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CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

The New Destinations International

DMAI Gets a New Name, New
Mission and New Value Proposition
to Empower Destinations to Excel
PAGE 20

Don Welsh, President and
CEO of the newly named
Destinations International

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Experiential Event Design

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PAGE 32



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Credit: Hilton Orlando Buena Vista Palace
The newly flagged Hilton Orlando Buena Vista Palace recently completed a major makeover. **PAGE 24**



Credit: ITA Group
DMCs ITA Group and Terramar created a spectacular closing night event featuring a custom-built "ship" on the beach. **PAGE 44**



Credit: Las Vegas News Bureau
The glittering Las Vegas Strip is forever changing with new and exciting properties and experiences. **PAGE 56**

Publisher's Message

Better Together

There's good news in this issue for planners and their partnerships with Destination Marketing Organizations, commonly referred to as CVBs, and other key meetings industry partners, including DMCs and hotel brands.

Enhancing professionalism is at the top of the list for Don Welsh, president and CEO of Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) — and the impetus for the rebranding of DMAI in both name and substance to Destinations International — DI. The group's name change becomes official at the association's 2017 annual convention this month in Montreal. In our cover story on page 20, Welsh explains the new mission and value proposition, which is designed to more effectively support and empower the more than 600 member destination organizations and CVBs in more than 15 countries to excel in each of their own tourism missions. In turn, planners are the beneficiaries of an enhanced ROI for meetings held in such dynamic destinations. "Destinations International represents a powerful, forward-thinking, collaborative association (committed to) exchanging bold ideas, connecting innovative people and excelling tourism to its highest potential," says Welsh, who himself is uniquely suited to lead such an effort, as his more than 30-year career excelling in the industry attests. Before accepting the leadership position at DMAI in January 2016, Welsh held CEO positions at Choose Chicago, the Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Association and the Seattle Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Welsh, who is also a veteran of the hotel industry, appreciates the partnerships hotel brands form with planners to continually upgrade and build new properties to suit their needs. See "Hotels Never Sleep" on page 24 for the latest and greatest.

In "DMC Success Stories" on page 44, read how a trio of planners and their Destination Management Company partners collaborated to pull off stellar events — including one by Hosts New Orleans, which also just "hosted" the fifth annual HGA Global Forum in New Orleans — see some snapshots from the June event on page 14.

And don't miss "Partners in Progress" (p. 38) for some great advice on strengthening industry relationships. Says David Jacobsen, CEO of TrivWorks, in our story, "The best types of strategic partnerships are those where both sides stand to gain tremendous value over the long-term." And that's really the bottom line, isn't it?

Harvey Grotsky
Publisher

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A COASTAL COMMUNICATIONS CORPORATION PUBLICATION

PUBLISHER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Harvey Grotsky

harvey.grotsky@themeetingmagazines.com

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Mitch D. Miller

mitch.miller@themeetingmagazines.com

MANAGING EDITOR

Susan S. Gregg

sue.gregg@themeetingmagazines.com

EDITORIAL COORDINATOR

Tracy Kolody Fantaccione

tracy.kolody@themeetingmagazines.com

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Sophia Bennett

Ron Bernthal

John Buchanan

Sara Churchillville

Cynthia Dial

Maura Keller

Christine Loomis

Derek Reveron

Mark Rowh

Patrick Simms

David Swanson

PRESIDENT & CEO

Harvey Grotsky

VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS

David Middlebrook

david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

ADVERTISING SALES OFFICES

2700 N. Military Trail, Suite 120

Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394

561-989-0600 Fax: 561-989-9509

advertising@themeetingmagazines.com

TX, OK, LA, AR, MO

Kelli Nilsson

214-291-3652 • Fax: 972-985-8069

kelli.nilsson@themeetingmagazines.com

Brooke Smith

214-291-3653 • Fax: 972-985-8069

brooke.smith@themeetingmagazines.com

WESTERN STATES/HAWAII

Marshall Rubin

818-888-2407 • Fax: 818-888-4907

marshall.rubin@themeetingmagazines.com

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News & Notes

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



MGM Grand and community executives break ground on the new conference center addition.

Waldorf Astoria Announces Iconic Property in Beverly Hills

BEVERLY HILLS, CA — The Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills opened in June at the intersection of Wilshire and Santa Monica boulevards. Adjacent to The Beverly Hilton, the 12-story hotel is the Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts' first new build on the West Coast and second California property. Gensler and Pierre-Yves Rochon Inc. are the co-design architects.

A Personal Concierge is assigned to every guest, from pre-arrival until departure, including an individual bespoke in-room check-in service. And, a private Rolls Royce house car offers complimentary drop-off service within a two-mile radius.

Each of the 170 guest rooms, inspired by the contemporary interpretation of Hollywood glamour and the Streamline Moderne style of the 1930s and '40s, has floor-to-ceiling windows that open onto oversized private balconies overlooking the Hollywood Hills and nearby Century City.

The rooftop pool deck, available only to hotel guests, is the loftiest and largest rooftop destination of its kind in Beverly Hills.

Three world-class dining venues include the legendary French chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's eponymous sig-



The Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills lobby.

nature restaurant Jean-Georges Beverly Hills, as well as The Rooftop by JG and Jean-Georges Beverly Hills Bar.

The hotel also features 6,300 sf of meeting space, including two ballrooms, perfect for corporate meetings or gala celebrations. www.waldorfastoria.com

Six Sigma Meetings Offers New Certification

Six Sigma Meetings has announced a new certification for the meetings industry that is based on the Lean Six Sigma approach to project management. The certification — Lean Six Sigma for Meeting Professionals (LSSMP) — has been approved by the Events Industry Council (EIC) for 48 CE Hours.

The LSSMP Green Belt certification transcends industries and will enhance professionalism because it is hard to earn, requires focused study and the actual completion of change in order to be certified. The course(s) have been designed specifically for meeting professionals who want to impact their operations and enhance their position within their organization and the industry.

"For too many years, meeting professionals have been looked at as 'party planners.' The CMP and CMM certifications carry value with our colleagues and within the industry, but not on a wider basis," stated Rob Wilson, instructor and Lean Six Sigma Black Belt. "By earning this certification, a meeting professional will stand out to both HR and management due to the wide acceptance of the Lean Six Sigma methodology."

The inaugural five-day course will be offered in Kansas City, September 17–22, and attendees who complete the project work will receive the LSSMP Green Belt certification. Other courses that will qualify meeting professionals for the LSSMP White and LSSMP Yellow belts will be available for purchase online.

For more information: contact Robert H. Walters, rwalters@sixsigmameetings.net, call 724-596-0290 or visit www.sixsigmameetings.net.

Tips & Trends

Why Incentive Travel Is No. 1

Silicon Valley has turned workplace incentives into an art form. From foosball tables to in-cafeteria sushi chefs, from napping pods to bike repair shops, offices in the San Francisco Bay area can amuse workers for hours on end. But when it's time to get down to business, companies such as Facebook and Adobe know that one of the best ways to inspire a group to perform is by offering a chance to travel.

Incentive travel is a \$14 billion industry. The Incentive Federation Inc. says that 38 percent of all American companies with revenues of more than \$1 million offer some sort of incentive travel. Between the fall of 2014 and the fall of 2016, the average amount spent on incentive travel by companies increased by 10 percent, with trips to different U.S. cities, Mexico and even Europe being the most popular.

THE MILLENNIAL FACTOR

Those numbers will only increase as younger employees join the work force. Members of the largest generation (estimated 79 million) overwhelmingly want to travel abroad as much as possible (75 percent). At the same time, the Deloitte Human Capital Trends 2016 study says that one in four would be willing to move to a new company right now if they felt it was a better fit. A company that offers millennials a chance to travel for hitting sales goals, garnering the most referrals, enhancing product awareness or achieving another metric is a company at which workers will want to stay.

Employers will want those employees to stay, as well. A 1997 study conducted in England showed an 18 percent increase in productivity when employees are offered travel incentives. Those trips can have a positive effect on the abilities of employees, too. According to *Psychology Today*, travel generally, and international travel specifically, helps make people less emotionally reactive to day-to-day changes, since it grants some perspective to the traveler. Multicultural experiences, such as exploring a new country, also can spark creativity. Essentially, incentive travel not only can inspire employees to new heights before they take their well-earned vacations, but it also can give them important skills to become even stronger contributors to the team upon their return.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE

And why do employees like incentive travel — and in many cases prefer it to cash-equivalent bonuses? The experiences. Whether it's a ticket to the Super Bowl, a wine tour through the French countryside or even a zip-line adventure through the Costa Rica jungle, an incentive travel package can't be spent on paying off bills or contributing to a retirement fund. These types of trips force the type A personalities, the workers who often are the most likely to hit those incentive points, to stop and turn their focus elsewhere. The hard-headed and driven sometimes have to be persuaded to take time off; giving them a free chance to do so will ensure that your top contributors are getting the rejuvenation time. Plus, it sure beats lunch-hour foosball tournaments.

— By Michael Upp, Senior Vice President, Mitch Stuart Inc. for the Incentive Travel Council

DMAI to Offer Reimagined Destination Management Program

WASHINGTON, DC — Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) Chairman Gary C. Sherwin,



WELSH

deliver a reimagined, cutting-edge and global Professional in Destination Management (PDM) program for today's destination management professionals. The new PDM program is designed to prepare entry- to mid-level professionals with the skills and knowledge critical to successful destination management and marketing.

The comprehensive educational program includes seven core courses — three conducted in a classroom set-

ting and four available online — and is available to individuals interested in the travel and tourism industry. The Fundamentals course will debut the program during DMAI's annual convention on Tuesday, July 11, 2017. Registration is now open.

“One of DMAI's key priorities this year has been to reinvent our educational programs so that they are relevant and meaningful to industry professionals regardless of where they are in their careers,” said Sherwin. “To help us fulfill this mission, we are thrilled to partner with George Washington University to help us reimagine and deliver the PDM program. Their longstanding expertise and commitment in the travel industry sector makes them the perfect choice to co-create this course for a new generation of destination organization leaders.”

The core content areas include: the fundamentals of destination organizations; destination development and

management; governance and finance; destination organization operations; membership and communications; marketing and research; and sales and group services.

“The new PDM program is the result of the association's 2017 Business Plan released earlier this year,” said Welsh. “It aligns with the four key pillars of our new brand — Community, Advocacy, Research and Education. We will continue to deliver important and impactful offerings, including research, networking opportunities, professional and organizational development, all with the intent to keep entry-level and even C-level leaders ahead of the industry curve.”

Upon successful completion of the required seven courses students will receive a Professional in Destination Management Certificate from The George Washington University School of Business and DMAI. *[See “The New Destinations International” on page 20.]* www.destinationmarketing.org

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



In a Branded Character Moment, a “Back to the Future” character introduces a company CEO.

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

Snapshots



Credits: 1-3 Digital Blue Photo; 4-7 Jacob Slaton Photography; 8-9 ibtm america

1-3 The Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) hosted its 24th Annual Education Invitational June 14-18, 2017 at Grand Wailea, a Waldorf Astoria Resort in Maui, Hawaii. In addition to a myriad of education and networking opportunities, the event featured a CSR activity and distinctive destination experiences. **4-7** PCMA's 2017 Education Conference was held at the New York Marriott Marquis in New York City June 11-14. In a city rich with design, art, architecture, fashion and more, New York City provided the perfect backdrop to think outside the traditional meeting paradigm. **8-9** IBTM America 2017 took place from June 14-16 at the newly refurbished oceanfront Diplomat Beach Resort in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. A packed itinerary for exhibitors, hosted buyers and delegates included The Central Hub, which provided the opportunity to learn about hot trends, discover the latest technology, relax and network.

Industry Events

MPI's 2017 World Education Congress

By all measures, this year's Meeting Professionals World Education Congress (WEC) at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas June 19–22 was a winning event. MPI's goal at the annual conference was to help meeting professionals stop planning meetings and start designing experiences.

There were more than 2,500 registered attendees of which approximately 55 percent were planners; nearly 70 percent in attendance were MPI members. In addition there were 142 virtual attendees. The MPI Exchange Program, which consists of hosted buyer planners and suppliers and Exchange Room (formerly MarketSquare) participants included 248 planners and 163 suppliers.

Attendees took advantage of more than 70 total education sessions, most of which qualified for clock hours. The sessions were focused on eight areas: Event Marketing; Event Operations; Legal Procurement & Compliance; Personal & Career Development; Technology & Big Data; Transforming Yourself from Planner to Producer; Transforming Yourself from Supplier to Partner; and Security & Risk Management, which received special emphasis.

MPI also introduced several new education offerings from the MPI Academy as part of its new Executive Education Series, including the Women in

It's Time to Stop Planning Meetings and Start Designing Experiences

Leadership Program and a designation program for the highly regarded MPI Experiential Event Series. In addition, the association formally announced it is collaborating with the National Center for Spectator Sports Safety and Security (NCS4) at the University of Southern Mississippi to develop educational programming and resources, with the first course — Emergency Preparedness for Meetings and Events — debuting at this year's WEC.

Learning From the Glitches

Even the glitches turned out to be learning experiences for planners on how to overcome inevitable and unforeseen hiccups during events. When Magic Johnson pulled out at the last minute as keynote, WEC in partnership with MGM Resorts International lined up new entertainment to save the day.

In his MPI Blog, Rich Luna, MPI's director of publishing, relates this reaction from an attendee: "For me, it was really great," said Unique Carey, a student attendee. "I got to get the insight

on what really happens when things don't go as planned. You have to have a Plan B and a Plan C, but you really have to work with your partners to make sure you're getting the right fit for your audience to make sure they're not losing value at the event."

MPI honored the recipients of this year's RISE (Recognizing Industry Success and Excellence) Awards at the annual signature event RISE Awards Presentation and Luncheon. The recipients were selected for exceptional achievements in the meeting and event industry.

The MPI Foundation's Big Deal at the Palace Ballroom at Caesars, the Rendezvous night networking event at XS Nightclub at Encore and the Not-So-Silent Auction raised \$340,000 to benefit scholarship and grant opportunities for MPI members around the world. MPI raised more than \$218,000 with the President's Dinner to support the MPI Academy in its efforts to provide more education to MPI's global community.

Other offerings included a redesigned Exchange Floor, plenty of networking events, and high-profile keynote speakers, guests and entertainment, including world-renowned spiritual leader Dr. Deepak Chopra and performances by Las Vegas entertainers.

Next year's WEC takes place in Indianapolis. www.mpiweb.org/indy18. **C&IT**



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1 Revving up for WEC 2018 in Indy. **2** Blue Man Group at the RISE awards. **3** Brian Stevens presented the MPI Chair Award during the RISE awards to (right) Michael Dominguez, S.V.P. and chief sales officer of MGM Resorts International. **4** (L to r) Ray Bloom chairman of the IMEX Group; Michael Gasta, America's Guest; and Harvey Grotsky, publisher, *Corporate & Incentive Travel*. **5** Hosted Buyer program. **6** The Big Deal fundraising event. **7** MPI President and CEO Paul Van Deventer. **8** Exchange Room break. **9** Attendees loved the pup- and pig-petting, too!

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Notes FROM THE COAST

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Mary.

A place that makes
the work worth it.

-Joshua



(Who do you want to tell?)

Fifth Annual Hosts Global Forum

More Than 240 Industry Leaders Let the Good Times Roll in New Orleans

Hosts Global (Hosts), a strategic partner for destination management services worldwide, hosted more than 240 clients and hospitality industry professionals for their fifth annual Hosts Global Forum. This invitation-only event occurred at the Sheraton New Orleans in Louisiana from June 26–29, 2017 where attendees participated in on-trend industry discussions, educational sessions, networking events and memorable destination-specific activities.

Global Gathering

"The Hosts Global Forum is our annual opportunity to bring together our 50-plus Destination Management Company (DMC) members, clients and colleagues from around the globe," says Marty MacKay, DMCP, president of Hosts Global Alliance. "Attendees travel 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' 2017 conference highlighted the wide variety of hospitable offerings, venues and musical talent that is available for group programs, meetings and events in New Orleans. This year's event

was made possible by many contributing organizations, including platinum sponsors: the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, Sheraton New Orleans, Cort Event Furnishings and Hosts New Orleans.

"Hosts' differentiator is our H Factor," said Jennifer Patino, DMCP, chief executive officer of Hosts Global. "We shared our Hearts and Hospitality during the welcoming night event when all attendees participated in a volunteerism program organized by Give2Get that contributed to two preeminent local nonprofit organizations: the Audubon Nature Institute and One Heart NOLA."

Learnings and Awards

Once underway, industry awareness was at the forefront of the conference. Featured topics included a discussion on innovative thinking presented by Keith Harmeyer, partner of SmartStorming, and an informative session on brand experience led by Laura Shuler, CEO of August Jackson Communications Design.

During the conference, Hosts proudly announced the winners of the annual Hosts Honors awards acknowledging DMC members who exceeded expectations in the following categories:

- **Critic's Choice Award** — Hosts Las Vegas and Destination Mexico.
- **Brand Honors Award** — Roberts Event Group.
- **H Factor Leadership Award** — Robyn Bass, DMCP, with Maple Ridge Events, and Michael Dalton, CIS, with Moloney & Kelly.
- **DMC of the Year 2016** — 2017 Award Capers DMC.

Local Color

It wouldn't be a forum for hospitality leaders without showcasing New Orleans' unique venues and musical talent. 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 and live performances by Kermit Ruffins & The Barbecue Swingers, and Grammy and Billboard award-winning musician, Irvin Mayfield. The unrivaled local knowledge and planning capabilities of Hosts New Orleans made the experience one all attendees will not soon forget.

At the close, Hosts unveiled the location of their 2018 Hosts Global Forum occurring June 21–24, 2018 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Moloney & Kelly, a Hosts Global member, Tourism Northern Ireland and Hastings Hotels have eagerly begun planning for Hosts' first European conference. To learn more go to: go.hosts-global.com/2018HostsGlobalForum **C&IT**



1 Client selfie at the Hero's Welcome event at the National WWII Museum (l to r) Julie Helmkamp, Brooke Lockett, Vanessa Hess, Ally Masi. **2** All attendees at the WWII Museum. **3** Corporate & Incentive Travel Publisher Harvey Grotzky poses with the WWII Museum's "Victory Belles." **4** Client attendees. **5** Airboat swamp tour. **6** Hosts Global Forum Client & Member Advisory Board (l to r) Joshua Jones, Brigitte Boone, Deidre Everdij, Marty MacKay, Jennifer Patino, Denise Marie Germano, Christina Lofton, chef Mark Quitney, Robyn Bass, Dee Kirby, Patti Palacios, Denise Silverman, Andy Gladstone, Heather Williams, Rachel Elliott, Jeff Broudy, Michael Dalton. **7** CSR. **8** A check for the Preservation Hall Foundation.

By Betsy Bair

How to Ask for a Raise — and Other Top Learnings From IAEE Women's Leadership Forum

Having recently consulted with a major professional association on the sustainability and long-term growth strategy of its women's leadership conference, I was motivated to attend a leadership forum for women in our own industry: the International Association of Exhibitions and Events' (IAEE) Women's Leadership Forum, which took place at the new MGM National Harbor in early May.

Here are some of the key learnings I took away from the forum, many of which can be applied to any aspiring professional or any conference.

1. Ask for a raise.

If you're a woman, never go to your boss asking for a raise because a man makes more than you. Having research about pay scales can add to your business case, but better yet, be able to show your value to the organization. Take notes when someone compliments you or sends you written props, when you've saved the company money, brought in revenue over and above expectations, helped your organization make a strategic leap or volunteered for projects or work that are not part of your job description. Oh, and by the way: NEVER say it's not my job when someone asks you do something (a top pet peeve among the women attending the forum).

2. Advocate for an advocate.

From a woman's viewpoint, it's best to have an advocate who will represent your interests in a room or a discussion that you're not privy to. This point was made not only during a panel of CEOs about engaging men as advocates (man-bassadors) to pioneer gender equality but also in a presentation by Jay Newton-Small, author of *Broad Influence: How Women are Changing the Way America Works* (Time, 2016). She told a story about women — in power — being excluded from some major decision-making meetings during President Obama's first administration. Rather than being competitive, key women banded together to form a network so they'd be aware of when they were being excluded. During a critical Oval Office meeting, which they had not been invited to, "they walked in, sat down and started participating." The men in the room got the message, and the women

weren't excluded again. It's important to know your advocate is truly making your case, and not just giving you lip service. As for the women in the White House? They knew they had each other's back.

3. It's not always about "show me the money."

The panel also made the point that making more money may not be the most important motivator for a woman. If work/life balance is important to you, be prepared to ask for time off, work-at-home options or flexible hours rather than

IAEE's Women's Leadership Forum featured education sessions for women at all stages of their career (here and opposite page).



Credit: IAEE

salary increases. A great reference is this recent article from *Harvard Business Review*: "How to Convince Your Boss to Let You Work from Home."

4. I versus we?

A consistent message: Women will rise to the top because they are consensus-builders. In the panel discussion, Gary Shapiro, president and CEO of the Consumer Technology Association, said that in the association world, it's all about the "we" not the "I." Participants recommended that women do need to learn how to better tout themselves, but suggested that you always mention another by name, or more than one, to ensure you are advocating for others. Wouldn't we want men to do the same?



5. Refuel, refill.

Clearly many attendees thought of the forum as more personal development than professional development (Emotional Intelligence, or EQ, versus IQ). A little refueling never hurt anyone. That says a lot about how important soft skills are to women leaders. But guess what we've discovered in dozens of our own engagements with association volunteers when we're tasked with improving the education at their annual conferences? Think of a mentor or boss you really admired. What attributes made them special? "Listens well, inspiring or visionary" always wins the day over "intelligent."

6. Encourage networking.

If there are large numbers of people from the same organization at your conference, it is important to help them branch out from those they've come with: Attendees will only reap benefits and grow if they leave their comfort zone and interact with new people. Formal networking can be intentionally designed. It can happen serendipitously, but ideally it should be both. Those attending the first afternoon at the forum had fun with an organized networking event — a scorecard where you had to fill in boxes such as "favorite des-

sert" and find a mate who had the same answer — but the following day lacked planned networking or table discussions.

7. Build to transform.

The speakers were entertaining, en pointe with messaging, particularly about personal improvement, and highly professional. I believe women's conferences should aim to be inspirational and transformative. This also can be achieved through the flow of the sessions: Start strong and end with emotion. According to the organizers of TED Talk conferences (as well as the advice we give our clients): "Save the most gripping speakers for the end. This is when your attendees are most open to being moved. It will leave them with a feeling that will stay with them — maybe even motivate them to action."

Do you think women should use "I" or "we" in a professional setting when talking about their achievements? Are you an advocate for people you manage, and if so, how?

The post "How to Ask for a Raise and Other Top Learnings from IAEE Women's Leadership Forum" appeared first on Velvet Chainsaw (www.velvetchainsaw.com). **C&IT**

“Women will rise to the top because they are consensus-builders.”



Betsy Bair

is Vice President, Strategic Narratives, for Velvet Chainsaw Consulting, which provides strategic consulting for associations and companies that are interested in growing or transforming their major face-to-face events through redesign of premium education, networking or the trade show floor. www.velvetchainsaw.com

By the GBTA Meetings Committee

The Hotel Commission Dilemma — Plan Now to Avert a Potential Disruption

Could an elimination of agency commissions in the hotel industry happen, like the elimination of airline commissions did in 1995? With the mounting pressure toward increased profits by hotel owners and the evolving nature of the hotel industry, further impacted by the mergers and acquisitions in recent years, industry leaders are looking for additional revenue sources in all corners of the hotel P&L. A big potential target is the commissions paid on every room night booked through an agency or meetings management company.

Commissions have historically been a channel-marketing fee that hotels offer to intermediaries when they place volume at their hotel, and were seen by the hotels as compensation for the use of the intermediaries' sales channel. In recent years, hotels began looking at all cost-reduction opportunities, including commissions.

Three different models exist for how commissions are utilized by intermediaries:

- Intermediaries use commission as a revenue stream.
- Intermediaries use commission as part of their revenue stream, and may use a fee-based model for other services.
- Intermediaries return commissions to the customer or customer takes commission directly from the hotel.

The Impact of Commissions

Three major players are impacted by the payment of commissions:

1. Hoteliers and their owners who pay the commissions.
2. Corporations and associations that may or may not receive the commissions back from their intermediaries and use them to offset the costs of their managed meetings program.
3. Intermediaries that receive payment for the use of their sales channels that may, or may not, return those commissions to their clients.

In a GBTA Meetings Committee survey of medium to large

companies across industry verticals, 50 percent of companies responded that they rely on commissions to support some part of their meetings management program.

Paying commissions on hotel rooms associated with meetings has been an inherent part of hoteliers' expenses, and they have historically found value in paying commission to intermediaries for the use of their sales channel.

For those intermediaries that use commissions as some, or all, of their revenue stream, commissions are extremely important. For intermediaries that offer sourcing only, commissions are their main source of revenue. For others, commissions are part of their revenue while fee-based services might make up the rest.

Likelihood of Elimination

While we have no definitive answer, we note that there are differing opinions on the issue.

As one of the hotel chains shared, "Owners are pushing hotels to maximize profits, reduce costs and evaluate all cost-of-sale points, to a greater degree in recent years. Due to increased financial obligations to banks, increased business costs and competition, owners are challenging hotels to find savings in all areas more than ever."

If you are an intermediary or company that is funded in whole or part by commissions, Tony Wagner, vice president Americas, for CWT M&E, has reassuring words for you: "Hoteliers may evaluate the structure of their sales channel compensation model (e.g. commissions) and incentives — all good businesses do — but no, I do not believe commissions will be eliminated in the M&E space. The difference between hotels and airlines is fragmentation. (Unlike airlines), the hotel industry is massively fragmented. What's key is that hoteliers understand the risk and bottom-line impact if they eliminated this channel compensation and others did not."

Mark Harris, on behalf of the UK-based Hotel Business Agents Association (HBBA), in the white paper "Money for Nothing," says, "The industry consensus is that change will come; the issues are the degree, and the speed at which the switch to fees takes place. It will take time, because this will be a huge step-change here that will need many disconnected parties to take the same steps at the same time — no easy task!"

Potential Impact

Intermediaries that rely on commissions as a sole source of revenue will face a significant impact. Some could end up closing shop as they may not be able to show any other value. Intermediaries that use commissions as part of their revenue could have an easier time shifting to the fee-based model as they already utilize that model for other services and customers are accustomed to it.

For the corporations and associations that receive commissions back and use these commissions to fund some or

Mitigation Strategies

No one can predict the future, and the best advice we can provide is to be prepared.

Mike Bingham, managing partner at BottomLine Group, says, "Those in the meeting supply chain, including the SMM industry advocates, have worked hard to mature the category. Like the transient world, those who can articulate and define the value of their programs will have no problems explaining a shift in the underlying supply change economics. One could argue that if companies had to invest in SMMP, versus relying

"In a GBTA Meetings Committee survey... **50 percent** of companies responded that they **rely on commissions** to support some part of their meetings management program."

their entire program, a significant impact would be felt. Ninety percent of our survey respondents rely on commissions to offset the cost of their meetings management program, and 42 percent said they would need to find another way to pay for their entire program if hotel commissions were reduced, or went away completely.

It would seem that hoteliers might not feel the negative impact as seemingly their profits would go up since they are not paying commission. Jerry Horan, president and COO of ConferenceDirect, sees it differently: Hotels don't have enough sales resources to cover every account. Lose the channel, lose the business opportunity.

He also believes that the client decides how to drive the business and will continue to do so. A reduction or change in commission structure by hotels will steer the customer to another brand, shifting market share.

on commissions to pay for the program, there would be more stakeholder support for the business case."

If you are a company or association using the services of an intermediary, have a conversation now that clearly identifies what is at risk if the commission model were to change, and how as business partners you could lessen the impact. Also, begin to articulate clearly the value of your SMM within your company now.

The GBTA Meetings Committee also recommends viewing the new training offering called "Corporate Meetings Program and Design: It's About TIME," which has a module on building a business case that is useful for a new program as well as proving the value of an existing program.

We can never be certain if this change could come, but one thing is certain; if it does, it will be very disruptive to the industry, so take the time now to make sure you have a plan. **C&IT**

The GBTA Meetings Committee

provides meetings management guidance, education and innovation through industry thought leadership. The GBTA Meetings Committee works to be the preeminent source of knowledge and strategic thinking on the state of meetings management for the industry by developing and maintaining educational materials and producing and communicating high-quality content on emerging trends in meetings management. www.gbta.org

The New Destinations International

President and CEO Don Welsh
Tells How DMAI's New Name, New Mission and
New Value Proposition Will Significantly
Empower Destination Organizations to Excel

By Christine Loomis

When Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) convenes its annual convention in Montreal this month, there will be one major difference between it and every convention that has preceded it: The acronym DMAI will no longer be the correct designation for the organization. Starting with the 2017 meeting, the group's official name will change to Destinations International — DI.

Destinations International

Chairman Gary C. Sherwin, who also serves as president and CEO of Visit Newport Beach, California, and DMAI President and CEO Don Welsh, made the announcement in March during the 2017 CEO Summit, which took place in Nashville with more than 180 in attendance. The announcement was met with a standing ovation, which came as something of a surprise to DMAI leadership. Since then, the team has received consistent feedback that this was a great name and direction for the association.

It was all part of a thoughtful process.

From October through December 2016, a DMAI team worked on the new organization name research and strategy. "Destination" or "Destinations" was the foundation for all of the name considerations, and there were quite a few in the beginning, according to Melissa Cherry, DMAI's chief marketing officer. The process included brainstorming sessions with the team, legal searches, name testing with key stakeholders and a competitive review of other associations. Once there was a final recommendation, it was shared with the DMAI Board of Directors for approval in November 2016.

In case you're wondering, a number of rather famous entities have also gone down the name-change route with great success: Datsun became Nissan, BackRub became Google and Apple Computers shortened its name to just Apple without confusing consumers for a nanosecond.

But changing a name is just one aspect of a rebranding process, whether for a corporation or an association. For DMAI, it's really about better serv-

ing its stakeholders by strengthening, clarifying and refocusing its mission and goals, the work it does, and, ultimately, its future.

"We realize we are a trade organization, not a marketing organization. Our members are the marketers. This is exactly why we felt the need to rebrand the organization," Welsh says. "Our efforts go far beyond a sharp new logo and a new name. Together with our members and partners, Destinations International represents a powerful, forward-thinking, collaborative association (committed to) exchanging bold ideas, connecting innovative people and excelling tourism to its highest potential."

As part of this collaborative process, DMAI conducted an extensive brand review over many months, which included stakeholder interviews and a deep analysis of key operational facets of the association. It began in July 2016 with the launch of the first of several planning sessions to review past and current initiatives with the goal of building a new framework for the organization

"Destinations International represents a powerful, forward-thinking, collaborative association (committed to) exchanging bold ideas, connecting innovative people and excelling tourism to its highest potential."

Don Welsh, President and CEO
Destinations International
Washington, DC



in 2017 and beyond. During the review process, the team collectively established a new vision, mission and value proposition, which in turn led to a new business plan for 2017.

Sherwin says that the collaborative process itself, as well as the resulting new brand focus developed during that process, “reflect the broader dimension of our organization.”

Coming Changes

In keeping with that broader dimension, the new name is just one of a full roster of changes that will take place in the coming months, changes that reflect the new DMAI brand — what it represents and how the organization intends to operate going forward.

The association’s long look inward revealed many things, but none more compelling than the understanding that change would necessarily include a greater focus on member needs. “We are fundamentally changing the way in which we operate,” Sherwin has said, “and that begins with consistent engagement with our members.”

Welsh provides a deeper context for that intentional shift. “The mission for the organization is to empower our members so that their destinations excel,” he says. “Together with the support of the Destination & Travel Foundation (which also is undergoing a name change and will become the Destinations International Foundation in July), we support more than 600 official member destination organizations and Convention and Visitor Bureaus (CVBs) in more than 15 countries. We do that with resources, research, networking opportunities, professional development and certification programs. Since we announced a strategic organizational realignment nearly one year ago to date, we have been and remain keenly focused on listening to what our members want, need and are willing to support.”

Welsh says that during the initial stages of an ongoing listening tour by the association’s leadership team, which visited with more than 300 members and partners throughout the year, “a few things were heard over and over again.”

Four Core Needs

Among them were four core needs expressed by stakeholders that ultimately emerged as a foundation on which to build positive change. First, the need for stronger **advocacy** on behalf of destination organizations and CVBs; second, the need for **research** to assist with strategic planning, return on investment (ROI), relevancy to stakeholders and advocacy for funding; third, the need for **education**, standards and best practices; and finally, the need for more peer-to-peer **networking**.

“A vibrant and engaged member community is the cornerstone of both the association and the foundation,” Welsh says. “The member-centric culture that DMAI/Destinations International has now instituted across all departments is core to the success of the new brand positioning and to the overall messaging for the association. By delivering on the stated value proposition, stakeholders in turn will feel engaged, valued and empowered.”

To ensure that continued engagement, Welsh says several goals are in place and will be a focus throughout 2017. Destinations International will:

- Continue the ongoing listening tour to further engage members and collect feedback to prioritize and evaluate all initiatives.
- Develop and share research, data and tools that support ROI, exemplify relevance to stakeholders and provide advocacy for funding.
- Focus on drawing members into a higher level of investment and participation in professional and organizational development opportunities.
- Clearly convey the role of the foundation to deliver value on member investment and support of the foundation’s efforts to support the association’s initiatives to empower destination organizations and CVBs through education, research and advocacy.

Four Key Pillars

These initiatives tie into Destination International’s four key “pillars,” which now help define the organization and pinpoint its focus for the weeks and

months ahead. The pillars are Community, Advocacy, Research and Education. Welsh says there are a variety of programs and goals within each pillar that clarify how members will benefit going forward.

Community: In terms of Community, he states, “We intend to become connection central; our members will be connected through knowledge sharing.” That is where community and education meet. “Destinations International is fully committed to supporting entry-level through CEOs,” Welsh says.

Advocacy: Becoming a voice for the organizations represented by Destinations International members is at the heart of advocacy efforts. “We will be the collective voice for destination organizations and CVBs,” Welsh says. “We will empower destinations on issues big and small. Our online Advocacy toolbox will feature advocacy crisis-communications plan templates, a case-studies library, a policy briefs library and more.”

Research: Also central to Destinations International’s stated mission, there is a lot going on in terms of how research will be front and center in the coming months.

“We will continue to deliver forward-focus and relevant data,” Welsh says. “We are thrilled to have Andreas Weissenborn on board as director of research and analytics, working alongside Jack Johnson, our chief advocacy officer. During our listening tour with members and partners, we consistently heard the need for research to assist with the creation of strategic plans, the ability to communicate return on investment, advocacy for funding and other means of support, and to truly be recognized as the brand manager of the destination. Filling this need has become a major initiative for the Destination & Travel Foundation. Andreas’ familiarity with the nature and needs of a DMO, a strong working knowledge of current and past research work at DMAI, his thoughts on how to improve those as well as new projects to undertake made him a clear choice.”

Weissenborn and Johnson will work together to expand the research library, which will include association and foun-

dation research reports, destination-related research, an external resource research library, destination industry resources and more.

Education: And finally, Welsh states, in terms of education, Destinations International “will be the definitive resource for professional development and destination management,” and there will be a strong component of increasing “next-generation professional development” for the growing number of younger members. “All of our educational efforts are being led by Colleen Phalen, a proven industry leader,” he says, “along with the recent addition of Haydee Barno, in the new role of director of education. We are in the process of developing an enhanced suite of education-based programs with entry level (PDM) up to the CEO level. CDME continues to be the hallmark of our industry’s commitment to education and we will build upon it.”

Two of the critical programs for 2017 that Destinations International will continue are geared for those younger industry professionals Welsh spoke of. They are the 30 Under 30 program and the Apprenticeship Program, both supported by the Destination & Travel Foundation. The 2017 Apprenticeship Program is a 600-hour program with the goal to help create a culturally and socially reflective tourism industry. The 30 Under 30 program offers 30 young industry professionals under the age of 30 the opportunity to attend the organization’s 2017 convention in Montreal, and take part in expanded networking and professional development throughout the year.

Additional educational programs are being developed this year and are expected to launch in 2018 and beyond.

International Growth

All of the association’s ongoing strategic goals remain relevant to what members want, need and are willing to support. These include building on strategic partnerships while at the same time transforming the association’s partnership business model in order to create beneficial solutions for destination

organizations, partners and DMAI itself, and expanding the organization’s international footprint to grow membership, non-dues revenue and global impact.

Welsh says the focus on international growth will be seen in part in the form of “new and enhanced destination tools through which we will collectively align, brand and market a suite of ‘best practice’ destination products.”

As an example, Welsh points to DNEXT and the Event Impact Calculator (EIC), which continue to be relevant for destinations in all parts of the globe. “All destination organizations require metrics and ROI,” he says. “We intend to grow the EIC to ensure that it is the industry standard. We’ll do that by working with and collaborating with other industry organizations.”

Additionally, he says, “We are working internationally with ECM, Europe, Canada, Australia, Mexico and Colombia to provide the products, services and education that they need. We will develop and launch DestinationFIRST, a new product that will provide destinations with the guidance and resources they need to establish a new destination organization.”

Membership on the Rise

Growth is, in fact, part of an overall strategy that is already working. While many associations face declining membership these days, Welsh says that DMAI membership is on the rise. “DMAI’s membership base continues to grow. We have added approximately 50 new members and we continue to work with all of our members, from the smallest budgeted destination organization to the largest, to provide value to all. Our model starts with the forward goal of domestic and international growth for our destination members,” Welsh continues.

“With that organizational membership comes the benefits and delivery of a value proposition that reaches all levels of membership, from entry level to CEO,” he says. To that end, the association plans to deliver more opportunities through new and refreshed education programs, the annual convention and its industry summits. And in keeping with

the goals of continued growth, providing added value and increasing engagement with members, Welsh says Destinations International will also “elevate the Destination Marketing Accreditation Program (DMAP).”

Like other associations, DMAI has made an effort to keep dues increases to a minimum, yet membership dues are, according to Welsh, “a strong revenue component” for the organization. That has made increasing existing revenue streams and finding new revenue streams all the more important.

“We are looking for more corporate partners globally and we are increasing revenues from our current events, summits, our annual convention and new events and summits that our members have deemed important,” Welsh says.

Crisis Management

Yet with all of the focus on change and innovation, it’s important to note that DMAI also continues to do what it has always done, including being ready when necessary to step in and help its members facing crisis.

Cherry notes that the team works under the mantra that there are no “little” plans. “One of the first things that was critical to implementation of the new strategic plan was to make sure that the organization could also continue to be nimble to what members need now,” she says. “From the travel bans to travel boycotts or public and private funding challenges, the team works hard to balance moving forward with the strategic plan while also being there to put boots on the ground when crisis strikes for any of our members.”

Of all the components of the rebranding effort, strategic plan and name change, Cherry says one of the most important pieces has been that process itself. “It was critical that there was a thoughtful and engaged process from beginning to launch to implementation,” she says.

If a thoughtful, thorough, engaged collaborative process and forward thinking ensures success, then Destinations International is looking at a rosy and productive future, indeed. **C&IT**

Hotels Never Sleep...

Brands Continually Roll Out New and Renewed Properties to Stay Competitive. Here's a Sampling From Across the Country

By Patrick Simms

First-tier cities tend to be hotbeds of hotel development, and this is to be expected given their high demand in the leisure, business travel and meetings segments. But these days it is especially challenging for planners to find lodging space in those cities, and so it pays to keep an eye on less-traveled pockets of the country where meeting hotel development is surging.

Northeast

One such destination is National Harbor, Maryland, located along the Potomac River just south of Washington, DC. While the destination has a recre-

ational feel with waterfront concerts, the Capital Ferris wheel and Tanger Outlets, there are two major meetings-ready hotels onsite, one of which is new and the other improved.

Last December, the MGM National Harbor began welcoming guests to its \$1.4 billion property, complete with a 3,000-seat theater, three celebrity-chef restaurants among 15 dining options, high-end retail establishments and a spa. The 308-room resort is also serious about meetings, offering the 50,000-sf MGM National Harbor Conference Center.

Even more recently, the AAA Four Diamond Gaylord National Resort &

Convention Center has 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 is supplemented by two outdoor terraces equaling more than 10,000 sf of space. With the addition of RiverView Ballroom, the 2,000-room Gaylord National now offers five ballrooms and more than 600,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space.

Akron, Ohio-based The Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company held its annual Customer Conference in January 2016 at Gaylord National. "We are excited to see the finished ballroom, as we were

watching the construction take place," relates Kelly Julian Fleming, corporate event planner. "It will definitely be a ballroom that we will want to utilize for our future programs. The natural light that this ballroom provides will help with overall creativity, productivity, mood and even reduce stress. We are very excited about the additional space and outdoor terraces right on the river with gorgeous views."

Meeting at the Gaylord National allowed all 2,059 Goodyear customers, exhibitors, associates and staff "the opportunity to network under one roof," says Fleming. "One location for our general sessions, our trade show floor, education sessions, meal function and sleeping rooms — no running to catch a shuttle to the hotel from the convention center." Among the numerous onsite dining and recreational venues, Fleming highlights The National Past Time Sports bar, which was "a very popular amenity with our attendees. It provides a great menu selection, a variety of TVs to watch sports, sports memorabilia and a friendly environment to meet at and network with one another."

Another DC property the 413-room Fairmont Washington, DC, completed a \$27 million renovation in January that encompassed all guest rooms, the lobby and loggia. The executive forum amphitheater was converted into the 2,900-sf Kennedy Ballroom, and the courtyard garden was leveled to allow for larger events.

Following is a selection of more regions and cities that are home to new

and renovated properties, creating exciting opportunities for corporate groups.

Southwest

Another destination outside of the first tier that is burgeoning with hotel development is Austin, Texas. The 1,012-room JW Marriott Austin opened in 2015, adding 120,000 sf of meeting space to the city's meetings infrastructure. This major new property is located just two blocks from the Austin Convention 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 is yet another major addition to Austin's hotel inventory, offering 1,048 guest rooms and nearly 140,000 sf of total meeting space. Amenities will include a heated swimming pool on the seventh floor rooftop terrace, full-service salon and spa, and state-of-the-art fitness center.

Groups also can take advantage of an upgraded Hilton Austin. The hotel completed a \$23 million renovation and modernization of its 80,000 sf of meeting space and lobby last year. The project follows upgrades to the hotel's 801 guest rooms, suites and executive lounge in 2014, and a refurbishment of the hotel's eighth-floor pool deck and bar in spring 2013.

"We were watching the construction take place. The natural light that this ballroom (now) provides will help with overall creativity, productivity, mood and even reduce

stress." The latest 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 Reverber. The former establishment features a multi-station open kitchen, Texan menu, specialty wine and cocktails program, and an indoor biergarten where attendees can casually convene. The Reverber, 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 to further enhance the Hilton Austin's F&B offerings: the Austin Taco Project, located a block off Austin's music "Main Street," and a 3,000-sf Starbucks with an Austin motif. Given all these improvements, planners who last brought a group to the Hilton Austin prior to 2016 would do well to consider revisiting the property.

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

South/Central

Nashville is another second-tier city that has welcomed major new hotels. The 453-room Westin Nashville opened last fall with 20,000 sf of meeting space. Highlights include a rooftop pool bar and lounge, L27; and a resort-style spa, Rhapsody Spa. Planners who are



Kelly Julian Fleming
Corporate Event Planner
The Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company
Akron, OH



Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center has enhanced its meeting space with the new 16,000-sf RiverView Ballroom situated in front of the resort on the waterfront.

Credit: Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center



The Reverberary at the newly renovated Hilton Austin is a recording studio-themed indoor/outdoor event space.

Credit: Hilton Austin

fans of Music City can look forward to an even larger property, the 533-room JW Marriott Nashville, scheduled to open next summer. Housing 50,000 sf of flexible meeting space, the property will boast Bourbon Steak, a Michael Mina Restaurant as well as a rooftop bar on the 33rd floor. Groups will have up to 32 breakout rooms at their disposal.

Next spring will see the debut of the 612-room Omni Louisville Hotel. The property will bring 70,000 sf of LEED Silver-certified meeting space to a prime location, just one block from the Kentucky International Convention Center.

And in 2020, an 800-room Loews convention hotel is expected to open in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. The new hotel, Loews Kansas City Convention Center Hotel, will be located across from the Kansas City Convention Center Grand Ballroom and offer about 60,000 sf of meeting space.

Northwest/West

The American Northwest is known for its majestic vistas, and a Seattle hotel opening this month will deliver in-

spiring views of Lake Washington from 23,000 sf of outdoor terraces. Offering a total of 60,000 sf of indoor/outdoor function space, the 347-room Hyatt Regency Lake Washington at Seattle's Southport is 11 miles from downtown Seattle and nine miles from the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. It's an ideal location for Bellevue, Washington-based PACCAR's RPM Expo, which convenes dealers and suppliers for product learning. The event has been booked at the Hyatt for next January and will bring in about 160 dealers in two separate waves.

"I was at a Hyatt focus group a couple years ago, and they mentioned they were putting in this new product on Lake Washington, and I was ecstatic because it was literally half a mile from my office," says Catherine Schrock, CMP, marketing events manager for PACCAR. Schrock, who has met the GM, adds that she has confidence that the new hotel will be up to par in its operations.

"My concerns about it being a new property are allayed by the fact that Hyatt's got an amazing training program.

And many of the staff will come from other Hyatts," she says. "Plus, with them opening (in July) and my meeting not being until January, they'll have had a chance to gel." Having participated in a hardhat tour of the property, Schrock observes, "They have great indoor and outdoor function space with beautiful views. The thing I like is all their meeting space has natural light without compromising the need for audio-visual; you can go natural light or you can block it out."

A rejuvenated property in the Emerald City is Motif Seattle, a Destination Hotel, which recently unveiled a \$10 million redesign of its 319 guest rooms. Rooms now include art walls that serve as bold representations of the Seattle cultural scene and artwork by local artists. Groups have the 6,000-sf Seattle



Credit: Hyatt Regency Lake Washington



Hyatt Regency Lake Washington at Seattle's Southport, 11 miles from downtown Seattle, opens this month.

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Ballroom and the 8,915-sf Emerald Ballroom at their disposal.

DaVita, a Seattle-based kidney care company, held its annual meeting at Motif Seattle last September, bringing in about 175 finance and accounting managers. "We have used Suncadia in the past, which is part of Destination Hotels, and to avoid monotony, we looked into other options in the Seattle area for our 2016 retreat," explains DaVita's C Level Executive Assistant Nikki Brummond. "We were delighted to find that Motif was part of Destination Hotels and allowed them to bid. ...While Motif was not the cheapest, it was the relationship we had with Destination Hotels that made the decision easy for us. It was something new, fresh (downtown Seattle vs. rural Suncadia), and we knew the Destination Hotels standard." Attendees can look forward to enjoying the redesigned guest rooms, as "We will definitely keep Motif in the rotation," says Brummond.

Farther south on the West Coast, the Oregon Convention Center is preparing for a headquarters hotel in 2019, the Hyatt Regency Portland. The 600-room hotel is expected to achieve LEED certifi-



The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Las Vegas recently completed a major renovation that encompassed meeting spaces and Casino Tower guest rooms.

cation, not to mention a 30 percent increase in convention business for Portland. The hotel will have its own 32,000 sf of ballroom and meeting space.

On the boutique end of the spectrum, The Pendry San Diego is a new West Coast property that is also in a prime location: just four miles from San Diego International Airport and three blocks from the San Diego Convention Center. For a boutique property, it's well stocked in function space (35,000 sf) and has a great diversity of F&B outlets (six restaurants and bars).

Leawood, Kansas-based Third Av-



enue Events recently brought a major automotive group to the 317-room property for a media-facing product launch. Third Avenue Events owners Annie Rector, CMP, and Kristin Hems, CMP, who did several site inspections of the property last summer and fall, cite several features that make the property a standout.

"It's one of the few hotels in the Gaslamp area that is vehicle-accessible in their ballroom spaces," says Hems. Another feature is "all of the different restaurants and bars it has on property. We were there for two weeks solid; I don't think I ate at every outlet they had." In addition, attendees gave "a lot of good feedback with regard to the technology they had in the guest rooms. They

have a port on the nightstand where you can plug in all of your chargers. You can stream whatever you're watching on your phone to the TV. Those kinds of little touches really made a big difference in their stay." The hotel's rooftop pool, which accommodated nearly 200 attendees on the deck for a special event, was another highlight.

In spring 2017, The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Las Vegas completed an aggressive capital expenditure campaign that began in late 2015. Improvements included a complete makeover of 640 guest rooms and suites in the 11-story Casino Tower. Also, the meeting and convention space makeover is now complete with the reopening of the 28,000-sf Artist Ballroom and the addition of nearly 18,000 sf of meeting and convention space. The newly expanded Artist Ballroom can be broken down into eight separate and flexible configurations. Ceiling heights in the new space reach up to 22 feet for optimal exhibition use. Hard Rock Hotel now boasts nearly 110,000 sf of contiguous meeting and convention space.

Southeast

Arguably the preeminent Southeastern meetings state, Florida has major hotel development news to share from top to bottom, as it were. Up north, the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront completed a renovation of its 951 guest rooms, corridors, the rooftop fitness center and Regency Club lounge in April. The guest rooms now evoke the St. Johns River with their color palette, and outdoor terraces allow planners to use the actual river as an event backdrop. The project also added six hardwalled meeting rooms, located on the fourth level of the ho-

tel's Terrace Building. Overall, the Hyatt offers more than 116,000 sf of flexible meeting and exhibit space.

Orlando is abuzz with hotel upgrades, one of the most significant being the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin's multiyear, \$140 million redesign that includes the transformation of all 2,267 guest rooms. The latest improvement was a \$5 million meeting space renovation, and the final will be a \$12 million lobby redesign projected for completion in the fall.

Meanwhile, Disney's Coronado Springs Resort is expanding over the next two years, adding new dining options, resort rooms and outdoor networking spaces. Construction is underway on a new 500-room tower that will overlook Lago Dorado. The expansion also will add a boardroom and two multipurpose rooms to the resort's current 220,000 sf of function space.

The former Buena Vista Palace Resort & Spa was recently reflagged as the Hilton Orlando Buena Vista Palace,



Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista recently completed a renovation of the Palm Ballroom.

connected to the new Disney Springs area by pedestrian skybridge. The 1,011-room hotel completed a major makeover featuring newly designed guest rooms, a new outside terrace and refreshed meeting spaces totaling 92,000 sf. The renovation also includes the Float Lagoon lazy river; new pools and cabanas; and Shades, a new poolside restaurant. As the hotel is an of-

ficial Walt Disney World Hotel, groups are offered entertainment and event production services through the Disney Event Group as well as the Disney Institute's educational programs.

Another property, Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista also is connected by pedestrian skybridge to the Disney Springs dining, shopping entertainment district, recently completed a

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Annie Rector, CMP, (left) and Kristin Hems, CMP, of Third Avenue Events arranged a product launch for an automotive group at the new Pendry San Diego.

Credit: Third Avenue Events

renovation of the Palm Ballroom with new furniture, fixtures and equipment. The hotel offers more than 78,000 sf of versatile meeting space including three large ballrooms and 38 breakout rooms,

"They have great indoor and outdoor function space with beautiful views. ...I like (that) all their meeting space has natural light without compromising the need for audio-visual."



Catherine Schrock, CMP
Marketing Events Manager
PACCAR
Bellevue, WA

and is just 10 minutes from the Orange County Convention Center.

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 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 at ChampionsGate, part of a \$40 million expansion project. The Osceola County Conference Center will expand, adding 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, up-scale 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.

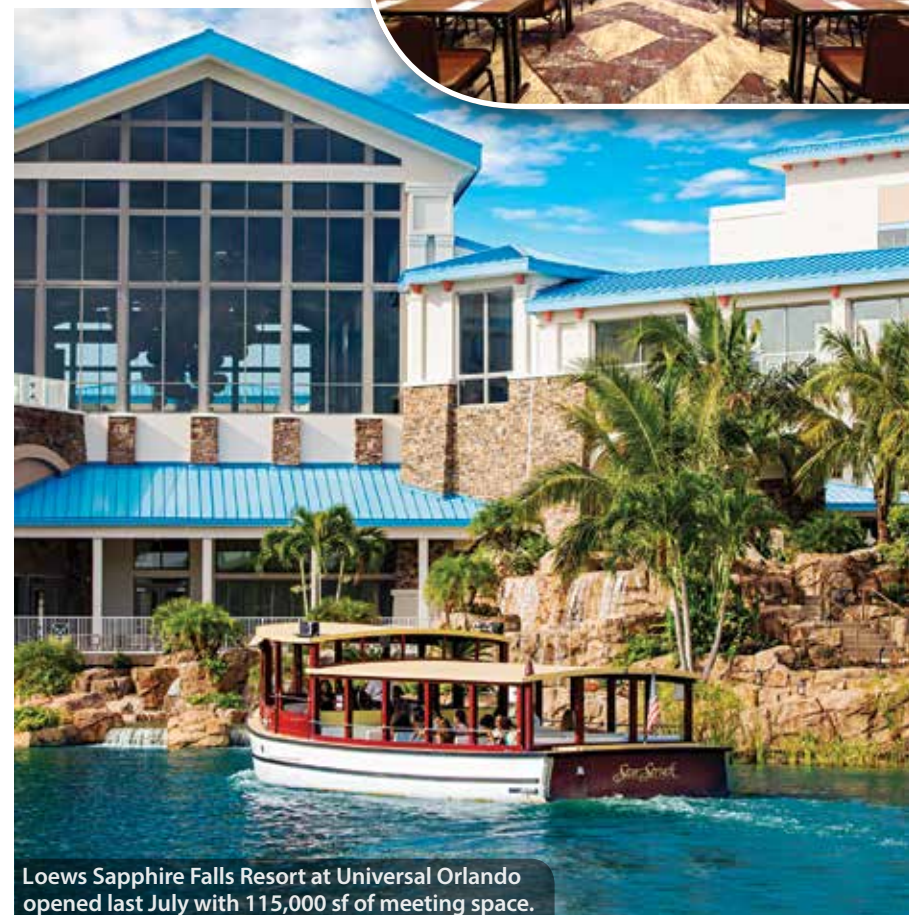
The 1,000-room Loews Sapphire Falls Resort at Universal Orlando opened last July with 115,000 sf of

meeting space, a 41,000-sf ballroom, 30,000-sf hall and 16,000-sf outdoor event area and an additional 16 meeting rooms and three meeting planner offices. The new meeting space at Loews Sapphire Falls Resort's prefunction spaces, filled with natural light, contain many open seating areas, perfect for workshoping new ideas or networking between sessions. An air-conditioned bridge connects Loews Sapphire Falls meeting space to Loews Royal Pacific Resort, creating The Loews Meeting Complex at Universal Orlando, offering a combined total 247,000 sf of meeting space and 2,000 guest rooms.

Down in Miami, the future is looking even more promising for the meetings industry with the MDM Group's acquisition of the former

site of the Miami Arena as part of the plan to build the Marriott Marquis Miami Worldcenter Hotel & Expo Center. Groundbreaking could occur this year for the project, whose first phase would include a 600,000-sf conference and exposition center and 1,100 hotel rooms; a second tower would house 600 hotel rooms. The hotel is part of a 30-acre mixed-use development that will include retail, dining and entertainment, and luxury residences.

When hotel developments are carefully tailored to market demand and preferences, they typically become success stories. Such was the case in Atlanta, with the \$70 million renovation of The Westin Peachtree Plaza completed in 2014. Every interior element of the hotel, including the lobby,



Loews Sapphire Falls Resort at Universal Orlando opened last July with 115,000 sf of meeting space.

Credit: Universal Orlando Resort



The Westin Peachtree Plaza's redesigned spaces included more conversation areas in the lobby.

Credit: The Westin Peachtree Plaza

all 1,073 guest rooms and suites, the entire 85,000 sf of meeting space, and the revolving Sun Dial Restaurant, Bar and View, were revamped. One of the guiding ideas for the redesign was Westin's emphasis on wellness.

"Westin has six pillars of wellness: Eat Well, Sleep Well, Work Well, Play Well, Move Well, Feel Well. So everything if possible had to support those pillars,"

explains Ron Tarson, the property's general manager. "For example, the pre-renovation property had a black terrazzo floor (in the lobby) with kind of bench seating. When we renovated, we understood that in order to work and play well in the lobby, what we would have preferred is a bunch of conversational areas. So the look completely changed; we carpeted a piece

of it and added beautiful conversation areas, many of them with televisions and hookups to be able to have impromptu meetings there. So the whole look of the lobby changed because our emphasis changed to be more targeted toward the Westin customer."

The project has led to new group business for the Westin Peachtree Plaza, Tarson reports, but it was also important to "communicate with our best customers while we were undergoing the renovation. One of the things they told us is make sure when you're inviting us back, you're inviting us back at the right time. And what they meant was, don't bring us in early if your meeting space isn't ready for having a group. Make sure that the first experience we have back with you is a good one. We listened very carefully to that and as a result, we didn't invite our group customers back until a good year after we invited our transients back. That took a bit of discipline, but it was absolutely the right thing to do."

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Experiential Event Design

Creating a Higher Level of Engagement Through Personalization, Interactivity, Technology and Even the Unexpected

By Maura Keller

In this ever more distracted and distractible world, meeting and event planners find themselves on a continual quest for new and innovative ways to capture attendees' attention and hold it long enough to drive home the meeting's message. The most successful at this are planners who become disciples of experiential event design.

For Erin Fontana, CMP, meeting and event manager at Special D Events, the design of an event is critical to driving attendee engagement and experience. "The discipline of meeting architecture allows planners to build an event based on the desired outcomes, whether that is improved learning, additional networking, attendee engagement or increased ROI for the host organization," Fontana says.

In today's digitally focused world where everyone is tethered to their cellphones, executing events in which attendees truly engage can be challenging.

As Vicky Fairhurst, executive producer at Bishop-McCann explains, there are many barriers to attendee engagement; we are all bombarded with hundreds of distractions every day and not just from the smartphone

in our pocket. As a result, attendees are rarely truly present in the moment.

"Whilst being present is the subject of many books on happiness, few of us ultimately practice the notion," Fairhurst says. "Our attention spans are shortening, and many of us feel the pressure to multitask at every moment of the day, leaving little headspace for engaging in a single task."

Gone are the days of sitting in a ballroom with a number of speakers taking turns to use the lectern. Today's participants expect events to reflect their day-to-day lives and the challenges that

"Despite the number of digital and virtual ways to connect, humans will always need face-to-face interaction to develop emotional connections."

Vicky Fairhurst, Executive Producer
Bishop-McCann, Golden Valley, MN



ASAE's annual
Xperience Design
Project helps attendees
think differently about
meetings.

“As we move into the future of meetings...there will be less speaker-to-audience delivery and more two-way interactive conversations. This...will invite attendees to take a more active role.”

Erin Fontana, CMP, Meeting and Event Manager
Special D Events, Ferndale, MI



come with a highly connected lifestyle. Smart event planners mix up the event format with different communication techniques to appeal to all types of learners. Workshops, panel discussions, video content, expos, gamification and interactive keynotes all strive to shake attendees out of their sometimes passive mindset and create a more active and collaborative level of participation, which results in increased learning.

Maritz Travel divisions, encourages the development of “personas” for each event they design.

Karen Watson, senior director of strategic events at Experient, explains that personas are not segments and not based on demographics, but instead help identify groups of people who share the same or similar attitudes, behaviors and motivations.

At a recent conference, Watson de-

veloped a “journey map” that outlined specific elements each day of the conference based on their appeal to the different personas her team had identified for the conference. For example, for the “Be-Wellster,” they highlighted the “yoga with the dolphins” and “morning run” along with specific menu items

speakers who strictly speak at attendees and don’t try to incorporate opportunities for audience participation. This can include asking attendees to discuss a point they just made with the person next to them to building in real-time polling and Q&A.

Engagement With Speakers

“Different event elements can appeal — and thus engage — different people throughout the event,” Watson says. One of her pet peeves includes



Attendees at this year’s IMEX Frankfurt event participated in interactive sessions with presenters. And smaller “pods” kept their attention.



Credits: IMEX Frankfurt

veloped a “journey map” that outlined specific elements each day of the conference based on their appeal to the different personas her team had identified for the conference. For example, for the “Be-Wellster,” they highlighted the “yoga with the dolphins” and “morning run” along with specific menu items

Event Personas and Personalization

And different people find different things engaging, which also adds to the challenge. Maritz Global Events, which includes the Experient and



“The journey map is like a shortcut to helping guests identify those elements of the program that might best appeal to them, but it certainly doesn’t limit them for trying out everything.”

Karen Watson, Senior Director of Strategic Events
Experient, Austin, TX

Dominique Nguyen, meeting planner at EventMates, recommends to increase engagement is a tool called “Question Ranking.” This involves attendees asking questions from their device of choice and voting for the ones they like the most.

“It facilitates audience interaction without them having to ‘take the mic,’” Nguyen says. “Tee-up questions can be pre-populated to spark interest among attendees and encourage them to add their own questions.”

Watson says, “It’s harder and harder to keep people’s attention, so you have to work at incorporating different things into presentations. This can even apply to entertainment at evening events. People want to participate, which you can build into more interactive food and beverage stations or food events that are educational.”

For years, Watson and the Maritz Global Events team have worked to make the content at events more interactive and dialogue-based. One of the challenges with this is that not all presenters are good facilitators.

“Facilitation is most often a separate skill set,” Watson says. “So while it makes the conference more valuable, because it drives engagement among and between the participants, it can make developing the content and finding the right presenter or facilitator more difficult.”

Build in Flexibility

To further positive engagement outcomes, Maritz Global Events builds schedules that allow people to be more flexible in how they spend their time.

Engagement Strategies

Vicky Fairhurst, executive producer at Bishop-McCann, offers this advice to foster attendee engagement:

- Ensure there are clear periods of time for people to connect with their daily work life. If attendees know there are regular breaks to check emails and voicemails, this will make them more comfortable being fully present in their current environment.
- Curate a variety of experiences to appeal to different types of audience members and learning styles.
- Take people out of their comfort zone, as research has shown that having new experiences produces new neural pathways that enhance memory. Keep the venue a surprise, challenge them to try new things, make the environment more physical.
- Put attendees in charge of the content — appeal to them to propose topics, discussion points and keynote speakers to make them feel fully valued and heard. — **MK**

“In the past we never would have had ‘competing’ elements, but now we acknowledge that some people are going to be distracted by a business emergency and be called out of a session. We design seating areas in the public space to allow for these side conversations, but in addition to this, we design elements of the event where everything doesn’t follow the exact schedule,” Watson says. “Some sessions may run 60 minutes, some may run 90 minutes, and some elements are available throughout the conference. This allows people to engage as they choose and personalize their experience.”

Engaging the Senses

Robert Fowler, managing partner and senior vice president of Catalyst-Creativ, an experience studio in event marketing, has had the opportunity of working with The Nature Conservancy on their last three annual trustee summits in Washington, DC. The meeting is



Actor Matthew McConaughey wowed the crowd when he made a surprise appearance at PCMA’s 2017 Convening Leaders.

a multiday event that takes place in a windowless ballroom. Catalyst-Creativ uses air-purification systems, live plant material and trees to make the space feel more alive.

“Touching on all the senses with every event is so important,” Fowler says. “Some days we even add nature sounds during walk-ins and transitions to make attendees feel like they are outside.”



Crescent-round room setups and other face-to-face type seating configurations naturally facilitate greater interaction and discussion.

Credits: (L) IMEX Frankfurt; (R) ASAE Great Ideas Conference

New Configurations and Formats

Conferences today are packed with so many sessions and events, it is difficult to compete for and win an attendee's full focus and attention even in the sessions they decide to attend. Fowler has found that keeping events as small as possible is best and using discussion circles where attendees can all see each other instead of sitting behind tables is ideal. Of course, the constant need to stay connected via cellphones, tablets and laptops makes it more difficult to hold attention.

"When attendees do not have a table to 'hide' behind, there is more engagement," Fowler says. "And please, no panels. We have found that panels are the least engaging way to present information. Use formats like fireside chats where someone from your organization interviews a guest, or have speakers give TED-style talks that last less than 15 minutes and get straight to the point of the content."

Fontana suggests setting the meeting room in crescent rounds instead of classroom style. This fosters a networking environment by being able to see and speak with several people at once rather than one or two people in a standard classroom setup.

Surprise and Delight Moments

Offering "surprise and delight" moments throughout an event also encourages attendees to explore what else might be in store for them. These moments can range from something simple like offering an unexpected catering item to a surprise appearance by a top music artist.

Fontana says incorporating CSR activities into a meeting also can be very beneficial. Activities such as a "build-a-bike" challenge can double as a teambuilding activity as well. "If your event is hosted in a new location each year, volunteering with a local community organization, such as a food pantry, can help attendees feel engaged and that they are making an impact



CSR activities like this one at IRF's Annual Education Invitational are an impactful way to engage meeting-goers.

in that community during their time there," Fontana says.

Anne Churchill, CMP, owner of AnnaBelle Events and Jubilee Planning Studio, says visuals are vital for engagement and experiential event design — this could be entertainment, a live band, food that's interactive or a photo booth.

"When a motivational speaker is involved, it may involve having screens that stream the speaker, so no matter where an attendee is in the room, they can see the presentation," Churchill says. "Planners should always go into each event visualizing its setup, as an attendee. Are interactive signs needed? Hostesses to direct guests? Or even a fun, playful map when they arrive?"

Planners need to always think of



"Planners should always go into each event visualizing its setup, as an attendee. Are interactive signs needed? Hostesses to direct guests? Or even a fun, playful map when they arrive?"

Anne Churchill, CMP, Owner, AnnaBelle Events and Jubilee Planning Studio, Columbia, MO

making a "wow" first impression and then evaluate the flow of the event for the attendees. How are the attendees going to naturally experience the event? One rule of thumb Churchill always uses is making sure attendees make their way through the entire event before finding a place to "land" or sit.

an event app. This keeps event information at attendees' fingertips and allows them to communicate with planners, who can give them real-time feedback. Planners can use the app to push event previews, notifications of schedule changes and other ongoing information.

As audiences at events skew younger, it's vital to incorporate social media. This includes using Snapchat geofilters for the event or creating Instagram scavenger hunts. For example, Watson recently orchestrated a scavenger hunt that reinforced the objectives and theme of the conference.

"We didn't hit them over the head with it — but just built it into the images we were asking them to capture," Watson says. "We also were able to

tease upcoming elements of the event based on the 10 things we had asked them to find during the event and post on Instagram. Gamification has been around but now it's a matter of utilizing social media for it."

As part of the gamification process, planners can keep track of statistics, including how many played the game

"That way, they see everything offered to them, and we encourage movement and mingling, rather than people going straight to their seats and staying there all night," Churchill says.

Mobile Apps and Social Media

Technology is a must for any meeting or event. All attendees are "plugged in," so that is often the best way to get in front of them. One core component of experiential design is developing

or how many images were posted, how many people downloaded the app, etc. All this data shows different levels of engagement and participation and how effective the experiential design of the event has been.

"Using a mobile app can also create a sense of community among attendees," Fontana says. "They can share their thoughts in real time on the activity feed as well as through various social media outlets. Plan to launch at least a month before your event to start conversations among attendees and build up excitement to the big day. Post-conference, attendees will also have the app community to continue the conversation."

Of course, most people attend a meeting or event to connect and learn. The experiential design embedded in social media facilitates both of these goals. Oscar Godwin Osei, meeting planner at EventMates, says social media tools, from a simple event hashtag to a Snapcode, enable attendees to easily connect with other attendees and receive easy-to-share information.

"When programming an event, schedule key content elements to be shared throughout the event," Osei says. "Infographics, quotes, videos, slides, info bites — information keeps guests engaged and coming back for more. Offer behind-the-scenes footage and recaps of the day, to drive attendee engagement well after the event is complete."

Osei also adds elements of fun: "Selfie stations continue to draw high participation rates. Include a hashtag sign holder, and you have the built-in 'share.' Show the pictures during the breaks and have attendees vote for the best selfie."

According to Justin Markle, who functions as director of sales and marketing at the Duke Energy Convention Center for venue management company Spectra by Comcast Spectacor, event apps allow for direct networking with those attending the same meeting.

"Touching on all the senses with every event is so important. Some days we even add nature sounds during walk-ins and transitions to make attendees feel like they are outside."

**Robert Fowler, Managing Partner, SVP
CatalystCreativ, Brooklyn, NY**

"Most events can create an event-specific hashtag," Markle says. "Promoting this prior to the event allows for additional networking before attendees arrive. This hashtag can be monitored by attendees, and they can see who else is talking about it, giving them an opportunity to connect beforehand."

Connecting Before, During and After

From social media to face-to-face activities, most elements during an event enhance engagement. But planners work to engage attendees before and after the event as well. Watson says

"While ROI is already difficult to measure in events, it's a key indicator in the results," Nguyen says. "If attendees are engaged in meetings, it will lead to more conversations, new ideas, problems solved and, ultimately, more business."

For many corporate events, and definitely the ones that Watson manages, networking is one of the key objectives of the event. This can be between peers (staff who need to work better together) and supplier/vendor (to develop relationships that will continue to benefit after the event).

"In order to deliver better networking and relationship-building, you have to build in engagement opportunities throughout," Watson says. "We have survey questions that ask the number of new relationships formed during the event. Looking at these numbers shows us if we have been able to deliver on the engagement necessary."

Creating memorable experiences is a way to help solidify the attendees' meeting or event experiences long after the event is over. Attendees may not remember all the content from an event, but if they see, do or experience something out of the ordinary, that will stick with them.

"Those cool experiences become associated with your brand and your company," Fontana says. "This can lead to higher levels of employee engagement. As we move into the future of meetings, I see it becoming more and more interactive. There will be less speaker-to-audience delivery and more two-way interactive conversations. This interactive approach will invite attendees to take a more active role."



Selfie stations with hashtag signholders are not only popular with attendees, but are built-in marketing tools.

the follow-up is important. Is it a postcard after the event? Video slideshow of photos from the event? Or perhaps it involves sharing content on the app or a post-event website, both of which provide the opportunity for guests to continue to engage with the event.

What's the ROI?

Effective experiential event design ties into impressions and event ROI.



Partners in Progress

Strengthening Industry Relationships That Are Crucial to Successful Meetings and Events

By Maura Keller

Business partnerships come in all shapes and sizes. Whether you are a corporate meeting planner, marketing agency, CVB, live event agency, DMC, rental company, entertainment agency, technology provider or social media curator, it has become even more important to create cohesive working relationships to provide the end client or attendee with the best possible meeting or event experience.



“When sourcing a location you have never been to, your best option is to **reach out to the CVB** for the most up-to-date information.”

Maureen Sojka

Events Manager, Creative Marketing Alliance, Princeton Junction, NJ

For Maureen Sojka, event planner at Creative Marketing Alliance, a full-service marketing agency located in Princeton, New Jersey, establishing these professional relationships provides her with a wealth of knowledge and experience.

“For example, when sourcing a location you have never been to, your best option is to reach out to the CVB for the most up-to-date information,” Sojka says. If you come across a new contract clause, you can reach out to your colleagues in the industry and see if they are experiencing the same thing and how they addressed it.”

Colleagues also are a valuable resource when selecting new vendors. However, the vendors themselves also can be helpful.

“I recently contracted with a transportation company who provided a referral for a Trivia Contest emcee who turned out to be the hit of our evening event,” Sojka says.

Building professional relationships is important in most industries, but even more so in the meetings and events industry, which is relationship-based.

Trust Is Crucial

As Lynnette Offen Gerber, CMM, CMP, manager of global accounts at Helms-Briscoe explains, meeting a hotel supplier, for example, could help a meeting planner decide between whether they want to do business with Hotel A versus Hotel B.

“It actually can be crucial,” Gerber says. “People want to do business with people they know and trust.”

Relationships have been crucial in Gerber’s own career: In her previous two positions, she had already known people at the organizations, which not only gained her entrée, but helped her ultimately get hired.

“Additionally, if a crisis comes up in a meeting or convention, working with those you have partnerships with will better help you solve the problem,” she says. “With the relationship already established, you are more likely to share information, and you are inclined to work together. You both are motivated as well.”

Patrick Burkhardt, chief idea person at Luxpitality, a San Diego-based hospitality company that connects new-

age businesses with unique hotels for corporate events or teambonding experiences, says that his company continually partners with other entities in the meetings and events field to create mutually beneficial outcomes. Luxpitality partners with some of the top hotels and businesses in the U.S. and Europe, and prides itself on harnessing local partnerships to provide clients completely customized group trip experiences. Burkhardt has more than a decade of experience in the hospitality industry and served as president of Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE) Southern California, the largest chapter in the world.

“We work with hotels, and that’s what we excel in. However we aren’t as savvy when it comes to executing ground-service activities and offsite venues for our groups,” Burkhardt says. “So we partnered with an amazing company called Hosts Global Alliance. They share the same global footprint as us but excel in all these services. We help them with hotels, and they help us with destination management services.”

“We partnered with an **amazing company** called Hosts Global Alliance. ...We help them with hotels, and they help us with destination management services.”



Patrick Burkhardt

Chief Idea Person, Luxpitality, San Diego, CA

'Coopetition' and a Changing Industry

Corporate meeting planners and other entities within the meeting-planning sphere share the same goal: to provide memorable meetings and events that provide an impactful outcome for attendees and companies alike.

Take Kathy Miller, for example. Miller is CEO of Total Event Resources, a Chicago meeting and event planning company that produces innovative events for Fortune 1000 companies, major trade associations and not-for-profit organizations. She says that the meetings and events industry has changed drastically, especially when it comes to business relationships.

Gone are the days when supplier partners stay in their "lane" when it comes to who manages what. For instance, the off-premise caterer used to manage food and beverage only. Now caterers can be "full service" — offering clients solutions and management for entertainment, tenting, lighting, rentals, venue selection and more.

"There are days when we are partnering with a caterer and other days when we are competing for the same business," Miller says. "It's no longer black and white, it's very gray, which is why one day they are your partner and the next they are your competitor. Hence the word 'coopetition,' we partner — cooperate — with our competitors that may also be our 'preferred partners.'"

For Miller, business relationships enhance her company's learning curve, as their partners bring new and innova-

tive ideas to Total Event Resources on a continual basis, giving Miller and her team the platform to be uber-creative in the proposal process.

"In Chicago, and I believe in other major cities where meetings and events are plentiful, we are finding that venues are popping up all over and are being bought and managed by a variety of supplier partners including scenic design firms, caterers, event agencies and DMCs," Miller says. "This makes the venue search and management process interesting for the live event agencies like us. Again, one day we are partnering with a scenic design firm to provide all the design elements and the next time we are competing with them."

Helping Reduce Costs

For Karen Shackman, president of Shackman Associates New York, relationships, quite frankly, are "everything." This is especially important when a meeting group wants to book something on short notice.

"Relationships are also important in New York City when traffic can completely alter the timing of an after-hours event or product launch," Shackman says. "We have worked with the NYPD to speed transportation and meeting logistics when unrelated problems could throw off timing. Relationships also help for meetings on a budget."

Shackman Associates also has piggybacked luncheons with other groups at hotels to save meeting planners thousands of dollars. Pulling this

off successfully is dependent upon continuing communication with key hotel and venue staff.

"Understanding who else might be meeting at a hotel helps us discover potential opportunities for sharing food and beverage," Shackman says. "When we piggybacked a luncheon at a five-star hotel, we noticed that our group of 750 attendees was similar in size and demographics to another one, so our relationships with the hotel event management team led the same menu to be prepared for 1,500 people, which obviously saved costs with a larger order."

Establishing Strategic Relationships

Today, much of the meeting and events business is built upon reputation and word of mouth. David Jacobson, who has more than 15 years of professional events experience, is the CEO of TrivWorks, a corporate entertainment and teambuilding company. He understands that to be successful, meeting and event professionals cannot operate within a vacuum. Collaborating with other industry professionals not only extends the planner's reach, but also provides access to talent, venues and offerings they otherwise wouldn't be able to deliver on their own.

"Be bold and approach those whom you genuinely feel there is the potential for a mutually beneficial collaboration," Jacobson says. "The best types of strategic partnerships are those where both sides stand to gain tremendous

"Be bold. ...The best types of strategic partnerships are those where both sides stand to **gain tremendous value over the long-term."**

David Jacobson

Founder and CEO, TrivWorks, New York, NY

value over the long-term; when seeking out potential partners — be it individuals, organizations or venues — think about what you have to offer, as well as what you could potentially do together as far as synergies. But don't be shy — the worst you can be told is 'no'!"

Jacobson says the biggest mistake corporate meeting professionals make when trying to establish partnerships within the industry is only thinking of the immediate, short-term benefit, and only thinking about what they'll get in return.

"That probably won't get you very far. You will likely be much more successful if you approach partnerships

not as quick hits, but as strategic investments, where both you and your potential partners' interests are well-aligned, and a mutual benefit is clearly outlined upfront," Jacobson says.

Richard Heby, marketing manager at LiquidSpace, a network for on-demand workspace, including event spaces, says corporate meeting planners should know what they expect to offer and what they can expect to receive from the partnership, but they shouldn't be afraid to reach out if they don't have a complete multiyear plan. "It's so easy to connect these days — so go and connect," Heby says.

Strategic partnerships have been the key to LiquidSpace's success, be-

cause the company works to connect venues with professionals, startups and other enterprises looking for space. "We partner with coworking spaces, business centers, hotels, private companies and direct landlords," Heby explains. Their network benefits everyone involved by injecting speed, technology and simplicity into the space discovery and rental process. That includes space for meetings, events, training sessions, team offsite events, flexible office space and more.

And great partnerships often will pay dividends in exclusivity and referrals.

Networking

When establishing professional rela-

"There are days when we are **partnering with a caterer and other days when we are **competing** for the same business."**

Kathy Miller

CEO, Total Event Resources, Schaumburg, IL



Information Sharing

The most useful information that meeting and event planners, vendors and CVBs can share with others in the industry is that which provides early insights into what's trending, which types of venues attendees respond best to and other related details that inform the very front end of the meeting and event planning process.

This includes trends, forecasts, quality assurance results, ROI and other actionable information. This level of detail supports the staging of events, scheduling resources and production, and managing the overall quality of future events.

That said, one of the biggest obstacles to effective collaboration is that people may think sharing information about their events, attendees and general meeting plans with suppliers or other planners means they are giving away a competitive advantage.

But by sharing the information, planners can evaluate such things as meeting or event effectiveness, ROI and attendee retention for future events.

One thing is for certain: The ability for industry professionals to use real-time analytics to collaborate and engage with one another is exciting. The good news is that the opportunity has never been greater and the capabilities more robust for driving this type of collaboration.

In fact, looking at data-sharing through the lens of mutually beneficial objectives creates the opportunity to transform the discussion from one of competition to one of collaboration. Understanding the needs, interests and preferences of meeting and event attendees ensures that meeting and event professionals, vendors, CVBs and all stakeholders deliver a great experience for future events.

— MK





“If our partnership with a vendor is unique, it gives a **selling edge** over our competition.”

James Bennett

President, Firefly Team Events, Los Angeles, CA

tionships within the meeting and event industry, planners are advised to reach out and identify those people or companies they prefer to work with, understand the value they can offer potential partners and what is expected from them in return.

Sojka recommends networking at industry events such as IMEX, PCMA, MPI, SITE, etc., and reaching out to the CVBs regarding upcoming site visits to learn more about their destinations.

Gerber also stresses that establishing relationships is easiest through joining a professional organization and becoming involved with it. Gerber was on the executive board of MPI Minnesota twice and she says that it has been crucial to her success.

“Not only do you get to meet people, but you also get to demonstrate your abilities and knowledge to them,” Gerber says. “That can be priceless for your career. It is definitely worth the time you invest in it.”

Leveraging LinkedIn

And it's important to remember that sometimes long-term partnerships begin with simple gestures, such as connecting via professional websites including LinkedIn, which can be a very powerful tool for connecting with industry players and generating business leads. Having a LinkedIn page facilitates engagement with followers, sharing potential meeting and event opportunities, and being available as a trusted resource.

LinkedIn also allows planners to

connect with potential industry partners by sharing industry-related blog content, participating in Q&A sessions or even displaying a call to action in your summary. As an added feature, LinkedIn provides analytics, which enable users to measure just how effective their updates are.

Providing industry-related blog content on LinkedIn also is an excellent strategy for gaining exposure from new audiences, while catering to an existing network and industry partners. But the goal is to provide shareable content — something followers would be genuinely interested in seeing, and would consider sharing to their own followers. The result is exposure that increases exponentially, particularly when content goes viral.

Participating in Q&A sessions related to the industry is a powerful way to build stronger connections and demonstrate industry expertise. The key is to add value to the conversation. The end goal is to establish partnerships with others within the meeting and events industry.

Getting an Edge on the Competition

“If our partnership with a vendor is unique, it gives a selling edge over our competition. Referrals are an obvious bonus of partnerships,” says James Bennett, president of Firefly Team Events in Los Angeles. “A less obvious benefit is that each of your partners may be a privately owned business. As a small business, we have growing pains and

struggles. I can reach out to some of my partners and have a heart-to-heart with an owner who's probably gone through similar situations. It's extremely valuable to have a network of peers that know your journey.”

Recently one of Firefly Team Events' planner partners added all of the company's products to their website. For Bennett and his team, that is like having an additional sales team promoting their clients.

“It allows us a wider reach and gives our partner a larger service offering,” Bennett says. “It's a beautiful win/win for both of us.”

Bennett has found that industry events are great for a first introduction, but it is vital that meeting planners follow up after those connections are initially made.

“Many of our partnerships with fellow suppliers are forged in the heat of battle while working for the same clients,” Bennett says. “With our hotel partners, we reach out to them quarterly and try to schedule face-to-face time with their teams as well as FAMs.”

Sojka advises other corporate meeting planners to avoid the common mistake of not moving outside of their circle. “The more inclusive, the wider the range of contacts, the broader the base of knowledge,” Sojka says.

And reputation is everything. “Nothing is worth losing your reputation over. Be honest, hardworking and true to your core values,” Bennett says. “For us, we're trying to keep our clients happy, healthy and engaged.”

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Event Planning

How Planners and Destination Management Companies Partnered to Create Spectacular Events

DMC Success Stories

If there is a reliable formula for the creation of a major meeting or incentive program that succeeds in spectacular fashion, it often includes an effective collaboration between the meeting planner and a destination management company. And, without a doubt, there is a simple, clear equation for a productive and mutually satisfying planner-DMC relationship.

By John Buchanan

It includes what might be dubbed the three C's: creativity, collaboration and communication.

To illustrate three diverse examples of DMC success stories, *Corporate & Incentive Travel* spoke with a trio of planners and their DMC partners in order to identify the traits that make such collaborations work.

Float My Boat (Before It Sinks)

ITA Group, an independent meeting planning company based in West Des Moines, Iowa, faced one of the industry's worst possible nightmares after learning, in the midst of planning an April 2016 incentive program that would take 150 qualifiers plus spouses and guests to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, that its local destination management company had suddenly gone out of business — vanished, with many questions lingering in the air.

Enter Cabo San Lucas-based DMC Terramar. David Abers, CMP, ITA's lead program manager, met Terramar's Senior Account Manager Cheryl Miller on an emergency site inspection trip. And the duo set about transforming a potential disaster into a rousing success.

Abers and Miller faced several daunting challenges. The JW Marriott Los Cabos Beach Resort & Spa was under construction and would open just six weeks before the high-end group arrived.

In addition, the program's signature element, a closing-night event that would feature a custom-built galleon on the beach as its spectacular venue, was in jeopardy. Saving it would be complicated and expen-

Constructing a custom-built galleon for a spectacular closing night event on the beach in Los Cabos was no mean feat for ITA Group and Terramar.



sive. "We had been planning to build an enormous 'ship' on the beach, and the hotel had said they were going to bulldoze the beach to make it level and just perfect for our event," Abers says. "But then we ran into unexpected zoning problems during the construction of the ship. And at that point, things started to unravel because the former DMC had been going out of business, and we had no idea what had been going on. So we had to go down there and figure out what we needed to do to continue on with the scheduled program. And we had very good meetings with Terramar and Cheryl. Fortunately, she was able to pick up the existing program proposal. But she also made it much better than it originally was, which improved the overall execution of the program."

Miller's first action, taken under duress, was to assess the overall program and make sure it could be delivered, as

planned and on budget, she says. "We also wanted to make sure that activities were being done the way we would have proposed them, and that the budget was accurate, and so on," she says. "In other words, we wanted to make sure the program was viable, as proposed."

A major element of accomplishing that was for Abers and Miller to work together to make the original client-approved budget work in the face of unexpectedly rising costs for the closing-night event. One important key to their ultimate success was that Abers and his ITA team were able to re-crunch their numbers and find savings that could be shifted elsewhere to sustain the event's bottom line.

Meanwhile, with the custom-built "ship" venue for their closing night suddenly thrown

into doubt, Miller stepped in and found a solution to the problem. "She and the owners of Terramar really came to the rescue," Abers says. They knew the people who owned the property adjacent to the JW Marriott, and they were able to lease that property for us so we could build the ship and execute our big event as envisioned." However, the acquisition of permits to stage the event presented another obstacle that had to be overcome. And then better sand had to be brought in to make the beach setting more aesthetically pleasing.

The end result: The program came off in spectacular fashion. "The event turned out to be phenomenal," Abers says. "And at the end of the night, we did a sensational fireworks display over the ship. The client and all of the attendees were thrilled. And no

Continued on page 46



Credit: Ellie Mae



Credit: Ellie Mae

Activity Planners created a superspy/superhero "License to Succeed" themed event for software company Ellie Mae.

High Energy, High Impact

When it comes to its annual user conference held each March, Pleasanton, California-based software supplier Ellie Mae has a simple goal: It wants to be able to claim the most sensational event in its industry. In order to achieve that lofty goal, for the last two years the event has been held at the tony Wynn Las Vegas hotel. And Susan Chenoweth, Ellie Mae's senior vice president of marketing, has worked with Activity Planners, one of the city's most acclaimed DMCs, and its president, Stephanie Arone, DMCP.

"We rely on Stephanie and her team for many elements of the event," Chenoweth says. "But one key is that each fall, we come up with a major marketing campaign and theme for the company for the following year. And then that theme is promoted at our conference and carried out throughout the year. And it's always used in a big way at our conference."

The theme for this year's event was "License to Succeed." And, Chenoweth says, what that meant for Ellie Mae's customers was to "get all of the tools and techniques they need to be successful with our software, successful in their business and successful as individuals."

Chenoweth relied on Activity Planners to bring the theme to life for the conference. "And that meant carrying it out through a number of elements of the conference," Chenoweth says, "but most importantly on the main stage for our opening general session."

Working as a team, Chenoweth and Arone developed a James Bond/007-based "superspy/superhero" theme. For example, registered attendees applied for their licenses to succeed and were granted secret code names and badges. The theme

also was carried out through all marketing and promotional materials and across the various meeting venues at the Wynn.

"The planning for this event starts the year before, and once the theme is set, then we go through a lot of ideas to see how to best deliver it," Arone says. "For example, there are a lot of ways you can do a spy or James Bond theme, so it's a matter of clarifying and refining how it can be made to work best for this particular group. And to do that right is actually a complex project."

A primary focus this year was a blockbuster, high-energy production for the opening general session, designed to deliver the wow factor with a capital W. Program elements included a custom-produced, theme-based video and a live production that culminated in a Las Vegas magician-level "reveal," or surprise physical introduction, on the general session's main stage, of company CEO and president Jonathan Corr. An illusion worthy of David Copperfield used a phone booth to transform a stunt man, dressed as a superhero, into the CEO in dramatic fashion.

The custom-built magical phone booth was then moved into the exhibit hall to host photo shoots with attendees and costumed superheroes. In another spectacular flourish, stunt professionals on motorcycles roared into the opening general session. "They rode the motorcycles up the aisles, and it was incredibly exciting," Arone says. Adds Chenoweth: "Can you imagine what we had to go through to make that happen? But it was well worth all the effort. It was really amazing. People were really shocked." And that was exactly the reaction Ellie Mae wanted. "Our goal is to really wake people up and

get them going," Chenoweth says. "We want high energy, high impact, right from the start."

In a budget-conscious era, not many corporate clients aspire to, or are willing to, pay the cost of such creative and sensational meeting attributes, Arone notes. "The level of commitment that Ellie Mae makes to really deliver a spectacular attendee experience is at the high end of the scale," she says. "It's very important to them as an organization. But not many companies these days think that way or are willing to make the investment that is required to do something that unique and spectacular."

The result? This year's conference drew 3,000 attendees, up from 2,200 in 2016.

"And one of the reasons our conference has grown so dramatically over the last several years is that our attendees have such a great experience," Chenoweth says. "If they're going to take the time and spend the money to attend, we want to make sure the event is very special to them and that they are as excited and engaged as they can possibly be. So we work very hard to deliver an awesome experience. And really great partners like Activity Planners play a major role in that."

The Big Easy, the Hard Way

When the Pacific Rim division of a major information technology company began planning its high-end spring 2017 incentive program for 42 attendees, the identification and selection of a destination that would offer a truly unique experience was at the core of the exercise.

Working with the Melbourne, Australia-based incentive house 212°F, the company ultimately opted for New Orleans and its French Quarter landmark hotel, the Royal Sonesta.

Why The Big Easy? "When my client was looking at destinations, they wanted one that would be a genuine experience, something their attendees would typically not be able to do on their own, and something that was a party," says 212°F Account Director Tanya Henneman, who led the planning of the program. "But they also wanted culture and history."

New Orleans fit that bill perfectly. However, given the timing of the trip



Credit: Jennifer Thelen

Incentive house 212°F enlisted Hosts New Orleans' expertise in staging a Big Easy client event steeped in local culture, including a French Quarter/Bourbon Street balcony experience.

— during Mardi Gras in February — a central issue became delivering an authentic experience of the singular culture and cuisine of New Orleans, and not just the world-famous celebratory madness of Mardi Gras.

Continued from page 45

one but Cheryl and me knew how much work had gone into pulling it off."

The most important key to success, Miller says, was an honest and trusting relationship forged under pressure between strangers. "My stress level in taking over a program that faced such challenges was up there," Miller says. "But David

and I were very much on the same page in terms of what his client expected and what we had to do to address the various issues and make the program a success."

As a result of their shared success, ITA has worked with Terramar on two additional incentive programs, for other clients in Cabo San Lucas, and they are now working together on a 2019 program to

Panama on behalf of the original client. In addition to its Cabo San Lucas headquarters, Terramar has offices in Cancun, Mexico and Panama.

"The keys to the relationship are open, honest communication and mutual trust," Abers says. "And with regard to the importance of those things, this was a learning experience for me."



Credits: Jennifer Thelen

Hosts New Orleans arranged a speakeasy-themed gala event at the Napoleon House, one of the most iconic destinations in the city.

Accomplishing those dual goals required special expertise and experience. As a result, 212°F turned to DMC Hosts New Orleans, the local outpost of worldwide DMC Hosts Global.

"The challenge," says Hosts New Orleans Associate Director of Sales Yvonne Collazo, CIS, "was operating a high-end incentive program of this caliber during Mardi Gras. There are a lot of unique obstacles that are created for a group during Mardi Gras. So that meant we had to have many detailed conversations during the planning process about what was realistic. For example, the client wanted to do the closing event on Fat Tuesday. Operating in the French Quarter on the final day of Mardi Gras presents unique challenges for obvious reasons. And those kinds of considerations really applied to the entire program because of Mardi Gras. For example, we didn't want the group to get stuck behind a parade, because then you're part of that parade for as long as it goes on."

Despite such a challenge, based on its longstanding and exceptional local expertise, Hosts New Orleans created a spectacular program that showcased the very best of the city, while also capturing the singular magic of Mardi Gras.

Program highlights included an



opening night "New Orleans Food Experience" at one of the French Quarter's renowned restaurants, which features an outdoor patio and live jazz. Another classic New Orleans experience included a po'boy event based on the city's legendary sandwiches, created in the 1920s and typically featuring roast beef, local specialty andouille sausage, or fried seafood served on crisp, light French bread with an array of condiments.

Other program high points included an interactive mixology experience with a live musical performance at the Royal Sonesta's Jazz Playhouse, and a lunch and sea plane/airboat outing at time-honored offsite venue Bayou Barn in swamp country outside the city. A dinner highlight was a New Orleans-style feast at Court of the Two Sisters, one of the French Quarter's oldest and most beloved restaurants.

The most unique and thrilling high point was VIP admittance to an exclusive Mardi Gras ball hosted by one of the city's most celebrated Mardi Gras "super krewes," the Orpheus parade, produced in the 1990s by Harry Connick Jr.

"The Orpheuscapade was at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, and it was a very sophisticated black-tie ball," says Hosts New Orleans Director of Operations Carol Padgett. "Our attendees were hosted by the captain of the krewe. That's an experience that very few people from outside New Orleans ever get to have. Our group got a police escort from the parade to the party. It's something you remember forever."

On their last day in the city, attendees experienced a speakeasy-themed gala event — An Evening of Fringe, Feathers and Fedoras — at the Napoleon House, one of the most iconic destinations in the city. The gala featured handsome gangsters and beautiful flappers who greeted guests with feather boas and fedoras on arrival, an absinthe tasting station, a six-course menu with premium beverages and wines, and a late night burlesque performance.

Although the program generated rave reviews from the client and attendees, for Henneman the most satisfying part of the experience was working so successfully with Hosts New Orleans. "The biggest thing for me was that they actually listened," she says. "They paid very careful attention to exactly what we said we wanted, what we were aiming for as an experience. And a big part of that was that we wanted something different, something really special. And not only did they bring it all to life, but they brought it to life just as I had imagined it. They really came through. Everybody loved the experience they had. But for me as the planner, the main thing was that my DMC perfectly executed my vision. They delivered exactly what I wanted and hoped for. And we got the best of both worlds, the Mardi Gras experience and the traditional New Orleans experience."

The end result: The new planner-DMC relationship has blossomed beyond New Orleans, and 212°F will now work with Hosts Global in various destinations around the world for future events on behalf of multiple clients. **C&IT**



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Destination



Atlantis Paradise Island recently introduced the new Junkanoo Bahamian Fest & Feast teambuilding program.

Credit: Atlantis Paradise Island Bahamas

The Best of the Bahamas & Caribbean

Enticing, Exotic and Always an Attendee Favorite

By Christine Loomis

The arc of islands that curve from the Bahamas in the Atlantic Ocean down through the Caribbean Sea to South America offers planners superb beaches, rich culture, history, plenty of activities and resorts able to meet diverse needs.

Aruba

Located below the hurricane belt, Aruba has nearly year-round idyllic weather.

Jay Smith, president of Sports Travel and Tours, likes Aruba. In February, he booked two liquor-industry sales incentive groups on the island, both at the Hilton Aruba Caribbean Resort & Casino, which completed a \$25 million renovation to guest rooms, public areas, pools, the beach and restaurants in December.

"I've hosted programs at a few resorts in my 25 years of bringing groups to Aruba," Smith says. "The Hilton has been one client's requested hotel, in part because one of the main point people had been to the hotel when it was a Radisson and enjoyed the property."

Smith says the Hilton staff excels. "As a meeting planner, you are important to them, and they work hard to address any issues and make a program work. Audrey Wolfe, director of catering and convention services, is a wonderful asset. Even under pressure times, Audrey is still working."

Among his program highlights is a sunset beach function, which he calls impressive. "The food is top-notch and we have had a variety of menu options. The AV, he adds, "is brought in from outside; you do need to work with the staff to make sure you/they get the AV the way you want it."

"Aruba offers great people, wonderful weather and a place you probably won't go to just once."

Jay Smith, President
Sports Travel and Tours
Hatfield, MA



In addition to functions on site, the group played golf at Tierra del Sol and had a dinner or two at local restaurants.

While Aruba temperatures average 82 degrees year-round, winter weather in U. S. cities can cause flight problems. "Possible alternatives are something to have in place before the moment of impact," Smith cautions. Fortunately, when delays occurred this winter, the hotel helped, adding nights to the end of the trip for attendees who missed the start.

Winter is Aruba's prime season. "You need to be patient with hotel staff to achieve the end results of your programs," Smith says. "They get very busy; you need to stay on top of details that you as the meeting planner must make sure are covered."

Smith suggests a minimum of four nights for a program so attendees really enjoy the experience. Beyond that, "Aruba offers great people, wonderful weather and a place you probably won't go to just once."

The Bahamas

Seven hundred islands across 100,000 square miles offer enormous diversity. Most well known are Grand Bahama and Nassau and Paradise Island, but there are many possibilities.

Bimini is the closest Bahamas island to the U.S. mainland — just 50 miles east of Miami. Ernest Hemingway and Martin Luther King Jr. both found profound inspiration here.

Barbara Becker, V.P. administration with Fields Auto Group in Glencoe, Illinois, brought 58 attendees to the Hilton at Resorts World Bimini last May. "Although it's not the easiest place to get to, it's worth the wait. The rooms are beautiful, the staff very accommodating and the casino is now open. Transportation once you land is easy. Leave the planning up to the RWB staff and they take all the worries away."

The group liked the resort's pricing and the fact that it

opened recently and just completed phase-two upgrades in June. "We like things shiny and new," Becker says. The staff was also a positive. "Everyone from the manager to the lady cleaning the floors has a positive, friendly attitude — exactly what you want when away from home."

Becker suggests planners "trust the staff; they know what will work for your group size and what won't." She has brought groups large and small to Bimini, though with groups over 30, she says, they mainly stay within the resort. "It's so beautiful and the food is wonderful, especially if you like seafood. You don't need to leave to get just about anything you're looking for."

On Nassau, Melia Baha Mar is a possible site for a New England manufacturing company's incentive program. Nell Nicholas, senior director, global sales, HelmsBriscoe, says, "Nassau is a great fit for this program. The clients prefer easy, inexpensive airlift from New England cities. Though they love all-inclusives, they like to get off property and there are lots of offsite activities here."

The resort is next to the in-progress Baha Mar development, which Nicholas says shouldn't deter planners. "Although the infrastructure of Baha Mar isn't complete, the Melia is easily accessible and a wonderful all-inclusive option with proximity to great golf and offsite water activities. The grounds are lovely and the buildings are beautifully appointed. Once all the Baha Mar facilities are up and running, it will be a fabulous resort complex."

Nicholas says the Melia offers a great value for the money, "and raises the bar in this area for all-inclusives. If you're a Melia resort frequent traveler, you'll be well acquainted with the restaurant offerings and consistently good Royal Service."

For those considering the Bahamas, Nicholas adds, "The

You couldn't design a dinner function any closer to the sea than this one at the Hilton Aruba Caribbean Resort & Casino.



Credit: Hilton Aruba Caribbean Resort & Casino

one advantage I cannot overemphasize is the knowledge, dedication and assistance the CVB offers to planners.”

Baha Mar, the \$4.2 billion integrated resort development located along the pristine beaches of New Providence in The Bahamas, opened its first phase in April. The first-phase opening includes the preview of the 1,800-room Grand Hyatt Baha Mar; Baha Mar Casino; Royal Blue Golf Club; The Baha Mar Convention, Art and Entertainment Center; Peter Burwash International tennis courts and facilities; multiple restaurants, bars and lounges; select ESPA spa experiences; the resort’s extensive pool and beach areas; and the entry show lakes and fountain shows choreographed to music, film and lights.

Grand Hyatt Baha Mar manages The Baha Mar Convention, Art and Entertainment Center, the destination’s 200,000-sf indoor and outdoor convention facility, and connects directly to Baha Mar Casino, the largest casino in the Caribbean. Baha Mar’s phase-one unveiling is followed by phase two with the debut of SLS Baha Mar in fall 2017, and the final phase will introduce the enhanced and expanded Rosewood Baha Mar in spring 2018.

Atlantis Paradise Island Bahamas is a destination oceanside resort with 2,317 guest rooms in five lodging options, more than 500,000 sf of indoor/outdoor meeting space, Aquaven-

“The island (St. Maarten) is truly an ecotourism and gastronomical experience you’re not likely to forget or find elsewhere.”

Susan M. Robertson, Principal
Docherty Incentives & Meetings
Minneapolis, MN

ture — a 141-acre water park — open-air marine mammal habitat, spa, golf course, casino, 40 restaurants and more. New at Atlantis is an app giving attendees access to mobile check-in, itinerary management, a direct link to guest services and more. Three new restaurants also opened, including 77° West, specializing in Bahamian-influenced South American cuisine, and there are multiple new dolphin experiences. In more news, after a \$20 million transformation, the Coral Towers will reemerge July 16, 2017 as The Coral at Atlantis with all new guest rooms, lobby, F&B concept and adults-only pool. Centrally located on the property, The Corals will connect to the Atlantis Conference Center, casino and Marina Village.

For groups, Atlantis recently introduced the new Junkanoo Bahamian Fest & Feast teambuilding program designed to immerse participants in the Bahamian culture. Junkanoo is a major cultural festival of the Bahamas, celebrating life and freedom with a street parade of music, dancing and festive costumes. Teams design their own costumes and compete in a dance competition during the Rush Out. The experience includes:

- Dinner featuring Bahamian cuisine.
- A Junkanoo history session with Principal of Bahamian Educulture Arlene Nash Ferguson.
- Junkanoo dance lesson.
- Costume creation.
- A traditional Junkanoo Rush Out: The Junkanoo Rush is when the rhythm of the music builds into what can be described as an intoxicating beat that inspires spectators to participate in the parade.

Dominican Republic

A glorious mix of dense jungle and sweeping beaches, the Dominican Republic has multiple resort areas — La Romana, Bavaro, Samaná Peninsula, Punta Cana —and remote adventure options, including stunning Parque Nacional del Este.

Dozens of resorts line Punta Cana’s beaches. There’s golf and water sports galore, excellent dining and nightlife. Kip Lambert, chief culture officer for Destinations Inc., chose Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana for a February incentive trip of 1,600 from a U.S.-based network-marketing company.

The Dominican Republic “perfectly met the criteria for this group in four important ways,” Lambert says: “Inexpensive airlift from across North America; an exotic factor that piqued the interest of attendees and helped them strive to meet the incentive’s goals; the all-inclusive option, including a resort credit attendees used for deeply discounted tours, spa and golf; and high-adventure activities for a young demographic.”

He calls the resort perfect for large groups and says the staff “can handle whatever you throw at them.”

The events team stood out. “It’s the best of any team we’ve worked with in the Hard Rock chain or the Dominican Republic,” Lambert says. “Fred Boutouba, general manager, is incredible. He greeted each coach upon arrival and gave instructions about the check-in process. Additionally, the resort gave us, the planners, extra surprise performers for our arrival/check-in experience — stilt-walkers with LED light suits, a roller-skating dancer who roamed the lobby engaging guests, a rock band playing outside the group lobby and beautiful décor to really dress up the group lobby, all at no extra cost.”

With such a large property, Lambert says, there could be issues with assigned rooms far from meeting space, but there weren’t. “The solution is a continuous shuttle system around the property that rarely seemed overburdened. I don’t recall any complaints about this from our attendees and their guests.”

Outside the resort, Lambert held an exclusive dinner for the very top performers at one of Cap Cana’s beaches. “We’ve done this exclusive event for years,” he says. “This location scored 99 percent satisfaction and 4.5 stars in a post-event survey.”

Lambert’s advice to planners is to purchase the Dominican Republic entrance visa in advance to be included in final travel documentation. “These can be preprinted or saved as a PDF and sent out electronically. At bare minimum, let your attendees know about the visa so that they can skip the potentially long lines at the Punta Cana Airport.”

He also recommends a site visit. “Fred Boutouba and his staff

will roll out the red carpet and make your visit very productive and expedited so you can make quick selections and have time to enjoy the resort.”

Puerto Rico

A U.S. territory since 1898, Puerto Rico offers rich culture, evocative history and no passports for U. S. citizens. Among its natural treasures is exquisite El Yunque National Forest.

Last April, NatureServe Inc., a Virginia-based organization providing data, tools and services related to wildlife conservation, met at the Sheraton Puerto Rico Hotel & Casino for a Biodiversity Without Boundaries conference. Don Kent, Ph.D., says the hotel offers “a convenient location and great facilities,” and standouts at the resort include “the staff, meeting rooms, food and VIP breakfast patio.”

Additionally, he says, “Meeting rooms are clustered on the second floor, easily accessible via elevators from the guest rooms or escalator from the lobby. Planners should be aware that there is a casino,” he adds, “but it was not a distraction for us.”

Kent notes, “Puerto Rico is a relatively easy travel location for U.S. attendees, both in flights and permissions. The island is also blessed with natural beauty and served us well for field trips. Many of our attendees extended their stays to snorkel and see the sights.”

About a dozen field trips were included within the conference, arranged in conjunction with partner, Para La Naturaleza.

Thanks to the resort’s great staff, Kent says there were no challenges organizing the conference, but he offers one suggestion for planners: “I recommend starting with Meet Puerto Rico to gain inside knowledge, assistance and discounts.”

In Puerto Rico news, Sheraton Old San Juan Hotel in Puerto Rico has completed a multimillion-dollar renovation to its 240 guest rooms, public spaces, meeting and pre-function spaces, and added a lobby café/evening tapas lounge.

El San Juan Hotel & Casino is undergoing a \$60 million phased renovation to restore the glamour for which the property was once known. Updates to the common areas (lobby and restaurants) and all of the guest rooms have been completed. Upgrades to the spa and entertainment venue, Tropicoro, will be finished by the end of the year.

A 6,000-seat concert and entertainment venue, slated to open in 2019, will anchor District Live!, a hospitality/entertainment area by the Puerto Rico Convention Center, which will include a 170-room luxury hotel with 6,000 sf of meeting space.

St. Martin/St. Maarten

Just 37 square miles, this island has two distinct cultures, governments and spellings. St. Martin, on the north, is French, while St. Maarten is Dutch.

The Westin Dawn Beach Resort & Spa is on the Dutch side, and was ideal for an East Coast-based building supply company’s customer appreciation trip in February. “While it was not the least expensive suggestion we provided,” says Susan M. Robertson of Docherty Incentives & Meetings, “the location, coupled with the quality of the room product, food, beverage

and service fit what the client was looking for to achieve his goals of rewarding his top customers.”

Dual cultures enhance the island. “You have two cultures and countries that come together as one,” Robertson says. “The tax-free shopping on the Dutch side is a bonus for shopping enthusiasts. The small town of Grand Case on the French side, with its multiple excellent restaurants, is considered the ‘gourmet capital of the Caribbean.’”

Other worthy sites she recommends include “Sunset Beach Bar & Grill, where you can literally feel the jet propulsion as aircraft come and go alongside this beach and bar, and The Lote-rie Farm, a secret hideaway nestled in the hillside of Pic Paradis where you can wine, dine, climb, hike and glide over the treetop canopy. The island,” she says, “is truly an ecotourism and gastronomical experience you’re not likely to forget or find elsewhere.”

Booking a program in high season yields positives, including good airlift with non-stops from multiple cities. There’s also Carnival Night on Tuesdays in Grand Case from mid-January to mid-March, where visitors and residents gather to experience what Robertson calls “amazing culture, live music, local crafts, art and gastronomy that combines French cuisine and flavors of the Caribbean.”

At the Westin, Robertson says, “The No. 1 thing that impressed me is the staff, starting at the top. GM Daniel Beddor is very hands-on. He was present everywhere, every day, and took the time to speak with as many guests as possible to ensure all needs were met or exceeded. He was in the restaurant at breakfast, in the gift shop, in the lobby, at our events. This also flows through the staff, from my conference services co-





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Kip Lambert, Chief Culture Officer/Brand Ambassador
Destinations Inc.
South Jordan, UT

ordinator to my banquet staff, banquet captain, to the restaurant manager and staff, to the front desk. All truly cared and were in the know of what activities my client planned or what attendees were doing off and on property. I can’t tell you how many resorts I’ve had programs in where we never see, let alone meet, the general manager. The dedication of this staff shows and is appreciated.”

The group held two events outside. “They were spectacular,” Robertson says. “The food was delicious and our AV needs were easily met.”

As with any program, she says, there were some challenges; however, “The Westin did everything within its power to appease me and/or find solutions. I would not hesitate to put another group in this hotel. They do an outstanding job.”

In October 2016, Liza Passantino Maguire, V.P. with CIMAX Inc., brought a sales incentive group from New Jersey-based Sparta Systems to The Westin. “Our clients look for a destination with not just the usual sunshine and activities, but where there are also great accommodations and exceptional service,” she says. “We also look to balance value against the ultimate product, and the island and hotel met those parameters, then exceeded them onsite.”

Like Robertson, Maguire points to the GM. “I can honestly say that, after over 26 years planning, the GM at this hotel was a big reason we booked it. And he was there every day of the program, carrying through on every promise and more. He’s exactly the type of GM we wish were at every client event. Additionally, Paola Morales, CSM, was also right there making sure our every need was attended to.”

Maguire recommends contacting Westin’s in-house DMC, calling them “fabulous to work with.” She believes working with an experienced DMC is “key to having your visions realized. We had gorgeous evening events created per our specifications, with not one stone unturned regarding service.”

She also notes, “There are very different vibes in different parts of this island, and as planners we know what our clients are looking for. I would make sure to do a full site visit and take into account staying at the exclusive Westin, but planning for excursions to different parts of the island.”

Among the excursions she recommends is a dine-around in Grand Case. She also says planners should be aware that the hotel is on the Atlantic. “The beach and waters were not rough since it’s in a cove area,” she says, “but keep that in mind when planning watersports. Take the group off-property to enjoy a day elsewhere if that is an important factor.”

Timing also makes a difference. “Flights in October were probably the only challenge we faced,” Maguire says. “There are limited non-stops at that time of year. Otherwise, the destination has everything you could want.”

U.S. Virgin Islands

These three islands are remarkably different, but each offers striking natural beauty plus resorts and facilities able to accommodate all kinds of groups.

St. Croix, one of the few islands completely surrounded by the Caribbean, is home to The Buccaneer, family owned and upscale. It was on the short list for a spring 2017 incentive program for a global technology company, HelmsBriscoe’s Nicholas says. “St. Croix is a good fit for this group due to easy access from major U.S. airports, short distance from the U.S. mainland, no passports required and lots of water activities. It’s the best of both worlds,” she adds. “It has a wonderful tourism infrastructure to meet the demands of the most discerning world traveler and pristine beaches and resorts offering serenity and tranquility.”

The Buccaneer works on all levels. “It offers onsite dining options and recreational activities (including golf), fabulous water views, comfortable accommodations and the ability to board a catamaran cruise directly from the resort beach with no need for ground transfers,” Nicholas says. “What is especially meaningful to our stakeholders is that The Buccaneer ranks high on TripAdvisor with excellent reviews.”

Ample function space is a necessity. “With several outside reception locations available, I can move my group from one night’s welcome reception location to another location for the closing night,” Nicholas says. “They’ll have two completely different outdoor dining experiences and I never have to leave the property to accomplish that.”

It’s a must to explore the island, however. “Be sure you take advantage of the water sports and activities,” Nicholas says. “St. Croix is all about the beautiful Caribbean waters. An absolute must is uninhabited Buck Island, offering world-class snorkeling and diving an hour’s cruise from The Buccaneer. Several cruise options are available and can be coordinated directly with the property.”

One caveat for planners: St. Croix’s scenic roads. “Although road quality is very good, St. Croix still has that ‘country road’ feel,” Nicholas notes. “Winding roads can be slow. When you ask for distances, say from town or the airport, be sure to ask in miles and time.”

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Destination

Las Vegas

By
Derek
Reveron

What's New for Meetings in the City That Never Sleeps

Las Vegas answers the challenge for groups that return to the same destination time and again but want the experience to be new and different each time.

Properties continually expand, renovate and add more meeting space, dining experiences, attractions, unique venues, upscale shopping sites, entertainment and technology. Las Vegas offers more than 150,000 hotel rooms and more than 11 million sf of meeting and exhibit space with more under development. And Las Vegas continues to develop more non-gaming activities for family-friendly meetings.

It's no wonder that, for the 23rd consecutive year, *Trade Show News Network* named Las Vegas the No. 1 trade show destination in the U.S. In addition, according to the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority's (LVCVA) 2016 Visitor Profile Study, 27 percent of visitors were in Las Vegas for the first time, compared to 11 percent in 2015.



The Las Vegas Strip.



Credit: Las Vegas News Bureau

The Vegas Uncork'd Grand Tasting event at Caesars Palace.

Caesars Delivers

Las Vegas' expertise in hosting meeting and convention groups means more groups are repeat visitors. For example, Bloomington, Indiana-based Solution Tree, an educational service provider, has held its 1,800-person, 2½-day educational conference at Caesars Palace every year since 2006. The company has signed through 2020, and plans to sign in 2021, says Renee Marshall, CMP, director of events, Solution Tree.

Caesars' history and familiarity with the group pays dividends. "Our value is tremendous," says Marshall. "Since we have a long history with Caesars, they give us amazing concessions that help our bottom line. We love everyone we work with from the sales team to the onsite contacts who execute the event."

Caesars was an ideal property for several reasons. "It met our needs because of the location on The Strip, the restaurants in the hotel and the attached mall," says Marshall. "It has flexible space to allow breakouts to be larger or smaller, and has a large room for general sessions. We don't do a lot of entertainment and activities as we are strictly a content-based event. We sometimes do a small dinner with our presenters in the hotel, but nothing for our attendees."

Planners like it when a property offers concessions without requesting them. That's what Caesars did. "We increased our room pickup and food and beverage commitment due to our high registrations," says Marshall. "Our sales manager could have just increased the room and F&B commitment, but instead of doing only that she also gave us additional concessions because our registrations were higher than expected. The concessions saved us thousands of dollars."

Caesars Palace is one of several Caesars Entertainment properties, and a new addition is coming soon. Caesars' CEO Mark Frissora recently told Bloomberg TV that, after the company emerges from bankruptcy later this year, he wants to develop 90 acres of land it owns in front of Caesars Palace.

Caesars also is adding newly renovated suites to its most exclusive collection of luxury accommodations at its Las Vegas resorts. By year-end, Caesars will have renovated more than 800 suites, increasing guest options from multiroom suites to elite two-story duplexes and grand villas that en-

compass more than 11,000 sf. More than 2,000 suites and villas are available for viewing online as part of Caesars Suites (www.CaesarsSuites.com).

Renovations include suites such as the Julius Tower and Augustus Tower at Caesars Palace; 231 newly restyled suites at Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino; and 11 newly renovated mini-villas at Caesars Palace available for booking in August 2017. The renovations come after an upgrade in 2016 of 4,800 total rooms at Caesars Palace, Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino, Paris Las Vegas and Harrah's Las Vegas.

Small Meetings No Small Matter

Las Vegas once had a reputation for not totally embracing small meetings. Not anymore. Small-meeting groups continue to flock to Las Vegas.

One company that recently held a three-day "boot camp" training for employees at the Luxor Las Vegas chose Caesars properties "because of their reputation, location and service," says the meeting's planner. "This year, we chose Luxor since it provided a great location and an onsite sales team that highlighted a brand new meeting space with a stellar onsite con-



"Since we have a long history with Caesars, they give us amazing concessions that help our bottom line."

Renee Marshall, CMP
Director of Events, Solution Tree
Bloomington, IN

vention and AV team. We were one of the first groups to hold a meeting in this newly built meeting space. The space was perfect for our size group," the planner continues. "We utilized the conference space, meeting space and hotel accommodations; having everything conveniently in one place helped us make the best use of everyone's time."

The group used two adjacent meeting rooms at the hotel, one for the general session and one for a one-on-one and vendor networking event where employees conducted individual 15-minute appointments with specific, preferred partners of their choice.

For entertainment, the group held a "Welcome to Boot Camp" reception in the Velvet Room. "It was a great opportunity for everyone to network, share experiences and get geared up and ready for the Boot Camp ahead," says the planner. "The atmosphere was perfect and everyone had a wonderful time."

Some planners complain that Las Vegas is pricey, especially for small groups. But "the value was great," says the planner. "The Luxor Las Vegas offers a reasonably priced destination that is easily accessible for people in many markets. The low group room rate and the meeting space fit our needs perfectly."



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“Whenever I am onsite at the Red Rock, I feel like I am their only client. Their staff truly is an extension of the event staff onsite.”

Lisa Jeans, Project Manager
CliftonLarsonAllen LLP, Minneapolis, MN



Off The Strip

A constant challenge for planners is keeping groups focused and in attendance at meetings in the city that never sleeps.

“Vegas is high energy,” says Mike May, president and corporate meeting planner for Spear One, a meetings, incentives and event planning firm. “It’s popular for driving attendance and audience anticipation, especially for customer events, user groups, product launches, sales kickoffs, private trade shows and training conferences. But attendees might skip part of the meeting and hit the casino floor. Or, they’re bleary-eyed, exhausted and struggle to be fully mentally engaged.”

That’s why some groups elect to meet off The Strip. “Groups looking to combine networking, relationship-building and educational content might enjoy an off-Strip resort in the Henderson area and have access to The Strip, without having attendees lose focus,” says May.

One choice for groups desiring to be near but off The Strip is Red Rock Resort & Casino, which recently hosted a 2½-day meeting for 350 clients of CliftonLarsonAllen LLP, a Minneapolis-based professional services firm.

“I love the location of the Red Rock,” says Lisa Jeans, project manager, executive team, CliftonLarsonAllen. “It is a 20-minute drive from the airport, and it offers all of the amenities of properties on The Strip, but on a smaller scale and much more private. Whenever I walk into the Red Rock, it feels like they have undergone a renovation. I feel that way because everything always looks new. I think that is very rare to find in a property.”

MGM Resorts International

MGM Resorts International boasts a plethora of properties on The Strip, including MGM Grand Hotel & Casino, Bellagio, Aria Resort & Casino, Delano Las Vegas, The Mirage Hotel & Casino, Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino, Luxor Hotel & Casino, Circus Circus Las Vegas, Excalibur Hotel & Casino, New York New York Hotel & Casino, Vdara Hotel & Spa and Monte Carlo Resort and Casino.

The size, grandeur and service of MGM properties attract groups of all types and sizes. Mandalay Bay, for example, is hosting more and larger conventions and trade shows due to the \$70 million expansion last year of the Mandalay Bay Convention Center. The facility added 350,000 sf of meeting, ballroom and exhibit space, bringing the total to 2.1 million sf. The improvements helped Mandalay Bay recently sign Microsoft to a multiyear contract to hold its annual event of 30,000 technology professionals at Mandalay Bay and several other MGM properties.

The all-suite luxury Delano Las Vegas, one of three distinct hotel experiences at Mandalay Bay, offers 20,000 sf of indoor meeting space encompassing 31 meeting rooms. Dining and eating spaces include the South Beach-inspired Delano Beach Club, which offers group buyouts for receptions. Guests can network at Delano’s Sage Living room with its overstuffed couches, back-support chairs, coffee tables and end tables. Groups can use the room’s two 52-inch, flat-screen TVs for presentations in a relaxed setting.

Another MGM property Aria Resort & Casino is undergoing a \$154 million expansion of its convention center that will add 200,000 sf of meeting space with state-of-the-art technology. The project includes indoor and outdoor spaces, and a glass-enclosed venue with panoramic views of the new T-Mobile Arena and The Park. Overall, the project will add 500,000 sf of meeting and event space upon completion in February 2018.

Aria and Vdara both recently added cutting-edge digital tablets to all guest suites. The tablets allow guests to order an array of services including in-suite dining, spa services, show tickets and the latest information about hotel activities. Aria also added check-in via mobile phones.



A CliftonLarsonAllen client group enjoyed a welcome reception at the Crimson Lounge at Red Rock Resort & Casino. The lounge extends to an outdoor space.

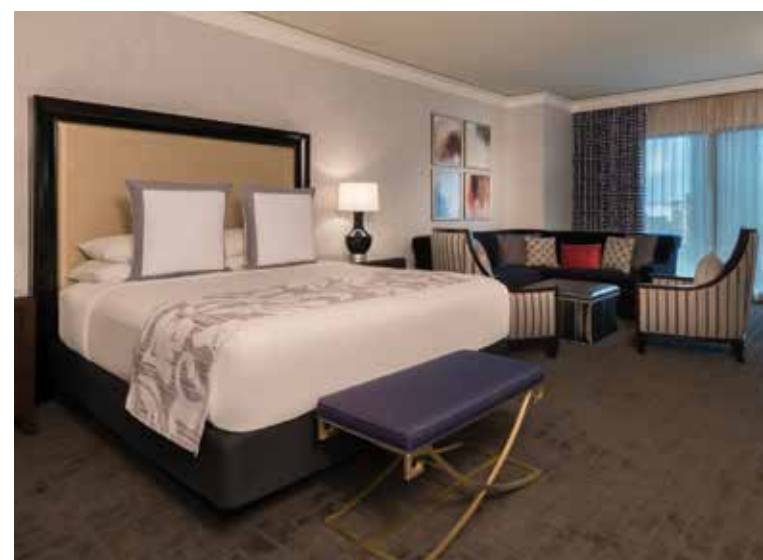
The Red Rock was perfect for a variety of activities and amenities. “A welcome reception was held in the Crimson Lounge, which is located off the casino floor,” says Jeans. “This is an excellent venue for a reception, as it allows for an indoor/outdoor reception. It has cabanas outside around the pool, which have individual heaters, if needed. They put together an awesome lighting package for us, including our logo, which just added to the ambience.”



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Credit: Wynn Las Vegas

This three-bedroom apartment at Encore Las Vegas boasts a spectacular view of The Strip and sister property Wynn Las Vegas.

In addition, a dinner was held in a portion of the Red Rock Ballroom. "This was not a themed dinner, as our goal was to encourage networking," says Jeans. "We had food stations and multiple bars throughout the ballroom, and I hired a crooner from the Las Vegas area to provide some evening entertainment."

Jeans raves about the service, especially from the convention services manager. "Whenever I am onsite at the Red Rock, I feel like I am their only client," says Jeans. "Their staff truly is an extension of the event staff onsite. My CSM and her staff did an incredible job with the food stations, which allowed for the greatest flow in the space. We received rave reviews from the attendees. We have held events at the Red Rock in the past and will do so again in the future."

Wynn Resorts

Properties with a world-wide reputation for luxury include Wynn Resorts, which has received more Forbes Five Star Awards than any other independent hotel company in the world. The luxurious and spacious Wynn Las Vegas and Encore Las Vegas offer a combined 290,000 sf of function space and 4,750 guest rooms.

According to Wynn Resorts CEO Steve Wynn in a late April earnings call, the Wynn board of directors has approved phase-one construction of the new Wynn Paradise Park that will begin in December 2017 or January 2018. The master-planned park will replace the Wynn Golf Club with a 1,000-2,000-room hotel tower and 260,000 sf of beachfront meeting and ballroom space overlooking a 20-acre lagoon — offering water sports activities — and a white sand beach and 4,000-

foot boardwalk. Cabanas, attractions and food service also are planned. The phased \$1.5 billion project is slated for a 2019 completion.

In addition, Wynn is expanding its distinctive luxury shopping experiences with the construction of Wynn Plaza, a 75,000-sf retail Strip-front expansion scheduled for completion in the first quarter of 2018. The Wynn Las Vegas and Encore Las Vegas already offer the 7,000-sf Wynn Collection boutique and the 99,000-sf Wynn Esplanade. And Wynn reopened Parasol Up after its renovation last year that included a new design, updated technology and new bar menu.

Guests sometimes use Wynn's plentiful space for interactive and teambuilding activities, including a program of workshops that Wynn Las Vegas introduced recently. The workshops are led by Wynn experts including master chefs, mixologists, DJs and sommeliers.

Experiential Events

The Wynn's offerings are examples of how Las Vegas continues to offer new activities to provide fresh experiences for groups that return again and again. But some groups prefer the same activities, according to Elizabeth Hansen, national sales manager, AlliedPRA Las Vegas.

"One thing to keep in mind is that sometimes it is OK to offer an activity again, especially if it was very popular and not every guest was able to participate," says Hansen. "One easy way to reinvent Las Vegas for repeat visiting groups is to try and chose a theme that we can embrace in décor, entertainment, activities and events."

Hansen offers an example. "One group, for example, was an incentive trip that came to Las Vegas for several years in

a row and hosted a poker tournament each time," says Hansen. "In order to make it feel exciting and new we changed the theme to it each time — Vintage Vegas one time and James Bond the next time, with entertainers on hand to help set the scene."

The millennial generation has impacted the ways in which Las Vegas is reinventing itself. "Las Vegas has embraced the

experiential state of mind that millennials have pushed forward but other attendees are really on board with at their events," says Hansen. "This means that the typical four-walled nightclub or restaurant with a pretty view just isn't enough anymore."

Hansen says that participants want events that encourage interaction among attendees and with the venue. "You no longer have to bring in those activities to a lot of the venues here in Vegas now because they are already there," says Han-



Credit: Tropicana Las Vegas

sen. "Venues like Brooklyn Bowl, Topgolf, Gold Spike Downtown, and the Beer Park have made a huge impact on the city."

More Changes Afoot

Other venues throughout Las Vegas are offering more of everything.

A stand-alone option is Meet Las Vegas on South 4th Street, a high-tech venue with three floors of event and meeting space where groups can take over one floor or all. Because each floor is truly a blank space, the possibilities for creating a one-of-a-kind event are limitless. The first floor of-

fers a total of 5,427 sf, the second 5,131 sf and the third 2,775 sf. In addition, an outdoor pavilion provides an additional 8,412 sf. Sales, event and catering teams can assist with every phase of planning and designing.

Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Las Vegas has completed phase one of its \$13 million Casino Tower remodeling, which included renovation of 640 guest rooms and suites. In addition, The Hard Rock added about 18,000 sf of meeting and convention space, and the 28,000-sf Artist Ballroom was remodeled. MB Steak debuted earlier this year at the Hard Rock, following the opening of Oyster Bar, a full-service bar and restaurant offering seafood.

After a recent expansion, Tropicana Las Vegas' all-new conference facility is divisible into as many as 38 breakout rooms and includes a 25,000-sf ballroom, the 55,000-sf Trinidad Pavilion — suitable for large general sessions and exhibits accommodating up to 4,800 attendees — and elaborate venues such as the Havana Room and Sky Beach Club. The newly transformed Tropicana Theater is a modern-yet-classic venue featuring a magnificent crystal chandelier, custom banquette seating areas, dark wood flooring and premium audio-visual technology. Overall, Tropicana Las Vegas offers more than 100,000 sf of flexible meeting and exhibition space in a convenient location on The Strip just minutes from the airport, major convention centers and top entertainment stadiums.



Credit: Meet Las Vegas

The first floor lounge at Meet Las Vegas, a three-floor, high-tech venue.

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People mill about Toshiba Plaza during the April grand opening of MGM Resorts International's T-Mobile Arena, a 20,000-seat sports and entertainment venue.

The 3,500-room Flamingo Las Vegas will commence a \$90 million renovation of 1,270 rooms in August 2017 and complete the project in the second quarter of 2018. The renovated rooms will keep the property's signature pink theme and feature retro-chic designs reflecting the hotel's history as a mainstay of the Las Vegas Strip. New room designs feature hues of gold and flamingo pink, reflecting the Flamingo's flamboyance.

MGM Grand recently broke ground on a 250,000-sf expansion of its conference center that will connect to the existing 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.

The 1,003-room Plaza Hotel & Casino, which has the largest ballroom in downtown Las Vegas at 19,000 sf, is currently conducting a multimillion-dollar renovation to the 30,000 sf of ballroom and convention space on its third floor. This renovation, to be completed this summer, will include numerous upgrades including partitioning, lighting, projection capabilities, a new portable stage and more. The Plaza also plans to expand its convention space with 12,000 sf of additional breakout rooms and a new business center to open fall 2017. Also recently opened was the Plaza Event Center, a 5,000-sf special event space with two stages, 18 large screen HD televisions, two projectors and a modern sound system. The Plaza Event Center accommodates 200 people in a range of seating options, and hosts live entertainment crowds of up to 300 people. The space is available for private-party buyouts.

The Westin Lake Las Vegas Resort & Spa is undergoing a multimillion-dollar renovation that includes all 493 guest rooms and is expected to be completed by fall. Meeting space is plentiful with 100,000 sf of indoor and outdoor space, including a 20,000-sf ballroom and 30 flexible spaces. Other meeting areas include gardens, poolside decks and lakeside beaches. In addition, The Westin provides access to three golf courses including the 18-hole Reflection Bay golf course designed by Jack Nicklaus.

Guests at The Venetian Resort Hotel Casino, The Palazzo and Sands Expo can network in small groups, get online and relax in a 1,170-sf pop-up lounge. The lounge, created in conjunction with Zappos and staffed by its team members, is located on The Venetian's second level and includes

a six-seat conference room. The Venetian also launched its Facebook Messenger direct booking channel, allowing guests to book directly through social messaging.

The planned Las Vegas Convention Center 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



"Las Vegas has embraced the experiential state of mind that millennials have pushed forward but other attendees are really on board with at their events."

Elizabeth Hansen
National Sales Manager, AlliedPRA Las Vegas

approach allows for continued use of the facilities without disruption during the construction. Upon completion, the LVCC will have 2 million sf of exhibition space, more than any facility except Chicago's McCormick Place. The project also includes a major technology upgrade over the next six years that allows companies to illustrate their brands throughout the LVCC. Maps, schedules and information will be added to digital service kiosks

Being the nation's No. 1 destination isn't enough for Las Vegas as it relentlessly strives to boost its advantages over competitors. Part of the effort is continuing the transition from the gaming capital of the U.S. to a well-rounded entertainment capital to ensure an even more eclectic menu of options for planners and their groups.

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On The Move



WILSON



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COLLINS



TALMAGE

The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe in Truckee, California, has named **Marian Wilson** as director of sales and marketing. She formerly served as director of sales at Horseshoe Bay Resort in Austin, Texas.

Lee County (Florida) Visitor & Convention Bureau welcomed **Jill Vance** as its new director of sales. Most recently she worked as group sales manager at Westin Cape Coral Resort at Marina Village in Cape Coral, Florida.

Kathryn Morgan has joined Visit Tampa Bay as regional account director

responsible for the mid-Atlantic region. She most recently was the Washington, DC-based representative for Visit Indy, the tourism marketing organization for Indianapolis, Indiana.

Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa in Rancho Santa Fe, California, has promoted **Mark Philips** to director of sales and catering. He most recently served as director of leisure sales at Rancho Valencia.

Ronnie Collins has joined Visit Phoenix's convention sales team as direc-

tor of sales. He most recently served as director of sales and marketing for the newly opened Hilton Cleveland Downtown in Ohio.

Randi Talmage was named sales manager for the JW Marriott Grand Rapids in Grand Rapids, Michigan, part of the AHC+Hospitality portfolio of hotels. She previously was director of convention services for the hotel. She will also lend sales support to the Amway Grand Plaza and the Downtown Courtyard by Marriott in Grand Rapids in the regional market. *C&IT*

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