibitors use attendee engagement tactics to impact their overall important objectives for exhibiting. Results indicate that integrating attendee engagement tactics is effective in impacting outcomes for the better; and that the most important objectives for exhibitors are sales lead generation, brand awareness efforts and relationship management activities.

Also, 60-plus percent of exhibitors using attendee engagement say attendee tactics are highly effective in influencing these specific outcomes. The report inventories and scores use of attendee engagement tactics to help influence 17 specific exhibitor outcomes with effectiveness scores for each.

"This report is a must-read for those looking to benchmark their approach to industry norms and to realign attendee engagement tactics to what works best to achieve success," said CEIR CEO Cathy Breden, CMP, CAE. [www.ceir.org](http://www.ceir.org)

## MGM Grand Breaks Ground on Conference Center Expansion

**LAS VEGAS, NV** — MGM Grand and community executives broke ground in June on a \$130 million new addition to the MGM Grand Conference Center.

The new 250,000-sf space at MGM Grand will connect to the existing Conference Center on all three levels and include a new 5,500-sf outdoor courtyard available for private events, a 49,000-sf ballroom, a 32,000-sf ballroom, three junior ballrooms and 11 breakout rooms. The resort's existing meeting spaces include the stand-alone, 92,000-sf Marquee Ballroom and the 16,800-seat Grand Garden Arena.

Upon completion, the MGM Grand Conference Center will total more than 850,000 sf. As part of the expansion, Stay Well Meetings — the industry's first-ever wellness meetings experience, which launched at the hotel in 2014, also will expand its footprint by 22,000 sf. [www.mgmgrand.com](http://www.mgmgrand.com)



Credits: 1-3 Zocica Images; 4 (with insets) Mark Damon/Las Vegas News Bureau

**1-3** ASAE delivered its newest event Xperience Design Project (XDP), May 23-24, at the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center. XDP brought together 1,816 association professionals and industry partners who collaborated on how to reinvent their meetings. **3** (L) Lab program leader Michael Dominguez, chief sales officer, MGM Resorts International, joins ASAE President and CEO John H. Graham, IV, FASAE, CAE. **4** Host Dena Blizzard welcomes attendees to the opening general session of the Meeting Professionals International (MPI) World Education Congress 2017 at the Park Theater in the Monte Carlo Las Vegas on June 19. (Inset) Meeting planner characters join the Blue Man Group during the opening general session. (Inset) Characters pose for a selfie in the opening general session. **5-7** Destinations International hosted its 2017 Annual Convention July 12-14 in Montreal, Canada, tweeting, "With more than 1,450 attendees, 100 speakers, 77 sessions and 100-plus exhibitors, this year's #AC17Montreal was one for the books." **5** (L to r) Gary Sherwin, CDME, APR, president and CEO of Visit Newport Beach, and outgoing chair, Destinations International, with *Association Conventions & Facilities* Publisher Harvey Grotzky. **6** (L to r) David Bradley, V.P. convention and tourism sales, Shreveport Bossier CTB; Grotzky; and Jim Wood, CDME, president and CEO, Meet AC. **7** Grotzky and AI Kidd, president and CEO National Association of Sports Commissions.



# 5th Annual HGA

June 26–29 at the Sheraton New Orleans, where attendees participated in on-trend industry discussions, a volunteerism program, educational sessions, networking events, the Hosts Honors awards, which recognized DMC members for exceeding expectations, and memorable destination-specific activities, including a

Hero's Welcome event at the National WWII Museum.

"The Hosts Global Forum is our annual opportunity to bring together our 50-plus Destination Management Company members, clients and colleagues from around the globe," says Marty MacKay, DMCP, president of Hosts Global Alliance. "Attendees trav-

**H**osts Global, a strategic partner for destination management services worldwide, hosted more than 240 clients and hospitality industry professionals for their fifth annual Hosts Global Forum. The invitation-only event occurred



# Global Forum Snapshots

el to one of our key destinations for a firsthand experience while also participating in professional growth opportunities and one-on-one business meetings with our DMC members."

"Hosts' differentiator is our H Factor," says Jennifer Patino, DMCP, chief executive officer of Hosts Global, noting, "We shared our Hearts and Hospital-

ity during the welcoming night event when all attendees participated in a volunteerism program" to benefit the local Audubon Nature Institute and One Heart NOLA.

The conference opened with the Hosts & Heritage Festival, a nod to New Orleans' Jazz Fest, and closed with a progressive parade through

Bourbon Street with stops at legendary venues. The unrivaled local knowledge and planning capabilities of Hosts New Orleans made the experience one all attendees will not soon forget. AC&F



# How to Maximize Social Media at Your Next Event

Jeffrey Barnhart



## Drive Engagement Before, During and After

One in three professionals uses LinkedIn, according to statistics compiled by Hootsuite. Facebook has 1.09 billion active daily users, and 6,000 tweets are sent every second on Twitter, according to the report.

With so many individuals active on different social media sites for different reasons, social media has become a way to interact with event attendees like never before.

Facebook is a place people go to relax and be entertained, so it is a great way to show off photos and videos of your last event to promote the next one. LinkedIn company pages serve as an overview for an association, so the channel is likely to be more serious and contain thought leadership, industry news and accomplishments. Twitter is a place for timely news, which can be shared instantly.

The “instant” nature of social media makes it an essential tool to document the value of an event to members by virtually bringing them to it.

Bottom line, social media can keep conference attendees engaged before, during and after the event.

### EVENT PROMOTION

Most important, use social media to promote your event.

For example, set up an event page on Facebook for attendees to meet each other and share information about the conference to get the excitement going. Post industry news relevant to topics that will be covered at the event.

Looking for another way to drive engagement? Share industry articles on Twitter and LinkedIn that complement and promote topics that will be discussed by the industry expert at your event and link back to your event’s webpage.

Tie all conversations together with the use of a hashtag. Do your research and select a new hashtag that can be exclusively yours. It is recommended that a reusable hashtag

is selected so the buzz can be connected year after year and event after event, and it becomes an online scrapbook when searched.

By using social media to generate engagement, the International Card Manufacturers Association (ICMA) increased annual conference registrations by 16.4 percent and increased annual conference exhibitors by 47.7 percent.

To achieve this growth, ICMA used compelling posts tailored to each channel’s audience, researched strategic hashtags and continually updated artwork on each of the brand’s five channels. Content featured in social media posts ranged from recognition programs, new member welcomes, event promotion, breaking industry news and media placements. All posts featured key elements including a URL, an image and hashtag, as well as concise wording,

and “check-ins” when posting from venues. (Also, don’t forget to tag companies and individuals when featuring photos in posts.)

The Event Service Professionals Association (ESPA) runs a trivia contest and virtual scavenger hunt before and during its annual conference. Pre-event questions encourage attendees to learn about the location, such

as historical trivia, famous people or movies made at the location. The pre-event questions get attendees excited about sights to see while they are at the destination. Interacting before the event helps the attendees get to know each other and anticipate meeting each other in person.

### ENCOURAGE SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTION WITH GAMIFICATION

Running a social media contest keeps attendees engaged and interacting on a different level.

Onsite, the virtual fun continues as ESPA members are encouraged to share a photo of someone they just met, find

an award winner and share favorite moments online using a special hashtag (#ESPAConference). All of the questions are designed to get attendees interacting and talking to each other while they are there. Participating in the social media-driven contest also gives members an easy ice-breaker to approach each other and network because it gives them an excuse to socialize. There is a prize for the first person who completes the entire hunt, which encourages more participation.

For ESPA members, social media activity skyrockets in the time period surrounding the conference, as designed. Compared to the rest of the year, online



*It is recommended that a reusable hashtag is selected so the buzz can be connected year after year and event after event, and it becomes an online scrapbook when searched.*

activity doubles with hundreds of Twitter posts from members before, during and after the conference that promote the event in a fun way and drum up excitement.

This is an example of gamification. It takes an ordinary task, such as meeting new people, and turns it into a fun, slightly competitive activity for everyone.

Social media also can be used for interaction during presentations for polls, opinions and to underscore the top takeaways.

### KEEPING THE CONVERSATION GOING WHILE

#### EXTENDING YOUR CONFERENCE REACH

Social media allows you to reach your members like never before. It becomes a way to communicate with members. For example, the next speaker is coming up, and if someone is lost, they can instantly communicate with you.

It also provides for instant feedback. You can craft a post after a session and ask for feedback about the speaker or top takeaways. It also can be leveraged to showcase the value of an event by asking people to post about their favorite session or their favorite meal.



Social media also allows you to reach members who were unable to attend the event by livestreaming some of the content. For the New Jersey State Nurses Association, sharing some of their annual conference content live on their Facebook page for the first time generated an organic reach of 10,902 in less than 48 hours, which is equivalent to 18 percent of that month’s impressions. All conference content on Facebook had a combined organic reach of 14,186 during the two-day event. The month of the conference had one of the highest numbers of impressions of the year, due to buzz that was generated from the live conference pieces.



# Hotel Update



## A Sampling of What's New & Renovated From Coast to Coast

The Hilton Austin's recent renovation included a meeting space makeover as well as the addition of new restaurants.

By Patrick Simms

Convention delegates can benefit from a great variety of hotel developments and improvement projects. Even a guest room or public space renovation at a small, economy property can be welcome, if that hotel is part of the event's overall lodging package. But for most planners of large association meetings, the kind of hotel development that really grabs their attention is the new "headquarters" hotel: a sizable, upscale property that is connected or proximate to the city's convention center. Fortunately, there are several such projects in the country today, either recently completed or on the horizon.

"The city's adding another large hotel to the convention center hotel package made it more convenient for our attendees," says Emily Whitzel, director, scientific and corporate meetings for the AHA. "We try to house our attendees near the convention center so they can either walk or spend very little on transportation." The conference brought in about 5,600

The new Marriott Marquis Houston and its Texas-shaped rooftop lazy river.



### TEXAS

Second-tier cities introducing convention hotels include Des Moines, Irving, Texas, Kansas City, Louisville, Nashville and Portland, Oregon. First-tier examples include Miami and Houston, where the new Marriott Marquis Houston debuted last December. Connected by skybridge to the George R. Brown Convention Center, the 960-room property was a boon to the February installment of the American Heart Association's International Stroke Conference.

Credits: Houston Marriott Marquis



delegates, many of whom were already quite familiar with the Marriott brand through previous AHA meetings. "We have a national account with Marriott, and we have been very happy with the various hotels we use each year for our International Stroke Conference and our Scientific Sessions," says Whitzel.

Houston's new addition to the Marriott portfolio made a great first impression, she adds. "It is always great to have a new hotel that is clean, crisp and up to date. The hotel had every one of the amenities that our attendees need, plus more. The various restaurant options are always a plus. The guest rooms were super clean and quiet," Whitzel comments. The Marriott Marquis Houston offers 153,724 sf of total meeting space across 52 meeting rooms, complemented by recreational amenities such as a Texas-shaped lazy river, infinity pool and full-service Pure spa.

One of the most vibrant Texas meeting scenes is Austin, where a new Fairmont hotel will complement the 1,012-room JW Marriott Austin, which opened in 2015 near the Austin Con-



Credits: Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront

Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront completed a multimillion-dollar renovation of meeting spaces, guest rooms and more.

vention Center. Last December, construction began on the \$6 million Red River Canopy Walk that will connect the Austin Convention Center to Fairmont Austin. Opening in September, the Fairmont will house 1,048 guest rooms and nearly 140,000 sf of total meeting space.

Groups also can take advantage of an upgraded Hilton Austin. The 801-room hotel completed a \$23 million renovation to its 80,000 sf of meeting space, lobby and restaurants last year. The renovation has redesigned the lobby to include social and work spaces, as well as a new digital media wall. Last summer, two new restaurants were added: Cannon + Belle and The Reverberby. The Reverberby, ideal for special events, is a recording studio-themed banquet hall complemented by outdoor space. A specially designed food and drink menu reflects Austin's culinary culture. Two more establishments were introduced last fall: the Austin Taco Project, located a block off Austin's music "Main Street," and a 3,000-sf Starbucks with an Austin motif.

"It is always great to have a new hotel that is clean, crisp and up to date. The (Marriott Marquis Houston) had every one of the amenities that our attendees need, plus more."

Emily Whitzel  
Director, Scientific and  
Corporate Meetings  
American Heart Association  
Dallas, TX

And in late 2018/early 2019, the 350-room Westin Irving Convention Center Las Colinas is scheduled to open adjacent to the 17-acre Irving Music Factory. The hotel will offer 16,000 sf of meeting space.

### FLORIDA

In March, the Association of American Colleges and Universities met in Jacksonville, Florida, for a national conference examining issues of diversity, equity and student success on college campuses. The hotel of choice was the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville, which had recently completed a multimillion-dollar renovation of all 951 guest rooms, corridors, the rooftop fitness center and Regency Club lounge. "Our guests enjoyed Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront and liked the hotel's staff very much," says Karen Kalla, director of network for academic renewal with the AACU. She adds that "The meeting rooms all met our needs very well. The larger-sized meeting rooms were amenable to our preferred room set using round tables." The renovation included a small meeting space expansion, with six new hard-walled meeting rooms added to the fourth level of the hotel's Terrace Building. Overall, the Hyatt offers more than 116,000 sf of function space, which comfortably accommodated the AACU's 550 delegates.



Credits: Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort

Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin has renovated 329,000 sf of meeting space.



A 100,000-sf expansion of the Osceola County Conference Center at Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate opens this fall.



Credits: Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate

Orlando is a major reason why the Southeast's hotel industry is so active. Demand spurs development in this first-tier city, where groups can take advantage of a redesigned Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort. This venerable property has invested \$140 million into the transformation of all 2,267 guest rooms and the renovation of its more than 329,000 sf of meeting space. The final component of the project will be a \$12 million lobby redesign projected for completion in the fall. Other significant hotel improvement projects in the "Theme Park Capital" include the construction of a new 500-room tower at Disney's Coronado Springs Resort over the next two years; the complete refurbishment of all 1,501 guest rooms and suites at Rosen Shingle Creek; and a 100,000-sf expansion of the Osceola County Conference Center at Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate to be completed this fall.

Recently expanded meeting space is available at Orlando's Westgate Lakes Resort & Spa. The 2,300-villa, luxury condominium resort now offers a total of 36,000 sf of meeting space after a 20,000-sf addition. Completed last year, the meeting space affords 360-degree views of Orlando, including the Orange County Convention Center and the nightly fireworks from Central Florida's theme parks. A 500-car parking garage was also added.

In November, the Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART), a national network of 22 affiliated grassroots, non-profit, congregation-based community organizations, utilized the new meeting space for a lay leaders training event addressing problem areas in their communities. Leah Woodward Wiley, development and leader training for DART, sourced the Westgate through HelmsBriscoe. "Not only did Westgate have the best deals, but I really like how their rooms are set up for our group. All the meeting space is on the seventh floor, so for those who have walking issues there are no challenges getting (to different breakout rooms) for different pieces of our agenda." Based on these logistical advantages and the proac-

tive service Wiley commends, DART has signed a two-year contract with the Westgate. "When I'm working with a staff that's all about service and also loves their job, I always want to go back, especially if the meeting space is perfect," she concludes.

About three years from now, planners can look forward to the debut of both a Marriott Marquis and a convention center in Miami, Florida. MDM Group recently acquired the former site of the Miami Arena as part of the plan to build the Marriott Marquis Miami Worldcenter Hotel & Expo Center. The first phase of the project would include a 600,000-sf conference and exposition center, along with 1,100 hotel rooms; a second tower would house 600 hotel rooms. It's just one of many significant hotel developments in the Southeastern United States creating opportunities for association groups.

#### SOUTH CAROLINA

Groups also can find exceptional service and meeting space in South Carolina at the Myrtle Beach Marriott Resort & Spa at Grande Dunes. This spring, the property completed a \$14 million makeover of its 405 guest rooms, including new furnishings, soft goods, new 50-inch smart TVs, luxurious walk-in showers and more. The hallways on the resort's 11 floors were recarpeted and updated as well. "They really did a nice job; the rooms really look good. In

all hotels, if you don't do room renovations every five to six years, it gets worn-looking," observes Nilda Padgett, director of meeting services/meeting planner with the South Carolina Association of Counties, which has been meeting annually at the hotel for six years. Held in January, the two-day event brings in about 145 insurance trust members and risk managers for training sessions within the hotel's 45,000 sf of meeting space. "We use a good bit of the ballroom because we have to set up classroom style for this meeting. And then we switch over to the evening function, where we do an oyster roast indoors," Padgett relates. The staff adds complimentary décor elements

**"When I'm working with a staff that's all about service and also loves their job, I always want to go back, especially if the meeting space is perfect."**

Leah Woodward Wiley  
Development and Leader Training  
DART  
Miami Shores, FL



The RiverView Ballroom recently debuted at the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center.

Credits: Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center

to the function to "make it beachy," she says, thus allowing the group to avoid weather issues outdoors in January.

#### MARYLAND

The hotbed of hotel development in this part of the country is arguably National Harbor, Maryland, where the MGM National Harbor opened last December. The 308-room resort offers groups the 50,000-sf MGM National Harbor Conference Center, complemented by a 3,000-seat theater, three celebrity-chef restaurants among 15 dining options, high-end retail establishments and a spa. The longstanding option for groups in National Harbor is the 2,000-room Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center, a AAA Four Diamond property that recently enhanced its meeting space with the new 16,000-sf RiverView Ballroom. The venue provides unobstructed views from its 270-degree floor-to-ceiling windows, and boasts two outdoor terraces equaling more than 10,000 sf of space. The resort now offers five ballrooms and more than 600,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space.

#### SOUTH/CENTRAL

The 453-room Westin Nashville, which opened last fall, eased lodging logistics for the American Animal Hospital Association's annual meeting, March 30–April 2.



The L27 Rooftop Bar at the 453-room Westin Nashville, which opened last fall.

Credits: The Westin Nashville



Rosina M. Romano, CMP  
Director of Meetings  
Entomological Society of America  
Annapolis, MD

“As long as the (new Hyatt opening in 2019) can show us some really great diagrams, I’d be confident in booking without going for a site visit.”

space, the property will be located just steps from Music City Center. Highlights include Bourbon Steak, a Michael Mina Restaurant as well as a rooftop bar on the 33rd floor.

The 612-room Omni Louisville Hotel, just one block from the Kentucky International Convention Center, will offer 70,000 sf of LEED Silver-certified meeting space when it opens next spring.

In 2019, an 800-room Hyatt convention hotel with about 75,000 sf of meeting space is expected to open across from the Kansas City Convention Center Grand Ballroom.

The Iowa Events Center (IEC) in Des Moines sports a direct connection to a new-build Hilton, which officially opens next April. The 330-room Hilton Des Moines Downtown has its own 14,000 sf of function space, including a 10,000-sf ballroom. Amenities include a signature restaurant, heated indoor pool and complimentary fitness center.

“We hope and plan to use the hotel for the majority of our room blocks for our annual meeting in October moving forward,” says Joah Hogan, senior director of education services for the Iowa Hospital Association.

Becky Anthony, senior V.P., education, adds, “We’re pleased to be able to provide our members the convenience of having lodging just steps away from the IEC.” The IHA most recently met at the Iowa Events Center for its 2016 annual meeting, bringing in 1,700 attendees, vendors and speakers. “We will be evaluating the hotel’s meeting space for events that we don’t already have contracted; it’s been included in recent RFPs,” says Anthony. “Looking ahead, we are planning to use the hotel for our biggest room block for the IHA Annual Meeting and also considering how we might be able to uti-



The Omni Louisville Hotel opens next spring just one block from the Kentucky International Convention Center.



Credits: Omni Louisville Hotel

lize space in the hotel for special events held in conjunction with the meeting.”

### LAS VEGAS

Las Vegas is home to three convention centers and a multitude of hotels with massive meeting space. But given its perennial popularity with convention groups, more space is always welcome. The 4,004-room Aria Resort & Casino is investing \$154 million to expand its LEED Gold-certified convention center, adding 200,000 sf of high-tech, flexible meeting space by February 2018. Post-expansion, Aria will house more than 500,000 sf of meeting space.

MGM Grand recently broke ground on a 250,000-sf expansion of its conference center on all three levels. Scheduled for completion in fall 2018, the new space will include two large ballrooms spanning 49,000 sf and 32,000 sf, three junior ballrooms and an outdoor event space. When complete, the expansion will give MGM Grand a total of 850,000 sf of meeting and convention space. As part of the expansion, Stay Well Meetings — the industry’s first-ever wellness meetings experience, which launched at the hotel in 2014 — also will expand its footprint by 22,000 sf and encompass the conference center’s entire second floor.

### NORTHWEST

Farther out West, the Hyatt Regency brand is bringing associations exciting new site options. This summer, Seattle welcomes the Hyatt Regency Lake Washington at Seattle’s Seaport, a 347-room resort 11 miles from downtown Seattle and nine miles from the Seattle-Tacoma International Air-



Rendering of MGM Grand Las Vegas’ 250,000-sf expansion of its conference center on all three levels, set for completion in 2018.

Credits: MGM Resorts International

port. The property offers 60,000 sf of indoor/outdoor function space, including 23,000 sf of outdoor terraces with panoramic views of Lake Washington.

In Portland, the Hyatt Regency Portland is scheduled to debut in 2019 adjacent to the Oregon Convention Center. The 600-room hotel will have its own 32,000 sf of meeting space and is expected to achieve LEED certification.

In 2014, Portland hosted the Entomological Society of America’s annual meeting, convening more than 3,400 attendees at the Oregon Convention Center — ESA’s second-highest attendance ever. The group utilized the DoubleTree by Hilton

Portland as its headquarters hotel, but the property’s location (four blocks from the OCC) was not ideal, remarks Rosina M. Romano, CMP, director of meetings for ESA. The new Hyatt will remedy that drawback, she says. “It’s always been on my radar to rebook the space since we had such a great meeting there. So I was waiting to get a headquarters hotel much closer.” What is more, the group has already had a great experience with the Hyatt Regency brand in Minneapolis, and will partner with the Hyatt Regency Denver for this year’s meeting in November. Regarding a return to Portland, she says,

“I know the convention center very well, and I know the city very well. So as long as (the Hyatt) is able to meet what we need for breakout space for committee meetings across the street, and the Hyatt can show us some really great diagrams, I’d be confident in booking without going for a site visit.”

But there may well be added competition for planners looking to book the OCC, given the city’s projection of a 30 percent increase in meetings business with the new hotel. “It’s definitely possible they could hit that increase,” says Romano. “It could lead to increased competition, and that’s why I’m itching and ready to go.”

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# Betting on Gaming Resorts

Maryland's MGM National Harbor, which opened in December, offers attendees a casino and other amenities that keep them onsite.



## Planners Find Winners From Maryland to Nevada

By Sophia Bennett

**G**aming resorts have a lot going for them. These sprawling properties can have a plethora of entertainment options, from gambling and night life to restaurants, spas and swimming pools. Because most are in the entertainment business, they're likely to offer good food and terrific customer service at reasonable prices.

The myriad distractions at gaming resorts can make it challenging to keep meeting attendees focused on the matters at hand. But a tightly crafted agenda, good flow to the event space, and built-in time for leisure and networking can help keep them on track. Meeting planners offer their thoughts about what makes these resorts good destinations for different types of meetings.

### SPARKING INTEREST FOR THE ELECTRONIC INDUSTRY COALITION

That out-of-the-way, resort feel was a big part of the reason the Electronic Industry Citizenship Coalition (EICC), a membership organization based in Arlington, Virginia, chose

to host a 50-person leadership meeting at the newly opened MGM National Harbor in Maryland. Valerie Esty, the nonprofit's meetings and member services manager, explains that the previous year's meeting was held in Washington, DC, but people kept leaving for work commitments.

"We wanted an intimate, fun atmosphere that would encourage dialogue," she says. The MGM was close to the group's headquarters but far enough away that people stayed onsite for the two-day gathering (plus the board and committee meetings that took place on either end of the main event).

"When you're in a big city, people want to go and explore, and you tend to lose people. If you can keep them onsite, they can come back more easily."

Valerie Esty  
Meetings & Member Services Manager  
Electronic Industry Citizenship Coalition  
Arlington, VA

Esty says she was very impressed by the MGM National Harbor, which had its grand opening in December. A lobby filled with modern artwork and upscale décor communicates that this is a special place as soon as guests walk through the door. The hotel has a range of restaurants, which meant guests could enjoy meals with each other without leaving the venue.

The meeting had a packed agenda, which means guests didn't have much down time. But when they were on their own, they could explore the property's swimming pool, spa, bars, casino and stores. Given that the property is so new, attractions are still coming online. The Bellagio Patisserie now

has a chocolate fountain, and Finks Rolex and Breitling stores are opening in July.

"The hotel has good meeting space, especially for somewhat smaller groups," says Esty, who points out that the nearby Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center can accommodate larger meetings if necessary. "The staff was amazing. I was really impressed with how cohesive they already were." Sometimes hotel staff in different departments don't work well together, she says, which makes it difficult to solve problems. At the MGM, communication was excellent and issues were resolved very efficiently.

Associations sometimes worry that hosting a meeting at a gaming resort will look bad or be criticized by bosses or constituents. "If you focus on the resort aspect, that helps with perception," Esty says. "When you're in a big city people want to go and explore and you tend to lose people. If you can keep them onsite, they can come back more easily." That means less attrition and fewer distractions than you might find at other venues.

### OSTEOPATHIC PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS HIT THE BEACH

Of all the cities known for gaming, Atlantic City is one of the most iconic. The city's struggles to attract business have been well-publicized in recent years, but revitalization efforts seem to be paying off. Tajma Kotoric, executive director of the New Jersey Association of Osteopathic Physicians and



AROC 2017 conference attendees network over lunch at Bally's Ocean Room in Atlantic City, which offers expansive ocean views.



Tajma Kotoric  
Executive Director  
NJAOPS  
Monmouth Junction, NJ

“Our attendees...like that (in Atlantic City) everything is under one roof. ...Once (they are) done, they can have dinner with friends, walk on the boardwalk, have a good time without having to sit in their car.”

Surgeons (NJAOPS), has seen positive changes come to the seaside town over the past few years.

NJAOPS hosts an annual conference called AROC that attracts 1,100 physicians, surgeons and exhibitors from across the region. There are continuing education seminars, keynote addresses by big names such as former U.S. attorney Paul Fishman and former NFL wide receiver Vance Johnson, a cocktail gala to honor their incoming president, and a 100-booth trade show.

“Atlantic City works well because they have these large spaces to host events under one roof,” Kotoric says. “What we hear from our attendees is that they like that everything is under one roof. Then once everything is done they can go and have dinner with friends, walk on the boardwalk, have a good time without having to sit in their car. They can walk instead.”

The AROC conference has been at Bally’s Atlantic City for the past 10 years. For the next two years NJAOPS is scheduled to be at the Golden Nugget. It’s right next to the marina, which means attendees can bring their boats. Kotoric also thinks attendees may be more likely to bring their families to a meeting at the Golden Nugget, which is very important to their membership.

“We’re having a difficult time engaging the millennials because they’re very family-friendly, and they don’t see Atlantic City as a family-friendly resort,” she says. “We hear a lot about how important it is to bring families to the convention because physicians are very busy and family time is precious. ...We were seeing pushback with the casino atmosphere.”

Golden Nugget is one of a handful of properties that’s trying to change Atlantic City’s “Boardwalk Empire” perception. While the resort has a casino, it’s removed from many of the other facilities. The property also has a good selection of shops and restaurants, as well as pools, an arcade, a spa and activities that give families plenty of things to do while mom or dad is at the conference.

When looking at facilities, Kotoric highly recom-

mends a site visit to make sure the space fits your needs. “A lot of hotels are chopping up (the event space) and it doesn’t give you a good flow to keep everyone under the one roof,” she says. “Do your homework and look at the venue a couple of times to make sure the flow works for you because you can easily lose your attendee by not having the right floor plan.”

In Atlantic City specifically, it’s very important to understand your contract. “A majority of their resorts have union restrictions, so truly understand your contract to make sure there are no hidden fees,” she says. “The unions require a lot of their own specifications, which can inflate your expenses.” One year NJAOPS hired its own videographers so it could livestream educational sessions. The hotel required that one of its AV staff sit in each room with the videographers, which tacked on an unanticipated cost.

But overall, Kotoric is bullish on AC. “We’re seeing finally that shift happening for the better,” she says. “It’s a great experience. Everyone really loves it. There are more people that are coming that are not associated with events; they’re just citizens. The atmosphere is changing. It’s nice to see it livelier.”

Caesars is an example of the newly bullish investment in the destination. Caesars has invested \$200 million over the last three years in its Atlantic City resorts, Bally’s, Caesars and Harrah’s Resort, including the new \$125 million Waterfront Conference Center at Harrah’s.

#### THE RIGHT FIT FOR THE WORKERS’ COMP ASSOCIATION

Shannon McLaughlin with McLaughlin Garner Group, a Jackson, Mississippi-based event services company co-



Gaming resorts such as Beau Rivage in Biloxi offer other benefits besides gambling, including live shows, shopping, swimming pools and spas.



The Colonnade at Dover Downs Hotel & Casino welcomes guests and meeting attendees to Delaware’s largest events property.

owned by Emily Myers Garner, recently collaborated with the Mississippi Workers’ Compensation Educational Association to plan a three-day educational conference. Six hundred people gathered to participate in workshops, hear keynote speakers, and network at meals and receptions. “The event went really well,” McLaughlin says. “They had great turnout and everyone seemed really pleased.”

The event was held at Beau Rivage in Biloxi, a property McLaughlin had successfully worked with in the past. “If you’re looking at the Gulf Coast, it’s the probably the top-caliber location as far as the building, the décor and the staff,” she says. “That’s not saying the other properties on the coast aren’t wonderful,” McLaughlin says, “but being an MGM resort property they step everything up a notch. The staff is very attentive. They’re very easy to work with.”

“Anytime you’re going to a space — and especially a new space — know what your vision is and let the staff know what your expectations are. There’s no such thing as overcommunication.”

Shannon McLaughlin  
Co-Owner  
McLaughlin Garner Group LLC  
Jackson, MS

Beau Rivage’s staff is always very accommodating and creative, she says. Because of the group’s size, the food service staff set up identical buffets in several of the on-site restaurants so everyone didn’t have to squeeze in to the same ballroom. “It allowed people to go out and eat and get off the conference room floor,” she says. “Sometimes when you’re in the same spot all day it’s nice to get a bit of a break.”

The food is always fabulous there, McLaughlin says, and she likes that the property’s restaurants and bars stay open late. It provides more opportunities for attendees to meet for informal networking and relationship-building after each day’s events have concluded.

McLaughlin advises planners looking into gaming resorts to look at all of each site’s amenities before settling on a location. People sometimes focus on the gambling

and forget that gaming resorts offer many other benefits, including live shows, shopping, swimming pools and spas.

Properties where the gaming portion is removed from the conference facilities also remove the temptation to skip out of meetings early. To keep participants engaged through the meeting, “try to have interesting speakers and keep the day flowing well,” McLaughlin says. “We try to do really yummy breaks where there’s fun food. There are always good door prizes and you have to be present to win, and that’s a bonus.”

The main thing to consider with gaming resorts is the same things planners think about with any venue: making sure the space is the right fit for the meeting. “Anytime you’re going to a space — and especially a new space — know what your vision is and let the staff know what your expectations are,” McLaughlin says. “There’s no such thing as overcommunication.”

#### AN EASY DRIVE FOR AAA

Dover Downs Hotel & Casino, a gaming resort that’s also Delaware’s largest property for meetings and events, has good prices, good food, great services, and plenty of entertainment and dining options. That and more is what keeps Marcia Powers, business operations administrator for leisure travel for AAA mid-Atlantic, which is based in Wilmington, planning an annual leadership forum there.

The event draws about 500 associates from as far away as Kansas. With all those people coming from other places, Powers appreciates that Dover Downs is near an airport and offers reasonable room rates. That’s pretty typical of gaming



Credits: French Lick Resort



French Lick Resort offers a relaxed environment and a Pete Dye golf course that members of the Indiana Bankers Association enjoy after meetings.

At French Lick “you don’t even know there’s a casino there unless you go find it. My members really enjoy golf, so golf is a bigger draw for us than the gaming.”

**Chris Bennett**  
V.P. of Meetings and Events  
Indiana Bankers Association  
Indianapolis, IN

resorts, she says; they offer low prices because they’re trying to draw people into the casino. The rooms are also quite nice, she reports. “The things I look for when I do site visits are spaciousness and cleanliness, and they definitely have those. The bathrooms are always immaculate.”

Powers has found all of Dover Downs’ hospitality quite praiseworthy. “You don’t have to pay tax on food and beverage,” she says. “That can be a significant portion of your budget if you’re paying tax on those items.”

“The service is very good,” she adds. “I’ve had excellent experiences with all the folks I’ve worked with down there, from the general manager on down. That means a lot to a meeting planner because someone has my back. If I needed something all I had to do was ask.”

Once guests are onsite they can avail themselves of the onsite casino, shops, restaurants, bars, spa and occasional concerts. The Dover Mall is within walking distance, and shoppers pay no sales tax. All of these easily accessible entertainment options mean planners can focus less on keeping attendees busy in the off-hours and more on the meeting agenda.

#### BANKERS ASSOCIATION FAVORITE

While gaming resorts are often associated with big cities and bright lights, some are tucked in rural communities

that offer beautiful scenery and a break from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. That’s one of the things the Indiana Bankers Association likes about French Lick Resort.

“It’s a relaxed atmosphere down there,” says Chris Bennett, the association’s vice president of meetings and events. “When we do meetings in Indianapolis it’s difficult to retain everyone. Everyone scatters out to restaurants and other attractions. At French Lick there’s nothing else there, so we’re the only game in town for them.”

The association’s annual three-day convention gathering kicks off with a welcome reception on the patio. After that there’s a combination of meetings, a trade show, a silent auction that benefits IBA’s PAC, a golf tournament, and plenty of time for guests to network and unwind. “My members really enjoy golf, so golf is a bigger draw for us than the gaming,” Bennett says of French Lick. They can play the championship Pete Dye course or one of several other courses. They also can check out the spa, pools, fitness center, bowling alley or arcade, walking tours of the historic property and more.

Bennett appreciates that the gaming isn’t front and center at the property. “You don’t even know there’s a casino there unless you go find it,” she says. Those who enjoy gambling can partake in their off hours. Those that don’t have plenty of other ways to keep themselves entertained. AC&F

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Credit: IMEX America, 2016



Credit: Chris Williams/ASAE

(Opposite page) Attendees huddle over their tablets at IMEX America. (Above) a VR demonstration at ASAE's Technology Conference & Expo.

# Meeting Tech Trends

Tune in to the Latest so Attendees Won't Tune Out

Will robots be presenting, drones be hovering, continuing education take place telepathically at your next meeting? That's probably not likely, at least not yet. But the near future of tech for association meetings will involve better ways to hone in on the specific needs of individual members, making best use of the devices everyone is already carrying and, as always, convincing attendees not to tune out.

"It's not really about one specific tech as much as everything is being converted to a visual experience," says Wilson Tang, V.P. of digital experience at FreemanXP, provider of personalized brand experiences. "There's practically no part of the event space that we aren't considering how to digitize."

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The IMEX America team is confident that AI is one of the

By Sara Churchville

major meeting trends for 2017, not just because it's next-level tech but because it is so easily applied to a basic conference need: connecting people. Grip, which bills itself as the world's first artificial

**"It's not really about one specific tech as much as everything is being converted to a visual experience. There's practically no part of the event space that we aren't considering how to digitize."**



Wilson Tang  
V.P. of Digital Experience  
FreemanXP  
New York, NY

intelligence event networking app, got high marks at IMEX America, winning the 2016 IMEXpitch competition for start-up tech. The app marries the LinkedIn request and the Tinder swipe, allowing attendees to connect in a "handshake" if both swipe their interest. If one does not, no harm done: The requests are anonymous unless the interest is mutual. Grip also offers event matchmaking to attendees onsite, with in-the-moment recommendations on which exhibitors to visit and sessions to attend.

## "FINDING YOUR TRIBE"

Targeted connecting, not just association-to-attendee but attendee-to-attendee, is also among IMEX's picks for tech trends to watch this year. Along with Grip, the IMEX America team singled out Loopd as a rising matchmaking service for attendees, and Zenvoy as a way for buyers and attendees to stay in touch. Separately, attendees also are connecting via Snapchat and private messaging services such as Signal, WhatsApp and ChatSecure.

## VIRTUAL AND AUGMENTED REALITY

Virtual reality software maker WorldViz also caught IMEX's eye for its business communication module, tentatively called "Skofield," which lets users present remotely via virtual reality. Event planners also can create elaborate worlds within the world to help focus attendee attention and, ideally, boost learning and retention.

Telepresence robots, which allow remote attendees not only to see and hear the goings-on but also to interact face-to-screen with physical attendees, have gotten plenty of buzz, but it remains to be seen whether they'll cement themselves into the foundation of events. "Robots are more eye candy," as Tang sees it. "People end up staring at them rather than engaging with them. Ostensibly, people would walk up and talk, but it's never natural."

Rather, he sees augmented reality — the system of imagery superimposed on the physical world of which PokemonGo is the most familiar example— as the tech future of continuing education for association meetings.



Credit: Grip

Grip, an artificial intelligence event networking app, allows attendees to connect in a "handshake" if both swipe their interest.



Dave Lutz  
Managing Director  
Velvet Chainsaw  
Winter Garden, FL

**“The big thing is people don’t mind being tracked when there’s a benefit to them. It’s just a matter of making sure that the consumer wins. That’s the big problem. ...Is the win big enough to want to be tracked?”**

“Apps, devices and so forth as learning and education tools are the next big revolution,” Tang contends. “Using smartphones or other devices, you find much more interactive and engaging ways to present content to attendees — for example, rather than slides and videos, interactive 3-D models attendees view on their phone as they’re going through the event. You can point your phone at a product or part of human anatomy to learn about it. It’s a far more engaging and interactive experience than watching a presentation.”

### PHONING IT IN

Smartphone tech for meetings is most likely to catch on best for the simple reason that, as Reggie Henry, ASAE’s chief information and engagement officer, notes in a different context, “Everybody has at least a smartphone with them. If you’re developing new apps, meeting apps, wayfinders, they have to work in a mobile environment.” At a recent ASAE conference, for example, Henry’s team used a mobile phone-based walkie-talkie app that allowed the members to set up different channels instead of renting walkie-talkies. “It doesn’t make sense to not take advantage of that,” he says of the ubiquity of personal phones.

And soon enough, most attendees will be toting not just any phone, but one that has built-in augmented reality software. The Lenovo Phab 2 Pro was the first smartphone to offer Google’s augmented reality software, Tango, and now the Asus Zenfone, just introduced at the 2017 Consumer Electronics Show, one-ups the earlier phone by supporting both Tango and Google’s virtual reality software, Daydream. Although both phones are



Credit: ASUS

tricked-out with high-end hardware meant to provide a bright, crisp augmented reality interface, they cost significantly less than a new iPhone — meaning there is zero wait time for the new tech to trickle down to the mass market.

### UNPLUGGING

This brave new world of ever more targeted connectivity also encompasses its inverse: the ever more desperate craving to disconnect. IMEX calls this trend “unsubscribe,” wherein attendees “reclaim their inboxes, their sanity and their time” in “a flight toward more authentic and meaningful productivity. In turn, the purposeful creation and appreciation of ‘no-thing’ time (using planning approaches such as White Space) will win more and more fans in 2017.”

Some association planners were already onto this trend before it became a trend. Nicole Malcom, BSB-HRM, director of operations, American Holistic Nurses Association, for example, builds disconnect time into the flow of her annual conference. At her June event of about 450 holistic nurses plus presenters and staff, she created “unlocked, static reflection rooms” that were “reflective of a spa...with aromatherapy and water fountains.” Attendees could wander through a labyrinth, practice some asanas and generally take a timeout from the general excitement.

### DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Granted, Malcom’s attendees are already occupationally inclined to take the road less frantic. Further, the association’s members range in age from 30 to 80, so Malcom used a hybrid of digital and analog sources to appeal to all comers. There was the standard CrowdCompass meeting app, which offered attendees an individualized experience in terms of speakers and sessions, and allowed them to leave notes for each other on the virtual bulletin board, download presentation materials to any mobile device and respond to surveys. There was also a physical bulletin board, paper handouts of the presentation materials and “paper bingo” for amassing signatures from exhibit booths.

The association’s “paper meets smartphone” approach is multipronged and designed to gradually bring members up to speed on tech: “We’re encouraging presenters to provide attendees innovative ways to integrate standard nursing practices with holistic ones by using technology, and introducing to nurses how to download apps onto their phone, how to recommend other holistic practitioners and how to introduce information to others,” she says.

Malcom also makes liberal use of the association website to provide downloadable professional headshots taken at

The Asus Zenfone, which made its debut at the 2017 Consumer Electronics Show, supports both Tango and Google’s virtual reality software, Daydream.

the conference and videos shot from a GoPro camera with head strap for an immersive perspective.

Apart from the conference, the association familiarizes members with tech in various other ways; for example, they’ve created a Power-Point presentation with instructions for local chapters on creating their own group Facebook page.

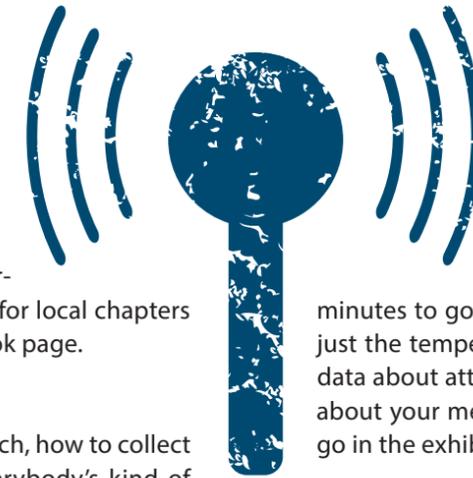
### BEACONS AND TRACKING

Once members are upskilled on tech, how to collect useful information from them? “Everybody’s kind of looking at a shiny object: collecting behavioral data through beacons — who went to a session, exhibit hall, how much time did they spend,” says Dave Lutz, managing director, Velvet Chainsaw, a consulting firm whose mission is to improve the conference experience. “It’s the hottest question mark because prices have come down to the point where it’s worth investigating. The exhibitor is going to have a perception that you won’t change with beacons or audits. I just don’t think we’re ready for mass behavioral tracking.”

Tang also sees the downside of geolocation data collection in how easy it is to misinterpret what’s collected. “There’s a lot of activity during shows, a lot of noise, a lot of heat maps, but without anyone actually going through the experience, understanding what was where,” he says. “The data told you a lot of people are at this corner, but the data didn’t tell you: that’s where the bathroom line is.”

Still, beacon technology has been successful in retail and elsewhere as a way of connecting with customer needs in real time, as well as inevitably providing reams of data that may or may not be useful later. The recent launch of Bluetooth 5 promises to expand the reach and usability of beacons and to upgrade the internet of things experience of having everyday appliances that send and receive online data. But that presupposes that attendees will in fact leave their Bluetooth on; typically, people are less likely to be “always on” when they’re away from home traveling, making it difficult to do accurate, widespread tracking, Lutz notes. And privacy concerns mean some will deliberately stay disconnected for periods.

“Some of the registration vendors are starting to put a beacon in the badge itself,” Lutz says, which solves the issue of an attendee being off the grid. Without a badge beacon,



the participation rate can be as low as 20 or 25 percent, he says.

Henry sees the benefit of beacons for event planners specifically in the improved ability to analyze location data in real time. “Imagine a room set for 100, with 95 already there and 10 minutes to go. You have time to get chairs in there, adjust the temperature,” he says. “If you can combine the data about attendees with other data you already have about your members, you can guide them to where to go in the exhibit hall and where to go next.”

### HIGH-TECH EXPECTATIONS

It’s one thing for planners and event organizers to believe they’re improving attendee experience through tech, but the real question is whether attendees agree with that assessment. “We all believe in getting better intel on your customers, but you can sometimes take it too far, and it’s hard to get the right read,” says Lutz.

Because their everyday experience of the convenience of tech is fairly advanced, “people’s expectations now are off the charts, when they think about how tech can affect them,” Henry says. And those expectations aren’t always being met in the event sphere. In fact, a recent ASAE IT-readiness study found a 40 percent gap between what association members expect from tech and what the staff thought they could deliver through tech, Henry says.

Even the conference registration process is tedious for attendees, he says. “Even though these are people that we know and have done business with throughout the years, we ask not only for identifying information, which the association should know,” but also questions for the exhibitors, questions about familiarity with the association’s other offerings — when the attendee just wants to register for a conference.

But is the ideal way to meet those expectations really to institute more tracking and collect more data? Maybe not. “I love how my association tracks my every move,” said no attendee ever,” Lutz says. “People don’t always like being tracked, but if they voluntarily raise their hand, that’s another ballgame. The big thing is people don’t mind being tracked when there’s a benefit to them. It’s just a matter of making sure that the consumer wins. That’s the big problem I don’t think I’ve heard the right solution for. Is the win big enough to want to be tracked?”

**“People’s expectations now are off the charts, when they think about how tech can affect them.”**



Reggie Henry  
Chief Information and  
Engagement Officer  
ASAE  
Washington, DC



Nicole Malcom, BSB-HRM  
Director of Operations  
American Holistic Nurses  
Association  
Topeka, KS

**“We’ve increased from 20 new members a week to 35 to 40 per week, just doing Facebook promotional ads. We are very specific, looking at who does what: Our age group doesn’t do Snapchat or Instagram.”**

well. She also runs ads on Facebook, targeting nurses in a 30-60-mile radius. “It’s not expensive,” she says. “\$525 is the highest I’ve spent in a month. But we’ve increased from 20 new members a week to 35 to 40 per week, just doing Facebook promotional ads.” The association also promotes on LinkedIn and Twitter. “We are very specific, looking at who does what: Our age group doesn’t do Snapchat or Instagram.”

**TIPS FOR PLANNERS**

- **Follow up on attendee actions, not eyeballs.** “We’ve developed this mindset of tracking implicit rather than explicit behaviors. Expressed behaviors are of greater value to understanding your customers,” says Lutz. “Just because I walk by a booth doesn’t mean I’m interested in that topic, per se. A stronger cue is if I go on a website or mobile app and add that to my itinerary; if I show up and scan to get CEUs; if I complete a conference survey for that session. There’s greater value in a specific behavior than, hey, I just happened to walk by or click on a link.”
- **The conference website matters. A lot.** “Planners have gotten onto the digital marketing bandwagon grudgingly,” says Tang. “But you have to have a great online presence. There are so many poorly designed emails and websites. If they’re not convinced in the 10 seconds they’re on your website, then you’ve lost them after that.”
- **Livestreaming events can build a conference base.** While planners may fear attendance will decline if they livestream sessions, “what they invariably find is the audiences increase. When you expand the audience base, more people want to be there in person. They’re using it to discover events and, on the planner end, to market events.”
- **See conferences from the outside in.** For Henry, the best use of tech involves approaching meetings from the attendee’s perspective. Can the registration process be faster? Can the flow of the event be more intuitive? “We should keep the customers and their time in our minds as we look at the whole process — the marketing, registration, assistance at the event. So often, we look at what we’re trying to do, and trying to deliver, and what we need, when we need to look at systems from the outside in,” Henry says.

**BETTER THE DATA YOU KNOW**

Meanwhile, however rudimentary their tech collection is, relatively speaking, one thing associations are not short on is data about their members. The challenge isn’t so much gathering data, but knowing how to understand it and how to use it to best effect. “Data from your meeting app is there, it’s just not being used,” says Lutz, who cites the lack of database structure among the issues keeping it unexploited. “Practical aspects of (data) are sometimes not fully understood.”

And of course, there’s the eternal question of budget. It can be bewildering to know what to invest in as technology rapidly ramps up, and unexpectedly expensive to try to change course later. Even moving from one registration provider to a new one can come with hidden costs that may not ultimately make fiscal sense, Lutz says. But software solutions planners already own can provide multiple options, some of which the association may not need this year but can build on over several years.



American Holistic Nurses Association event attendees take a selfie.

**MOBILE APP AD INFINITUM**

“When I started in 2013, we were not tech-savvy at all,” says Malcom. But once she convinced the executive director to invest in a mobile app, “it was a lot easier to increase visibility in a lot of other ways. It was a slow takeoff the first year, but last year, our numbers indicated that we had an average of people using the sessions for 30 minutes and 45,600 ad views.”

Malcom also notes: “I’ve been able to recoup a lot of my costs from the mobile app just by selling ads. I’ve sold about five or six banners, so it’s starting to take fire.” Those who once only advertised during the conference now advertise in the association’s magazine and e-newsletter as

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# Safety & Security in a Volatile World

## Ensuring the Safety of Meeting Attendees Is Tops on Planners' Agendas Today

By Christine Loomis

Prior to the conference, we asked Suppe for his take on what planners need to do in light of recent attacks at various types of venues, including the concert in Manchester, England. He started by stating that risk comes in many forms.

"Concerns vary from show to show, depending on the nature of the show," Suppe says. "For example, some shows that come to the LVCC demonstrate equipment that may be hazardous, such as welding machines, or the exhibitor may have hazardous chemicals or processes to demonstrate. These all contribute to risk that must be mitigated to protect the building and occupants in a way that allows exhibitors to demonstrate their products or services. Building occupancy is also a concern — how many people will be in the building? Do we see potential for a large group to cause a bottleneck that needs to be prevented? We also review and approve floor plans prior to shows in order to assure that we have enough capacity to provide clear egress routes from the show floor in the event of an emergency."

Cities also must be prepared, and Las Vegas is a prime example of being ready for the unexpected. "Las Vegas is among the safest travel destinations in the world and uses the most advanced training and technology to maintain a secure environment," Suppe notes, adding that the key to successful preparedness lies in communication and collaboration.

He says the city has three primary components to its collaborative security and safety efforts. "The first is the Las Vegas Security Chiefs Association, which was formed in 1987 and promotes security professionalism and enhanced communication and information-sharing between resort security directors, corporate security leadership and all public agencies.

"The second is the Southern Nevada Counter Terrorism Center, aka, the Fusion Center, comprised of multiple agencies providing direct communication, resources, expertise and intelligence across multi-jurisdictions within the Southern Nevada region, including the resort corridor. The Fusion Center maximizes our ability to respond to all potential crimes and hazards affecting the destination. The Fusion Center also houses the first position of its kind, an intelligence analyst dedicated to the resort corridor. The position is responsible for direct liaison with resort security directors and corporate security leadership.

**L**ike it or not, the world has changed. Security and safety concerns must be front and center at business and association meetings these days.

In May, the Events Industry Council, comprised of CEOs of more than 30 leading industry organizations, released its top five trends shaping the events industry: safety and security was No. 1.

The EIC's announcement included this statement: "Given the state of national security around the globe, it is imperative that the events industry concentrates on efforts to ensure the safety of attendees. In this regard, Events Industry Council member, the International Association for Venue Managers is developing a safety and security designation and guidelines for convention centers to meet Department of Homeland Security accreditation. Additionally, the Events Industry Council's APEX initiative has formed a work group to develop additional resources for meeting professionals to become more educated and proactive on safety issues."

The topic of event safety was a headliner at multiple industry events this summer. For example, Meeting Professionals International's World Education Congress announced at its meeting in June a collaboration with the National Center for Spectator Sports Safety and Security at the University of Southern Mississippi to develop educational programming and resources, with the first course, Emergency Preparedness for Meetings and Events, debuting at WEC.

### WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

The International Tourism Safety Association, together with the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA), Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department and Las Vegas Security Chiefs Association, put on the 24th International Tourism Safety Conference in June. More than 20 countries were represented at the conference, which took place at the Las Vegas Convention Center (LVCC). Among those speaking was Ray Suppe, president of the International Tourism Safety Association and executive director of customer safety for LVCVA.



Credit: Sam Morris / Las Vegas News Bureau

**"We...encourage organizers to consider heightened security measures such as photo ID requirements, explosive detection dogs or increased local law enforcement as appropriate."**

Ray Suppe

President, International Tourism Safety Association  
Executive Director of Customer Safety, Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority



Kari Messenger, CMP  
Meetings Manager  
Association Management Center  
Chicago, IL

**“While emergencies are not always life-and-death circumstances, staff and attendees look to the meeting planner as to how to react to a situation.”**

“The third,” Suppe continues, “is our Convention Center Area Command, responsible for policing the Las Vegas Strip. The station is housed on the campus of the Las Vegas Convention Center and is home to the tourism safety unit. Through a secured texting environment, law enforcement shares up-to-date information and status reports of ongoing events.”

For planners, Suppe says he believes the first step is development of a crisis plan for each specific event. His group can even provide a template for guidance.

“It’s important that organizers understand the life cycle of an event from the security perspective,” he says. “Once the lease for a show is signed, organizers need to get their contract security provider in place. I recommend having one person in charge, whether it’s a dedicated show staff or hired consultant, to better facilitate communication. Then there are milestones that should be accomplished six months before the show, such as organizers meeting with the venue security team and learning about resources they can provide, and three months before, such as finalization of evacuation and crisis plans, as well security, fire and medical plans. We also encourage organizers to consider heightened security measures such as photo ID requirements, explosive detection dogs or increased local law enforcement as appropriate.”

One directive organizers should communicate to attendees is See Something, Say Something, which is essential. “Convention attendees can participate by texting the center’s security team or talking to any of our security representatives in person,” Suppe says. “Our building partners, show producers and contractors have provided support by sharing the program with their employees. See Something, Say Something is a simple, effective program to raise awareness of safety and security concerns and to emphasize the importance of reporting suspicious activity or behavior to security personnel.”

Partnerships and collaboration with local experts are also imperative in terms of cybersecurity, according to Lawrence Roney, executive director of information technology for the LVCVA.

“Cybersecurity is at the forefront of our information technology initiatives,” he says, “especially since the LVCC hosts some of the world’s largest technology shows, such as the Consumer Technology Association’s CES, the National Association of Broadcasters and InfoComm International.

“The LVCC’s exhibitor and public-access networks are physically separated from any corporate information and building system control networks,” Roney continues. “Additionally, we rely on our partners at Cox Business, and their advanced convention services team, to provide carrier-grade security, network monitoring, intrusion detection and threat mitigation for our trade show producers, exhibitors and guests at the LVCC, as well as the Cashman Center (20 minutes away). Network and cellular equipment operation centers are monitored around the clock. These areas deploy advanced physical security safeguards and access control protocols to ensure our physical information technology infrastructure remains secure.”

### THE PLANNER PERSPECTIVE

Preparedness, communication and collaboration with venues and community partners also top the list of what planners say they believe is essential for ensuring an event is safe.

Kari Messenger, CMP, meetings manager with Association Management Center, worked on the 18th annual meeting of the American Society of Bioethics and Humanities (ASBH) in Washington, DC, in October — shortly before a well-publicized presidential race. The group of 1,200 was based at the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill.

“There are many factors when thinking about safety and security,” Messenger says. “The most common emergencies at a conference are medical emergencies when an attendee gets hurt or needs assistance, power outages and social disturbances. More serious situations planners should be ready for include fire, terrorist attack and citywide emergencies.”

To plan effectively, staff and attendees must be informed and work together. “While emergencies are not always life-and-death circumstances, staff and attendees look to the meeting planner as to how to react to a situation,” Messenger says. “Planners need to communicate with venue security teams to ensure all safety and security information is shared. Once the planner has this information, it’s important to put it in writing and share it with staff attending the meeting.”

For ASBH, Messenger had several documents in place prior to the event:

- An emergency preparedness plan detailing information on local hospitals, in-house security information and how to respond in different emergency situations.
- A crisis management communication flow chart, listing staff names and telephone numbers and showing who

contacts whom in an emergency, as well as which staff person contacts exhibitors, board members and speakers.

- A staff responsibilities document stating the responsibility of each staff member should an emergency occur.

“Educate your staff and provide them with these materials to review before leaving for onsite,” Messenger advises.

Given the location and timing of the ASBH event, security was heightened. “Our team wanted to ensure we were ready for any event,” Messenger says. “Besides having phone conversations with our venue security team and discussing procedures, our CSM provided us with a tool called District of Columbia Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency (DC HSEMA), an app that alerts those in the area of any threats or emergencies in the city. Our CSM mentioned that many locals use this app, too. Being from another state, I felt more connected to the conference city and confident I’d have timely access to information in an emergency.”

Just weeks before the team headed out, Messenger received a call from her CSM alerting her that a high-profile guest needed to host an event during ASBH’s move-in and first day of registration. “As it was only weeks before Election Day, it didn’t take much detective work to figure out who this guest was as it was mentioned that the Secret Service would be present,” she says.

Once onsite, Messenger said she was impressed with how prepared the hotel was. “From the time of the call from the CSM, we worked on a plan to ensure our attendees could reach the registration area as needed while still maintaining proper security requirements for the high-profile guest. Once the day arrived, I was mesmerized by how polite and accommodating Secret Service agents were to our attendees and my team. As promised, they followed through with allowing our attendees to cut the line of security to enter the registration area for ASBH. The hotel staffed the area to ensure our attendees knew where to go and what was happening within the hotel. This communication made it seamless for our meeting to continue on schedule. Not only did our group feel safe and well taken care of, we were a small part of history being in the action of a high-profile candidate rally weeks before the election, not to mention seeing the best of the best of conference security in action.”

Regardless of location, Messenger expects a venue to provide access to its security team around the clock. “I want to know who my main contact is, how the situation will be handled and how long it will take for a response. I’m looking for who on their staff is trained in CPR, where fire extinguishers and defibrillators are located and where the emergency exits are in each breakout room. These details must also be communicated to the rest of the event staff so all are prepared.”



Pamela Dallstream, CMP, CMM  
Director of Education  
Society of Critical Care Medicine  
Mt. Prospect, IL

**“Keep your eye on what is happening worldwide and be prepared for the worst-case scenario at your event. Assume disaster won’t strike your event, but have plans in place should something happen.”**

As for attendees, Messenger says providing an emergency contact during registration is paramount. “And once onsite, emergency exit information should be brought to the attention of all attendees in each session room. These notes can be added into the housekeeping section of announcements. Just a few minutes of calling attention to the space gives attendees a clear idea of how to exit in an emergency.”

When it comes to what’s most important, Messenger echoes others. “Communication! That’s the No. 1 thing to ensure that a planner and team are ready to handle any situation. Taking time to go through each potential situation and how to handle it is so important. If a situation does occur, your team will know what to do and where to report. That can make all the difference in handling an emergency.”

### GLOBAL ISSUES PLAY A ROLE

Pamela S. Dallstream, CMP, CMM, director of education for the Society of Critical Care Medicine (SCCM), says planners need to be aware of global security concerns as well as concerns within their own environment. SCCM’s group of 6,000 met in January at the Hilton Hawaiian Village on Oahu.

“Planners need to watch the news and understand any threats that might impact their meeting environment,” she says. “Medical organizations are especially susceptible to individuals or groups protesting pharmaceutical companies (that are) exhibiting at a meeting, so planners must be prepared for instances such as picketers outside the facility, protestors entering the facility with signage, etc.”

SCCM requires all venues and facilities to provide a copy of their security measures, noting all exit doors from the buildings and including a list of the closest hospitals, pharmacies and security numbers to call within the facility (not necessarily 911). “We also provide SCCM staff with a map of the facility and identify where staff should gather in case of emergency. Staff leadership has a set of security guidelines to follow should a disaster strike during an event.”

As for language in contracts, Dallstream says, “Planners should require hotels and other facilities to agree to an expanded force majeure clause that allows for the organization



Phelps R. Hope, CMP  
Senior Vice President  
Meetings & Expositions  
Kellen  
Atlanta, GA

**“A non-U.S.-located conference requires more security protocols, communications and planning. Additional items such as medical evacuation or hostage insurance and security might be required.”**

to cancel the meeting if a natural or unavoidable disaster strikes that prevents 25 percent of registrants from attending the meeting.”

To keep critical information secure, she says, “The SCCM maintains our data behind a secure firewall. We are PCI compliant, so credit card payment onsite at meetings is handled in front of the customer — no swiping of cards behind the scenes.”

Like Messenger, Dallstream says attendees must provide emergency contact information during registration, including a name, phone number and email address. “This information should remain on file with the meeting organizer and should be added to the name badge, along with the name, number and address of the local hotel, for quick reference by onsite medical personnel.”

Dallstream advises planners to, “Keep your eye on what is happening worldwide and be prepared for the worst-case scenario at your event. Assume disaster won’t strike your event, but have plans in place should something happen.”

#### COLLABORATION LEADS TO SUCCESS

Phelps R. Hope, CMP, is senior V.P., meetings and expositions, with Kellen, an association management company. He lists the primary safety and security concerns for planners as physical safety, personal items/equipment security, food safety and data security.

He stresses collaboration in preparedness. Event organizers should, “First, identify the needs areas, then the vendors, contractors and local officials who will influence success in these areas, and create a planning committee comprised of each of these team players so the issues of security have a professional, educated, experienced approach to the planning, communications and execution of safety and security.”

In terms of venues, Hope says, “Planners should expect only basic security coverage from most venues. Regardless of needs and what is contracted, all planners should broach the topic of security specifically with their venue partners so it is an open and understood topic. That way any supplement

tal needs can be quickly identified and a plan developed to accommodate them.”

He points out that communication needs differ at different events. “The frequency of communications depends on the level of security protocols and what needs to be communicated to attendees and exhibitors and how often. Regardless of the specific environment, a communications plan should be established for every conference, even if the decision is not to communicate,” Hope says.

International destinations require different protocols and considerations. “A non-U.S.-located conference requires more security protocols, communications and planning. Additional items such as medical evacuation or hostage insurance and security might be required,” he says. “Talk with your peers, listen to the local officials and vendors. If in doubt, err on the side of being overly cautious.”

That said, Hope believes most vendors, venues and contracting professionals, whether here or overseas, have a stake in making a meeting safe. “Our collective livelihoods are hinged on successful meetings and events, so in general we all have a vested interest in a successful program. However, on every team are those who are not as committed or who are perhaps simply having a bad day, and it’s the planner’s responsibility to not let those people negatively affect the integrity of the planning process. Sometimes it takes more effort, and that’s what makes a good meeting planner a great meeting planner.”

Like others, Hope says data protection is critical. “The two main areas for cyber protection at a conference are the registration database and credit card payment information for registration and hotel bookings. Since all credit card processing requires heavy PCI compliance, specifically around the storage and use of the actual card numbers, this is an area that is assumed to have solid protection. “However,” he adds, “a planner can make a mistake by deviating from an established, reputable online registration system and management company by going with a ‘free’ online tool found in the public domain. This can lead to serious data-protection failures. A mistake many inexperienced planners make is sharing a registration list openly with too much data included. Planners should protect their data as though it is a pot of gold, because in essence it is!”

To fellow planners, Hope says, “Never let your own ego or agenda get in the way of the job at hand. Be humble when dealing with other cultures and communities, but be firm and never let the integrity of the event be compromised. Remind yourself that you do not know it all — even if you have done the same event many times — and you need to listen to others. You may need to rely on them at some point, so begin the relationship with that in mind to help build loyalty and ‘buy-in’ to your goals.”

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# Golden State Meetings

## Planners Offer an Inside Look at Their California Confabs

When it comes to meetings, few U.S. states can boast the diverse allure of California. The sun shines for most of the year, and weather extremes are rarely tested. Cities large and small beckon planners, while pre- and post-conference attractions are many and varied. And although East Coasters are rife with put-downs about the state's "granola" culture, deep down, they all just wish they could be California girls, right?

By David Swanson

About 55 percent of the meetings held in California in 2016 were events drawing from in-state. Out-of-state groups were led by those from Texas and followed closely by Massachusetts, Washington, Florida and New York (the data included training/seminar, client or customer meeting/service, business meeting, and convention/conference/trade-show events).

Typical of many events conducted in the state, the California Special Districts Association (CSDA) chooses to stick close to home in planning its Annual Conference & Exhibitor Showcase, and Monterey has proven to be a crowd-pleasing locale.

"We have a great history with our meetings in Monterey," explains CSDA Professional Development Director Megan Hemming. "It tends to be one of our most popular conference locations. Since I started with CSDA, we have had our 2011, 2013 and 2015 annual conferences there, and we're planning for September 2017. Monterey Regional Airport is easily accessible from Northern and Southern California, and our attendees love going there. It has a great walkable downtown, the wharf and Cannery Row, which gives our attendees some great options for any free time or open evenings for dinners."

Located about two hours south of San Francisco by car, Monterey County is a jewel-studded trove of desirable

small cities and towns, including Monterey, Carmel-by-the-Sea, Pebble Beach, Carmel Valley, Big Sur and Salinas. The area served as the glam backdrop for the recent HBO mini-series "Big Little Lies," while a roster of investments is raising Monterey County's profile for meetings. And it's home to the Monterey Bay Aquarium at the ocean's edge on historic Cannery Row.

The 40,000-sf Monterey Conference Center will put the finishing touches on a \$60 million renovation this fall; the Portola Hotel & Spa next door recently completed a \$10 million renovation of all 379 guest rooms and bathrooms; Sanctuary Beach Resort Monterey Bay is undergoing a \$4 million renovation of its restaurant and meeting space; and Embassy Suites by Hilton Monterey Bay Seaside is finishing an \$11 million renovation of its ballrooms and guest rooms.

"The investments that are happening here in Monterey County are not only investments into the individual properties, but also the community and destination," says Tammy Blount, president and CEO of the Monterey County Convention and Visitors Bureau. "The renovations and upgrades will give visitors new experiences that will inspire them to share their life-enriching stories with others."

### THE CVB SETS THE TONE

The California Special Districts Association annual event draws 600 attendees, and Hemming says the ease of coordinating hotels and the conference center are a prime advantage to working with Monterey. "They just get it, and they want to make your life as easy as possible. They bring creative ideas and solutions to the table as well. They understand an association's need for branding and, for our last event, connected us with a local sign company to create amazing window clings to direct our attendees between the conference center and hotel. We even added clings to the elevator doors — there was no doubt whose meeting you were attending.

"Lauren Siring with the Monterey County CVB just sets the tone off right for any event in Monterey," Hemmings continues. "Take advantage of the CVB resources from site visits through the completion of your event. They can provide you with marketing tools like digital banners, postcards and microsites. They are coordinating our housing block for this year's event, and it is saving me a ton of time. They also had someone who set up a table near our registration area to serve as a resource about Monterey — where to eat, etc. This saved our registration staff time and also gave our attendees a more informed answer to their questions."

Hemming says that the base hotel for her group is the Monterey Marriott, but that due to the popularity of the program, overflow blocks at the Portola Hotel & Spa, Hotel Pacific and Hyatt Regency Monterey Hotel and Spa on Del

"We have a great history with our meetings in Monterey. It tends to be one of our most popular conference locations."

Megan Hemming  
Professional Development Director, California Special Districts Association, Sacramento, CA

Monte Golf Course also will be used, which the CVB assisted in securing.

### SEAMLESS SERVICE

"Monterey offers a great service called the Monterey Conference Connection, which really helps meeting planners by coordinating all of the facilities, giving you one main contact so it doesn't feel like you are planning three different meetings. They try to make it as seamless as possible. The conference center includes complimentary basic Wi-Fi, which our attendees and exhibitors love. You can also receive complimentary meeting space based on the amount of rooms you pick up.

"The space at the conference center is great and getting even better," Hemming adds. "From the previews I have seen, the renovation will be stunning — so light and bright and much more user-friendly space, including upgraded technology and LEED certified. The Marriott and Portola have taken the conference center's lead and done their own renovations as well. I've just toured these facilities, and they are looking great. New lobbies, restaurant upgrades, open concept — our attendees are really going to enjoy networking in these new spaces." In all, the interconnected Monterey Conference Connection space — Marriott, Portola and conference center combined — encompasses 85,000 sf.

Hemming cites several members of the hospitality community as being helpful, in particular mentioning her Marriott senior account executive, Kristine Van Winkle. "She really knows my group, our demographic and what's important to our attendees. Marriott really does want to make your event a success. Don't be afraid to ask questions about what they have seen that has been successful for other groups.

"We have a lot of food and beverage events in our exhibit hall, and Michele Pearce, director of event planning at the Marriott, helped me create special packages for the exhibitors to be able to host appetizer or dessert trays in their exhibit space. It helped to drive traffic to the booth but also helped us offset some of our costs. Michele suggested incorporating local produce, like artichokes, that they could offer at a great price. We have even done root beer floats with them, which attendees loved. And in addition to tons of fresh produce and great craft beer, Monterey also has amazing local wines. We've incorporated tastings into some of our receptions, and it's been a great way to keep attendees talking and networking. But the most popular by far was the ability to have their chef's award-winning clam chowder as part of the lunch in



Windy K. Christner, CMP  
Senior Director  
Meetings and Expositions  
APhA  
Washington, DC

**“It’s our third time in 20 years that we have been to San Francisco. Although it’s a very expensive destination for an association, we have a proven record bringing in attendees here.”**

“San Diego is a well-known vacation destination,” explains Bauders. “With near-perfect weather year-round, a variety of activities within a few miles of each other and fantastic hotel options, looking to San Diego as a potential option for our large annual conference in the future was a no-brainer. It is easy to access via airplane or car and with our members mainly coming from within the state, this was extremely appealing.”

The Manchester Grand Hyatt had the additional lure of being listed recently as the West Coast’s top meeting hotel, ranking No. 8 on Cvent’s 2017 list of the Top 100 Meeting Hotels in the U.S. Located a short walk from San Diego’s convention center, the hotel features more than 316,000 sf of indoor-outdoor meeting space and 1,628 guest rooms, and ranks as the tallest waterfront building on the West Coast.

“The board and I hosted our meeting at the facility to have a site tour for our annual conference,” says Bauders. “Our conference includes over 20 educational sessions, 186 booth spaces, four tanker trucks and a variety of networking events. It is important to find a space that has enough room within the hotel without having to use a convention center. The Manchester Grand Hyatt was one of several hotels we have been considering.

“I primarily worked with Bethney Gardner on the site tour, seeing if the facility would work for our large conference. She was incredibly helpful and patient. Any time you are trying to fit a conference into a new space, there are always challenges. She was able to work with



our exhibit hall. It’s so delicious — we are working on ways to bring it back for our menu this year.

“Take advantage of the beautiful scenery and all that Monterey has to offer,” Hemming adds. “You should do at least one meeting — even if it’s just for a small group of VIPs — up in Ferrantes Bayview Ballroom at the Marriott. That view will make them feel really special.”

#### NO-BRAINER SITE SELECTION

The idea of taking a potential meeting site out for a test drive is what brought the Pacific Oil Conference board of directors to San Diego for its annual nine-person “Winter Reconvene” meeting, based at the Manchester Grand Hyatt San Diego. Christina Bauders, the organization’s event and communications director, used the gathering to scope out logistics while considering the city and hotel as a possible 2019 location for the annual 1,500-attendee conference.

San Jose’s McEnery Convention Center and (inset) newly renovated City National Civic Courtyard.



Credits: San Jose CVB

me and come up with potential solutions and options. She listened to what was needed and wanted to be sure I was satisfied with the outcome.

“There are two hotel room towers,” Bauders notes. “When booking your meeting space, be sure to specify that you’d like your guest rooms to be in the tower closest to the space. If not, you could get lost finding your meeting space. The hotel is pretty big.”

The Manchester Grand Hyatt is also quite well located. In addition to being positioned close to the convention center and right on San Diego Bay, the hotel sits at the foot of the city’s historic Gaslamp Quarter, a turn-of-the-20th-century collection of restored buildings. Dozens of restaurants and bars, shopping and the city’s most vigorous nightlife are all within walking distance of the Manchester Grand Hyatt.

“We visited the Gaslamp District to tour the bowling alley and to have dinner, but I wish I had blocked off more time to tour what else was down there,” Bauders adds. “I also really like the Top of the Hyatt bar, located on the 40th floor. It has great atmosphere and beautiful views of the city and bay.”

Advice for other meeting planners headed to the Manchester Grand Hyatt? “If you can, lay out your program or schedule in advance so you can be strategic about the placement of your events and individual meetings. There are just so many options, you should make sure you are using the space optimally.”

#### ANNUAL MEETING BY THE BAY

Another repeat client for one California city is the Washington, DC-based American Pharmacists Association (APhA), which returned to San Francisco for its annual meeting in March (2017), an event that drew 6,100 attendees. Windy K. Christner, CMP, senior director of meetings and expositions for APhA, says past experience is a key reason they keep coming back.

“It’s our third time in 20 years that we have been to San Francisco,” Christner explains. “Although it’s a very expensive destination for an association, we have a proven record bringing in attendees here. The city of San Francisco itself is an easy marketing draw for people who love the destination, it’s relatively easy to get to, it’s unique in its architecture and beauty.”

**“Looking to San Diego as a potential option for our large annual conference in the future was a no-brainer.”**

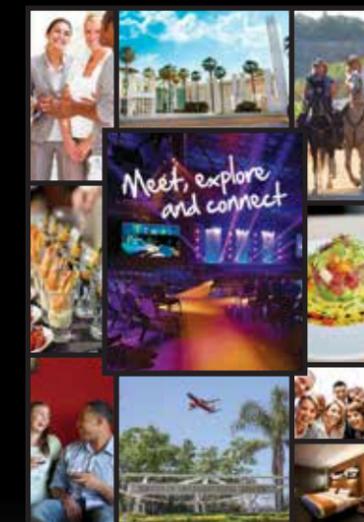
Christina Bauders, Event and Communications Director  
Pacific Oil Conference Board of Directors, Sacramento, CA

APhA based its meeting at the Moscone Center, the city’s largest convention and exhibition complex. Comprised of three main halls, APhA occupied the North and South halls, located underneath Yerba Buena Gardens and just south of Union Square. Christner says the center’s location, close to hotels, was a major attribute.

“It’s got the appropriate meeting and exposition space that fits for our event. We have a history there, so we knew the facility and some of the people. And the food was fantastic, with excellent offerings — I would give it high marks.”

The primary challenges APhA dealt with centered on costs. “Rental is one of the higher that you pay in the country, though it was comparable to other big cities. Labor was expensive, trying to purchase the correct amount of bandwidth for internet was a problem, and we needed to hire separate security because of the prominent vagrant issue. We worked closely with hotels, the Moscone Center and the

## GREATER ONTARIO CALIFORNIA



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The Greater Ontario area, 45 minutes west of Los Angeles, is a less expensive alternative for meetings.

Credit: Greater Ontario CVB

neighborhoods because of the homelessness. We wanted to make sure our guests' walk from their hotels to Moscone was a safe and enjoyable one."

### GROWING PAINS

There was another unique challenge that presented itself as the event date drew closer: A renovation and expansion of the Moscone Center. "It was not the best time in the world to be at any convention center — the renovation was not something we knew about when we signed on six years ago. But Moscone Center did an excellent job of keeping us abreast of the construction, with monthly calls to hear what the latest and greatest was. Still, there was a bit of noise issues we were told we wouldn't have, and we overshot the amount of signage we needed, because we were concerned about getting our people from point A to point B."

APhA swallowed rooms at 10 area hotels, with the Hilton San Francisco Union Square — the largest hotel on the West Coast — serving as headquarters. "The Hilton has a very, very good location at Union Square, so our attendees never got bored," says Christner. "They've got a great front-of-house team that makes people feel very welcome. One of the things that helped us was Hilton having a sister property, Parc 55, where we were able to secure overflow rooms and offer a good experience for attendees." The 1,919-room Hilton offers 134,000 sf of meeting space, while the 1,024-room Parc 55 two blocks away has an additional 30,000 sf.

"It was a little confusing getting around at the hotel, but they offered human directionals, which was really important. But Hilton worked with us to provide a very comprehensive and enticing package. Our salesperson was John Flannigan, and our convention services (person) was Bill Boring. These were really good partners, and they worked long hard, hard hours to support us."

Christner says she benefited by working with people she had liaised with previously at the San Francisco Travel Association, but she felt services provided at the CVB for marketing and customer service "could use a bit of fine-tuning. It seems as though smaller destinations are more eager to provide service with marketing efforts, like area maps and walking directions customized to your event. But the bureau is staffed

with seasoned professionals and people who know the city and your meeting."

Tips for planners looking to San Francisco as a potential meeting destination? "Be very budget conscious — this is important. Talk to the convention center and your hotel about

the types of charges you should anticipate. There are a lot of things you have to pay for, and you'll pay a pretty hefty cost. But also take advantage of what the destination has to attract attendees — San Francisco has a lot to offer."

### MORE GOLDEN STATE OPTIONS

In downtown San Jose, the SoFA (South of First Area) district is host to an eclectic strip of cultural museums, galleries, and nightlife venues. Attendees can enjoy live music, hand-crafted cocktails, and some of San Jose's best food. It is also home to the newly opened Uproar Brewing Company and Forager taproom — part of the burgeoning craft brew scene in San Jose. Both establishments offer unique venue spaces with their rustic, modernized warehouse settings that complement additional event venues in the SoFA district.

San Jose's City National Civic Courtyard and Montgomery Courtyard recently have been renovated. The picturesque location includes newly built custom benches, gas inline heaters, outdoor lighting and a fire pit. The entire courtyard has been wired with sound and can be split into two courtyards or used as one with movable rustic gates. In the future, the courtyard will feature a live video feed of the theater's interiors. It has a total of 5,407 sf and can fit up to 1,081 people.

In the heart of Southern California, the Greater Ontario area is an affordable alternative to nearby Los Angeles, and within easy access to three international airports, Disneyland Resort, beaches, wineries and Ontario Mills, California's largest value-retail shopping destination.

Three new hotels in Rancho Cucamonga, part of the Greater Ontario market, will add a combined 339 rooms to the area's hotel room inventory when they open in 2018: Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott; Residence Inn by Marriott and Hampton Inn by Hilton.

More than half of Ontario's 6,000 hotel rooms are within walking distance of the Ontario Convention Center and less than a mile from L.A./Ontario International Airport. The convention center, which offers 225,000 sf of meeting and convention space, recently added Café Connect, a new dining experience in the main lobby designed for convention attendees with a grab 'n' go menu. The café features an outdoor patio with mountain views. AC&F

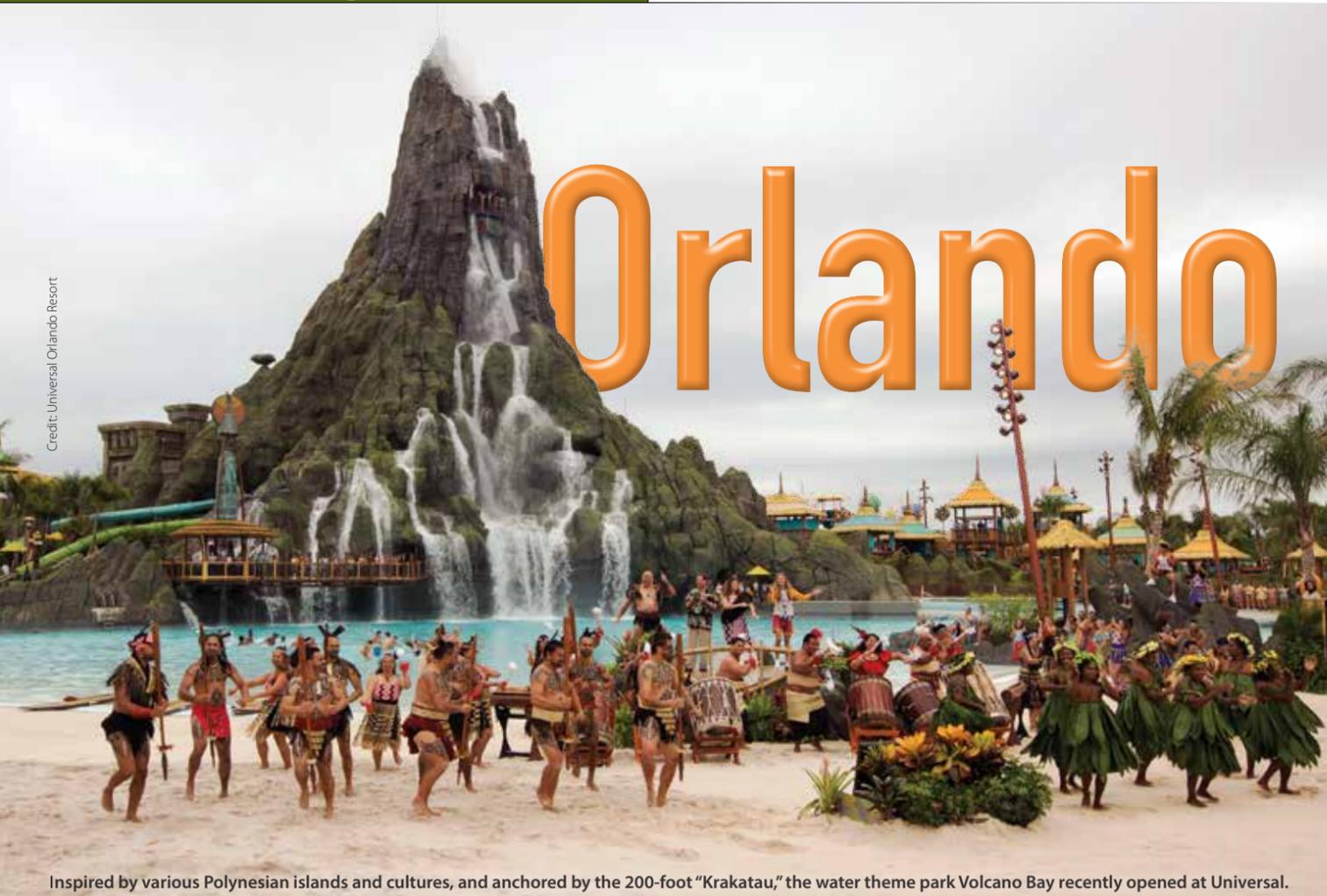


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# Orlando



Credit: Universal Orlando Resort

Inspired by various Polynesian islands and cultures, and anchored by the 200-foot "Kakatai," the water theme park Volcano Bay recently opened at Universal.

## The World's Theme Park Capital Boasts World-Class Meetings Infrastructure, Value, Access and, of Course, Fun!

The mere mention of Orlando to anyone who lives outside the state of Florida sets the mental gears whirring around a theme-park vacation.

On the surface, amusement parks might not seem like the most natural backdrop for serious meeting business. Yet Orlando is solidly established as one of the top conference destinations in the world, with events held at the nation's second largest convention center as well as meeting spaces at more than 450 hotels that cater to groups of all sizes and all budgets. Orlando's year-round visitor experience encompasses a dizzying range of leisure options for meeting downtime, from golf at more than 150 courses to kayaking through wild waterways inhabited by alligators and manatees. It's no wonder the city experienced a record 68 million visitors last year, up from 66 million in 2015. And for meetings, Cvent has ranked Orlando as the No. 1 meeting destination for four out of the last five years.

By David Swanson

But here's Orlando's secret: Whether for a day or an hour, what Florida visitor doesn't want to sneak off and see in person Harry Potter's Wizarding World or careen along the tracks of Space Mountain? The theme parks aren't all fantasy and coasters: Head to SeaWorld's Discovery Cove and you'll swim with bottlenose dolphins by day and finish off the evening with a beach luau.

Jeanne Torbett, CMP, CMMM, president, Superior Media, Meetings & Management Inc., says the theme parks are one reason her meetings in Orlando for two rheumatology organizations have been such a success.

"Both our groups bring their families to our conferences, so there is always something in the area for them to do while their physician family member is in class," says Torbett. "They have Universal Orlando, Disney and Sea World at their fingertips."

And the hotel meeting facilities seal the deal. "Orlando has a venue for every kind of meeting, from tiny to huge," Torbett

adds. "And because there is so much competition, they are beautiful and priced right. The choices are better than anywhere else in the nation. We hold conferences in other states, and no one can beat Orlando for the spaciousness, beautiful rooms and lobbies, restaurants and personnel."

### A UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCE

Last July Torbett held a combined meeting of 500-plus attendees for the Florida Society of Rheumatology and Florida Allergy, Asthma & Rheumatology Society in Orlando. For state organizations, Orlando is about as central as it gets in Florida, but Torbett was also bringing these groups to a specific hotel for the third time.

"I have managed physician societies for over 25 years and, to date, Loews Portofino Bay Hotel at the Universal Orlando Resort is the only venue we have used more than once," explains Torbett, who says she is currently negotiating with the hotel for 2021. "We cannot say enough about the staff. Most of them have been with this facility since it opened many years ago, and it shows. They work so well together it's like they can finish each other's sentences."

Torbett cited the hotel's catering as being a standout. "We hold meals and breaks in both the exhibit hall and classrooms plus receptions in the foyer areas. No matter where we ask them to do the meal setup it is done to our specification and done with style — the food is always delicious."

Torbett notes that the footprint for Loews Portofino Bay is in a U-shape, and meeting rooms are at the bottom of the U. "We have a few elderly attendees who asked to be placed in sleeping rooms closer to the meeting rooms. The hotel accommodated their request, no problem."

Loews Portofino Bay is one of five onsite hotels connected to the Universal Orlando Resort, ranging from rock-star luxury (Hard Rock Hotel), to tropical flair (Loews Royal Pacific Resort) to a setting with a Caribbean vibe (Loews Sapphire Falls Resort). The 5,200-room complex contains 295,000 sf of indoor meeting space and 97,000 sf of outdoor space. Plus, all five hotels are within walking distance or a quick shuttle ride to the Universal theme parks and Universal CityWalk, the resort's shopping, dining and entertainment district.

"Since you can take a boat or bus from the hotel to Universal's CityWalk we held our board/faculty dinner there, at Emeril's Orlando," says Torbett. "It was so easy. No one needed to get in their car and try to find a restaurant in a city they were unfamiliar with."

Torbett didn't arrange for a private event inside the theme parks — something the Universal Orlando Resort can assemble — but many of her attendees' families spent time at the parks. For those staying at Loews Portofino Bay Hotel, Hard



Universal's new Meeting Enhancements program is designed to incorporate branded character moments into the meeting agenda.

Credit: Universal Orlando

Rock Hotel or Loews Royal Pacific Resort, free Universal Express passes allow guests to skip the lines on most rides and attractions (theme park admission required).

New happenings at Universal include the recent opening of the water theme park Volcano Bay next to Universal's new Cabana Bay Beach Resort. Inspired by various Polynesian islands and cultures, and anchored by the 200-foot "Kakatai," Volcano Bay is replete with a bevy of water-based thrills as well as after-hours private event options.

Universal Orlando also recently announced new Meeting Enhancements including characters (such as the Minions), customizable performers and unique entertainment elements to engage attendees and help deliver specific messages and reinforce conference theming.

### LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Orlando's central position in the state also works for the annual conference of the Florida Adoption Council, which is a repeat customer for the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Orlando at SeaWorld.

"We have chosen to have our conferences in Orlando or its surrounding areas due to accessibility for professionals from all over the state as a good central meeting spot," says Mary Wheatley, executive director of Heart of Adoptions and Heart of Adoptions Alliance. "But it also has easy access to a large airport for those that fly in to attend the conference from other states."

While cost and location were the primary draws that initially lured the adoption organizations to the DoubleTree at SeaWorld, Wheatley says the efforts of the staff there keep them coming back.

"Convention services as well as preconvention sales are phenomenal at this property," explains Wheatley. "Their individualized attention stood out from our first visit a few years ago, and they still ring true every time we plan another annual event at this facility. Get to know them, as they can be true miracle workers and save the day in a matter of moments when needed."

"After having events in Jacksonville, Tampa Bay and numer-

## Orlando Update

Renovations and enhancements are afoot at the **Orange County Convention Center** (OCCC), the nation's second largest. The OCCC, currently providing 2.1 million sf of exhibition space and 480,000 sf of flexible meeting space, recently announced proposed Campus Master Plan projects to expand the convention center's North/South building. Key priorities include adding a 200,000-sf, flexible, divisible, column-free multi-purpose venue with a combination of retractable and floor seating to accommodate between 18,000-20,000 guests. The project also will incorporate a new Convention Way Grand Concourse, an enclosed connection between the North and South concourses that includes ad-

ditional meeting and ballroom space and provides a new grand entry to the North/South Building along Convention Way. Construction is projected to take a little more than four years.

Improvements to the OCCC recently completed include a new 7,000-sf destination lounge creating a gathering area with a video wall, LED systems and lighting to support corporate branding and displays. The newly designed 62,182-sf Valencia Ballroom was unveiled late last year.

Five bridges now connect nearby hotels to the convention center. The **Hyatt Regency Orlando** opened its second bridge in May, which connects the hotel to the OCCC's West Building.

Extensive refurbishments have been completed at **Rosen Shingle Creek**. All 1,501 guest rooms and suites, the hotel's

grand lobby and many of its retail, restaurant and lounge spaces now feature a more contemporary Spanish revival-style design. In addition, the hotel's 18-hole championship Shingle Creek Golf Course has been redesigned, and is complemented by a new open-air, covered pavilion for 19th-hole events. The AAA Four Diamond hotel houses 490,000 sf of function space.

This fall will see a major meeting space addition at the **Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate**, part of a \$40 million expansion project. The Osceola County Conference Center will add 100,000 sf of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space, and a new market-style restaurant will debut. In addition, the Omni is adding 93 spacious, upscale guest rooms, bringing the resort's total room count to 813 guest rooms and suites, plus 49 two- and three-bedroom luxury villas. Finally, a new 23,000-sf recreational area has already been introduced at the resort.

The **Hilton Orlando Buena Vista Palace's** multimillion-dollar upscale makeover includes a redesigned lobby and guest rooms, as well a new lobby bar and outside terrace. The renovation also includes the Float Lagoon lazy river; new pools and cabanas; and Shades, a new poolside restaurant. More than 90,000 sf of meeting space is available. AC&F



The new destination lounge at the Orange County Convention Center.

Credit: Orange County Convention Center

ous ones in Orlando, we have found this property to be the most accessible in terms of meeting locations in relation to hotel rooms," Wheatley adds. "It makes it so easy on attendees that need to run up to their room to change, handle a conference call, or take a quick break. This feature is just one more convenience that keeps us coming back year after year."

Spread across a lush 28-acre property and located within walking distance to the Orange County Convention Center, the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Orlando at SeaWorld is in the process of completing a renovation that will add the 20,000-sf Majestic Ballroom, slated for completion in November, and 20,000 sf of outdoor courtyard space, divisible into five event spaces, set to open late August. When complete, the hotel will boast a total of 100,000 sf of indoor/outdoor event space.

Wheatley says the hotel already has enough venues onsite that her smaller (100-attendee) meeting can schedule all of its events at the hotel. But that doesn't discourage guests from exploring further afield.

"Orlando has so many options for outings and events for

adults — not just for family-friendly or child-focused activities," says Wheatley. "In addition to the nightlife areas on Disney properties, our attendees have enjoyed doing Magical Dining in September at a variety of locations around Orlando." (Magical Dining is an annual, month-long event that discounts a three-course, prix fixe dinner to \$33 at more than 70 top restaurants and sends \$1 for each meal sold to an Orlando charity.)

### AIRLIFT

As Wheatley confirms, it's more than amusement parks that make this city tick. And a chief attribute cited by most meeting planners is Orlando's fly-in access.

In addition to being a natural hub for events targeting guests from Florida and the Southeast, Orlando International Airport (MCO) is served by affordable, nonstop flights from 81 cities in the U.S. Orlando's appeal as a vacation destination also has helped the airport land service from major international cities. Today MCO is served by such major overseas car-

riers as Avianca, British Airways, Emirates, LAN, Lufthansa and Virgin Atlantic, flying in from 52 international destinations (20 of them seasonal).

Orlando International Airport is embarking on a major new expansion. For the year ending September 2016, MCO handled 41.5 million passengers at its North Terminal Complex, and arrivals are increasing at a record pace. With the airport's capacity currently maxed out at 45 million passengers, the need for expansion has become more urgent. In November the airport's board authorized a new \$1.8 billion South Terminal Complex to add 16 gates and increase capacity to 55 million passengers annually. Construction could be complete by the summer of 2020.

### INTERNATIONAL ACCESS

Such access is vital for some of the events overseen by Debbie Zaporoni, director of conference management for Kasalen Meeting & Events.

"We have an audience with international representation from several different countries at the conference," explains Zaporoni, regarding the annual conference of the International Association of Clinical Research Nurses. "Ease of international flights to Orlando is much appreciated by attendees flying from outside of the U.S. This really makes a difference when people are trying to plan their travel budgets, not only with flights, but also with ground transportation options."

Zaporoni held her October 2016 event at the 626-room Wyndham Lake Buena Vista Resort. Zaporoni says the big draw for her conference was Orlando and the proximity of the Disney amenities, reached via frequent and free shuttle bus. Having the event situated within walking distance to the Disney Springs shopping and dining complex also was conducive for networking and meeting breaks.

"Being at the Wyndham was one-stop shopping," explains Zaporoni. "You could get there and never need a car while having all of your needs met right there — dining, entertainment, spa, comfort, relaxation, beautiful grounds and weather. Also,



The newly renovated ballroom at the Wyndham Lake Buena Vista Resort.

Credit: Wyndham Lake Buena Vista Resort

"We hold conferences in other states, and no one can beat Orlando for the spaciousness, beautiful rooms and lobbies, restaurants and personnel."



Jeanne Torbett, CMP, CMMM  
President/CEO  
Superior Media, Meetings & Management  
Jacksonville, FL

no matter young or old, everyone is drawn into the appeal of the theme parks in the area."

The main tower at Wyndham Lake Buena Vista offers 232 lake-house-themed rooms, with an additional 394 rooms located in the less-expensive five-story Wyndham Garden wing, which is ideal for SMERF groups. Including the 12,000-sf Horizons Ballroom, the resort offers 25,000 sf of meeting space, with 21 meeting rooms and an outdoor venue.

"We prefer to utilize a hotel's meeting space for several reasons," says Zaporoni. "The costs of room rentals can be negotiated against sleeping room profits. Also, all activities are contained in one venue. It's easy to take the elevator from guest room to the meeting rooms without too much walking or navigating through different buildings.

"Economical is also one word that should be mentioned" in relation to Orlando, Zaporoni adds. "We plan meetings all over the world. In no other city can one stay at a fantastic hotel in a great resort setting for under \$150. I can't mention price enough."

But the resort's convention services are what may have secured Zaporoni as a future repeat customer for Wyndham Lake Buena Vista.

"All of the staff provided first-class, personalized service to our group and made our event flow smoothly and without



Debbie Zaparoni  
Director of Conference  
Management  
Kassalen Meetings & Events  
Pittsburgh, PA

**“We plan meetings all over the world. In no other city can one stay at a fantastic hotel in a great resort setting for under \$150. I can’t mention price enough.”**

issue. The convention services, banquets and audio-visual staffs were all outstanding — they were with us every step of the way. Someone was by the desk checking on us constantly. It was almost like having additional meeting planning staff onsite.

“As far as the level of staff involvement, accessibility and expertise, the Wyndham Lake Buena Vista exceeded our expectation,” Zaparoni concludes. “I went back to my office and said ‘we need to take another group back to the Wyndham.’”

### CONVENTION-SIZE RESORT HOTEL

Ease of access also made Orlando a “great fit” for the Phillips Southern Buying Show, a 1,000-attendee convention held by Phillips Pet Food & Supplies.

“Our event draws from the whole country,” says Jessica Ciecwisz, Phillips’ marketing and event planner for the October 2016 meeting. “There is a ton of available flights into Orlando, making it a really easy decision on attending.”

The company hosts all of its annual buying shows in resorts, not convention centers, choosing the 2,267-room Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort for this year’s event.

“You get a different feel with resorts than you do with a convention center,” suggests Ciecwisz. “Convention centers have a lot more space and more private meeting rooms, but there is a lot more planning and exposition services needed, which cost more money. The Swan and Dolphin exhibit hall space was very large and gave Phillips the opportunity to grow this program here for years to come. Their facilities are very event friendly and the staff is great to work with.”

The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort recently completed a comprehensive \$5 million renovation of its total 329,000 sf of meeting space at both the Swan and Dolphin properties. The makeover is part of the Swan and Dolphin’s multiphase \$140 million redesign, including all 2,267 guest

rooms. The Swan’s guest rooms were finished in 2015; the Dolphin’s rooms will be completed by the end of this year; and the \$12 million lobby redesign will be done by this fall.

“The rooms — no matter what hotel block you are located in — are super close to the event facility,” adds Ciecwisz. “There are no long walks down really long hallways to get to the exhibit hall. It is right off the main lobby of the hotel. And we loved how the resort is so centrally located on Disney property.”

Guests of the Swan and Dolphin enjoy some valuable extras normally availed only to those staying at a Disney-owned property. They can take advantage of extended theme park hours, as each day one of the four Disney theme parks opens an hour early or stays open up to two hours after regular closing. And Disney’s scheduled boat launches and bus transportation throughout the resort are available to Swan and Dolphin guests.

“We have done events with both Walt Disney World and Universal Studios,” says Ciecwisz. “Each theme park really works with you to create the event you want and provides great insight into other ideas you would not think of.”

### ORLANDO SITE SELECTION ADVICE

What tips do these experts have for meeting planners considering an Orlando event? Jeanne Torbett sums it up:

“If you have the ability to do so, spend a week in Orlando and do six or seven site visits. Use the internet to find all the venues in the size that would work for you, then get on the



A Causeway event at Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort.

Credit: Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort

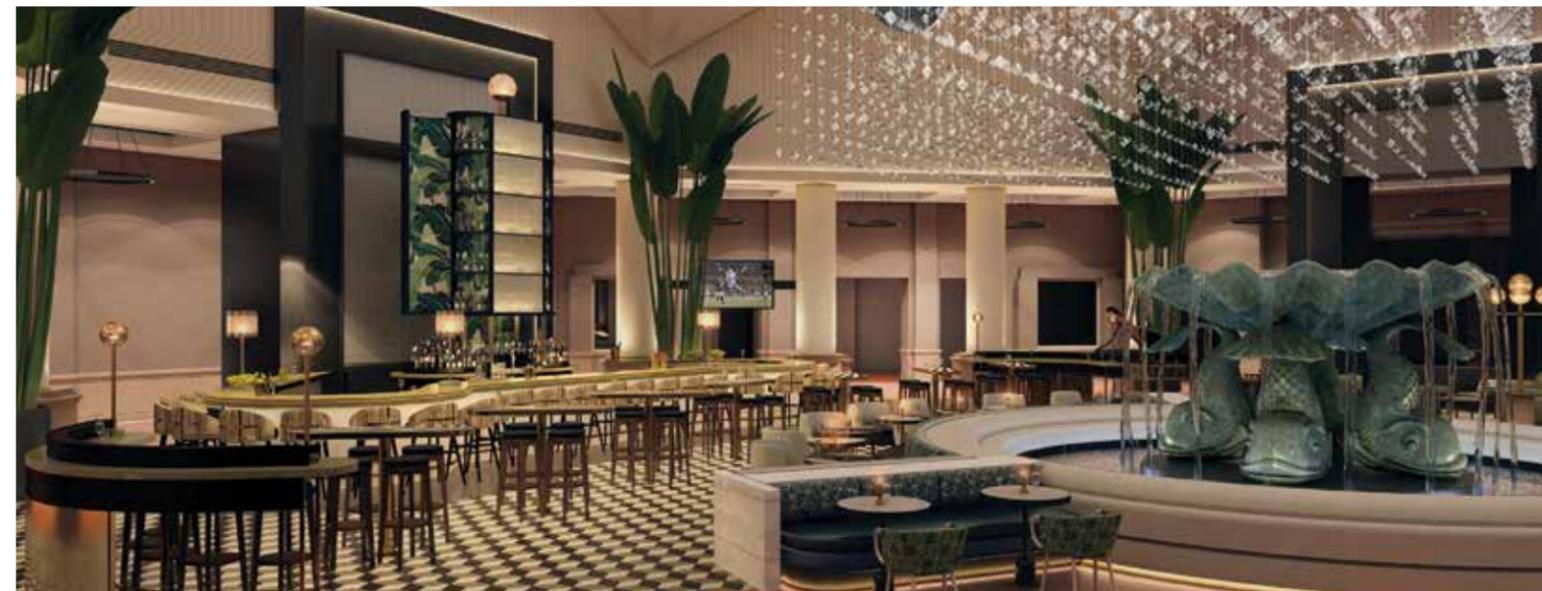
phone and call to make sure they have the availability for your dates. Then, set up the sites and view them all, checking to see which venue would work best for your conference.

“But be sure to have your phone and take pictures of each hotel or they will run together once you get back to the office and are trying to make your final decision.”

And don’t forget to grab a few selfies with Mickey Mouse while you’re at it.

AC&F

# AN ALL-NEW PERSPECTIVE ON MEETINGS AND EVENTS



All-New Walt Disney World Dolphin Lobby Concept - Scheduled for completion in September 2017

The Walt Disney World Dolphin lobby will undergo a \$12 million re-design, the final stage of a \$140 million renovation project, the largest makeover in the resort’s history. It will be completely transformed into a sleek, contemporary space featuring new food and beverage options and offer an inviting area for guests to relax or network. A recipient of the prestigious Meetings & Conventions Hall of Fame Award, the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin is a nationally respected and recognized leader in the convention resort arena. The resort offers more than 329,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, 84 meeting rooms, and 2,267 guest rooms and suites which feature the Westin Heavenly® Bed. Attendees can also relax in the luxurious Mandara Spa, indulge in one of our 17 world-class restaurants and lounges or enjoy our unique Disney Differences.



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CAMPION

The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, has named **Beth Campion** group account director for the Northeast and mid-Atlantic regions. She was director of national accounts at The Diplomat Beach Resort in Hollywood, Florida.

**Jay Marsella** was named director of sales and marketing for Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. Previously, he served as the opening director of sales and marketing at the Houston Marriott Marquis.

The Cincinnati USA Convention & Visitors Bureau named **Jeff Simic** national sales



MARSELLA

manager with an emphasis on business trade associations, engineering, scientific, environmental, medical and pharmaceutical meetings. He was group sales manager at Westin Cincinnati.

**Randi Talmage** was appointed to sales manager for the JW Marriott Grand Rapids in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She was director of convention services.

**Michelle Minyard** was named national sales manager at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. She was sponsorship director for the Festival International de Louisiane and the New Orleans Wine and Food Experience.



MINYARD



CURTIS

**Kathryn Morgan** has joined Visit Tampa Bay as regional account director responsible for the mid-Atlantic region. She was the DC-based representative for Visit Indy.

Atlantis, Paradise Island in The Bahamas has named **Jim Curtis** as vice president of group sales. He most recently served as director of sales and marketing for The Diplomat Beach Resort in Hollywood, Florida.

**John Washko** was named vice president of exhibitions and conventions sales for Mohegan Sun, Uncasville, Connecticut. He was V.P., group marketing and sales for Atlantis Paradise Island, Bahamas. AC&F



WASHKO



Sierra Ballroom Event

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