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THE MAGAZINE FOR GLOBAL MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

## Going Above and Beyond

CVBs Take  
Hospitality  
to the Next Level  
PAGE 18

## Navigating Risk in a World Full of Fear

Comprehensive Crisis Management  
Plans Are Needed Now More Than Ever  
PAGE 24

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**Orlando Meeting  
& Incentive  
Planner Guide**

See Special Pull-out Insert Inside

An attendee at Cisco Live 2018, the company's largest customer event and annual trade show, held in Orlando, takes her picture in front of a huge branded display.





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Credit: Atlantis, Paradise Island

Atlantis, Paradise Island, the largest meeting resort in The Bahamas, entices planners with luxuries like beach-entry pools. **PAGE 46**



Credit: Hutchinson Island Marriott Beach Resort & Marina

Florida's Hutchinson Island Marriott Beach Resort & Marina, just north of West Palm Beach, is a top meeting venue for business travelers. **PAGE 52**



Credit: Sam Morris / Las Vegas News Bureau

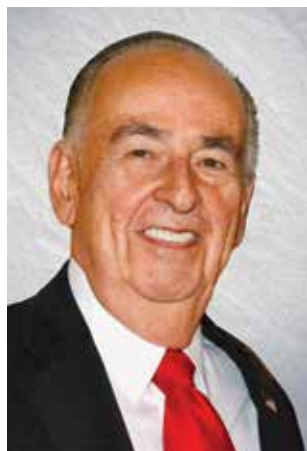
The glamour of The Strip is no longer the only draw for planners to bring meetings and events to Las Vegas. **PAGE 58**



# Publisher's Message

## Get Help From the CVB

When you're planning a meeting or event, the destination might be the biggest factor in your decision. After all, you want your attendees to get the most they can out of the experience. In "Going Above and Beyond" (Page 18), you'll find a good partner-in-planning with the destination CVB, who knows everything there is to know about the destination and can help with securing accommodations, assist with finding suitable entertainment and even promote your event. All across the country, you'll find CVBs ready to help.



For example, Visit Pittsburgh just assisted with this month's PCMA 2019 Convening Leaders. The event took place in three venues: the David L. Lawrence Convention Center for its opening reception and main program, Heinz Field for its closing reception and Stage AE for Party with a Purpose. Visit Pittsburgh's destination services representative helped connect the event planner to local vendors, as well as entertainment sources, for the event and provided keynote speaker suggestions.

Kudos to Craig Davis, president and CEO of Visit Pittsburgh, and his professional team for providing PCMA the assistance to accomplish such a major successful event.

"Client service from CVBs ... that go above and beyond logistics, instead truly immersing themselves into client cultures, helps planners take their events to the next level," says Samantha Vogel, CMP, senior manager, meetings & travel of GameStop in Grapevine, Texas.

In this issue, our pull-out Orlando Meeting & Incentive Planner Guide offers a wealth of the latest information about the most popular Florida destination that is at the top for attracting meetings and events. This 32-page guide features information about meeting hotels and resorts, convention facilities, theme parks, dining and entertainment. "Visit Orlando is one of the biggest reasons why Orlando is so successful as a meeting destination," says Dieter Burgoa, general manager of PRA Orlando.

Harvey Grotsky  
Publisher

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## Circa Resort & Casino to Debut in Las Vegas in 2020



LAS VEGAS – Developers and brothers Derek and Greg Stevens have unveiled plans for Circa Resort & Casino, a brand-new integrated gaming resort in downtown Las Vegas set to open in late 2020. A welcome addition to the iconic Fremont Street Experience, Circa will be the first ground-up resort development in the area since 1980.

“At Circa, our goal is to create a destination resort in a historic part of the city, while showing guests the time of their lives,” says Derek Stevens. “We plan to double down on the world-class service Las Vegas has always been known for while bringing personalized experiences to a new level.”

Over the past decade, the duo’s investments have played a role in reshaping downtown Vegas, attracting new waves of visitors and locals while leading the turnaround success story of “vintage Vegas,” paying homage to the city’s vibrant history. [www.circalasvegas.com](http://www.circalasvegas.com)

## Caesars Entertainment and ImpactNV Launch Fund to Support Victims of Human Trafficking

RENO, NV — Caesars Entertainment, announced the creation of The Shared Future Fund, an innovative investment model used to create long-term positive change for adult and child victims of human trafficking. The fund will be controlled



BLACKHURST

and managed by ImpactNV, a nonprofit in Southern Nevada dedicated to mobilizing cross-sector leadership to address pressing social needs and building a better community.

The fund will be initially resourced by in-kind donations, financial support from Caesars Entertainment and an inaugural fundraising event this spring. Jan Jones Blackhurst, executive vice president of Public Policy and Corporate Responsibility at Caesars Entertainment, says, “As the first social impact fund for Nevada, we hope that our new venture can be a model for companies and communities collaborating to end systematic inequity.” [www.caesars.com](http://www.caesars.com)

## Associated Luxury Hotels International Expands Its Portfolio

BOSTON — Associated Luxury Hotels International (ALHI), which serves as the global sales force for an elite collection of luxury independent hotels, has increased its domestic portfolio with the addition of seven new hotels.

“These new additions enhance ALHI’s curated luxury portfolio of meeting, convention and incentive hotels and resorts, and offer unique and authentic options to our clients,” says Mark Sergot, chief sales officer, ALHI.

Halcyon, a hotel in Cherry Creek–Denver, is a 154-room property featuring 6,500 square feet of elegantly appointed indoor/outdoor meeting and event areas.

The Maven Hotel at Dairy Block – Denver, is a uniquely crafted downtown hotel with 172 rooms and suites, and features 12,100 square feet of flexible meeting and event space.

The Crawford Hotel – Denver Union Station is downtown Denver’s most iconic hotel, with 112 rooms and 7,800 square feet of flexible meeting space.

The 80-room Oxford Hotel–Denver features 9,125 square feet of meeting and event space that can accommodate up to 250 guests.

The AAA Four Diamond Hotel Alessandra – Houston is a 223-room property featuring 9,930 square feet of flexible meeting and event space.

The 4,000-acre Omni Barton Creek Resort & Spa – Austin offers 493 guest rooms and 60,027 square feet of meeting and event space. A \$150 million renovation is currently in the works.

The Kimpton Hotel Palomar Phoenix features 242 spacious guest rooms and suites plus 10,000 square feet of function space. [www.alhi.com](http://www.alhi.com)



SERGOT

## The Post Oak Hotel at Uptown Houston Opens The Spa

HOUSTON — The Post Oak Hotel at Uptown Houston recently opened The Spa, a 20,000-square-foot urban oasis offering unique treatment rooms, including a couples suite with an en-suite bathtub and shower; tranquility pools with body-contouring hot stoned daybeds; aromatherapy-infused steam rooms; detoxifying high temperature, low-humidity saunas; multi-sensory thermal showers; state-of-the-art Technogym fitness center; and quiet lounges with zero-gravity chairs.

“Houston deserves a unique, first-class spa, and I was inspired to bring one to my Post Oak hotel,” said owner Tilman Fertitta. “We offer only top-of-the-line products and services that you won’t find anywhere else in the country.”

The Spa indulges guests with an unparalleled wellness menu featuring exclusive products, rituals, massages, aromatic oils, body and facial treatments, body scrubs and the latest innovations in skincare techniques.

The Post Oak Hotel is the first spa in Texas and the first AAA Five Diamond hotel in the nation to partner with Cinq Mondes, the French pioneer and expert in spa rituals and treatments cultivated from the world’s most unspoiled regions: Brazil, Japan, Polynesia, Bali, Switzerland, Morocco, India and Thailand. Each ritual is thoughtfully derived from the region’s techniques, beliefs and practices to deliver a sensorial experience that establishes well-being, radiance, relaxation, regeneration, beauty and balance for the body and mind.

Set on 10 acres, The Post Oak Hotel at Uptown Houston boasts 250 guest rooms and suites; 20 executive residences; and an elegant 35,000-square-foot conference facility, including the largest ballroom in Uptown Houston. The 5,000-square-foot, two-bedroom Presidential Suite offers private elevator access, media room, exercise room and secluded terrace. [www.thepostoak.com](http://www.thepostoak.com)

# Tips & Trends

## 2019 Meeting and Event Trends

In the ever-changing world of events, it is important for corporate meeting and event planners to constantly anticipate attendees’ needs and desires. Every year, new trends emerge, presenting both challenges and opportunities.

### Today’s employees want shorter meetings and more time with their families.

Busy career folks want to spend more time with their families, so it is important for planners to find creative ways to pack impactful activities into shorter time frames. Rather than several keynote speakers throughout a day or week-end, consider coordinating a panel with a few experts who bring different perspectives to a topic. This results in a more well-rounded discussion boiled into one block of time. Another family-friendly consideration is to start your meeting or event on a Sunday night at a fun, memorable location, allowing attendees to bring the family to enjoy a pre-conference weekend at the destination.

### Tech is still king.

From registration to agendas to networking, integrating technology into many aspects of a meeting or event is here to stay. Mobile technology, especially apps, is becoming increasingly more prevalent as attendees are preferring things to be simple, streamlined and high-tech. Putting your meeting or event directly in an app ensures attendees can register from their phones. It is also becoming more common for QR codes to be placed on name tags so attendees can connect via their phones rather than collecting physical business cards. The less attendees have to carry (and potentially lose!), the better.

As well, apps are helping keep attendees safe at meetings and events. It is becoming common for an event app to incorporate features that allow attendees to report inappropriate situations — and often offer options for safe rides for those who have been drinking or otherwise feel unsafe.

### FaceTime isn’t face-to-face time.

While logistics are becoming more digital, virtual meetings are becoming a thing of the past. The digital conference trend is waning as the model is transitioning to more onsite events that are interactive and focus on in-person team and relationship building. While virtual meetings can still be beneficial for smaller groups and international teams — and can often be a cost-effective option — research shows that they result in low engagement and retention. There’s still something really powerful about getting a group of like-minded people into the same room to participate in discussions and workshops.

### Ditch the conference room for a unique venue.

Getting out of the traditional office or conference center ballroom and into unique venues like gaming centers or theme parks is a simple way to shake things up and let your team connect in new ways.

### Shake up the structure.

You have likely heard of it: the unconference. It is not a new format, but it is quickly becoming extremely popular. There is an element of intrigue baked in, since there isn’t a full agenda for the day or weekend until attendees essentially create it. You’ll want to pre-plan one engaging topic to drive attendance, but crowdsource additional topics, facilitators and information directly from attendees ahead of and during the event. Unconferences are strictly peer-to-peer connection and instruction, which ultimately lead to attendees feeling empowered and fulfilled.

— Megan Diaz



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# News & Notes

## The Waterfront Beach Resort Unveils New Meeting and Event Spaces in Huntington Beach



HUNTINGTON BEACH, CA — The Waterfront Beach Resort, a Hilton Hotel, has completed several new meeting and event spaces across the oceanfront property to offer myriad options for various-size events.

The property boasts more than 50,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space with ocean views: Breakwater Ballroom, Whitewater Ballroom, Coastal Ballroom and Vista Lawns — all located in the recently completed nine-story, 152 suite Twin Dolphin Tower.

**Breakwater Ballroom:** This grand ballroom is the largest event space at 8,424 square feet and can accommodate up to 600 guests. It features spectacular lighting and chandeliers, the latest audio-visual technology and high-speed Wi-Fi.

**Whitewater Ballroom:** This 4,200-square-foot, flexible-space ballroom can accommodate up to 300 guests or be divided into three smaller rooms.

**Coastal Ballroom:** The 3,108-square-foot with outdoor terrace includes high-vaulted ceilings, an enclosed outdoor fireplace and water feature.

**Vista Lawns:** The two-tiered, 3,880-square-foot outdoor event space can hold up to 425 guests or can be arranged to provide privacy for two different functions. [www.waterfrontresort.com](http://www.waterfrontresort.com)

## Hutchinson Island Marriott Beach Resort Unveils New Look

STUART, FL — Hutchinson Island Marriott Beach Resort & Marina in Stuart, Florida, recently unveiled the transformation of its more than 30,000 square feet of meeting rooms, conference spaces and event venues. The resort's Plantation Ballroom can accommodate small board meetings to large-scale conferences for up to 500. High-speed Wi-Fi, custom catering and professional presentation services make planning gatherings of all types simple at the newly renovated venue.

The hotel, just north of West Palm Beach, features a private marina, gym, three pools and an 18-hole executive golf course. With 274 villa-style suites that feature full kitchens spacious rooms and step-out balconies, the resort is ideal for long-term stays. [www.marriott.com](http://www.marriott.com)

## World-Class Events Solidify Buenos Aires as a Dynamic Option for Meeting Planners

BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA — Throughout 2018, Buenos Aires hosted more than 1,280 meetings and conventions across all industries, including world-class events like the recent G20 and U20 Summits, the 2018 Youth Olympic Games and Art Basel, to name a few. With expanded air connectivity, the strong value of the U.S. dollar and a continued 21 percent VAT tax exemption on accommodations for foreign tourists and value-driven business trips, the Argentine capital is poised to continue its success as a top meeting destination in 2019.

Buenos Aires' unique atmosphere offers dining, entertainment, nightlife and a new LEED-certified state-of-the-art Exhibition & Convention Center (CEC), which put it at the forefront of innovation among the world's largest cities. Earlier this year, it was recognized as the top South American city on the IESE Cities in Motion list and ranked No. 11 on the International Congress and Convention Association's (ICCA) list of Top 20 Cities of Meetings Organized in 2017.

For meeting planners seeking a dynamic destination to host their 2019 events, the "City of Many Passions" offers flexibility in convention size and needs. The strong dollar creates added value allowing them to stretch their budgets beyond expectations, and attendees will benefit from added connectivity to the city's major airports, Ezeiza International Airport (EZE) and Aeroparque Jorge Newbery (AEP), including American Airlines first-ever, nonstop service between Los Angeles (LAX) and EZE. [www.travel.buenosaires.gob.ar](http://www.travel.buenosaires.gob.ar)

# Snapshots



Credits: (1-3) Travel South USA, (4) Pasadena Convention & Visitors Bureau, (5) Denise Truscello/Getty Images (6) XLIVE

**1-3** The 7th annual Travel South USA International Showcase held November 26-29 in Nashville, was full of networking events, music, entertainment, shopping and the best "Southern Hospitality," which was the showcase's theme. **4** Hyatt Place executives, along with the Pasadena CVB Sales and Marketing & Communications teams, attended the opening of Hyatt Place Pasadena on December 20. (From L-R:) Taylor Fry, Eva Prezenkowski, Amanda Westervelt, Jean-Ann Pavoni-Biller, Michael Ross, Bernadette Soriano, Brandon Taba, Jeanne O'Grady Goldschmidt, Christine Susa, Crystal Williams. **5** On January 10, after an appearance at the 2019 State of the City address in Las Vegas with Mayor Carolyn Goodman, developer Derek Stevens invited attendees to an afterparty at the Downtown Las Vegas Events Center, where he revealed details about the Circa Resort & Casino, slated to open in December 2020. **6** Industry members gathered at the Mandalay Bay Convention Center in Las Vegas for the XLIVE 2018 Annual Conference & Expo held December 9-12. (From L-R:) Waco Hoover, co-founder, XLIVE; Scott Blackburn, CEO, Thuzi; Rob Higgins, executive director, Tampa Bay Sports Commission; Rod Patane, president, LiveCity; Evan Korn, managing partner, iDEKO.



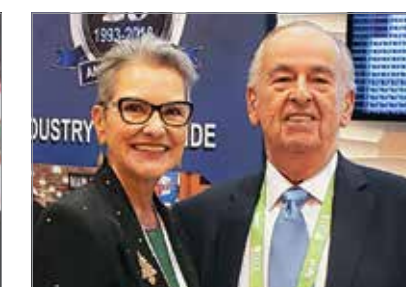
# Expo! Expo!

## IAEE's Annual Meeting & Exhibition

The International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE) held its Expo! Expo! IAEE's Annual Meeting & Exhibition in New Orleans December 11-13. This event attracted more than

2,300 attendees representing 26 countries to the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. This year's exhibition was the largest in 17 years, featuring a sold-out show floor with 298 exhibitors. Attendees

participated in education sessions, networking events, a reception at Mardi Gras World and "Humanity Rocks: A Celebration with a Cause" that raised \$16,000 to benefit New Orleans' Kingsley House.





By Shimon Avish and the GBTA Meetings Committee

## The Changing Meetings Technology Landscape

In recent years, the meetings management technology landscape has evolved at a phenomenal rate.

It used to be that selecting a meetings management technology platform was straightforward since there were only a few suppliers, and all the systems provided the same functionality.

These days, the variety of technologies available for managing meetings is staggering, and the systems address the needs that end-users did not even know they have.

### Best-in-breed Platforms

Today, we not only have enterprise-level meetings management solutions, we also have best-in-breed platforms, which include the following long list of niche technologies: abstract management, association management, attendee tracking, check-in and badge printing, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and marketing automation, digital marketing tools, exhibitor and floor plan management, housing, lead retrieval, matchmaking, presentation management, registration, staffing, transportation, venue management, and virtual and augmented reality systems.

Additionally, we have event mobile apps, second screen technologies, beacons, smart badges, virtual meeting solutions and simple meeting systems.

What has led to this sudden enthusiasm for the development of new solutions in the meetings technology space? According to a recently published book on the subject, *The Face of Digital: How Digital Technologies are Changing the \$565 Billion Events Industry*, by Marco Giberti and Jay Weintraub, the meetings and events industry is seen as ready for disruption by tech innovators. "They are enthusiastic about the size of the industry and the scale of available business opportunities..."

At the same time, Giberti and Weintraub note that "forward-thinking investors, private equity firms and venture capitalists are showing interest in event tech."

They add, "More than \$1.96 billion was invested [in event

tech companies] in 2015-16, with 372 companies funded in the last five years..." and it is this influx of capital combined with the sense that the industry is primed for disruption that is fueling the emergence of very interesting and creative technology solutions.

Another dynamic forcing change in the event tech space is that participants come to events with an expectation that the technology they use at events will give them the same personalized experiences they have as consumers in their non-work lives. This is lending pressure to create innovative new solution types that mirror the consumer experience where their preferences are known and catered to by marketers.

All of this change happened in a very short time and is leading to considerable confusion for end-users.

While these dynamics have led to the development of many exciting technologies, meeting planners are having trouble adapting to the variety of new technologies, and it may take years for the market to sort out the

valuable solutions from the not-so valuable.

### Pros and Cons

It is also worth noting that it wasn't so long ago we were talking about how the consolidation of the top meetings technology suppliers was leading to an unhealthy dominance by one supplier, but now we find ourselves talking about the fracturing of the meetings technology space into numerous niche technologies and suppliers. As in all things, this fragmentation has its pros and cons.

On the pro side is the emergence of so-called best-in-breed solutions that allow for the combination of many of the technologies enumerated above into a unified whole through the use of Application Program Interfaces (APIs) that integrate the various tools and facilitate data flow between them.

These best-in-breed solutions are emerging as potential competitors to all-in-one enterprise solutions.

Additionally, a number of the new systems are self-service

solutions, which shift some of the burden of meetings management to meeting stakeholders.

This is seen as a feature, not a glitch, especially for technologies like simple meeting systems that allow end-users to search for and book venues in keeping with an organization's guidelines, while simultaneously providing end-users with a sense of empowerment to select and book their venues.

Many of these new solutions have the potential to be true disruptors in the strategic meetings management

and events they attend, and enabling the measurement of that engagement, addressing one of the more intractable problems in the meetings and events space, namely the determination of a return on investment for live events.

By measuring interactions with the new tools, marketing teams are now able to determine whether participants are engaged with their events and measure their satisfaction.

On the con side, we see that disruption is, well, disruptive, and requires years to shake itself out. Some of the

Many of these new solutions have the potential to be true disruptors in the strategic meetings management (SMM) space, as they **offer unique capabilities** not provided by enterprise level solutions.

(SMM) space, as they offer unique capabilities not provided by enterprise level solutions.

Additionally, organizations are now finding themselves freed from a single supplier development road map which threatened to dictate the meetings technology capabilities available in the marketplace.

The emergence of these engagement enhancement and measurement tools is timely in that adoption of the standard SMM model has likely peaked. Organizations that have not yet adopted SMM are looking for alternative models that match their business needs, which are more focused on generating brand loyalty, leads and sales, and much less focused on cost savings and compliance.

Many of the emerging digital solutions developed in recent years have the ability to meet this new need by significantly enhancing participant engagement in the meetings

implications of this are seen in the slow adoption of emerging technologies by meeting planners, and the difficulty for user communities in the development of technology strategies for their organizations, given all the options, unproven track records and long-term financial viability of these companies (approximately 75 percent of venture-backed startups fail).

These factors can introduce considerable risk into selecting emerging technologies.

Generally, the GBTA Meetings Committee sees that the emergence of new meetings technologies brings with it accompanying pros and cons with respect to the disruption of strategic meetings management programs, and the enhanced engagement and measurement of attendee participation, and will be closely monitoring trends in these areas in the year to come.

C&IT



### Shimon Avish

Avish is a 20-plus-year veteran of travel and meetings management. He has worked as a consultant for American Express Consulting, American Express Meetings & Events, Management Alternatives, Shimon Avish Consulting and is currently the head of Acquis Consulting Group's Meetings Management Group. As current member and former vice chair of GBTA's Meetings Committee, he has led the committee's Thought Leadership Initiative. Avish is a frequent contributor to industry publications, presenter at conferences and is considered an industry thought leader.



# Nature's Inspiration and Reward

## A Summer Alaska Incentive Adventure at Katmai Lodge

By Anahid Arakelian

**M**id-summer destinations boast waves, beaches and a good tan, but great weather is only one condition for planning an attractive incentive trip.

The larger focus is how will a special destination inspire and reward those who work hard to achieve their company's business goals. Nature provides the perfect little reward tucked away in Alaska's stunning landscape.

Experiencing a retreat at King Salmon's Katmai Lodge along the breathtaking Alagnak River, spanning the Alaska Peninsula, is far from typical and certainly memorable.

Reviewers on TripAdvisor rated Katmai Lodge overall 5 out of 5, and ranked it No. 1 out of all 16 specialty lodges

near King Salmon, and the neighboring Katmai National Park and Preserve.

Katmai's remote and picturesque riverside location provides guests an exclusive secluded environment because the lodge can only be accessed by plane or boat.

The unique expedition starts when guests are flown on the lodge's private plane directly from King Salmon to Katmai. If traveling from Anchorage, guests fly directly to the lodge on a private charter plane.

Upon arrival, lodge staff offers exceptional hospitality, great local cuisine and comfortable accommodations. The lodge even has its own pastry chef.

"The natural beauty of Alaska alone is awe-inspiring when first stepping

off the plane; even after returning year after year, this environment promises amazement," says Katmai Lodge CEO Robin Follman-Otta. "Retreating here is special. From the lodge staff to the fishing guides, we carefully select hospitable and knowledgeable people to make the limited season meaningful and remarkable for our guests."

During the Katmai Lodge's season from late June to early September, it delivers an adventurous destination experience at one of Alaska's pristine fishing locations. All necessary fishing gear is provided by the lodge. From novice to expert anglers, everyone fishes at their own pace.

Guests can customize their guide experience, even tailoring it to a

teambuilding activity in nature. Typically, guides lead two guests at a time which makes a good ratio of guide per guest attention, but this can be expanded to small intimate groups.

Anglers are led by experienced fishing guides, whether wading in gear waist-high in pure fresh waters, navigating by boat or simply by waterside. After a day of viewing wildlife and fishing, lunch is prepared — a barbecue of the fresh catch. Wood-plank salmon is a favorite.

Options are available for visiting different excursion locations led by the expert fishing guides. The Alagnak River and surrounding fly-out areas, such as Margot Creek, offers more than just fishing.

Alaska natural wildlife provides the unexpected and an element of pleasant surprise for viewing soaring bald eagles and regal brown bears in their natural habitats. At Brooks Falls, mother bears and their cubs are seen fishing, bathing and cajoling together.

"Alaska scenery is awesome; the fishing is fantastic, but what makes Katmai the best lodge in the state is the staff and the guides," says Katmai Lodge guest and commercial airline pilot Captain Ed Tatro. "The wildlife is incredible. The lodge is relaxing. The entire experience is addictive. I already have my reservations to visit next year."



Credit: Charnel Powers

Along the Alagnak River, the fish migrate in different months, offering anglers a bountiful selection of all five species of Pacific salmon, including king, sockeye, chum, pink and silver throughout late June, July and August. Rainbow Trout, Arctic grayling, Dolly Varden, Arctic char and Northern pike swim all season long.

It is not uncommon for guests to take home catch up to 50 pounds for sharing with friends and family. The lodge expertly fillets, freezes and vacuum seals fish in a leak-proof box ready to take on the flight home.

After a day of enjoying the outdoors, guests sip cocktails and share photos of their catch for bragging rights in the cozy main lodge. Gathering in the main lodge for darts, board games and

cards further enriches the camaraderie. Some guests choose to decompress in the lodge's heated wood-planked steam sauna.

For private occupancy of the entire lodge for a period of time, it can accommodate up to 65 people with activities including sightseeing and fishing.

Katmai Lodge offers flexible packages to meet incentive travel budgets, activities for helping teams communicate and building interpersonal skills in a fun and exciting way at a unique location, making it an inspiring travel destination.

For more information, visit the Katmai Lodge website at [www.katmai.com](http://www.katmai.com). To coordinate a custom package for a corporate retreat or other incentive travel, call Charnel Powers at 714-557-3432. **C&IT**



Credit: Katmai Lodge

Above: One way to get to Katmai Lodge is by private charter from Anchorage. The hour-long flight travels over some of Alaska's most beautiful scenery. Left: For a unique adventure, visit Brooks Falls at Katmai National Park. Watching one of the largest concentrations of Alaskan Brown Bears as they intercept the Sockeye salmon on their migration over Brooks Falls is a must-see experience.



# Going Above AND Beyond



New developments in Oklahoma City include a \$288 million convention center, opening in 2020 (inset top), and the Omni Oklahoma City Hotel, set to open in early 2021 (inset bottom). A new streetcar system will link these venues to the downtown district.

from CVBs like Visit Indy that go above and beyond logistics, instead truly immersing themselves into client cultures, helps planners take their events to the next level."

That kind of service also takes "Hoosier Hospitality" to the next level and is part of the reason GameStop is returning to Indianapolis in 2020.

## Visit Jacksonville

Finding an event venue that fits all of the client's parameters and symbolizes the city can be challenging, and thus, an opportunity for a CVB to really shine.

Visit Jacksonville begins this process by collecting key data. Last year, a technical/engineering group client of the CVB was looking for an offsite venue that accommodated 200 to 225 attendees and was "unique to the city of Jacksonville and spoke to the city's assets," says Courtney (Hartert) Gumbinger, CMP, CHS, director of convention services for Visit Jacksonville. "We had them share with us things they had done in prior years so we didn't include similar venues. We always ask a series of questions to help us recommend venues for them to visit while onsite. We provided them with descriptions, pictures and links, and had them narrow down their selection to the venues they wanted to see."

After that initial stage in site selection, Visit Jacksonville arranged the kind of site visits that convey the character and event potential of each option.

"We arranged personalized visits at three of the venues that we thought would fit their request," Gumbinger says.

## CVBs Take Hospitality to the Next Level

While CVBs are in the hospitality industry, the term "hospitality" may not encapsulate the full palette of services they offer meeting clients. Going

By Patrick Simms

that all offer similar basic services, such as housing, registration and volunteer support. Both event promotion and design are also vehicles to express the city's unique character to attendees, and there are no better consultants on local culture than CVB staff. The best CVBs can translate that culture into events that align with a client's corporate culture and enlist local partners to realize that vision.

### Visit Indy

A prime example is the work of the Indianapolis CVB, whose senior convention services manager, Roberta Tisdul, CMP, recently helped customize an offsite event for one of Grapevine, Texas-based GameStop's key vendors. The event was part of the August 2018 GameStop Conference. Tisdul first took the GameStop planner and vendor on a tour of several venue options. The planner opted to do

a food truck block party on the event promenade just outside the Indiana Convention Center. Tisdul also brought in Accent Indy, a local DMC, to help execute the event, which followed the "festivalization" trend.

"We have been incorporating festivalization more and more into our culture to create organic and socially dynamic attendee interactions with our sponsors," explains Samantha Vogel, CMP, senior manager, meetings & travel, GameStop. "Knowing our culture, Roberta helped us source a DMC that could take our

GameStop vision and incorporate our sponsor's vision to design a one-of-a-kind festival atmosphere that thrilled our attendees and sponsor. Client service



**"Client service from CVBs like Visit Indy that go above and beyond logistics, instead truly immersing themselves into client cultures, helps planners take their events to the next level."**

**Samantha Vogel, CMP**, Senior Manager, Meetings & Travel, GameStop, Grapevine, TX





Visit Indy helped plan the 2018 GameStop Conference, with events that followed the “festivalization” trend.

“At Sweet Pete’s candy store, we arranged for ‘Sweet Pete’ himself to do the chocolate tour and allowed them to [sample] a sweet of their choice in the store. At The River Club [a historic downtown social and business club], we arranged a group photo to be taken with the iconic river view behind them. For the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, we wanted them to experience a unique way of getting their attendees there, so we arranged transportation with our St. Johns River Taxi to escort them to the venue and back.”

After these experiences, the client was able to make a well-informed choice: the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens. “The river view, entertainment options and the river taxi were their reasons for choosing this venue,” Gumbinger explains.

The CVB also assisted in promoting the event with items such as posters, visitor guides, “This Bag is Headed for Fun in Jax” luggage tags and a promotional video. Their staff created a customized microsite for the group with all the information attendees would need to plan their trip to Jacksonville.

“Included in the microsite was information that we would be at the hotel during registration to answer any questions they may have about Jacksonville,” Gumbinger says. “Attendance was not tracked, but we believe this positively impacted both the hotels and surrounding businesses as it created greater awareness and comfort to explore area restaurants and activities. ...We come prepared for any question we may get — anything from ‘How do I get around?’ to ‘Where can I get the best shrimp ‘n’ grits?’ Our favorite question is, ‘If I could only do one

thing while in Jacksonville, what should it be?’”

As a concession, the CVB offers attendees shuttle service on a night of their choice to help them explore surrounding neighborhoods.

### Visit New Orleans

When a multilevel marketing organization brought its annual meeting to the Big Easy for the first time, they wanted to kick off the event

with a unique New Orleans experience for the roughly 18,000 attendees. New Orleans & Company was tasked with helping to pinpoint the ideal venue partner among its 1,200 hospitality members, sourcing personalized proposals from those that fit the client’s specs. Toward facilitating site visits, the CVB creates an online, mobile-friendly itinerary that can be shared with everyone involved and updated in real time.

**“The biggest thing is that [compared to some other CVBs] I’ve worked with, Visit Denver is very up-front: Here’s what we can’t do, here’s where they give us the green light.”**

**Emily Moreau, Senior Event Operations Manager, PennWell Corporation, Tulsa, OK**

No atmosphere is more indigenous to New Orleans than Mardi Gras, and Mardi Gras World ultimately became the host for the client’s event. Located on the Mississippi River, the venue includes a float den that surrounds guests with floats that will roll in more than 40 parades. This kind of atmosphere both expressed the city and generated excitement appropriate to a kickoff.

In determining how to best market New Orleans’ assets to attendees, the CVB “starts with identifying the overarching theme of the meeting and looking at the profile of the average attendee,” says MaryBeth Guarisco, CMP, senior manager of specialty services & programming, New Orleans & Company. “Planners are the experts on what their attendees are interested in or enticed by, so we can take that insight and provide information about

New Orleans that appeals to the group. For example, groups who tend to bring families along may be more interested in attractions such as the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas and The National WWII Museum, while groups with a heavy millennial attendance are likely to be enticed by photogenic locales, ‘foodie’ adventures and high-tech activities.”

Speaking of high-tech, Guarisco explains that marketing tools have largely shifted to digital.

“As marketing skews to a digital-first — and now mobile-first — model, the majority of our tools have transitioned to digital options. Photos and videos are often used on websites and social media, as well as in email and print distributions. We have provided customizable New Orleans-themed email blast templates, banner ads, digital graphics, a mobile-friendly microsite and more.”

Physical promotional items have not been completely obviated, however. “Promotional brochures and giveaways,

such as Mardi Gras beads, are popular to engage attendees and drive excitement for the destination at the year prior meeting,” Guarisco adds.

Both packages of marketing services and flexibility in those offerings are important. “Many of our tools serve as turnkey solutions for our clients, but when a group identifies a need that is not already in our toolkit, we work to find a solution, which often results in adding a new offering to our complimentary marketing toolkit,” she says.

### Visit Oklahoma City

With all of the new development in Oklahoma City, planners won’t hesitate to look to this destination for future meetings and events. Its location in the center of the U.S. makes its easy access an even bigger incentive.

The \$288 million Oklahoma City Convention Center will feature nearly 200,000 square feet of exhibit space, a 30,000-square-foot ballroom and 45,000 square feet of additional meeting space. Its prime location across the street from the new 70-acre Scissortail Park, set to open later this year, and near the Chesapeake Energy Arena, home of the NBA’s Oklahoma City Thunder, will appeal to both conference attendees and locals. The convention center will open in 2020.

“This totally new convention center marks a significant milestone in Oklahoma City’s commitment to the meetings and convention industry,” says Mike Carrier, president for the Oklahoma City Convention & Visitors Bureau.

The new 17-story, 605-room Omni Oklahoma City Hotel, set to open in early 2021, will also be a nationwide destination for meetings and events. The \$241 million property will serve the city’s revitalized downtown area and feature 29 suites, seven dining outlets, 78,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting space, an expansive pool deck with event space, retail and a Mokara Spa.

“Oklahoma City has been incredibly welcoming to our Omni family. The revitalization surrounding this hotel is unprecedented, and we are honored to be a partner in the future of Oklahoma City,” says Peter Strebel, president of Omni Hotels & Resorts. “As a recognized leader in the convention center hotel

**“We come prepared for any question we may get — anything from ‘How do I get around?’ to ‘Where can I get the best shrimp ‘n’ grits?’”**

**Courtney (Hartert) Gumbinger, CMP, CHS**

Director of Convention Services, Visit Jacksonville  
Jacksonville, FL



market, we are redefining and reimagining the traditional headquarters hotel in exciting markets of growth and change across the country and Oklahoma City is leading the way for progressive downtown redevelopment.”

Scissortail Park will connect downtown Oklahoma City to the shores of the Oklahoma River. Construction on a 40-acre section across from the new convention center will be completed later this year, with the lower 30-acre portion set to open in 2021. The park will offer a variety of activities, including concerts, walking/biking/running trails, outdoor education opportunities and more.

A new streetcar system will link the park, convention center and the new Omni hotel to downtown attractions, dining and nightlife.

“Once the new center, the Omni headquarter hotel, the new Scissortail Park and the OKC Streetcar are all complete, Oklahoma City will be a completely new destination in the south-central U.S. for meetings of all sizes,” says Carrier.



New Orleans & Company recently coordinated an event for 18,000 attendees at Mardi Gras World, a magnificent outdoor venue located along the Mississippi River.

### L.A. Tourism

L.A. Tourism’s Destination Services team is similarly flexible in helping planners to create an “only-in-L.A.” experience for their attendees.

The team stays abreast of the city’s cultural trends and latest venues, and has access to some of the best entertainment, set designers and event producers in L.A.

Recently, the Destination Services team partnered with The Garland Hotel in North Hollywood to host its annual Customer Advisory Board meeting. The event featured a “glamping” (glamorous camping) theme that had attendees leave the boardroom and gather in a giant camping tent, surrounded by The Garland’s manicured outdoor park. The CVB even creatively branded the camp “WANNAGOLALA.”

Other examples of special events the Destination Services team has produced for clients include: customized food tours across Downtown with Six Taste Food Tours that incorporate historical and restored venues, such as the Cathedral of Saint Vibiana; large-scale receptions on the backlot of a major movie studio with red carpet and “paparazzi”; and teambuilding activities like Olympic-style games at Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

### Visit Pittsburgh

The Pittsburgh CVB staff recently showcased the Steel City for PCMA 2019 Convening Leaders. The meeting industry event utilized three primary venues: the David L. Lawrence Convention Center for its opening reception and main program, Heinz Field for its closing reception and Stage AE (an indoor concert venue, amphitheater and nightclub) for Party with a Purpose.





Credit: Visit Denver

## Visit Denver

While creativity and resourcefulness in event promotion and design are increasingly hallmarks of CVB service, the basics of effective customer service continue to impress planners. Timeliness is one aspect.

"Pretty much as soon as you sign the contract, Visit Denver will reach out and say here's what we can do"

Visit Denver assisted PennWell Corporation in planning its conference and trade show for 5,000 attendees at the Colorado Convention Center.

A total of 18 hotels representing brands such as Hilton, Fairmont, Omni and Marriott welcomed PCMA delegates.

Among PCMA's hotel partners was the Kimpton Hotel Monaco. Housed in a historic building in the Old City, the 268-room property offers groups 13,000

to promote the upcoming meeting, says Emily Moreau, senior event operations manager with PennWell Corporation. The company held HydroVision International, a power-generation conference and trade show, at the Colorado Convention Center in 2017, bringing in about

**"Planners are the experts on what their attendees are interested in or enticed by, so we can take that insight and provide information about New Orleans that appeals to the group."**

**MaryBeth Guarisco, CMP**

Senior Manager of Specialty Services & Programming  
New Orleans & Company, New Orleans, LA



square feet of meeting space and a rooftop lounge.

A consulting company recently held a party at the Kimpton Hotel and partnered with Habitat for Humanity to assist in various building projects for a local community group.

Visit Pittsburgh's destination services representative helped connect the client to local contractors and construction companies, as well as entertainment companies for the party, and provided keynote speaker suggestions.

The CVB staff also assisted the group in obtaining a music permit.

All in all, Visit Pittsburgh provided customer service to this 175-attendee group that was on par with its service to citywides like Convening Leaders.

That contributed to impressing the consulting company's attendees, many of whom remarked that Pittsburgh, often stereotyped as a "blue-collar town," was nicer than they expected it to be.

5,000 attendees to the Mile High City. Another important tenet of customer service is setting realistic expectations about the service that will be delivered. "The biggest thing is that [compared to some other CVBs] I've worked with, Visit Denver is very up-front: Here's what we can't do, here's where they give us the green light. [In other cases], it's me asking those questions."

Despite any limitations, the CVB will definitely "go the extra mile when it comes to onsite promotion," Moreau adds. "They'll produce pole banners with your logo on it, get in touch with local restaurants and so on. Basically anything you ask for, they're always willing to help, which is fabulous when a planner is going to a city they haven't been to before."

A promotional signature of Denver meetings is the image of the 40-foot-high blue bear sculpture that peers into the convention center lobby, entitled "I See What You Mean."

Visit Denver cleverly deploys the image throughout their marketing pieces.

"I think that is very important when you can be familiar with a brand without even having to see the words" [to identify the brand], Moreau comments. "When we were hosting a party at the convention center and I needed some entertainment, I called [my CVB rep], and she said, 'Do you want us to send a blue bear as a mascot?' I said, 'Sure. I wouldn't have ever thought of that.'"

HydroVision International partnered with several hotels, and the CVB presented Moreau the RFP results in her preferred format.

"When I get the proposal back, it's very helpful if it has all the hotels that can participate with their initial proposed rate, how far they are from the convention center, etc.," she says "From there, I can take it and work with it on my own without having to talk to all these individual salespeople."

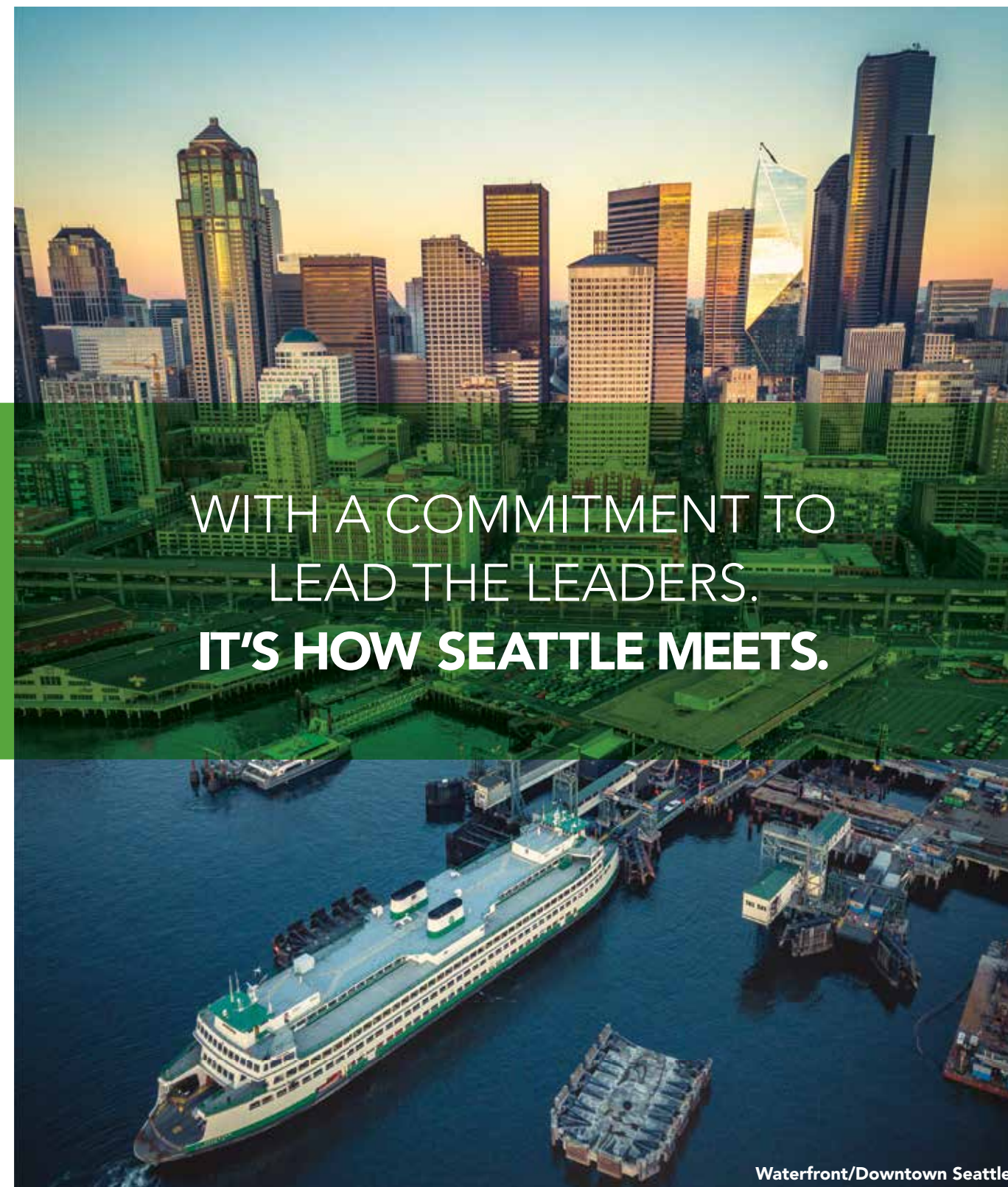
Visit Denver took more work off Moreau's hands when a major client attending the show wanted to coordinate an offsite party. A CVB convention services manager "was able to help them and worked as an extension of my event team," she says.

She looks forward to partnering again with Visit Denver in 2022, when HydroVision returns to the city.

There are several partners that a planner could rely on to create engaging promotions and onsite experiences for attendees. DMCs, third-party planners and even hoteliers can all contribute innovative ideas.

But CVBs today are really outdoing themselves in devising ways for a planner to make the biggest impact using their city's resources. They're versed in event industry trends like festivalization and glamping. They're masters of digital promotion. They can connect groups to venues that not only express the city's culture, but also fit with the meeting's spirit, theme and attendee demographics.

In short, CVBs are going far beyond the logistical hospitality, while preserving all those basic services that have made them, for many planners, indispensable. **C&IT**



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# NAVIGATING RISK in a World Full of Fear

## Comprehensive Crisis Management Plans Are Needed Now More Than Ever

By Derek Reveron

Planners who lack a system for managing meeting safety and security may be courting disaster because they remain vulnerable to a wide range of threats.

The need for a comprehensive crisis management plan is greater than ever. Recent trends in violence, including the shooting at Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas in 2017, have increased awareness that it can happen at hotels and resorts.

“Our plans must be somewhat **customizable** to fit the variables that change meeting to meeting. There is **no one-size-fits-all**.”

**Tyra Hilliard, CMP**

Attorney and Assistant Professor, College of Coastal Georgia, Brunswick, GA



While concerns about active shooters are growing, planners must be prepared for a wide variety of safety and security threats ranging from fights between attendees and tablecloth fires to natural disasters and bomb threats.

Yet, most planners don't have a plan.

Tyra Hilliard, CMP, attorney and assistant professor at the College of Coastal Georgia, wrote a PhD dissertation on why planners forego crisis management procedures. “What my research found was that the top reasons planners lacked crisis management plans were because they lacked the time, money, support and knowledge to create one, or they were required to have a plan but weren't going to bother implementing it until they had to,” says Hilliard.

She urges planners who don't have a plan to create one.

“I want planners to think incrementally about managing risk,” says Hilliard. “Do something, anything, then improve on it. If you can't afford to hire security professionals to assess and manage risk, don't decide to do nothing. Do what you can on your own, tweak it next time and add a little more each time. It's not an all-or-nothing proposition.”

While planners must be ready for all security or safety emergencies, certain types occur more frequently than others.

### Common Threats

“Meetings face more small potential safety issues than something big like an active shooter,” says Alan Kleinfeld, CMP, director of emergency planning at Arrive Management Group, which specializes in security for meetings and conferences.

“Violent acts are increasing, but it's still more likely you'll have an attendee trip over an untaped cable than you will have a guy walk in with a gun,” he says. “The most commonly overlooked safety aspect is knowing when to call 9-1-1 and knowing where help is needed.”

Kleinfeld cites an example of an emergency he witnessed at a meeting he didn't plan that lacked a detailed crisis management plan.

“At a recent outdoor reception, a man collapsed, and the planning staff froze,” he says. “No one dialed 9-1-1. No one ran to get an AED (automated external defibrillator). When someone finally picked up the phone to get help, he didn't know the address of the venue, which meant emergency medical service didn't know where to go.

“When the ambulance got there, the path for them to park was blocked. All these small missteps can cost valuable minutes to get help to the person who needs it.”

Other planners also give examples

of emergencies that can be problematic without a plan.

A fire alarm sounded while Heidi Foels, a producer for Bloomington, Minnesota-based metroConnections, an event and conference planning firm, was in a theater event packed with 1,000 attendees.

“The presenter ignored the alarm while attendees anxiously stirred in their seats,” says Foels. “As the support planner on the program, I immediately was on my phone with the venue manager asking for an update. The venue manager suggested that those who felt uncomfortable staying should go, and others should stay calm and wait for updates.”

Foels and her team promptly followed their plan to evacuate everyone and gave detailed instructions over the microphone on how to leave safely and where to go.

“The team made the decision because the presenter was not briefed on how to react and instruct the

“Continue to **review and revise existing plans** as needed and stay in touch with partners, such as hotels, venues and CVBs...”

**Alan Kleinfeld, CMP**

Director of Emergency Planning, Arrive Management Group, Charleston, SC



attendees in the event of such [a situation]," says Foels. "Chaos almost ensued. Our team provided as much guidance with crowd evacuation as we could, but the venue should have also had a plan in place where we could have reacted sooner and more knowledgeable than we ultimately did."

### Bombing and Inebriation

Catherine Chaulet, president of Washington, D.C.-based Global DMC Partners, cites two examples.

The first situation involved managing a corporate program during the Boston Marathon bombing. Immediately after the incident, officials locked down the entire city, including hotels and airports. Cellphone service was temporarily spotty. However, the communication and flexibility parts of Chaulet's emergency contingency plan helped alleviate uncertainty among attendees.

According to Chaulet, "There were many times that we didn't have updates on what was going on, but our plan was to send out communications to attendees' emergency contacts every

situations where an attendee has had too much alcohol," says Chaulet. "They put themselves and others at risk if they become violent or sick. These situations can be managed well, but they can also become very disruptive or even violent. They can result in situations ranging from bringing people back to their rooms early to taking them to a hospital."

Mike O'Rourke, founder of Washington-based Advance Operational Concepts, a global security consultancy, cites an example in which a large corporation headquartered in a conflict zone brought in his company as a security consultant.

"There was a terrorism threat, yet my client was planning a televised high-profile, black-tie event with hundreds of guests, including executives, celebrities and the international diplomatic community," says O'Rourke.

"Diplomats had their own armed security teams, yet my client's non-negotiable rule was they couldn't bring weapons into the facility," he continues. "To prevent these important

safety emergencies will occur or when they will happen. However, planners can create a comprehensive plan that includes prevention techniques and strategies for handling consequences.

But many planners have an inadequate crisis management plan or lack one altogether because they don't have the time, budget and expertise.

Planners often focus on the details of meetings and providing a good attendee experience, while paying little attention to security.

According to Foels, "Some planners tend to forget this very important role of theirs. As planners, we need to be aware that attendees often lack the experience to recognize risks in unfamiliar settings and may not have the confidence to ask for advice if they feel unsafe.

"Perhaps some planners have never been to the venue or, on a greater scale, the city or state the meeting or event is in," she continues. "Due to this, they feel uneasy about creating a crisis management plan. The best practice is to identify local resources available, have open discussions about these plans and walk through and review them once onsite."

Greg Jenkins, partner, Bravo Productions, a Long Beach, California-based event planning company, offers the following advice: "Many planners feel that doing your own plan is too much work or too far out of their realm of expertise. Therefore, a detailed plan is never developed. Another reason is because they never think it could happen to them. How many times do we hear about tragic stories in the news, and those involved say, 'I never thought something like that could happen to me.'"

But it can. That's why it's necessary to have a crisis management plan that does at least the following basics:

- Cover emergency response procedures, such as providing maps of the meeting site. Detail contact information for property and venue staff, hospitals, emergency services and law enforcement. Also have contacts for consulates of international attendees. Keep all contact information on hand at all times.
- Set up a chain of command and

designate roles and duties for staffers. Know who will do what.

- Meet with the property's staff to review onsite security plans. Know the capabilities of the property and staff to handle emergencies and provide related equipment. Does the venue staff have medical training and equipment?
- Know the emergency procedures of suppliers, transportation companies and offsite meeting venues.

on the meeting," she adds. "If it is a 200-person meeting at a downtown U.S. hotel, then planners can probably handle the planning with the help of the hotel's security team. If it's a 5,000-person meeting with attendees from many countries in a location known for terrorist activities, then by all means, use professional help."

Foels also believes that planners can create their own safety and security management plans. "And, we should

to someone with experience in safety planning. This doesn't mean you have to spend a ton of money. It could simply be a short-term project to get a security plan outline."

### Teamwork is Key

Whether a security plan is self-made or created with experts, it can be strengthened through teamwork with partners.

According to Chaulet, "Teamwork is

"As planners, we need to be aware that attendees often lack the experience to **recognize risks in unfamiliar settings** and may not have the confidence to **ask for advice** if they feel unsafe."



Heidi Foels

Producer, metroConnections, Bloomington, MN

"Existing plans might be perfect for securing ... another organization's meeting. But how do you know someone else's plan is **sufficient** for your meeting?"

### Mike O'Rourke

Founder, Advance Operational Concepts, Yelm, WA

hour, even if there was no real update. The steady communication and flexibility that our team put in place helped ease the minds of attendees and their families so that they were not imagining things that were worse than they already were."

The second incident involved a drunk attendee.

"I've experienced dangerous

guests from canceling, we arranged for their heads of security to inspect our security arrangements. Satisfied with that, diplomats attended without their own armed security, and the event was a success."

### Create a Comprehensive Plan

For the most part, planners can't predict exactly what type of security and

always be able to provide training and guidance to those who need help doing it," she adds.

"When you're in the role of a planner, attendees look to you for guidance in emergencies," Foels says. "Being knowledgeable on the location of hospitals, emergency routes and exits and more is your responsibility. Every team member's role should be identified up front, and we should ensure that crowd control is covered if a situation arises."

However, says Foels, "The key is knowing which other professionals or resources you need to pull in as part of your safety and security plan to make it the most comprehensive it can be."

Kleinfeld also believes it's crucial to use several resources.

"Planners can do the plans on their own with applicable resources, such as online, print and colleagues," he says. "Having said that, planners who don't know where to begin or don't have the staff or hours to do it can certainly turn

the essential element that is critical to creating a successful plan. From the host venue or hotel to the tour company to the entertainment to the DMC, each party will look at safety with their internal teams and from their own angle."

Planners can also use teamwork to help ensure they don't overlook property-specific security issues.

"By involving all the key vendors and working collaboratively, the group will identify all items that should be included in the plan that perhaps the planner didn't think about initially. There might be something the planner would miss without knowing the locality or culture well enough," Chaulet says.

A safety and security management system can be rendered ineffective if there are mistakes in its planning and execution.

Hilliard says that one of the most common mistakes planners make involves using off-the-shelf plans without customizing them for each meeting.



"The tricky thing about safety and security for meetings is that it's a moving target," she says. "Our plans must be somewhat customizable to fit the variables that change meeting to meeting. There is no one-size-fits-all. While safety and security for a typical business assumes the same physical plan in the same location, meetings are just the opposite. We may be in a different city or country or venue with a different program and participants each time."

Kleinfeld cites two other common mistakes. "For those who have a plan, the mistakes are not training team members and not revising the plan," he says. "Continue to review and revise existing plans as needed and stay in touch with partners such as hotels, venues and CVBs or other suppliers that have a role in the event."

other local resources in advance. Roles and responsibilities are not identified in advance."

Security expert O'Rourke, who works regularly with corporate planners, says a common mistake is relying too much on a venue's security plan.

"It's the top mistake I see from the meeting and event planning sector," he says. "Existing plans might be perfect for securing an empty facility or another organization's meeting. But how do you know someone else's plan is sufficient for your meeting?"

O'Rourke offers this advice to planners: "You must be boots-on-the-ground, walking the site in person and visualizing your event there."

"Visualize where attendees will enter, where credentials will be issued and where emergency exits are," he

improve security plans. Even if every meeting proceeds without a mishap, it's wise to do a post-meeting review.

Jenkins suggests asking the following questions after each meeting:

- Were there deviations from the event security plan? If so, why?
- How did having security in place make the guests feel? What was the perception?
- Was there a comfort level with having security in place, or did attendees feel threatened or somewhat alarmed about it?
- Was there adequate security to handle an emergency if one had occurred?
- If security guards were used, were they in the right place? Did they stroll around? Were they courteous? Were they alert?



**"The steady communication and flexibility that our team put in place helped ease the minds of attendees and their families..."**

**Catherine Chaulet**

President, Global DMC Partners, Washington, DC

#### Tailor Plans

Failing to cater emergency plans to attendee differences is another shortcoming. "We may loop all attendees into one category by creating a plan for everyone rather than individually," says Foels. "Those with disabilities an/or age limitations will need plans adjusted for them."

She also reminds planners to rehearse procedures and define roles for the staff at the property regarding safety and security.

"Practicing plans in real time upon arriving onsite at the venue is key, as the plan may have roadblocks that need to be worked out," says Foels. "Planners sometimes don't do their due diligence in talking with venues and

says. "Think to yourself, 'Attendees will enter over there. Credentials will be issued here.' See where the emergency exits are. Test doors yourself. Know the most likely avenues of approach for accidental or deliberate unauthorized access."

#### Communicate

Another no-no is failing to communicate with vendors.

"Planners think about needing to have a safety plan, but they don't always allocate the time to discuss a plan with each vendor," says Chaulet. "Make time to collaborate with vendors around safety issues."

It's also critical that planners learn from mistakes to constantly revise and

Once upon a time, meeting security involved little more than hiring a few guards to watch people.

However, the variety and nature of threats to meetings have multiplied immensely in recent years. These days, planners must prepare proactively to assess, prevent and manage the outcome of practically every emergency imaginable.

Planners don't have to do it alone. Teamwork is best and can involve vendors, hotel and venue staff, DMCs and security experts.

Plenty of help is available for planners without the time or inclination to create a crisis management plan, and those who lack one shouldn't tempt fate any longer. **C&IT**

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# HOTEL PLANNER PARTNERSHIPS

Relationships Can Find Balance  
Based on Meaningful Dialogue

By John Buchanan

In the jargon of the meeting industry, perhaps no other term is used more today — or more inaccurately — than “partners.” Meeting planners and hotel executives invoke it to characterize one another and suggest harmony and synergy. But the truth is that such harmony and synergy do not exist often enough in any sort of enduring way.

John Branciforte, area director of sales and marketing at the Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek, acknowledges that underlying reality while politely understating it: “At times, we have an adverse relationship that we don’t need to have.”





That “adverse relationship” has only been exacerbated over the last two years by a swing of the proverbial market pendulum to what both sides describe as a seller’s market.

And it is the very notion that such a thing as a “seller’s market” exists in the hotel industry that is at the root of the larger problem when it comes to seller-buyer relationships and genuine acts of partnership.

Michael Dominguez, senior vice president and chief sales officer at Las Vegas-based MGM Resorts International, cites the frequent invocation of a “seller’s market” as the source of a long-standing and fundamental conflict between meeting planners and hotel salespeople.

“When we talk about why hoteliers and planners are not better partners and we’re not working better together, that notion of a ‘seller’s market’ is one of the biggest reasons why,” Dominguez says. “I wish that our industry, and especially those organizations that shape industry dialogue, would start to understand that we are the only vertical industry that talks about a seller’s market or a buyer’s market vs. *the market* — in other words, supply and demand, which are the two things that drive all markets. And, by always talking about what kind of market cycle we’re in, we pit ourselves against each other, regardless of which cycle we’re in.”

In other words, he says, the perception is always that one side or the other is taking advantage.

Although he believes that the idea of a seller’s market is a dangerous misnomer, he does acknowledge that its perceived existence takes a real toll.

“When we’re in a so-called ‘seller’s market’ cycle, like we are now — meaning high demand and limited supply — when we’re in front of a customer, we tend to be ‘selling’ them instead of taking the time to find out what their pain points are and what they really need,” he says.

That is one area where most hoteliers can improve their overall performance, he adds, by becoming more empathetic rather than being in “sales mode.”

Another element of the current conundrum is what Dominguez calls “the elevator pitch.”

“I’m not a believer in the elevator pitch,” he says. “That’s something I talk about often at industry events. The elevator pitch means that if you’re stuck in the elevator with a meeting planner and you’re riding down 50 floors, by the time you get to the ground level, he or she should know everything about my hotel that I want them to know.

“The challenge with that in today’s world is when those elevator doors open and that person leaves, what do you know about them and their business and what they need? Instead of just telling a planner who I am and what I have to offer, I need to take the time to ask them who they are and what they need and want.”

Another way of looking at that dynamic, he says, is “instead of thinking in terms of what I can sell this meeting planner, I should be asking, ‘How can I help you create better experiences at your meetings?’”

The even larger issue, Dominguez says, is “the concerns or discord that exist now are coming from our inability on both sides to take the time to



**Michael Dominguez**  
Senior Vice President  
and Chief Sales Officer  
MGM Resorts  
International  
Las Vegas, NV

**“The concerns or discord that exist now are coming from our inability on both sides to take the time to understand other points of view than our own.”**

understand other points of view than our own and to understand what each other’s objectives are.

“And, for meeting planners,” he continues, “their concerns always start with their pain points. But as hoteliers, we don’t start the conversation there often enough. On the other hand, if you do start with that, and the planner tells you his or her biggest pain point is their budget, then it’s going to be very hard for me to tell you that you’re going to have one of the most tech-savvy and successful meetings in one of my hotels next year. But at the same time, I have a responsibility to tell you honestly and candidly what you can accomplish on the budget you have.”

Branciforte concurs with that point. It is particularly frustrating to him that planners often do not understand that prices are dictated by market conditions and a hotel’s operating margins.

“We still see planners who come in and say they want \$75 [a gallon] coffee,” he says. “That doesn’t exist anymore. That’s just one example of how many planners have preconceived notions when it comes to costs. So they say in their RFPs: ‘Here’s my budget, and I’m not going to spend more than X.’ But they’re not really looking at what the market data for the destination says. They’re trying to come in and bid room rates that



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**John Branciforte**  
Area Director of Sales  
and Marketing  
Wyndham Grand Orlando  
Resort Bonnet Creek  
Orlando, FL



**“When you’re doing business by just pointing and clicking, you’re doing more to derail the whole process than you are to help it.”**



are \$50 a night below what the market is getting. And, they think that's OK."

### Time Poverty

Yet another increasingly prominent issue that makes it difficult for hotels and planners to create and maintain meaningful partnerships is what Branciforte calls "time poverty." That means people on both sides are often too busy to take the time to create and build genuine relationships, as opposed to simply completing transactions.

For example, Dominguez says, a surprising number of meeting planners at small and mid-sized companies plan as many as 50 or more meetings and events each year.

"If someone is planning that many meetings a year, I think it's going to be very difficult for them to be able to give each one the attention to detail it needs and deserves," he says. "And, based on what I see as significant differences, in terms of market knowledge, between those who plan very large meetings and those who plan small meetings, time poverty is one of the key differentiators."

Planners of major meetings, he notes, generally plan only that one event and have substantial support teams that handle individual aspects of the meeting, such as room block management or onsite activities. They also typically have a much longer planning window.

Planners of small meetings, on the other hand, often handle all aspects of the meetings alone. And, they usually juggle multiple meetings that are all being planned in an abbreviated time window. The result: extreme time poverty that damages the overall process of meeting planning and synergistic relationships with hoteliers.

### Emails and Electronic RFPs

Making matters even more challenging, Branciforte says, is that these days, meeting business is largely conducted via email and electronic RFPs, which include minimal, if any, human contact or real communication.

"My salespeople and I strive to understand who our constituents are and what they're trying to achieve with their meetings," Branciforte says. "That's a lot harder today because of everything being handled electronically. As a hotel salesperson, you have to work harder



**David Abers, CMP**  
Events Account Manager  
ITA Group  
West Des Moines, IA

**"The meeting industry has become more of a business-to-business environment than a people-to-people environment."**

to extract the information you need because an RFP cannot speak."

David Abers, CMP, events account manager at independent meeting planning firm ITA Group in West Des Moines, Iowa, agrees.

"The meeting industry has become more of a business-to-business environment than a people-to-people environment," he says. "I'm more of a people-to-people person. But 90 percent of my business is done by email."

Veteran third-party planner Lori Kolker, founder and president of Elle K Associates in Rockville, Maryland, also strongly agrees that email has become the bane of the industry. Seventy percent of her meetings are now planned via email.

"I hate that," Kolker says, who spent seven years in hotel sales before launching Elle K. "I'm very old school. I believe in real communication and real relationships. And, you can't have those things if you conduct business via email. When I started as a planner 22 years ago, nobody used email in the hotel business.

They picked up the phone and called you. Now that kind of communication is basically a thing of the past. That hurts all of us — planners and hotel people."

For hotel salespeople and meeting planners who truly want to develop genuine partnerships, Branciforte says the important thing is to push beyond the barriers of electronic communication and have actual dialogue by phone or, ideally, face-to-face during a site visit to the destination.

"For that reason, I push my salespeople to find the avenue by which we can get that dialogue going and find out more about what the planner needs and wants. My view is we need that in order to provide a meaningful and detailed response to what is typically a 'flat' RFP," he says.

Kolker applauds Branciforte's initiative. "I wish more hotel salespeople would pick up the phone and call me instead of trying to do everything by email," she says. "In the defense of hotels, there are a lot of meeting planners who say, 'I don't want to be bothered. Just email me the information I need.' But I wish they wouldn't do business that way."

### Dates, Rates and Space

Equally as detrimental to the overall process as emails and electronic RFPs is the fixation meeting planners have on the holy trinity of meeting metrics: dates, rates and space.

Because so many planners rely on that simple formula for assessing a hotel's viability, and the initial response is by definition quick and electronic, Branciforte believes the process is now too narrowly defined at the outset.

"If those are the only metrics you're going by, then you have an initial process that is flat," he says. "From the hotel side, I think the hardest part of the process now is to get planners to actually engage and go beyond those simple metrics."

Abers agrees that the dates/rates/space parameter is now "the essence of the process."

"Quite frankly," he says, "if we're doing

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an RFP and three hotels come back with the dates, rates and space we need, we might go visit those three hotels and talk to people. And, that might become the deciding factor. But as the starting point, it is now just about dates, rates and space."

Branciforte says a related issue, particularly when it comes to third-party planners, is they increasingly send RFPs to multiple hotels in various destinations, meaning that the hotel is not just competing with other hotels in Orlando, but numerous other properties in Florida and elsewhere.

"That really is nothing more than a 'data collection' mode, with that data being presented back to their client as a way to start narrowing down the meeting host's options," he says. "That makes it increasingly hard for the hotel, frankly, because you're no longer being treated as a resource. You're just one of six hotels being considered in each of six different destinations. That, unfortunately, changes the entire process from the very beginning. You're no longer just competing in your local market. You're now competing all over the place."

Abers also concurs with that opinion. "We're a third-party planning company. So we do a lot of legwork before we even send out RFPs," he says. "We sit down with our clients ahead of time and go over possible destinations. Then we narrow it down to types of hotels — five-star, four-star, a resort — we send out a limited number of RFPs."

Finally, as if any other contributing factor were required to make the fostering of "partnerships" any more difficult, there is what is widely perceived by meeting planners as a declining level of experience and professionalism among hotel salespeople since the Great Recession, when many veterans left the industry as it melted down.

"I agree with that perception 100 percent," Kolker says. "Many hotels have replaced truly professional and knowledgeable salespeople with younger ones who are just order takers. They just send you their bid. They do little or nothing to actually try to help you.

Then they say, 'That's our offer. Take it or leave it.'

"That is very frustrating because our business should not be conducted like that," she continues. "The real problem now is that the order takers just throw out information. 'This is our meeting room rate. This is our food and beverage minimum.' They make no real effort to understand me and what I need."

"My RFPs are very specific. I spell out exactly what I want and expect, and what the deal-breakers are."

And, she adds, that damaging dynamic was further enhanced in 2018 by a strong seller's market.

Abers questions whether lack of experience or professionalism are really



**Lori Kolker**  
Founder and President  
Elle K Associates  
Rockville, MD

**"When I started as a planner 22 years ago, nobody used email in the hotel business. They picked up the phone and called you."**

the issue, but he agrees with the larger point Kolker makes.

"We do get the salespeople that say, 'Take it or leave it,'" he says. "That's really an indirect reaction to the market. If you look back to 2011 or 2012, hotels were extremely flexible in terms of accommodating all of our needs. Now, it is more of a 'take it or leave it' approach, and they say, 'If we don't have a definite answer by the end of next week, we're going to sell the room block to somebody else.'"

Abers adds that mentality is increasingly common in the current seller's market.

### Finding a Solution

As an industry leader whose role stretches far beyond his job as head of sales for MGM Resorts International, Dominguez believes that both hoteliers and meeting planners should aggressively and consistently pursue more meaningful dialogue.

"Each of us needs to understand the objectives and strategy of the other. Planners need to understand that on our side, those things are not always the same. Year by year, they can change, based on market conditions," he says. "But I find that if both the planner and the hotel can take the time to talk about their business and their needs, and ask each other questions and learn from each other, then you start to have a

genuine relationship. Once you have a real relationship, then you can start thinking of each other as real partners."

Branciforte notes that such issues have become a widespread area of concern and conversation in the industry.

"Everyone, including organizations like MPI, is talking at the same time about these

issues," he says. "And, we're all kind of saying the same things. I really believe what we — planners and hoteliers and the industry — want is to find a balance based on dialogue."

"But, I go back to my point earlier about electronic RFPs and email communication. When you're doing business by just pointing and clicking, you're doing more to derail the whole process than you are to help it."

When it comes to the notion of real hotel-planner partnerships, Abers proposes a more fundamental solution, which places the onus squarely on the shoulders of hoteliers.

"The main issue is dealing in fairness and appreciating loyalty," he says. "By that I mean we, as planners, were there for you, as hoteliers, when the market was down. But now the market is trending upward. And, you're telling us to 'take it or leave it.' To me, it's all about fairness and loyalty. Fairness and loyalty work both ways."

C&IT



# Making a Game of It

## Interactive Technology Boosts Attendee Experience

By Maura Keller

From using smartphones to measure steps walked during a wellness conference to participating in event-wide “competitions” among attendees, the gamification of corporate events and meetings management has taken center stage.

Gamification, or gaming strategy, is the utilization of technology to entice meeting attendees in various ways. Social media and interactive networks are increasing daily, and many people are using these interactions to engage audiences like never before.

### Making an Impact

Gamification of meetings and events takes many forms. At a recent internal company event at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios in Florida, one of Cvent’s partners centered their gamification efforts around the Harry Potter theme and made the game interactive within the park. They sorted attendees into “houses,” and displayed the houses on a leaderboard to encourage friendly competition. They utilized beacons onsite that sent push notifications to attendees as they approached certain areas of the conference. For example, “The game theme completely matched the rest of the event and brought a new level of interaction



Convention “players” were given a list of challenges to complete via phone, kiosk or demo presentation. Once they reached 3,000 points, they earned a spin on the prize wheel.

to the mobile experience maximizing attendee engagement,” says Myllisa Patterson, corporate meeting expert and senior marketing director at Cvent.

The above example illustrates how, over the course of the last decade, meeting professionals have seen the mobile phone go from a future-learning technology to a vital tool in people’s everyday life.

“Eighty-four percent of people say they couldn’t go a single day without their mobile device, and that reliance doesn’t stop at a conference,” Patterson says. “Before we knew about mobile event apps and gamification, the meetings and events industry was struggling to reach an audience whose attention was split between the live event experience and the mobile experience.”

Now, many event professionals have recognized the importance of turning what was once a distraction into an opportunity, and because of this, gamification plays a more significant role in enhancing the attendee experience.

Consider this: Today, almost all of

**“Eighty-four percent of people say they couldn’t go a single day without their mobile device, and that reliance doesn’t stop at a conference.”**



**Myllisa Patterson**  
Corporate Meeting Expert and Senior Marketing Director, Cvent  
Portland, OR

consumers’ favorite mobile apps are gamified, without them even realizing it. Starbucks rewards patrons win free drinks when they’ve collected enough gold stars (earned from previous purchases). Fitbit has daily challenges where an individual can compete in a step competition with friends, strangers and even themselves. And, navigation apps, like Waze, are getting into gamification, letting a person “level up” after reporting a certain number of road incidents.

As Patterson explains, attendees now expect to be digitally connected with others (and with an event) even before they are onsite, and upon arrival, they like to be able to find exactly what they need when they need it — just as they can do with their other daily tasks.

“We are seeing higher mobile adoption and more attendee engagement than ever before, and we can thank gamification and mobile event apps for making that possible,” Patterson says.

With nearly 10,000 events utilizing Cvent’s mobile app solution this year alone, Cvent has seen incredibly creative implementations of gamification across events of all sizes. The company also uses mobile event apps and gamification for its internal events with employees.

“With a dispersed workforce, it allows for a really great way to stay connected and engage with each other across time zones and borders,” Patterson says.

For instance, before and during an event, Cvent corporate meeting planners have mobile apps and gamification being used to share directions to conference venues and highlight other nearby spots where attendees may want to congregate and explore.

“Our clients are also using mobile apps to offer attendees a better way to browse session information and find the content that best applies to them,” Patterson says. “The ability to easily make an agenda more personalized is a major driver for app adoption, as attendees want to make the most out of their time spent onsite.”

Meeting and event planner Karen Shackman, founder of Shackman & Associates, has recently incorporated gamification into corporate and incentive travel in several ways, including a popular twist on the teambuilding spy scavenger hunt.



As attendees boarded their welcome shuttles at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios in Florida, a beacon sent an alert that they had arrived at Platform 9 ¾, a nod to the magical train platform in the novel.

Scavenger hunts are hitting a new level in New York City, and the “hot” item to be found is a “kidnapped” executive or colleague.

As Shackman explains, this person is the star of up to four video clues delivered to teams of attendees via their mobile devices. The clues outline a sinister plot against the company, and the group is on a race against time as spies try to find secret information — which can be physical items hidden in public or via beacons — that helps the rescue and saves the company or group from disaster.

Whether it is for a unique new twist in scavenger hunts for destination meetings or as a collaborative way to plan off-hours experiences, virtual reality within gamification is the next big thing in 2019 and beyond for corporate meeting gaming.

“In the case of scavenger hunts, players can learn about the city or the challenge themselves by doing more than simply collecting items; they can take over territory, collect virtual items and use them to become more influential,” Shackman says.

This helps attendees experience areas and locations from the game in real life. Running a virtual reality scavenger hunt in a destination meeting can also help customize an exciting downtime itinerary.

“We have found that millennials, in particular, do not want to be simply trucked around in a group,” Shackman says. “We are seeing huge growth in augmented reality scavenger hunts. This is a huge step forward in location-based



**"We are seeing huge growth in augmented reality scavenger hunts. This is a huge step forward in location-based reality games for corporate teambuilding."**



**Karen Shackman**  
Founder and Meeting Planner  
Shackman & Associates  
New York, NY

reality games for corporate teambuilding. Instead of playing on a Google Map layout, as with other platforms, players can walk around in the real world as they look at their screens."

Gamification also has found its home on the convention floor. Samuel Smith, managing director at Interactive Meeting Technology, says an information services company used event gamification to connect customers to content, drive them to the trade show floor and to staff-led demos. Players were given a list of challenges that they could complete either on their phone, at a kiosk (in the trade show area) or by participating in a short demo presentation. Once players reached 3,000 points, they were allowed to spin the prize wheel.

"As compared to a typical event gamification activation, earning spins on the prize wheel doubled attendee participation and quadrupled the total number of challenges that were completed," Smith says. "Individual exhibitors felt like they had more booth traffic, the client collected more data to be used for market insights and attendees appreciated the instant gratification of getting a prize at the prize wheel — rather than waiting until the end of the event."

Jamie Moran, CEO and co-founder of Scavify, a gamification app, works with conferences and event planners to boost attendee engagement by having attendees complete different interactive challenges (snap photos, record videos, location check-ins, quizzes, scan QR codes, etc.) to get points and earn rewards.

While many of the mechanics remain the same — points, leaderboards, rewards, etc. — the medium is now largely mobile and more interactive. The most common examples of gamification Moran has seen implemented involve encouraging interaction between attendees and an event's vendors, sponsors and themes. This is often in the form of digital passport programs or scavenger hunts, where attendees scan QR codes to verify visits to vendor booths, take photos and videos capturing their interactions around the event, sharing these interactions on social media and answering trivia questions in real time.

### Pros and Cons

The original benefit of gamification involved getting attendees — who were looking at their phones anyway — to at least be engaged with the event when doing so.

"Gamification is the ability to effectively incentivize and motivate actions and behavior by transforming an otherwise ordinary activity or program into something that feels more like a game," Moran says. "Building competition, points, leaderboards and rewards into an activity can greatly increase participation and interaction."

Gamification is also fairly easy to incorporate into activities to make them fun for attendees without sacrificing higher-level event goals.

As Patterson explains, while that's still

"Just as many other aspects of the events industry have become increasingly focused around mobile strategies, gamification has also become increasingly focused around mobile technology," Moran says. "Paper bingo cards and physical stamps for

vendor passport programs have been replaced by QR codes and scanners built directly into each attendee's device."

a valuable function, apps have become much more sophisticated, and one of the biggest advantages of event app gamification today is enhancing the attendee experience.

"Many of the people at your event or conference are going to be navigating unfamiliar venues with schedules that are jam-packed," Patterson says. "We've found that carefully curated gamification can really draw people into the app and encourage them to use it."

Gamification is like the gateway into getting attendees to realize the time-saving tool that is at their fingertips — empowering them to make faster and smarter decisions about where and with whom they will spend their time onsite.

Additionally, gamification is a great way to increase foot traffic to booths at an event. By giving unique QR codes to booths and assigning points for every QR code scanned, meeting planners can instantly boost traffic and engagement. It also gives attendees the opportunity to move around the event and strike up conversations with more people.

Patterson says one thing to note is that there is a fine line between engagement and distraction.

"If attendees are more involved with the game — even more so than the content being provided onsite — it might be time to address how the live event experience is engaging attendees," she says.

Another downfall of gamification is that if the game is no longer fun, attendees may stop using the app completely.

"We encourage our clients to consider



**Samuel Smith**  
Managing Director  
Interactive Meeting Technology, LLC  
Minneapolis, MN

**"As compared to a typical event gamification activation, earning spins on the prize wheel doubled attendee participation."**



Attendees can complete interactive challenges (snap photos, record videos, location check-ins, quizzes, scan QR codes, etc.) to get points and earn rewards.

who the audience of the event is and to tailor any gamification to that crowd. Plan ahead so it doesn't become stale or a distraction before the event concludes," Patterson says.

So how can gamification increase mobile adoption on the part of attendees, and why is it important to do so?

As Patterson explains, gamification is one of the best ways to guarantee event app adoption. In fact, 59 percent of the top performers in Cvent's Mobile Event App Benchmark Report were those who used some form of gamification.

She points out that the same report finds that gamification boosts engagement by 44 percent and drives a 95 percent increase in user contribution.

"Gamification is not only increasing mobile adoption, but providing those who do adopt a more captivating and engaging experience that they are looking for," Patterson says.

### Making the Most of Gamification

The same mechanics that make gamification effective for encouraging participation in activities can also be applied to driving attendees to a broader adoption of an event's greater mobile strategy. This includes providing attendees incentives and rewards for interacting with the event on their mobile devices.

"This gives event organizers an additional avenue for attendees to become aware of, engage and ultimately adopt the event's entire mobile medium beyond the initial gamification activity," Moran says.

With mobile being such a critical

To make the most of gamification and engage attendees, meeting planners need to have a well-designed plan around the key aspects — desired attendee actions, competitive elements, rewards, etc.

Moran says it's also important to support the activity with proper messaging and promotion, provide attractive rewards for attendees and think through the effort required by attendees and the rewards needed to motivate it.

"It also helps to incorporate physical displays throughout the event that promote the activity through things like TV monitor displays of leaderboards, photos streams and social media streams," he says. "All of these strategies will help increase awareness and incentivize participation."

Other ways to make gamification at a meeting or event successful include:

Make it fun. Gamification is one of the best ways to guarantee event app adoption. Patterson says that if the game isn't fun, doesn't have a clear purpose and doesn't align with the event goals, a meeting planner can bet that attendees will stop using the app.

"Inject friendly competition by including a leaderboard that displays the top 10 players with the highest scores to motivate attendees to keep playing," she says. "Up the stakes by having prizes for the top three players."

Make it fair. As much as friendly competition in gamification is a good

platform for events to provide information, generate additional revenue through sponsorship opportunities and connect attendees to social media, it is important for event organizers to create multiple avenues like these to serve as entry points for engaging attendees on mobile that can then be used to further expand broader mobile adoption.

motivator, it is not unheard of for highly competitive individuals to take the game too far. These players are the ones that run around the event doing everything humanly possible to move themselves up on the leaderboard. Perhaps they've even found a loophole that allows them to get ahead with minimal effort.

"While this can be easily avoided, it's still possible," Patterson says. "And, seeing someone skyrocket up the leaderboard can discourage others from playing the game, as they have lost hope of ever catching up to win."

Meeting planners can minimize this risk by adjusting players' scores accordingly and actively monitoring the leaderboard for any outliers. Another best practice is refreshing the leaderboard at the end of each day to give



**Jamie Moran**  
CEO and Co-founder  
Scavify  
Media, PA

**"Paper bingo cards and physical stamps for vendor passport programs have been replaced by QR codes and scanners built directly into each attendee's device."**

players an even playing field the next day and adding up total scores at the end of the event.

Make it beneficial. Rachel Butts, solutions development manager at Brightspot Incentives & Events, says that while most mobile apps will be downloaded by a majority of attendees, many won't interact with the app unless there's something in it for them.

"Gamification plays to our competitive nature as humans and keeps attendees coming back to use your technology," she says. "Through gamification, you can drive your attendees to use the app daily — or more if you're doing it right. Attendees gain insights from the information they're receiving, sponsors gain recognition through



in-app advertisements and investors see the ROI of the product.”

Brightspot is a big proponent of using gamification in the meetings they plan to help facilitate networking and educational opportunities.

“We know people are constantly using their phones to take photos, so we build on that trend and award points for uploading relevant photos to the activity feed,” Butts says. “During a recent trade show, we saw unprecedented participation, including an upload of 1,200 photos — two times the number of app users at the conference.”

A key piece to successful gamification is making it easy for attendees to get something out of the event, all while having fun. For example, Patterson suggests using gamification

beneficial to the attendee and exist solely as a cool aside to the event or conference,” Patterson says. “It can be easy to get carried away with gamification and gamify everything, leaving little meaning to the game itself. Gamification works best when the purpose of the game aligns closely with the goals of the event. Designing a successful game is as much strategy as it is creativity.”

While gamification can be a powerful tool, it, like most other things, requires the proper framework and support in order to maximize its potential.

As Moran explains, it’s easy to fall into the trap of tacking on a last-minute “gamification feature” to an event app or slapping some points and a leaderboard on an activity without thinking through the actual attendee experience.

“This superficial level of gamification may make organizers feel like they are ticking the gamification box, but their activities often fall flat because the attendee experience is poor, or the core gamification elements and greater strategy are not well-aligned,” he says.

Another common mistake Moran sees event organizers

make is not spending enough time mapping out and understanding their overall gamification strategy. This includes the event goals, actions they want attendees to take and the balance between effort required by attendees and the rewards needed to incentivize those actions.

Moran says it’s also easy to forget other key support elements that can greatly impact the outcome of your gamification strategy, including proper messaging and promotion of the activity, communicating with relevant stakeholders (i.e., vendors, sponsors, other event personnel), providing supporting displays throughout the event space that showcases activity (i.e., photo streams, social media streams, leaderboards) and investing in rewards that are actually attractive to attendees.

#### Down the Road

The role of gamification in the future of meetings and events is unknown;

however, considering how people are embracing technology in all aspects of their personal and professional lives, it is most likely here to stay.

In fact, the Cvent teams sees a future where gamification continues to grow in its role as a driver of attendee engagement, along with exciting developments in the tech world, including augmented reality. With augmented reality, attendees can bring gamification to life just by using their smartphones.

“What was once a game relegated to the two-dimensional view on the mobile screen can become a more engaging 3D experience in real-time,” Patterson says. Unlike virtual reality, augmented reality doesn’t isolate the user with a headset, but instead allows for a more unique and interactive real-life experience that can be shared with those around them.

Patterson predicts that venue maps will become easier to navigate with 3D displays, and beacons will be able to send out push notifications for gamified promotional activities, such as helping the event’s mascot find treasure hidden onsite.

“The opportunities really are only limited to our imagination, and as technology progresses, so too will the mobile technology and gamification offered at live events,” she says. “And, we’ll be exploring all of the opportunities.”

Moran believes many of the core mechanics of gamification will remain the same over time — points, leaderboards, competition, rewards, etc. — but the types of experiences that incorporate gamification will continue to evolve with technology. Over time, these experiences will become more and more interactive.

“Virtual and augmented reality are well underway and will continue to improve and make for more interactive experiences for attendees,” he says. “As mobile apps and technology continue to evolve and improve, additional functionality that makes tracking attendee activity, creating more personalized experiences and measuring engagement will become easier for both attendees and organizers.” **C&IT**

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**Rachel Butts**

Solutions Development Manager  
Brightspot Incentives & Events  
Irving, TX

to promote networking, which can be difficult for many attendees.

“With the help of gamification, attendees can more easily break the ice. By adding points to certain networking activities, it encourages attendees to talk to one another, while still gaining traction in the game,” she says.

#### Mistakes to Avoid

When incorporating gamification into a meeting or event, there are some key mistakes that planners should try to avoid. For instance, a crucial piece of successful implementation of gamification is making it easy for attendees to get something out of the event and incorporating a little fun along the way.

“A common mistake that we see are games that are neither engaging nor





# Handling Conflict When the Stakes Are High

## Clear Communication Will Make the Difference Between a Successful and Disastrous Event

By Christine Loomis

**P**lanners often wonder what the best practices are for handling conflicts that arise onsite at conferences or in the planning process.

But in the world of planning meetings, when *aren't* the stakes high?

Jennifer Squeglia, CMP, an independent event professional with Rhode Island-based RLC Events, says, "As professionals and leaders in the event industry, both as hospitality partners and planners, we are faced with challenges, opportunities and conflict constantly. Think about it ... we bring people together who are away from home (familiarity, family), at times surrounded by an exotic environment (challenging climates, foreign languages) and

consistently wowed with creative fare and full, hosted bars. On top of that, we are doing our jobs in a world that is characterized by bizarre weather, random acts of unkindness, and all parts of a conference can be photographed and/or videotaped and exposed to millions of people within minutes. I mean ... what could possibly go wrong?"

What could go wrong, indeed. Attendees caught on video smoking marijuana? Check. Keynotes who don't show up? Check. Two attendees in the same conference having medical emergencies? Check. An irate high-level executive who puts his hands around the neck of a planner because ... wait for it ... the coffee ran out? Check.

These are all real-life planning nightmares. But as Squeglia notes, "It's not the situation, but how you handle the situation."

Often planners must decide in a fraction of a moment whether or not to call doctors or police, what kind of action to take to save an event from catastrophe and whom to rely on for assistance no matter the situation. They have to be prepared for any and all possible emergencies, and they are the ones usually held accountable by stakeholders even when the situation is completely out of their control.

Needless to say, there are common themes in handling conflict and challenge, with the most important

arguably a planner's ability to stay calm and think through a plan even while surrounded by chaos.

But if there is one element that makes the biggest difference between success and catastrophe, one tool that every planner should take out of his or her toolbox when a dicey situation arises, it's communication.

What's the most common mistake many planners make when faced with an unexpected serious situation just prior to or during a conference?

"Depending upon years of experience, I would say they fail to notify their manager or a senior executive for fear of the situation being perceived as their fault," says Rebecca Rosensweig, CMP, AVP and meeting and event planner, who recently retired. "As I gained more experience and built relationships with

about all the other actions and tasks that need to continue to move forward in order to have a successful conference. As the planner, you are the conductor who should communicate clearly with key stakeholders, ask for help where needed and make sure that communications are discreet and appropriate for the level of the situation."

Then there's the issue of timing. Squeglia notes that planners often try to solve a problem too quickly without really thinking it through.

"I know I can be guilty of this," she says. "I will try to resolve something fast to get it off 'the list.' Taking an extra moment to really think it through and not acting rashly is critical."

While blame is never helpful, what about accountability — either your own or someone else's? What if, for example,

they understand what went wrong and learn from it. The key is to make sure the guest/attendee experience is remedied quickly but not ignore that it happened. Address it professionally and move on."

Harris agrees. "It's important that our colleagues and vendors are aware of the consequences of their actions," she says. "That is how we all learn and grow. But don't waste time in the moment with who is at fault. Once a problem arises, we work together to find a solution. It's important that we circle back when time allows and debrief the lessons learned during each event. In a proper forum, it can be more of a discussion and negotiation to make things right and to make sure it doesn't happen again."

Rosensweig points out that every situation is different, but "historically, I would bet most planners 'just take care

"My theory is to **fix the problem swiftly and gracefully** with collaboration — several heads together are always better than one."



**Jennifer Squeglia, CMP**

Independent Event Professional, RLC Events, Warwick, RI

key executives in all the companies I'd worked for over the years, I knew when to bring something to an executive's attention to help mitigate any damage or serious repercussions."

Jill Harris, CMP, director of meetings and incentives with Protective Life Corporation, in Birmingham, Alabama, believes many planners neglect to follow the proper channels of communication and delegation and don't use discretion.

"It's important to rely on trusted colleagues and hospitality partners in order to be able to meet the immediate and constant demands of your event while also being sensitive to the situation that has developed," she says. "It is not wise to zone in on the situation and forget

someone on the hotel team screws up or an attendee misses a flight because of his or her own inability to arrive at the airport on time, or someone on your team sends out incorrect information to 1,000 attendees? Is it important to hold the right person accountable or is it more important to fix the problem?"

"The answer to this question could vary depending on the gravity of the problem," Squeglia says. "My theory is to fix the problem swiftly and gracefully with collaboration — several heads together are always better than one. And, don't waste time blaming anyone. Once the problem is resolved, however, then address the situation with your colleague or hotel partner being as constructive as possible, making sure

of it' without anyone having to take the blame. Having pre-meeting FAQs and clear instructions regarding travel, hotel check-in times, agendas, emergency contact numbers if an attendee is stranded or misses a flight, etc., can help mitigate many problems."

Having a Plan B and clear communication and instructions for all the "what ifs," in fact, can make a huge difference in many situations — those that come from unexpected external circumstances, as well as those within the planning teams.

"If an attendee misses a flight, you have already sent clear instructions of whom to call and how to handle travel issues in your pre-event communications," Harris says. "If a hotel is oversold and is walking guests, that will hopefully



not be a surprise because those terms were negotiated in the contract and through open communication with the hotel during the planning.... There should always be a plan for the 'what ifs,' which one needs to discuss with the hotel in advance and then stay on top of during the event. Communication is key."

But what constitutes a Plan B? For Rosensweig, it has many parts.

"I strongly believe many problems can be avoided or mitigated by having clear FAQs, pre-event travel tips, contingency plans and clear and concise executed legal agreements spelling out 'walk' clauses, Force Majeure, etc.," she says. "There should also be clear communication with your support staff and team regarding what the onsite work expectations are and consequences if someone misbehaves on the job."

apart, so it's also our role as planners to be approachable. In the end, it's a partnership, and an event cannot be successful without a hotel team that is 100 percent behind you."

As for what's out of your control, Squeglia's recommendation is to plan for the worst and hope for the best.

"Obviously, you cannot control weather, and you really don't know what that will be until just before the event, so it's crucial to always have a solid weather backup plan in place," she says. "I've never worked an event where everything was perfect, and your ability to remain calm, think on your feet and use your resources effectively are critical when things do come up. Regarding a hotel being oversold, I am vigilant about ensuring that 'no walk' clauses are in my contracts. I stay in close contact through-

be the easiest path to take, but it's definitely the best one. I suggest collaborating with your company's main point of contact to help resolve the issue. Don't try to handle it alone, especially if it's a top executive."

Rosensweig also suggests contacting someone within the company. "I strongly support reaching out to an HR representative to discuss the situation and make sure you have all the facts, not just hearsay. It's important to build trust with the executives in your company and to find mentors so there's someone you can go to if the situation involves a manager or top executive."

What if board members get into a shouting match or tempers flare at a conference? The first step, these planners say, is to make sure the scene is not within public view.



"Don't waste time in the moment with who is at fault. Once a problem arises, we **work together** to find a solution."

**Jill Harris, CMP**

Director of Meetings and Incentives, Protective Life Corporation, Birmingham, AL

Thinking ahead to anticipate problems is much of the job for planners, says Squeglia.

"The devil is in the details. Always think about 'what if' and have a plan in place," she says. "Collaborating with your peers and supplier partners throughout is critical. Planners should also communicate their expectations and event details and not assume anything. It's also important to ensure that everyone on the team understands their role and responsibilities.

"One thing I always say during a hotel pre-con is that stuff happens all the time, and if a situation arises, I insist they let me know what the issue is," Squeglia continues. "We can resolve it together much more effectively than

out the entire planning process, having full knowledge of the hotel's occupancy over my event dates."

Sometimes, conflict arises due to the inappropriate actions of executives, managers and other stakeholders, making a planner's handling of the issue especially tricky. If a situation involves the poor conduct of a high-level executive or direct superior, a planner may be reluctant to report the problem for fear of being fired.

For Harris, the path forward in such situations is unequivocally clear. "My advice happens to be one of the core values of my company: 'Do the right thing.'"

Squeglia echoes that recommendation. "Doing the right thing is always the right answer," she says. "It may not

"Find an open meeting room and figure out a way to get them in there and get the door shut without them even realizing you are there," Harris says.

"This has never personally happened to me," Squeglia notes, "but I would do my best to move the conflict out of a public space as soon as possible and separate the people involved in the conflict. If need be, contact security."

Rosensweig, however, has experienced such situations firsthand and a remedy became part of her ongoing planning strategy.

"If things were getting out of hand, I would suggest to the executive or employee that we have a private room where the conversation could continue. I have been in a situation like this more

## Common Strategies for Handling Conflict

- Stay calm.
- Use common sense.
- Be discreet when having those difficult conversations; ensure they take place in a private location, not in front of staff or attendees.
- Know your resources and be collaborative with all your partners.
- Don't be defensive.
- Take your leadership role onsite seriously; be aware that everyone is looking to you for answers.
- Overcommunicate.
- Trust others.
- Stay on track.

C&IT



than once in my past, and it became a standard requirement in all my contracts that we have an executive ad hoc room for private conversations."

There's also the issue of problems between planners and the hotel teams they work with, such as the conference services manager. Because this relationship is so integral to successful conferences, planners must be very careful in how they handle such conflicts.

long-standing relationship with the hotel, the sales contact and executive team would probably have a solution ready before a planner even says anything.

"But if they don't," she says, "be very specific about the quality and service expectations you have and how they have not been met. Specific instances and situations will help the team identify the best person to be your support going forward."

These are just a few examples of issues that go sideways at a conference. There are endless possibilities of conflict and challenges a planner might face, which goes back to Squeglia's initial point: "It's not the situation, it's how you handle the situation."

So what's the best advice for planners who find themselves faced with an unexpected and serious issue at a conference?

"Remain calm, use your discretion, be respectful, communicate clearly and use your resources — your business partners and, in particular, your hotel partners," Squeglia advises.

"Trust your partners, colleagues and hospitality partners," Harris says. "Don't be afraid to ask for help and guidance."

For Rosensweig, too, it comes down to relationships.

"Reach out to your team, to the experienced planners, managers and other co-workers with whom you have built relationships," she says. "Bottom line: Meeting and event planning is a relationship business. I still have good, strong relationships with CSMs, global sales executives and hotel executives with whom I did business at the beginning of my career 35 years ago! I strongly recommend to any new planner that it is important to build relationships and alliances and to get to know the executives whose programs you support. That is key to a meeting planner's success." C&IT

"There should be **clear communication** with your support staff and team ... and **consequences** if someone misbehaves on the job."

**Rebecca Rosensweig, CMP, AVP**

Meeting and Event Planner, Huntersville, NC

"I would typically involve the sales manager with whom I had negotiated the contract, as well as the head of banquets or conference services, to help resolve the issues and, if necessary, request that a new CSM be assigned to our program(s)," Rosensweig says.

Harris points out that if you have a

Squeglia, who started her career in the hotel business, also suggests talking to others on the hotel staff. "I would escalate the situation to the director of sales, my global sales partner and/or the hotel's general manager. I would do my best to resolve the situation through collaboration," she says.



Destination

# Island Hoppers

It's Easier Than Ever to Bring Meetings to the Caribbean and The Bahamas

By David Swanson

Enticing weather, tropical surroundings and a variety of cultural influences lure meeting planners to the Caribbean for memorable events of all sizes. Island hotels offer one-of-a-kind settings and venues for indelible group interaction, while amenities such as golf, spas and gorgeous beaches await.

While not all islands have expansive meeting facilities, those that do offer venues that can compete head-to-head with many stateside facilities for services and technology. And, air access to the region is better than ever, with islands like The Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Grand Cayman, Jamaica and Aruba served from multiple airports in the eastern U.S.

## Puerto Rico

To stay abreast with the latest from one of the region's most important meeting sites, I ventured to Puerto Rico in early December, 15 months after Hurricane Maria carved a destructive path through the island. It marked my eighth visit to San

Juan over the last two decades and, given the wealth of dire reports coming out of the island, I was prepared to see a destination that was not primed for visitors, much less for substantial meeting business.

But I found most of San Juan in excellent shape. In fact, the city looks even better than it did seven or eight years ago, when the island had been hit hard by a different storm, the economic crisis. And, resort areas outside the city such as Rio Del Mar and Dorado Beach are looking as beautiful as ever.

San Juan is home to the region's largest and most technologically advanced meeting facility, the Puerto Rico Convention Center. Centrally located between history-rich Old San Juan and the Condado district, the convention center has a 157,000-square-foot exhibition hall and the region's largest ballroom (39,500 square feet), a facility sufficient to host groups up to 10,000.

I was surprised to hear that the complex, which opened in 2005, was fully operational just 48 hours after the hurricane.

Atlantis, Paradise Island is the largest meeting resort in The Bahamas, comparable to the best Vegas meeting hotels.

"The convention center served as the command center for FEMA and as headquarters for the Puerto Rico government," explains general manager Jorge Pérez. "The amount of energy was quite impressive. We served 10,000 breakfasts, lunches and dinners daily for the first month after the storm."

A modest facelift is currently in the works at the convention center, bringing in new carpets and color schemes that will be completed by June. Next door, a dining and entertainment complex, District Live!, is under construction. The facility will include a 105,000-square-foot concert and event venue with a capacity for 6,000 patrons, an eight-screen cinema complex and a 175-room Aloft Hotel by Marriott, scheduled to open later this year. In all, four hotels will be located less than a five-minute walk from the convention center.

One of the first to book a major meeting in San Juan following Maria was American Airlines, which set its annual

1,000-attendee Global Sales Conference in the city last May, just eight months after the storm.

"We wanted to connect with our team members there and give back to the community," says Lindsy Wyner, CMP, senior specialist meetings and events at American Airlines. "Given that the island had just been devastated, everyone was very up-front about the state of everything. The biggest challenge was our concern with regard to power, security, etc."

Wyner made several site visits in the four months leading up, to ensure that the island would be comfortable and safe.

"We held the bulk of the event at the convention center, as none of the hotels could hold a group our size," she adds. "We had conversations with the team at the convention center in regard to our needs and the high-level visibility of this meeting, but we felt confident that they could meet our expectations, and the space was perfect for us."

Wyner says American Airlines didn't use much of the facility's technology, working instead with PSAV to bring in a production team to oversee the AV and run the show.

She spread the group among five hotels, including the 503-room Sheraton Puerto Rico Hotel & Casino, located opposite the convention center. With the largest hotel ballroom on the island (16,290 square feet), the Sheraton has ample facilities for medium-sized groups, including meeting space flooded with natural light. A soft renovation for the rooms and meeting facilities is scheduled for the hotel in Q3 2019.

Wyner also used two smaller properties across from the convention center, the 126-room Hyatt House San Juan and 149-room Hyatt Place San Juan/City Center, which opened in 2014 and 2015, respectively. Remaining guests were booked into the San Juan Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino and La Concha Renaissance San Juan Resort, both located in the Condado area, a 10-minute drive from the convention center.

"We held our opening reception at the La Concha resort, and they blew us away," she says. "Their level of service was top-notch. They worked with us to make the event special, their food was fantastic, and we could really tell how excited they were to have us. They shared our desire for a successful event."

One of the island's original resorts, built in 1958, La Concha is awash in period Tropical Modernism architectural details.



"Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) was a surprise in every way. It truly is the most developed and vibrant capital of the Caribbean."

Ben Sauvage, DMC, DMCP, CMP, CIS, CEO Connect, Fort Lauderdale, FL

The 483-room property received a \$220 million renovation in 2007 to reopen as a Renaissance-flagged resort. But many of the original meeting facilities remain, including an elegant, 5,576-square-foot ballroom and breakout rooms that face





Credit: San Juan Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino

features almost 40,000 square feet of meeting space and sits less than a mile from the international airport.

Located 45 minutes east of San Juan, the 400-room Wyndham Grand Rio Mar Golf & Beach Resort has more than 100,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting space, including a 20,913-square-foot ballroom. The hotel's restaurants have received a full makeover: At the end of last year, Marbella was renovated, and the new casual restaurant Roots Coastal Kitchen features farm-to-table dining; Palio Seafood & Steakhouse will reopen with a new Italian concept later this year.

Just 26 miles west of the San Juan airport lies Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve. Sitting on the hallowed grounds of a famed Laurance Rockefeller-built resort, the 114-room Ritz-Carlton Reserve reopened in October, following a full refresh of facilities and landscaping, including a reimagined signature restaurant, Coa, and a new Omakase & Ceviche Bar. The historic Surf Room serves as the resort's ballroom, offering 4,558 square feet of meeting space with floor-to-ceiling windows encompassing a 180-degree sea view.

Some of Puerto Rico hotels are still undergoing renovation. The 652-room Caribe Hilton celebrates its 70th year with a reopening scheduled for this spring. A total of 65,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting space awaits at the Caribe Hilton, all refreshed this year. The airport-adjacent Ritz-Carlton

Some attendees of American Airlines' Global Sales Conference last May stayed at the San Juan Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino.

the ocean. One beach-level space, the Atlantiko Room, has been divided and encompasses a new nightclub, Fifty-Eight, with the remainder of the space opening onto the sea — no cookie-cutter meeting spaces here. Rooms in the Ocean Tower are currently undergoing a full renovation, while Suites Tower accommodations have received their facelift and are fully operational today.

Nearby, the 404-room San Juan Marriott housed relief personnel during Puerto Rico's initial recovery, but the main tower reopened to leisure guests last April. The hotel's 123-room Cabana wing suffered extensive water damage during the storm, and a full renovation was completed in December. The main tower will be renovated in stages this August through December, and the hotel's 7,000-square-foot ballroom will also get a touchup. Several breakout rooms overlook the beach and rolling surf.

For Wyner, using a DMC, Destination Puerto Rico, was key to the event's success. "They were awesome," she says. "Don't be afraid to use a DMC. They have knowledge and expertise that you can't find anywhere else. When you are bringing 1,000 people to an island, to be housed in five separate hotels, with the meeting at a separate location, holding a reception offsite and doing eight separate community service events, you need help.

"Destination Puerto Rico could not have provided us a better support system. They handled all of our transportation, décor and entertainment. They were affordable, and we never felt that we were being taken advantage of. They know the island better than you do, and they can guide you to make the best decisions for your attendees, your events and your budget. We could not have pulled off an event like this without them."

Other Puerto Rico properties ready for meeting and convention business include El San Juan Hotel, home to the most gorgeous lobby in the Caribbean, lined with acres of hand-carved cherry mahogany. The 388-room hotel, now part of Hilton's Curio Collection, completed a \$65 million renovation in 2017, and has been used for relief personnel since the storm. But a grand reopening was held in December, and the resort's old world elegance and glamour shines anew. The El San Juan



"We wanted someplace where we could contain the group and have everything in one place."

**Veronica Tostado-Span, SCPM**  
Marketing Manager Solutions, Architectures and Engineering Group, CISCO Systems, Glendale, CA

San Juan is still deep in renovations; a reopening date has not been announced. And, reopening dates for El Conquistador and Las Casitas, both Waldorf Astoria resorts, have also not been announced.

But for Wyner, the island proved ready for her group of well-traveled professionals months ago. "The hospitality in Puerto Rico is top-notch," she notes. "They are helpful and kind and were grateful to have the business."

### Dominican Republic

One island over, the Dominican Republic is one of many Caribbean destinations that were not impacted by storms this year or last. While hotel development has been largely focused for the last several decades on the Punta Cana area, the capital city of Santo Domingo has business infrastructure and air connections to make it a smart meeting option. Safeguarded by imposing stone walls 15 feet deep, the city's Colonial Zone is a UNESCO World Heritage Site — it was the first European city in the new world and cobblestone streets and architectural landmarks provide authentic historical ambience.

.....  
"We wanted to connect with our team members [in Puerto Rico] and give back to the community. Given that the island had just been devastated, everyone was very up-front about the state of everything."

**Lindsi Wyner, CMP**, Senior Specialist Meetings and Events, American Airlines, Richardson, TX  
.....

"The Dominican Republic is one of the countries that has been experiencing the most economic growth in Latin America in recent decades," suggests Ben Sauvage, DMC, DMCP, CMP, CIS, CEO of Florida-based Connect. "Santo Domingo was a surprise in every way. It truly is the most developed and vibrant capital of the Caribbean."

The U.S. Meat Export Federation selected the capital city for its Latin American Product Showcase last June, basing the group at the 300-room Renaissance Santo Domingo Jaragua Hotel & Casino, the city's top meeting hotel.

Oversized guest rooms still look fresh following a 2016 makeover, and the Renaissance has more than 23,000 square feet of indoor meeting space, including the tiered La Fiesta Theater with seating for up to 1,200, and the 7,729-square-foot Anacaona Ballroom. Additional space is found outside on a sea-facing lawn and next door at the Sheraton Santo Domingo Hotel.

"We were able to give a high-level experience to the group," adds Sauvage. "A five-star hotel with excellent service, a conference room that met the space and technology standards, and multiple historical and cultural options for leisure at a very short distance that added authenticity."

He also noted that the contracting process with the Renaissance Jaragua was smooth, making the planning process easy, and that the hotel's food and beverage options were diverse. But for a memorable closing night event he looked to the Colonial City.

"We did a panoramic walking city tour with cultural surprises along the way," says Sauvage. The walk ended the Hodelpa Caribe Colonial, where they were welcomed by the national folkloric valet in the entrance against the rhythms of merengue.

"We had the final dinner at a beautiful Spanish patio in the Hodelpa," he says. "The staff was very flexible with the short notice changes and the chef was open and creative — they put big grills outside, and the meat was great. The Colonial City is beautiful enough there was no need to invest in big décor, though a tent is mandatory because the weather in the Caribbean is unpredictable. It rained, but everything went great."

Sauvage added one caveat to working in the Dominican Republic. "The shipping process is too slow, items were delayed." He recommends buying supplies in Santo Domingo, or otherwise arranging to have all items shipped well in advance through the local DMC.

### Aruba

Another top Caribbean destination planners look to is Aruba, and several of the island's Palm Beach resorts have seen recent improvements.

The Hilton Aruba Caribbean Resort & Casino recently completed a renovation encompassing all aspects of the resort, including redesigned guest rooms, refreshed landscapes and re-conceptualized menus and décor for the property's five restaurants.

The Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino saw a refurbishment of guest rooms, as well as to its Tradewinds Lounge and Ruth's Chris venue, and a facelift for the Amsterdam Ballroom.

A \$21 million redesign at the 357-room Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort Spa & Casino updates the accommodations with a chic look while adding modern amenities. The resort's Regency Club Lounge has been moved from the top floor to the ground level for easy access from the pool, beach and casino.

### The Bahamas

Scheduling a major event at a brand-new hotel is bound to encounter a few bumps along the way, but for Veronica Tostado-Span, SCPM, marketing manager solutions, archi-



Credit: Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino

Recent renovations to the Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino have planners showing more interest in this meeting destination.

tectures and engineering group at CISCO Systems, the new 1,800-room Grand Hyatt Baha Mar in Nassau, Bahamas, presented an opportunity for the company's biannual meeting of 1,200 partners.

"It was the perfect storm for us," she explains. "We've done Hawaii, Riviera Maya and Miami, and the next for us to try was the Caribbean. But we started planning late, just six months ahead. The Grand Hyatt Baha Mar had just opened, and the dates we needed were available.

"Something else that was really important was air accessibility because we have people from 42 different countries attending, from the Americas, Europe and Asia. So, we were looking for an accessible destination, we looked at security, at services like ground transportation, and of course, the overall experience with food and beverages."





Credit: CISO Systems

Grand Hyatt Baha Mar in The Bahamas was the perfect location for CISO's 2018 Partner Connection Week with 1,200 attendees from all over the world.

"We wanted someplace where we could contain the group and have everything in one place," adds Tostado-Span. "We invaded the whole resort, and it worked very well."

The Baha Mar complex sprawls over 1,000 acres along Cable Beach, just west of Nassau on New Providence Island. After construction delays, the \$4 billion project opened in 2017 with the Grand Hyatt, followed by the 299-room SLS Baha Mar and 233-room Rosewood Baha Mar last year. But the Grand Hyatt hosts the bulk of the meeting facilities, which includes three nautical-inspired ballrooms and a 2,000-seat entertainment venue — more than 200,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting space in all.

Flexible space was requirement of CISO's Partner Connection Week, for an important component is one-on-ones between executives and partners — 567 individual meetings

"Atlantis is a meeting planner's dream, as it offers every type of traveler or earner something to do, whatever their interest may be."

**Michelle Harris**, Director of Events  
Thirty-One Gifts, Columbus, OH



in all. "We needed to be able to have them float, and for that we used the whole fourth floor," explains Tostado-Span.

"We asked for a lot of different things that they're not used to. For instance, we branded the whole hotel, which sometimes is really hard. Some hotels might say 'not here, not there,' but we were even able to brand the suites. Hyatt said yes to 99 percent of our crazy requests, from ice cream carts to massage chairs on the convention floor. We had a beach party, and they brought everything we needed, including building fire pits. Working with someone that is so open makes our work easier and more pleasant."

One cautionary note Tostado-Span shared was to watch out for transportation costs from the U.S. to The Bahamas. "Everything has to come from Miami," she explains. "That was something we did not expect. I thought the event was going

to be cheaper than doing it in Miami, but our AV costs went through the roof, because it all had to be flown in.

"But Baha Mar was the perfect size for us, and The Bahamas were a beautiful location," Tostado-Span concludes. "This was their first big multiday event, and it was a real commitment from them to go into this hand-in-hand with us. But it was a partnership, and we created something really good."

The direct selling organization Thirty-One Gifts also looked to The Bahamas for its Leadership Incentive Trip last September. Drawing 2,300 attendees, the company needed a large facility to host its group, and chose the 3,400-room Atlantis. The 171-acre resort, part of Marriott's Autograph Collection, includes a casino, golf course, retail complexes, more than 20 restaurants, an aquarium and the largest water theme park in the Caribbean.

"Atlantis is a destination that so many dream of visiting," says Michelle Harris, director of events for Thirty-One Gifts. "Offering this site as an incentive destination provided amazing results."

Located on Paradise Island, a smaller outcrop off New Providence connected by bridge to Nassau, Atlantis is a resort city that compares to the best of the larger Vegas theme resorts — just add sea and sand.

Recent renovations and additions to Atlantis include two new restaurants at The Cove, the luxury wing of the resort, with a newly designed poolscape and cabanas; a new lobby and guest room design for the Coral Tower; while full room renovations are to be completed this month at The Reef tower. A kids concierge is now available at The Coral for children to customize their vacation, while babysitting services can now be booked through the Family Trip Planner on property.

"Atlantis is a meeting planner's dream, as it offers every type of traveler or earner something to do, whatever their interest may be," adds Harris, who notes that size was a determining factor for the group. "There are numerous on-property activities: the beach, water slides, entertainment, a casino, the aquarium and more."

Thirty-One Gifts did plan an offsite excursion for a select group. "We held an event on Pearl Island for 275 people. Our DMC, Equilibrium, assisted in creating a unique and memorable experience for our earners. We offered lunch, music, fun drinks, massages, snorkeling, speedboat rides and a variety of water activities."

Harris called out Sharon Jacques, a "wonderful, dedicated and determined national sales manager. The staff is extremely helpful and accommodating and has the guest and meeting planner at top of mind, all the time. Anything you ask or need, they figure out a way to help or simply just take care of it."

Although Atlantis accommodated Thirty-One Gifts with an all-inclusive package, Harris still cautioned on setting reasonable budget expectations.

"The prices of F&B at Atlantis can be quite high," she explains. "Go in knowing what you are willing or able to spend. Be open and transparent with your attendees concerning their out-of-pocket expenses."

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## Destination

Credit: Dawn Read / Winterfest, Inc.

Winterfest, Inc. loves having its retreats in the tropical paradise, where the weather is as welcoming as the beaches.

# A Fresh Look at Florida

Once Dependent on Tourism, the Sunshine State Now Thrives on Food, Fun and Facilities

If you haven't been to Florida in a while, things may seem a bit different.

Florida's grown up. It's now the third most-populous state, with a population approaching 22 million. Once subject to a feast-or-famine economy mostly dependent on the tourist trade, Florida's now characterized by reborn cities with thriving downtowns.

Miami used to be a low-rise city, where the sidewalks were said to "fold up" after dark. It is now a world-class metropolis, boasting one of the most impressive skylines in America. Jacksonville's downtown has been energized by its Riverwalk and the historic neighborhoods surrounding it. Tampa has also revived its downtown, with a Riverwalk connecting hotels, restaurants and office buildings. Across the bay, St. Petersburg, once in decline, is now a lively city filled with youthful entrepreneurs and innovators.

Wherever you go in Florida, you'll find excellent meeting hotels and resorts.

### Jacksonville

This city is named after Andrew Jackson — who never actually set foot here.

Pretty much ever since, Jacksonville has been overshadowed by seemingly more glamorous Florida cities. But no more.

"Jax" is revitalizing itself from the ground up. And, people are noticing. It was picked as a "Top 10 Best Value Destination" for 2018 by *Lonely Planet*.

This city has 400 parks — more than any other city in America. It's laced with bike paths, nature trails and lakes, and nearby are 22 miles of beach.

The city grew up around the banks of the St. Johns River. But the riverfront eventually fell victim to neglect. When the Riverwalk opened in 1985, however, change came to downtown, and this waterside promenade is filled with restaurants, nightspots and unique shops.

The Prime F. Osborn III Convention Center and its 275,000 square feet of event space is also on the river, within a mile of 2,000 hotel rooms.

Recently opened Hyatt Place Jacksonville/St. Johns Town Center has 160 guest rooms and more than 3,200 square feet of meeting space. Three other new hotel projects are underway, as well. Tru by Hilton at St. Johns Town Center is opening in February, with a focus on corporate travelers. Hyatt Place

By Thomas Rynne

— The Strand at Town Center will also cater to business travelers and small meetings. And, the Atlantis will be a \$77 million, full-service resort with 320 guest rooms and meeting space, with groundbreaking before year's end.

Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront recently completed a major upgrade of its 951 guest rooms, and Lexington Hotel & Conference Center — Jacksonville Riverwalk is about to complete an upgrade of its 322 guest rooms and 35,000 square feet of meeting space.

### Daytona Beach

When Jackie Robinson ran onto the baseball field here in 1946, Daytona Beach entered the national spotlight for the first time.

The 23 miles of white-sand beaches are still among the most famous in America. The Daytona International Speedway shows off the race cars of tomorrow, while the Ponce Inlet Lighthouse, Florida's tallest at 175 feet, dates back to 1887.

Daytona Beach has 12,000 guest rooms in hotels with up to 60,000 square feet of meeting space. In addition, the Ocean Center convention facility offers 205,000 square feet of flexible event space and a stunning glass exterior.

Located within retail/entertainment district ONE DAYTONA is the Fairfield Inn & Suites Daytona Beach Speedway/Airport, with 105 guest rooms and 1,181 square feet of event space. The oceanfront Hard Rock Hotel Daytona Beach opened in March, with 200 guest rooms and 20,000 square feet of meeting space. The Daytona, Autograph Collection is set to open in April, with 145 guest rooms and 10,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor event space.

Existing properties are upgrading. The Hilton Daytona Beach Oceanfront Resort recently renovated all 744 guest rooms and its 60,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting space.

At the Daytona International Speedway, attendees can meet in some of the most unique spaces in the country. The Motorsports Hall of Fame of America is a 10,000-square-foot facility also available for rentals.

### The Palm Beaches

It wasn't too long ago that Palm Beach County was mainly agricultural, and its core city, West Palm Beach, had fallen on hard times. But times are no longer hard.

Palm Beach County is now home to 1.5 million people, and reborn towns like Delray Beach, with a downtown that's been recognized as one of the coolest in America. And now West Palm Beach is a shiny example of urban rebirth, with popular entertainment and shopping districts and a vibrant downtown.

The hotel scene is a lively one. The Ray Hotel is set to open in Delray Beach in mid-2019, with 143 guest rooms, a rooftop restaurant and an elevated, glass-enclosed event space for up to 300 attendees. This November, the Banyan Cay Resort & Golf will open in West Palm Beach with 150 guest rooms and more than 15,000 square feet of meeting space.

The Boca Raton Mandarin Oriental is set to debut in 2020,

with 158 guest rooms, a 4,500-square-foot ballroom and a variety of flexible conference rooms.

The Five-Star, Five-Diamond Four Seasons Resort Palm Beach re-opened in November, after an extensive renovation that included its 196 guest rooms and 21,128 square feet of meeting space.

Offsites are expanding, as well. The iconic Norton Museum of Art is closed due to a \$100 million expansion. When it reopens in February, it will have an additional 50,000 square feet



**Paul Steen**, Director, Global Accounts  
HelmsBriscoe, Orlando, FL

"It was winter in Florida, and we liked holding some events outdoors. The spaces [at JW Marriott Orlando] were conducive to productive meetings, and our post-meeting surveys were very positive."

— much of dedicated to meeting and event spaces.

In Palm Beach County, even transportation's booming. The new Brightline intercity express railroad connects West Palm Beach to Fort Lauderdale and Miami, and, in only two hours, to Orlando.

Just north of West Palm Beach, in Stuart, discover a compelling mix of style and substance at the Hutchinson Island Marriott Beach Resort & Marina. Located in the sunny enclave of Hutchinson Island, the hotel offers luxury accommodations in the main resort or the beachfront Sandpiper Tower suites and resort amenities, such as an 18-hole golf course, fitness center, a private marina, three pools and several dining options. Hutchinson Island Marriott Beach Resort & Marina is also a top meeting venue, boasting more than 30,000 square feet of flexible event space. Area attractions include Johnathan Dickinson State Park, the largest state park in Southeast Florida, and historic downtown Stuart, home to more than 50 locally owned shops and restaurants.

### Greater Fort Lauderdale

Broward County's population is now pushing 2 million, and its biggest city is now pushing toward the sky. "Lauderdale" was once a sleepy, low-rise city known for Spring Breakers on holiday. But no more. This is now very much a sophisticated urban center, with new towers approaching 50 stories and young businesspeople moving into them.

Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport is undergoing a major expansion, and Port Everglades is one of the top three cruise ports in the world. And, the Greater Fort Lauderdale/Broward County Convention Center, already 600,000 square feet, is going to get a lot bigger.

It's about to get a new convention headquarters hotel, too. The Convention Center Expansion and Headquarters Hotel





Credit: Hutchinson Island Marriott Beach Resort & Marina

Hutchinson Island Marriott Beach Resort & Marina is the perfect place for guests wanting to enjoy a peaceful incentive trip with a tropical feel.

Project will add more than 400,000 square feet of meeting/event space and an 800-room, Four Diamond hotel with 73,000 square feet of meeting space.

Home2 Suites By Hilton Fort Lauderdale Airport-Cruise Port offers 130 guest rooms and a 1,024-square-foot meeting room. Fairfield Inn & Suites Downtown Fort Lauderdale/Las Olas is a Marriott property with 108 guest rooms and 1,037 square feet of event space.

Recently opened Costa Hollywood Beach Resort has 307 rooms and 3,500 square feet of meeting space. The Dalmar also opened last year with 209 guest rooms and 16,000 square feet of meeting space. Coming in September is Le Meridien Dania Beach at Fort Lauderdale Airport, which will have more than 23,000 square feet of function space.

### Greater Miami

Miami is one of America's most dynamic cities, and its futuristic skyline is now one of the most impressive in America.

With the biggest cruise port on Earth, a rapidly expanding international airport, modern transportation systems — and, of course, beautiful beaches and attractions — Miami's now an international hot spot.

It's a hot spot for meeting planners, too. Aloft recently opened in tony Coral Gables, with 137 guest rooms and 13,000 square feet of meeting space. Four Points by Sheraton Miami Airport, with 124 guest rooms and 1,000 square feet of meeting space, also recently opened. Hyatt Centric Brickell Miami opened in the Brickell Avenue Financial District with 208 guest rooms and 7,500 square feet of meeting space.

Several iconic properties are now upgrading. Turnberry Isle Miami has undergone a \$150 million expansion/renovation and has emerged as JW Marriott Miami Turnberry Resort & Spa with 790 guest rooms and 121,000 square feet of meeting space. The newly designed Loews Miami Beach Hotel is even better after a \$50 million renovation of its 790 guest rooms and 65,000 square feet of meeting space.

The granddaddy of all Miami upgrades, however, took place at the Miami Beach Convention Center, where a \$620 million

upgrade/expansion resulted in a brand-new, state-of-the-art facility. With the addition of 300,000 square feet, the "new" MBCC is now 1.4 million square feet. There's a new 60,000-square-foot ballroom and a new 20,000-square-foot ballroom with a glass roof. There's now 500,000 square feet of contiguous exhibit space. In addition, the center is LEED-certified.

Janet Hoppenstein, CMP, is national account manager with Experient. She brought 450 attendees from the Human Capital Institute to Miami in June, for the 2018 Strategic Talent Acquisition Conference. The group stayed and met at the InterContinental Miami, downtown on the harbor, with 641 guest rooms and 101,000 square feet of meeting space.

"Miami is a city that attracts international attendees — including some of ours — and the hotel was thoughtful enough to present international food specialties," says Hoppenstein. "Its waterside location enabled some of our sponsors to hold events on boats. And, the InterContinental knows how to do productive events."

"Both the client and the attendees were very pleased with Miami," she says. "Would we go back? Well, we're having our Workforce Planning Conference at the InterContinental next year."

### Orlando

Orlando has 122,000 hotel rooms — the second-most hotel rooms of any city in America. The Orange County Convention Center is the second-largest, with 7 million — yes, 7 million! — square feet of event space. It's also the fourth-busiest in the U.S., attracting some 1.5 million attendees who pump \$2.5 billion annually into the region's economy.

Orlando International Airport is building a \$1.8 billion south terminal and an adjacent \$1.3 billion train station. The station and gates 16 to 21 of the terminal will open later this year, with a moving sidewalk.

Orlando's theme parks offer options you can't find anywhere else. Universal Orlando Resort has debuted a program that adds unique branded character moments and inspirational themes for meetings. Loews Sapphire Falls Resort at Universal Orlando has 1,000 guest rooms and 115,000 square feet of event space. Universal's Aventura Hotel has recently opened, offering 600 guest rooms and 115,000 square feet for meetings.

DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Orlando at SeaWorld has completed a significant expansion and now offers 100,000 square feet of meeting space with more than 1,000 guest rooms. The Marriott Orlando Downtown has renovated all 293 guest rooms and the 16,000 square feet of meeting space.

Paul Steen, director, Global Accounts at HelmsBriscoe, held an event at the JW Marriott Orlando, Grande Lakes, for 120 attendees last February. He was involved in site inspections, hotel bids, choice of hotel, room setup and meeting- and reception-planning.

"It's a fairly new hotel," Steen says, "and we wanted to try it out for a shareholders' meeting. We stayed at the JW Marriott, and used the meeting space connecting the Marriott to the Ritz-Carlton. It was winter in Florida, and we liked holding some events outdoors. The spaces were conducive to productive meetings, and our post-meeting surveys were very positive."

"There's one thing I would advise planners considering this property," Steen adds. "This hotel is very popular with planners. Meetings are booked well in advance. So if you're considering it, you'd best start planning two to three years in advance. And, going forward as soon as you can."

### Naples/Collier County

The beautiful town of Naples has received numerous "Best Of" designations, among them the No. 1 Happiest-Healthiest community in America in a recent Gallup poll — for the third consecutive year.

The big news in the Naples meeting scene is the huge — \$320 million — upgrade of the JW Marriott Marco Island Beach Resort. The Marriott has long been one of Marco's most popular meeting properties. Now, though, it's not just "popular." It's world-class.

There are nine superb restaurants, from grab-and-go to gourmet, 809 redesigned guest rooms, and there's now 100,000 square feet of the most technologically advanced, most attendee-friendly meeting space you've ever seen. There's also a 30,000-square-foot ballroom, high ceilings and roomy interiors, magnificent vistas of the Gulf of Mexico, and coming soon is a new restaurant geared to meeting attendees — a combination gastropub and gaming emporium.

All these meeting amenities are hardly surprising, though, in a resort whose event planners are trained in the "seven meeting purposes" (Celebrate, Decide, Educate, Ideate, Network, Produce, Promote).

The Hilton Marco Island Beach Resort & Spa recently completed a \$40 million upgrade of the 12,000 square feet of meeting spaces and the restaurant, and will finish an upgrade of the 310 guest rooms in late summer.

Dawn Read is event director at Winterfest, Inc., Greater Fort Lauderdale's annual festival celebrating the holiday season. She put together a Strategic Planning Meeting for the Board of Directors last March, bringing 100 attendees to LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort (189 guest rooms and 11,000 square feet of meeting space).

"Winterfest is a multi-event South Florida tradition," Read says, "and it requires a meetings environment conducive to meticulous planning. This was our third

"Miami is a city that attracts international attendees — including some of ours — and the hotel was thoughtful enough to present international food specialties."

**Janet Hoppenstein, CMP**

National Accounts Manager, Experient, Richardson, TX

meeting at the LaPlaya in recent years. Our attendees like the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Naples, the recreational opportunities ranging from golf to the Everglades, and the fact that the property's right on the beach. And, I like it because the meetings staff is very professional... which makes my job much easier."

### Fort Myers/Lee County

Lee County includes the tropical islands of Sanibel and Captiva; the growing "new" town of Bonita Springs; and the historic town of Fort Myers, where good friends Thomas Edison and Henry Ford built adjoining homes on the banks of the Caloosahatchee River.

Captiva and Sanibel Islands are laid-back and tropical, each with its own particular charm. Sanibel is the larger and more populated, with good shopping and restaurants. Captiva is slower-paced, a leafy hideaway with a beach lined by magnificent mansions.

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Recently renovated Turnberry Isle Miami has emerged as JW Marriott Miami Turnberry Resort & Spa.

With 330 acres, 45,000 square feet of meeting space and 465 guest rooms, South Seas Island Resort on Captiva Island is well-equipped to handle sizable meetings. There are six restaurants, a full-service spa, golf and tennis, and great shopping on the resort and across the street.

'Tween Waters Island Resort & Spa is a different type of meeting resort. What began as a weekend fishing village in 1931 now has 138 units, 19 of which are restored, colorful cottages used as officers' quarters during World War II. There's 12,000 square feet of meeting space and three eateries.

In Bonita Springs, the Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort and Spa offers 454 guest rooms and 82,500 square feet of meeting space overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. For an interesting offsite venue, planners can use the Southwest Florida Event Center here, which holds up to 1,000 people for events.

Or, you can have your meeting at monuments to American ingenuity — the adjoining homes of Edison and Ford. Edison built his home in 1885, and Ford soon joined him. Interesting meeting spaces abound here, among them the Edison Ford Museum.

### St. Petersburg/Clearwater

In St. Petersburg, everything old is new again. This city of 265,000, in the doldrums only a decade or two ago, is a modern American success story.

Local folks are repurposing old properties into trendy apartments, cafes, bars and foodhalls. Central Avenue, once devoid of traffic, is today a throbbing urban artery both day and night. And, St. Petersburg's population, once predominantly aging, is now youthful and entrepreneurial.

Just to the north is Clearwater, with a beach recently named the best in America by TripAdvisor — for the second time in three years.

Hyatt Place St. Petersburg/Downtown opened in 2017 with 175 guest rooms and 5,201 square feet of meeting space, along with a rooftop pool, fitness center and restaurant. Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach also opened in 2017, on the beach, with 343 guest rooms, 22,000 square feet of meeting space and three restaurants.

On St. Pete Beach, the Sirata Beach Resort completed a renovation of its 382 guest rooms last fall, to go with 30,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor function space.

The Hyatt Regency Clearwater Beach Resort & Spa recently unveiled an upgrade of its meeting space and 287 guest rooms, all having additional charging stations to provide for multiple mobile devices. There are now 65-inch flat-screen TVs in each room, along with new carpeting and freshly painted blue and gray walls that give the rooms an aquatic feeling. There's new artwork throughout the resort, and new food and beverage options, including a 24-hour market.

The resort added 37 suites, most of which include fully furnished kitchens. In addition, the popular Skimmer's Bar, which features several local beers on tap, has been relocated to the SHOR American Seafood Grill.



**"Our attendees like the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Naples, the recreational opportunities ranging from golf to the Everglades, and the fact that the property's right on the beach."**

**Dawn Read, Event Director**  
Winterfest, Inc., Fort Lauderdale, FL

Meeting spaces haven't been left behind in the resort's upgrade, either. It has combined two meeting spaces into the new 3,100-square-foot Belleair Room, which has floor-to-ceiling windows with stunning views of the ocean, along with a balcony for an even closer look. And, the resort has also upgraded the Bayview Room, an eighth-floor meeting space for up to 25 attendees.

Lisa Hartmann is director of education for Pinellas Park, Florida-based Center Academy, a for-profit company with 10 private schools in Florida and Georgia for children with learning disabilities. She believes the Hyatt Regency is especially adept at holding executive meetings, and she brought 15

school principals and corporate executives to the resort for the fourth straight year in November.

"We had executives there, several guest speakers and we held a dinner for 40 people to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the company," Hartmann says. "We find an extraordinary expertise on small meetings at the Hyatt Regency. In fact, many hotels wouldn't even host a group as small as ours, for fear we might be taking space away from large groups. But it's easy to see that Hyatt staff care for the smaller groups with as much dedication as the larger ones. They make my job easier. And, what greater compliment can a meeting planner give?"

Several other beloved hotel icons are coming to life again. Fenway Hotel first opened in Dunedin in 1927, but was eventually sold and then closed. Now it's back in all its art deco glory, with 83 guest rooms and 11,126 square feet of event space. The Vinoy, first opened on New Year's Eve in 1925, re-opened as the Vinoy Renaissance St. Petersburg Resort & Golf Club last year, with its 361 guest rooms and 65,000 square feet of function space in the style of the Roaring '20s.

### Tampa

Tampa's also enjoying a renewal. The Riverwalk along the Hillsborough River now ties together major hotels, restaurants, parks and office buildings, bringing a breath of fresh air to downtown.

AC Hotel Tampa Airport opened earlier this year, in the upscale Westshore district, with 175 guest rooms and 2,458 square feet of event space. Nearby, the former InterContinental Hotel has been transformed into the new Westshore Grand, with 325 rooms and 17,000 square feet of flexible meeting space.

Even parts of town that haven't changed much in the past century — like Ybor City, born in the original Cuban emigration in the 1800s — will see new hotels. The first one in decades is planned for late-2019, a 176-room boutique project that will probably have meeting space.

A 213-room joint Hampton Inn, Home2 Suites recently opened just minutes from the Tampa Convention Center with a 2,000-square-foot meeting room. A 519-room JW Marriott Tampa with 126,000 square feet of meeting space is set to open in 2020, complementing the 600,000-square-foot Tampa

Convention Center across the street. The Tampa Marriott Waterside Hotel & Marina, with 683 guest rooms and 43,229 square feet of meeting space, is now completing a \$40 million renovation. The Sheraton Tampa Bay Riverwalk Hotel, with 12,000 square feet of event space, has recently completed a remake of all 277 guest rooms.

Busch Gardens Tampa has meeting spaces accommodating up to 4,000 people. Or, you can rent out the entire park.

The recently re-named Zoo Tampa at Lowry Park has event spaces accommodating up to 500, along with 17,000 square feet (capacity 700) at Safari Lodge.

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# Nevada's Dynamic Duo



The bright lights of Park MGM in Las Vegas (left) draw big crowds, while twinkling lights on the patio of the Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort create an intimate event.

## Reno Has Just as Many Exciting Options as Its Glitzy Neighbor Las Vegas

everything our sales managers and we want when we offer a program," says Linden Calder, national director of retail operations training for Subaru of America, Inc. "They are sophisticated people with high incomes who are highly educated. They like the shows and restaurants. There's good weather, and the flights in and out are easy and available. There's a high level of customer service.

"When you want to put together a themed event, there is no easier or better place than Las Vegas," Calder adds.

For 2018, Cash Bash's décor and activities were based on a popular children's book and movie. As people arrived on Sunday, they could grab snacks and drinks and watch football in a hospitality suite, which was decorated to look like the story's famous tea party. The main incentive program took place in a stage set to look like something found on the other side of the looking glass. (Subaru worked with Absolute Amusements to bring the storybook land to life.) At a long-drive golfing championship, people hit balls that looked like hedgehogs with clubs done up to look like long-necked birds. People were delighted by the little details from the story.



**Don Ross**, Vice President, Catering, Conventions and Events  
Caesars Entertainment, Las Vegas, NV

"Las Vegas has the best dining that the world has to offer. Within three miles, we've got almost every big chef in the world."

**T**hirty years ago, gambling was the main thing that brought people to Las Vegas and Reno. Casinos were rare in the rest of the country and afforded visitors plenty of excitement and an enticing air of edginess.

That's no longer the case today. Gaming has dipped in Las Vegas and Reno, but most everything else is on the rise. "Hospitality, entertainment and food and beverage have really taken off," says Don Ross, vice president of catering, conventions and events for Las Vegas' Caesars Entertainment. "Las Vegas has the best dining that the world has to offer. Within three miles, we've got almost every big chef in the world. We've got some of the best shopping in the world."

The meetings, conventions and incentive trips industry has continued its own dramatic upswing, to the point where Las Vegas is now one of the biggest and most beloved event destinations globally.

Reno has seen tremendous new investment in hotels and resorts. The number of interesting shops and restaurants is growing, and it continued to be an amazing place to experience art. "Airlift has gone up year over year with new lift and

By Sophia Bennett

new carriers," says Mike Larragueta, vice president of sales for the Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority.

Lake Tahoe and other outdoor recreation spots offer opportunities for adventures year-round. All of these things make Reno a destination that's just as exciting as its more glitzy neighbor. Find out what's new and enticing in Nevada's two largest metro areas.

### Las Vegas

"Las Vegas is a dynamic, exciting city unlike any other, and we're constantly evolving," says Amy Riley, CEM, senior director of business sales for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA). Whether it's an entertainer, restaurant concept, event venue or hotel, there's something new to see pretty much every time you set foot in the city.

"From the fine-dining restaurants to the 24-hour coffee shops to the entertainment and nightlife and shows, everything is right there at your fingertips," says Bryan Gay, CMP, senior vice president of sales and conventions for the SLS Las Vegas.

Guests will never lack things to do — and everything they might want to do is a stone's throw away, which keeps transportation costs low and guests eager to keep coming back.

One of the best things about Las Vegas is that it offers something for everyone.

"There's something for groups of all budgets, whether you're very cost-conscious or whether the sky's the limit," says Gus Tejeda, director of marketing for the Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas. "Along with that, there's myriad hotel options, from budget to five-star. This city has the best meeting space options on the planet, with the ability to accommodate meetings ranging in size from 10 to 10,000. It really lends itself to any type or size of group."

The Four Seasons was recently home to an event that showcases why Las Vegas is an ideal destination for businesses wanting to provide memorable experiences for employees. It was called Cash Bash, and it's an annual incentive trip for regional sales managers at Subaru of America, Inc.

"The reason we go to Las Vegas is, generally speaking, it offers



Subaru had been to the Four Seasons before and typically doesn't go back to the same hotel twice. However, "I was impressed with the people at the Four Seasons and the way they demonstrated their desire for our business," says Calder. "The level of service they showed us was the type of service I'd like to extend to customers and the way things should be done by our sales managers. They were perfect partners to produce the event."

Part of the great service that's available throughout Las Vegas comes from the level of experience of the typical service industry employee.

"We've been the No. 1 trade show destination in the country for the past 24 consecutive years, according to the Trade Show News Network," said Riley. "We host approximately 22,000 meetings and conventions each year, with 70 percent welcoming 500 people or less, and we hosted a record-breaking 6.6



**"The whole city revolves around travel and tourism, so we're experts. It's important to ask questions.... Really listen to what people are suggesting. They know their hotels."**

**Steve Blanner**, Senior Vice President, Hotel Sales  
Wynn Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV

Another standout aspect of Las Vegas is the wide array of entertainment options that are available. The ability to see world-class concerts, plays and other shows gets people excited about coming to Las Vegas. They're more likely to register for conferences and compete for incentive trips. Companies shouldn't feel like they have to pay for large parties or major performers at their events if they don't want to. There's no worry that guests will get bored; there's something happening in Las Vegas 24/7.

However, corporations that want to put on their own special events have an added advantage when they come to Las Vegas. Due to the fact that there are already so many celebrities in Las Vegas for residencies or special events, it's often possible to arrange for big-name performers without having to pay for their transportation costs. Ross recalls a recent event for a group of 12,000 people that included a themed dinner on the lawn followed by a performance by Kelly Clarkson. Caesars was able to schedule Lenny Kravitz for another corporate meeting.

Even if you decide to provide your own entertainment, Ross recommends allowing plenty of time for people to explore the many other things Las Vegas has to offer.

"Do an evening event from 7 to 9, for example, then let people enjoy the city," he says. "Strategize and use the city wisely."

Amid the amazing-built environment of Las Vegas, it can be easy to lose sight of getting attendees outside and taking advantage of the beautiful weather. But that's something more people are looking for in this day and age.

"They don't want to sit in a box boardroom all day long," says Blanner. "They're looking for rooms with natural light or patios. That's really where we've carved out our own niche."

A lot of our meeting rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows. A lot have balconies overlooking the golf course or pool."

Outdoor offerings will improve with the addition of a 300,000-square-foot event facility slated to open in 2020. The two-story building will include a 20,000-square-foot outdoor pavilion for receptions and other gatherings. It will complement the recently opened Wynn Plaza, a 70,000-square-foot shopping center that includes a fitness center by SoulCycle and organic coffee and tea shop called Urth Caffe.

The Wynn is far from the only property making



Credit: Wynn Resorts

Many of the meeting rooms at Wynn Las Vegas have balconies that overlook its magnificent pool area.

million delegates in 2017. Simply put, we're the experts and the industry leader for hosting meetings and conventions."

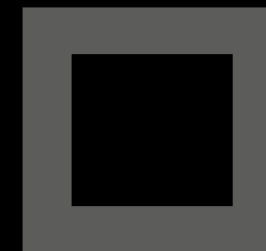
Steve Blanner, senior vice president of hotel sales for Wynn Las Vegas, strongly advises meeting planners to take advantage of that expertise. "The whole city revolves around travel and tourism, so we're experts. It's important to ask questions and get the most out of wherever you are. Really listen to what people are suggesting. They know their hotels."

**"We host approximately 22,000 meetings and conventions each year.... Simply put, we're the experts and the industry leader for hosting meetings and conventions."**



**Amy Riley, CEM**, Senior Director, Business Sales  
Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, Las Vegas, NV

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**Bryan Gay, CMP**, Senior Vice President, Sales and Conventions SLS Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV

improvements right now. According to the LVCVA, more than \$19 billion is being invested in Las Vegas facilities right now. The new CAESARS FORUM Conference Center will be a 550,000-square-foot facility with 300,000 square feet of meeting space, including the two largest pillarless ballrooms



Harrah's Las Vegas will have direct access to the CAESARS FORUM Conference Center when it opens in 2020.

in the world. Harrah's Las Vegas, the LINQ and the Flamingo Las Vegas Hotel and Casino will all be directly accessible from the conference center. It is expected to open in 2020.

The SLS, which was purchased by Meruelo Group early last year, recently started a \$100 million renovation. The casino and one hotel tower will be finished by the third quarter of this year. Upgrades to the remaining towers and common areas will begin after that. Thanks to some changes that have already been made, large events can now inquire about using the marquis and temporarily rebranding their hotel with their company's name and logo.

“A recent client had their branding all over the property, which was great for the attendees because they felt like it was their place,” says Gay. “We can really present their brand very well.”

“Over the past year or so, several properties have undergone significant renovations and/or rebranding, including the Monte Carlo, which has rebranded as Park MGM, as well as the boutique NoMad Las Vegas,” says Riley. “Additionally, the Palms Casino Resort has enjoyed an extensive renovation, and last fall,



**Gus Tejada**, Director of Marketing Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV

Waldorf Astoria opened in the former home of the Mandarin Oriental. On the north end of the Strip, Resorts World is under construction, and the former site of the Fontainebleau is expected to open in the early 2020s as The Drew.

“Another significant update is the Las Vegas Convention Center District,” Riley continued. “The expansion and complete renovation of the Las Vegas Convention Center will add 600,000 square feet of exhibit space, new meeting rooms and other amenities.”

Construction on the expansion started in September and will be completed in 2021. An overhaul of the existing facility will start after that and should wrap up by 2023.

## Reno

Reno was established during the California Gold Rush in the 19th century, and it's experiencing a gold rush of a different sort today. Dozens of businesses have set up facilities in northern Nevada in recent years, including companies such as Tesla and Switch, says Larragueta with the Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority. A tech firm called Blockchains, LLC recently purchased 64,000 acres at the Tahoe-Reno Industrial Center and is getting ready to open a new office and research center. The concentration of innovative companies makes Reno an interesting place for businesses to visit and learn more about what their peers are doing.

Local event properties are going through some big changes. Meruelo Group bought the Grand Sierra Resort a few years and has put more than \$200 million into improving to the meeting space, restaurants, pool, fitness center and more. Marnell Gaming purchased the Nugget Casino Resort in Sparks in 2016.

“The property is in the midst of a complete and total renovation, floor to ceiling, wall to wall,” says Randy Kennedy, director of marketing communication for the Nugget.

All 788 rooms in the west tower have been renovated. The east tower, which has more than 600 rooms, will be spruced up this year. The lobby, casino and 110,000-square-foot convention space have all been completely redone. There's a new sports-themed restaurant and bar called Game On.

“Marnell Gaming is really bullish on the Reno market,” Kennedy added. “They've voted with their dollars and have put a lot of capital into the property.”

**“This city has the best meeting space options on the planet, with the ability to accommodate meetings ranging in size from 10 to 10,000. It really lends itself to any type or size of group.”**

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As these large companies have invested in local properties, it's spurred redevelopment at other local resorts and hotels. The rooms and food court at Circus Circus Reno were recently renovated, and the Eldorado Resort Casino is currently doing a refresh of all guest rooms. The Silver Legacy Resort Casino just opened the largest spa in the region. The former Fitzgerald Hotel has become the Whitney Peak Hotel, and the old Siena Hotel has transformed into the Renaissance Reno Downtown Hotel, a trendy spot with features like bocce ball and Reno's longest bar.

Whatever hotel you choose, Karen Nichols, president of Red Carpet Events and Design, a local destination management company and corporate event planning firm, says great service is a given.



Credit: Shelby Whitehead

**"We are an events town.... Our hotels are phenomenal in regard to knowing what the business traveler needs. They're well-versed in events because we have so many."**

**Karen Nichols, President**  
Red Carpet Events and Design, Sparks, NV

experience," says Nichols. "Reno is the closest big city to Burning Man. The community has a strong presence in the Reno area, and they do phenomenal community art projects. There are amazing mural tours that have incorporated Burning Man art, as well as works by local muralists and artists."

Groups can also arrange to go to The Generator, a maker studio that hosts many of the people who make large art pieces for Burning Man. It provides classes and a glimpse into where some of the festival's magic happens.

The community plays host to several large special events throughout the year. The Best in the West Nugget Rib Cook-Off, which has been named the best barbecue festival in the country, draws large crowds over Labor Day weekend. Hot August Nights and Street Vibrations, a motorcycle rally, are other popular events. Festivals like these give visitors a chance to experience something different. (Alternatively, they give planners dates to work around, since hotel availability is often quite limited during these community-wide events, Kennedy points out.)

"Reno is a great market, as far as close-by getaways," says Kennedy. "Lake Tahoe is 45 minutes from our door. Some of the best resorts in the world are surrounding Lake Tahoe. There are at least 30 golf courses within a 45-minute range of Reno. It's a fabulous outdoor playground."

Nichols was involved in an event for NCAA Division I basketball coaches that was sponsored by an athletic apparel company. The gathering took place at a Lake Tahoe resort and involved activities such as a chili cook-off, riding electric bikes around the lake, boating and plenty of other outdoor adventures.

"In my business, what we're trying to do is foster connections between people," she says. "Going to Lake Tahoe and being in a kayak with someone — it creates that closeness that's missing when you have a meeting between four walls."

For those who are less interested in outdoor activities, nearby Virginia City is a historic mining town with old Victorian homes, saloons, museums and other attractions. And, Reno has great shopping, including a large outlet mall and a Scheels location that pegs itself "the world's largest all-sports store."

Event attendees will never lack for things to do in "the biggest little city in the world."

**C&IT**



Credit: LVCA

The Las Vegas Convention Center is undergoing an expansion that will add 600,000 square feet of exhibit space.

"We are an events town. We're used to having different entities come in and do events, and that translates to the corporate business, as well. Our hotels are phenomenal in regard to knowing what the business traveler needs. They're well-versed in events because we have so many."

People looking to offer unique local experiences to guests have several options. The Midtown neighborhood has become a trendy spot for restaurants, breweries, art galleries and independent shops.

"We get lots of people who want to have the Burning Man

**"Reno is experiencing a gold rush of a different sort today. Dozens of businesses have set up facilities in northern Nevada in recent years, including companies such as Tesla and Switch."**



**Mike Larragueta, Vice President, Sales**  
Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority, Reno, NV

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Steve O'Malley, Michael Guerriero, and David Peckinpugh (pictured left to right)  
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## On The Move



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Associated Luxury Hotels International (ALHI) has appointed **Heather Buss** as vice president of sales for the Mid-Atlantic region. She has 18 years of hospitality sales experience. Prior to joining ALHI, she served as director of global sales at Salamander Hotels & Resorts.

Sonesta Resort Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, welcomed **Julianne Dirks** and **Courtenay LaMountain** as senior sales managers. Dirks previously worked with Omni Hilton Head Ocean Front Resort as a sales administrator. LaMountain held roles as conference services manager, sales manager and destination sales executive for Westin Hilton Head.

Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek has appointed **Suzanne Moore** as director of group

sales, and **Gustavo Sanchez** and **Hanane Jellouli** as group sales managers for the resort. Prior to this, Moore was senior sales manager at the Omni Orlando Resort ChampionsGate, Sanchez was senior sales manager at Universal Orlando Resort for Loews Hotels, and Jellouli worked in sales at the DoubleTree Orlando International Airport.

DoubleTree by Hilton Orlando at SeaWorld has appointed **Marje Jones** as director of sales and marketing. Jones has more than 25 years of experience in the hospitality industry and most recently served as a director of sales and business development in the D.C. metro area.

Montage Beverly Hills has appointed **Jennie Hoffman** director of sales and marketing. Hoffman

previously worked for Pyramid Hotel Group where, as regional director of sales and marketing, she was responsible for hotels in Los Angeles, Hawaii and was part of the transition of a property in Ireland.

Omni Hotels & Resorts has appointed **Dan Boyer** as director of sales and marketing for Omni Oklahoma City Hotel, set to open in 2021. Most recently, Boyer was director of sales and marketing at Sheraton Grand Phoenix Hotel.

The Wisconsin Center District, which owns and operates the Wisconsin Center convention space, Miller High Life Theatre and UW-Milwaukee Panther Arena, has named **Megan Seppmann** as vice president of sales. She was most recently area associate director of sales for Marcus Hotels & Resorts. **C&IT**



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