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A COASTAL COMMUNICATIONS CORPORATION PUBLICATION

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# CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR GLOBAL MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

## Cruise Meetings

Larger Ships Now Come With  
Flexible Meeting Spaces

PAGE 16

Norwegian Cruise Line's  
*Norwegian Breakaway*  
at Port New Orleans

## Atlantic City: The New Frontier

Planners Searching For New Meeting Spots  
May Find Refuge in New Jersey  
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## Influential Women in the Meetings Industry

How Some of the Most Accomplished  
Females in the Business Found Success  
PAGE 32

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Some new hotels offer unique amenities, like the guest rooms that overlook the infinity pool at Hotel Xcaret Mexico. **PAGE 26**



See our list of some of the amazing female influencers who impact the meetings and events industry every day. **PAGE 32**



Ocean Resort Casino, which opened last June after a \$175 million renovation, is the tallest building in Atlantic City. **PAGE 48**



# Publisher's Message

## Bigger Ships, Better Options, More Meeting Space

Years ago, a cruise was chosen mostly as an incentive program because on-board meeting facilities and services were few and far between. But times have changed in a big way. "Cruise Meetings" on Page 16 talks about how cruise lines have stepped up their game by adding more flexible meeting space, new onboard amenities and services and innovative audio-visual technology. The result? Business is certainly booming. Moreover, many cruise companies that were catering

solely to incentive programs are now actively seeking meetings business and are building new and bigger ships that fit the unique requirements of meetings at sea.

In fact, cruise ships now compete with hotels to host meetings and events. And they have an advantage: The ships' all-in-one package may often be quite affordable. Cruise lines are expanding destination options while remaining generally less expensive than hotels of comparable quality, giving planners-at-sea budget-saving options amid the current seller's market for hotels. Cruise ship meetings are typically 20 percent to 30 percent less than those of hotels and other land-based venues.



"The number of new ships that join the marketplace each year is staggering," says Eldon Gale, director of events for Scentsy, who recently planned a successful event for 2,200 attendees aboard Royal Caribbean's *Symphony of the Seas*. "Each ship seems to be bigger and better than the previous, and each offers a new level of offerings that exceed the previous. Cruise ships are constantly innovating and pushing the limits of what's possible — much more so than you get from a traditional hotel."

Newer ships provide a variety of spaces for all types of meetings, events, incentives, board retreats, receptions, customer appreciation programs and more. There are dedicated conference centers with audio-visual and wireless capabilities. Most ships have theaters or lounges that can be used, and some even have revolving stages.

Miami-based Landry & Kling Global Cruise Events says nearly 100 new ships are expected to debut by 2025, a sure sign that the cruise industry and the meetings and events industry will be partnering for a long time to come.

Land lover options are still the most popular with destinations like Atlantic City and New Orleans offering vast choices of accommodations and meeting space. New and renovated space in Atlantic City (Page 48) is appealing to planners, while the charm of New Orleans (Page 58) remains very popular as a premier meeting and incentive destination.

Harvey Grotsky  
Publisher

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## Caesars Entertainment Announces Plans For First Non-Gaming Hotel in the U.S.

LAS VEGAS — Caesars Entertainment Corporation plans to open Caesars Republic Scottsdale, its first non-gaming hotel in the United States, as part of its goal to expand its brands and loyalty network through its licensing strategy.

Caesars Republic Scottsdale will be located adjacent to the region's premier luxury retail destination, Scottsdale Fashion Square, and will be a four-star hotel developed by HCW Development and operated by Aimbridge Hospitality. Caesars Entertainment will license its brand, advise on design elements and integrate the loyalty network, Total Rewards.

"Caesars Republic Scottsdale represents the introduction of a new world-class brand and further progress on our strategy to expand our non-gaming business into premier destinations," says Caesars Entertainment President and CEO Mark Frissora.

This modern 11-story glass structure will have 266 rooms and a 7,000-square-foot column-free ballroom with 34-foot sliding glass doors which open to the adjacent lawn, suitable for outdoor events for up to 600 people. The ballroom is divisible into four sections and can accommodate up to 500 guests. Additionally, the ballroom will feature a cutting-edge sound, internet and audio-visual system. On the second floor, there are five breakout rooms which will accommodate up to 40 people each or can be opened for events up to 200 guests.

The most stunning part of Caesars Republic Scottsdale



will be the seventh floor, encompassing a rooftop pool and bar — the only rooftop pool in Scottsdale — featuring breathtaking views of Camelback Mountain. This area will also serve as private event space for exclusive groups or company events.

Caesars Republic offers a new kind of lifestyle hotel experience; the first brand from Caesars Entertainment designed exclusively for non-gaming hotels. The brand pays homage to the dynamic energy of Las Vegas. No two hotels within the brand will be exactly alike.

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

## Benchmark Will Operate Avenue Bellevue InterContinental Hotel

BELLEVUE, WA — Benchmark, a global hospitality company, is expanding its presence in the Pacific Northwest and will operate the Avenue Bellevue InterContinental Hotel. Part of a new billion-dollar condo, hotel and retail development in downtown Bellevue, Washington, just east of Seattle, the property will be InterContinental Hotels & Resorts' first venture in the Pacific Northwest. The two-tower development will

feature 332 luxury residences and 85,000 square feet of high-end retail, food and nightlife. Avenue Bellevue will also include the 252-room InterContinental Hotel, which will offer a full-service spa and fitness center, meeting space and other luxury amenities. Construction is set to start in mid-2019.

"We are tremendously proud to be part of this visionary project and to welcome InterContinental Hotels into the Benchmark management portfolio," says Alex Cabañas, Benchmark's CEO.

The project developer is Fortress Development, a commercial real estate developer and privately held investment company based in Bellevue. Its CEO and Principal, Andy Lakha, is a longtime resident of the city with a strong commitment to the community and great admiration for InterContinental's pioneering efforts in developing the luxury market in destinations on six continents. Designed in partnership with Seattle-based Weber Thompson and HBA, the largest hospitality design firm in the world, Avenue Bellevue residents will have access to the InterContinental Hotel amenities, including room service, housekeeping, spa and fitness center, concierge assistance and valet parking.

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



## Grand Hyatt New York to be Redeveloped



NEW YORK CITY — The Grand Hyatt New York, the hotel that launched Donald Trump's career as a real estate developer in the late 1970s, is being redeveloped by an investor group that plans to demolish the existing structure and replace it with a 2 million-square-foot tower that includes office and retail space, as well as a new Hyatt hotel.

Manhattan developer TF Cornerstone and investment firm MSD Partners LP are taking control of the ground lease and existing hotel on East 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue, directly adjacent to Grand Central Terminal. The developers intend to contribute air rights from Grand Central Terminal under the rules of a recent rezoning, according to the statement. The existing hotel will operate in its current form until at least the end of 2020. The project will require approval from city and state officials.

"We look forward to the opportunity to bring a new icon to New York's skyline and help advance the city's goals for desperately needed new development and infrastructure in East Midtown," says Jeremy Shell, principal, TF Cornerstone. [www.hyatt.com](http://www.hyatt.com)

## Tips & Trends

### Top 5 Meeting Trends For 2019

"We learn a lot from our guests, often by observation in addition to their direct feedback," says Ted Davis, chief sales and marketing officer of Benchmark. "The speed of life and business is laser-fast today, communication devices intrude constantly and lifestyles have adjusted accordingly. This includes when in meeting environments. But we've also learned that moments of togetherness, where the pace slows a bit maybe over cocktails or dinner, are genuinely treasured, and this is where successful relationships are forged and strengthened, lasting long after the conference comes to an end."

#### 1 Privacy is the No. 1 Technology Requirement of Planners Today

Super-fast, reliable and secure Wi-Fi throughout a property is a must.

Privacy and security of information for conference guests is paramount to planners. Not just the content of the meeting — the content of participants' personal communications, too. Privacy and security is at the top of every planners list!

#### 2 Food For the Soul

Food brings people together, whether they know each other already or are just getting acquainted. Since attendees tend to be concerned with wellness, learning what food they are putting into their bodies is essential. Here's what they want in 2019: Food that is fresh and locally sourced, in-season when flavor is most robust, presented in small bites and enjoyed interactively. With informed consumers comes increased demand for growing dietary restrictions or preferences well beyond vegetarian and gluten-free. Paleo, keto, pescetarian, vegan and religious dietary requests are just the beginning of specialized conference dining this year, and chefs have taken note!

#### 3 Don't Facebook Me! Don't Tweet Me!

It's not that professional meetings planners aren't sociable. It's just that email continues to be the most preferred method of communication. What's new, though, is that they don't want to be contacted for business via social media. So, don't Facebook them, or Tweet, or Instagram. Be respectful of a planner's time and aware of how they prefer to communicate, including those who may or may not welcome a personal phone call. A simple handwritten note will go a long way in making a memorable impression, too!

#### 4 Preference For Independents

Flexibility, customization, authentic and unscripted experiences all rank high in the minds of planners today, as does the feeling that independent properties excel in providing these for groups needing to create memorable and highly productive meetings. Another issue is also at hand with planning professionals relating to independent properties: commissions, which are generally higher with independents. As more meetings involve third-party planners, this is of significant importance to meeting planners going forward.

#### 5 What Millennials Want From Meeting Venues

State-of-the-art technology, multiple plug-ins and USB ports for their myriad devices in the meeting room, public spaces and in their guest room, entertaining and fun activities on property and outside, non-traditional seating and meeting arrangements to enhance engagement in meetings during the day — this is what millennials are demanding today. The big reveal, though, is millennials want Privacy Rooms for personal conversions, sensitive phone calls and for personal needs.

— Ted Davis



# News & Notes

## Sandestin Investments Unveils Renderings of New Sandestin Hotel

MIRAMAR BEACH, FL — Sandestin Investments, LLC released final renderings of the Sandestin Hotel, which broke ground last September on northwest Florida's Gulf Coast. The new 250-room hotel is located adjacent to the Baytowne Conference Center at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. Completion is set for April 2020. The full-service hotel will include a restaurant, spa, fitness center and a signature rooftop pool and bar. It will have more than 20,000 square feet of meeting space and feature a 13,000-square-foot ballroom, all contiguous to the more than 30,000 square feet of existing meeting space at Baytowne Conference Center. Additionally, guests of the hotel will have access to the many amenities offered by Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort, including seven miles of beaches, four championship golf courses, 15 tennis courts and a 113-slip marina. [www.sandestin.com](http://www.sandestin.com)



## MGM Resorts' New Mobile App Features Mobile Check-In, Digital Keys

LAS VEGAS — MGM Resorts' new mobile app has features that will save time and enhance the overall guest experience, including in-app reservations, mobile check-in and digital keys.

"We are committed to developing and utilizing technology to better serve our customers, and our company's new user-friendly app does just that," says Kelly Smith, senior vice president and chief digital officer, MGM Resorts International.

Prior to traveling to participating domestic MGM Resorts destinations, guests can book their room, discover dining and entertainment options available while in town and check in up to 24 hours in advance through the app. Guests also can customize their stay by requesting room upgrade options.

The MGM Resorts app also provides resort information, the ability to make reservations at the property's venues and mobile check-out on the morning of departure.

Download the free MGM Resorts app through the App Store and Google Play. [www.mgmresorts.com](http://www.mgmresorts.com)



Credit: Tory Kooyman

# Snapshots



**1** Cynthia Kunz, global sales director, meetings & incentives, Velas Resorts and Corporate & Incentive Travel Publisher/Editor Harvey Grotsky. **2** Distinguished guests gathered for the ribbon cutting ceremony to officially open Hotel Bennett in Charleston, South Carolina, February 1. **3** Left to right: Caesars Entertainment CMO Chris Holdren, Raiders owner Mark Davis, Caesars Entertainment President and CEO Mark Frissora and Raiders President Marc Badain celebrated an historic partnership between Caesars Entertainment Corporation and the Las Vegas Raiders January 28. **4** Attending GBTA's 16th annual Leadership Summit in Nashville January 28-29 were (top, left to right): David Richardson, Cathy Stroud, Sherrill McLean, Stacey Day, Michael Henthorn, Rob Fugett and (bottom, left to right): Gloria Gonzalez, Cindy Lewis, Evie Hodges, Kelley Clark. **5-6** SITE Crystal Awards were handed out during the SITE Global Conference 2019 in Bangkok, Thailand, January 12. Honorees included PRA (top, left to right): SITE President Philip Eidsvold, CIS, CITP; Sarah Reichert, business development manager, One10; Madelyn Marusa, PRA's vice president, industry relations; SITE Foundation President-Elect Carina Bauer, and Eco Destination Management Services (bottom, left to right): Philip Eidsvold; ECO DMS Managing Director and COO Maureen Every, CIS, CITP; DMCP; ECO DMS President and CEO Wichita Villacres, CIS; Carina Bauer.



# DISCOVER

## L.A.'S COASTAL POINT OF VIEW FOR YOUR NEXT MEETING

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By Steve Wildemann

## Dazzling AV Attracts, Engage Attendees

To make a convention or meeting memorable, attendees need to walk away feeling inspired with a renewed connection to each other and the company.

Create a connection with your attendees and make your company's message stand out using audio-visual (AV) technology as an effective delivery tactic. AV technology can drive an entire conference in exciting new ways to engage attendees and deliver memorable results.

Leveraging AV as an engagement tool doesn't have to cost a fortune. There are ways to maximize new technology, such as LEDs, to dazzle.

Technology advances have allowed audio-visual

programmability, color choices, movement and shapes. Some lights are capable of having an image file programmed for projection in addition to just lighting a space. Interchangeable patterns often come with these LED lights, enabling a shape to be layered to create lighting textures.

### Large-Format LED Panels Increase Floor Space, Attendance

The old-school tripod screen or rear-screen projection are no longer your primary options. Large-format LED panels are taking over with sleek styling and a smaller footprint. The demand for this equipment at events has been steadily increasing for many reasons, including:

The human eye is naturally attracted to light and movement, so **projection mapping** onto something within your event or exhibit space is an effective way to draw eyes to where you — and your clients — want them.

companies to deliver impact with a reasonable investment. Ask your AV partner for advice on how to showcase your company's message in an engaging way.

### LED Lighting

Bulky, power-hungry lights of the past are being upgraded to lighter, brighter, modern LED lighting systems. These efficient systems are more reliable than traditional incandescent lamps and offer brighter, cleaner light for all types of events.

The lights are also more compact, which gives more options for setting up in meeting spaces with a smaller footprint. In addition, they are much cooler than traditional lights, so spaces do not have to adjust for heat from the lighting.

LED lights also have many more features, including

- LED screen resolutions have increased, dramatically changing the quality of the presentation in the last five years.
- Panels can be put together to form larger, custom-looking screens for any space. Ultra-wide curved screens offer a cinematic look helping to create an immersive, theatrical experience for attendees, similar to how a large movie screen captures an audience.
- When using larger panels, don't just think horizontal. Turning them vertical gives a whole new perspective to an image, especially with social media feeds.
- Leverage the larger screens as a platform to showcase your social media feeds, which will reinforce your relevancy and engage members, especially the younger ones, who prefer to connect virtually before they spend time in person.



- LED screens have a much smaller footprint than traditional screens and projectors. Space-hogging rear projection systems can take up a large footprint in a room; whereas, an LED panel can be placed against a wall with minimal intrusion. In most cases, this means a meeting planner can gain back one-quarter to one-third of their event space for more attendees. The slim profiles also allow for additional screens to be used within a space, allowing all attendees to have a perfect view of the presentation.
- Costs on this technology have come down so they can compete with traditional projection systems. Setup costs can be less than traditional systems, especially since venues are capitalizing on exclusive rigging rights that sometimes increase traditional costs. LED panels are so lightweight, they can be supported with ground-based stands instead of needing rigging.

### Sound Mapping Directs Attendees Attention

Attendees usually hear something before they see it and naturally look to see where a sound is coming from. Sound mapping is a technique that balances the sound for wherever attendees are in the room.

For example, if someone is speaking from the corner of the room, the sound comes from that direction to draw attention to it, then the sounds move to the next spot in the room.

As an event moves around a room, the computer-controlled sound processor automatically adjusts the

speakers for each cue, creating an immersive environment so the sound naturally appears to come from wherever the speaker or performer happens to be.

### Projection Mapping as Event and Exhibit Hall Engagement Tool

Projection mapping is an opportunity to pump new, vibrant life into a space, which can add value for key presenters or sponsors, who want to maximize their visibility to potential patrons.

Projection mapping enables light to be mapped and projected onto any surface — leaving the traditional pipe and drape exhibit booth in the dust.

This tool allows three-dimensional objects of any size and shape to become canvases for images or video. Everyday objects come to life with color and the optical illusion of movement.

New technology is making projection mapping easier and faster to execute at events. Instead of taking hours to render an image, computers may take minutes or even seconds to process and have it ready for use, cutting down on time and labor costs.

The human eye is naturally attracted to light and movement, so projection mapping onto something within your event or exhibit space is an effective way to draw eyes to where you — and your clients — want them.

Partner with your independent audio-visual provider to collaborate about ways to integrate the latest technology to attract additional sponsors and attendees to your event.

C&IT



### Steve Wildemann

Steve Wildemann is president of Rental and Staging Network and president and owner of Advanced Staging Productions in Pennsylvania. With more than 30 years of experience in the event technology business, he leads RSN, a top-tier network of live event production companies throughout North America. For more information, visit [www.rentalandstaging.net](http://www.rentalandstaging.net).



By Jennifer D. Collins, CMP

## Experiential Learning — A Different Take on Corporate Training

**W**hen it comes to corporate training events, there's a lot of talk these days about something known as experiential learning. So just what is it and what benefits does it offer corporations?

Experiential learning is a way for companies to help their team members gain real-world experience that they can transfer to their roles.

It's about immersing them in an activity that can inspire them to think of ways to deliver results in their role with the company. The goal is to align with an experience that

immerse them in situations in which they can create new memories and new sensations to draw on in their roles.

Often, those immersion activities involve some sort of interactive experience. More than a teambuilding ropes course, today's experiential training events often take place in a similar industry, or even within the same industry. For instance, call center employees may gain new insights into customer service by witnessing it firsthand in a hospitality-based business or by participating in an inspiration session or even training for employees that work at a help desk.

### Make it Stick

Making the experience memorable is more likely to help the information stick. When someone participates in an activity that speaks to them on both personal and professional levels, they are more likely to find ways to use the principles they learned.

A study by the University of Chicago found that college physics students learned a science subject more readily if a hands-on approach was used as the teaching method.

The study found that hands-on learning made the sensory and motor areas of the brain more active when the concepts being taught were recalled. In one example, participants in a study used spinning bicycle wheels to better understand

expands participants' creativity while developing their skills and, ultimately, building a stronger team.

But, training today needs to be about more than a speaker at the front of a room talking through a slideshow presentation. That technique may be fine for part of a training event, but instead of telling employees new information, a better way to embed information for the long-term is to get people out of their chairs, on their feet and using their hands and minds. Experiential learning events typically get team members out of the office for a few hours or a few days, and

angular momentum.

The goal, then, is to create an environment of self-discovery. An experiential learning event should not be designed to "tell" or necessarily even "show," but to simply present information so that participants can make their own connections.

The idea is not to make the event just another mandatory meeting, but rather, make it a place where participants feel they can explore ideas, purpose and even emotions. They need to feel that they can get outside their comfort



# TURN ANY MEETING INTO A SHOW.

THE COMPANIES YOU WORK WITH VARY. YOUR COMMISSION SHOULDN'T.



Steve O'Malley, Michael Guerriero, and David Peckinpugh (pictured left to right)  
Maritz Global Events

 **MGM RESORTS**



## Perspective

zone and connect, in some way, with their new environment, if only for the comparatively short time that the event takes place.

### Planning is Key

The key to a successful event is to design a program that will indulge the curious natures of participants. That begins by defining the goals of the experience at the onset of planning.

A discovery session can help surface ideas, from the problem that needs to be solved to the anticipated outcome of the event. For instance, if better customer service

Gather inspirational thoughts from participants while their experiences are still top of mind, and then overlay those on the problem that needs to be solved.

Brainstorm using a whiteboard or other ideation tool, and then share the results with participants. As ideas begin to gel into workable steps, processes, policies and programs, track the measures to help determine not only return on investment, but also whether the expected results are realized — or even exceeded.

### Follow Up to Check Results

The results of any experiential learning event are best

Experiential learning is a way for companies to help their team members **gain real-world experience** that they can transfer to their roles.

to improve sales is the goal, then how many new or repeat customers should be gained within a certain time frame after the event? Defining the end goal first can help identify the purpose of the event, which is then used as the framework for all subsequent decisions.

Next, identify trendsetters that already excel at what the training is planned to deliver. If building a team that better understands change management is the goal, then what other organizations or companies excel at that skill?

Gaining access to such an organization may require exceptional partnership-building skills on the part of the event planners. But even companies in the same or similar industries are often willing to participate in experiential learning, and the prospect of “seeing how the other guys do it” on its own is enough to get some participants excited.

Planning for the event should also include an idea session after the event. More than just sharing notes after the experience, the idea session should work to flesh out how the information gained can be applied on the job.

discovered down the road. Performing an assessment six months after the event can help reveal whether learning has been implemented and improvements have been achieved. Successes should be shared with the team, and any new best practices being employed may also be used to strengthen other areas of the organization.

### A New Working World

With baby boomers exiting the workplace and corporate offices filling up with inexperienced workers, there is an unprecedented shift taking place in the workforce. In today's world, the skills and dedication of a team can make all the difference between success and failure, so keeping employees engaged and motivated is crucial.

Experiential events are an investment, just like any other professional development expense. But with a little forethought and good planning, the outcomes of an experiential learning event can mean a more efficient, productive, world-class team.

C&IT



### Jennifer D. Collins, CMP

Jennifer D. Collins, CMP, is president and CEO of JDC Events, an award-winning event design company that strengthens brands and delivers impactful results. She is a sought-after industry speaker and internationally best-selling author of *Events Spark Change: A Guide to Designing Powerful and Engaging Events*.





## Meetings at Sea



Meister Meetings & Travel Corp. recently planned an 11-day Mediterranean cruise for 65 executives aboard the *Celebrity Reflection*. Among the attendees were (from left to right): Kim Nowicki, Mimi Haley-Meister, Louise Glove, Karen Knowles and Lee McLain.

# Cruise Meetings

## Larger Ships Now Come With Flexible Meeting Spaces and a Boatload of Unique Experiences

By Derek Reveron

It was once difficult to imagine that cruise ships would compete with hotels for meetings and events. However, in recent years, cruise lines have overcome perceptions that meetings at sea are too expensive, lack space and offer less than hotels provide.

Planners now have everything they need for successful meetings at sea because cruise ship companies are building larger vessels with bigger and more flexible event, conference and breakout spaces.

According to Dan Meister, CMP, owner of Boca Raton, Florida-based Meister Meetings & Travel Corp., “Newer ships are bigger, offering more dedicated meeting space, as well as flexible restaurants, intimate entertainment clubs, larger theaters and even dedicated outside space that all can be used for groups at some point during a cruise.”

“There are more cruise ships options than ever, from megaships to smaller ultra-luxury ships, giving more choices than ever along with new itineraries and destinations,” adds Meister. And the wide variety of activities on cruise ships is a main reason why Meister says he is “a big fan of groups onboard cruise ships.”

### More Meeting Space

Shari Wallack, president of Buy the Sea, a Plantation, Florida-based company that helps incentive and meeting planners create group cruise experiences, has seen firsthand how cruise lines have expanded meeting space over the years.

“Cruise lines are aware that groups require function space for private events,” says Wallack. “Royal Caribbean Cruise Line has always been the biggest proponent of having dedicated conference space onboard. And, on the new *Celebrity Edge* ship, there is The Meeting Place, a flexible venue that can accommodate privately catered meals. Specialty restaurants on many of the newer ships have been outfitted with audio-visual equipment.

“In addition,” Wallack continues, “cruise lines are more flexible in allowing groups to use their large theaters for day and sometimes evening functions. One of my favorite venues is the AquaTheater on Royal Caribbean’s Oasis-class ships. It’s a 600-person outside palladium with a stage and two Jumbotrons. It’s an out-of-the-box

venue. For example, the stage can open up and have high divers splash into the water after a CEO finishes a presentation and exits.”

Adding more meeting space improves the ability of cruise ships to help planners achieve meeting goals and provides a



**Dan Meister, CMP**  
Owner  
Meister Meetings  
& Travel Corp.  
Boca Raton, FL

“Newer ships are bigger, offering more dedicated meeting space, as well as flexible restaurants, intimate entertainment clubs, larger theaters and even dedicated outside space that all can be used for groups at some point during a cruise.”

their actual programming to create something completely new and different just for your group, chances are you will meet with resistance. More than that, it really isn’t necessary.”

Gale adds, “Ships do their thing day in and day out, and they have it down to a science. Just go with the flow and trust that the things they do to entertain and delight their transient guests will work just as well for your group with very little effort on your part.”

Being flexible helped Gale to plan a successful incentive recently for 2,200 attendees aboard Royal Caribbean’s *Symphony of the Seas*.

“Because our group was so large, we divided it in half and held two rounds of all our events,” says Gale. “This included two back-to-back awards general sessions held in the ship’s theaters; two back-to-back welcome cocktail parties on the boardwalk; two back-to-back farewell dessert receptions in the onboard ice-skating rink and two dinners.”

Meister recently planned a Mediterranean cruise for 65 executives aboard *Celebrity Cruise Lines’ Reflection*. The goals of the meeting were networking, learning and fun.

“The group kept a dedicated meeting space throughout the cruise for

greater diversity of experiences than land-based events. Cruises offer several destinations in one package — their privately owned islands, the ship itself and ports of call.

Cruise lines are expanding destination options while remaining generally less expensive than hotels of comparable quality, giving planners-at-sea budget-saving options amid the current seller’s market for hotels.

More planners are realizing they can meet budget and attendee needs on cruise ships. However, flexibility is required because cruise lines still lack hotels’ cavernous conference centers and meeting rooms, and the vessels program activities differently.

### Flexibility Helps

According to Eldon Gale, director of events, Scentsy, a Meridian, Idaho-based distributor of scent-based products, “You do need to be flexible and work with a cruise ship. If you try to dramatically change



*Celebrity Reflection* has a dedicated conference room onboard.





Credit: Norwegian Cruise Line

Three of Norwegian Cruise Line's ships, (from left to right) *Norwegian Escape*, *Norwegian Epic* and *Norwegian Breakaway*, include indoor and outdoor venues for customizable group functions, as well as fun dining experiences, great shows and casino gaming.

impromptu and scheduled meetings and learning," says Meister. "They enjoyed a dedicated area of the main dining room for early seating so guests could mingle and dine with different attendees within the dedicated area. There were also exclusive shore excursions and daily meet-ups on the ship."

When attendees weren't meeting in areas devoted to planned group functions, they networked with each other.

"It was interesting to see how attendees naturally got together on their own based on activities, games and facilities onboard," says Meister. "We always had at least 25 people in the front row of the nightly show and another 20 in the Sunset Bar and Lawn Club on the top deck of the ship enjoying cigars. There was also a small group that met in the casino every night and another group that enjoyed Silent Disco."

The cruise was a hit. "This was a well-traveled group, and they all really enjoyed this ship and thought this was one of their best trips," says Meister. "I think cruising is perfect for groups and offers a little something for everyone."

### Advantages Galore

Meetings at sea can offer several benefits over hotels, depending on the needs of a group, its size, attendee makeup and goals.

The main advantage of at-sea meetings is they make it easier for planners to control costs and stretch budgets.

Cruise ship meetings are typically 20 percent to 30 percent less than those of hotels and other land-based venues.

Meister cites an example of the savings: "We just priced a cruise incentive for Japan and China, and the savings were almost 40 percent less than doing the same program on land with country-to-country transfers and flights, etc."

Cruises are cost-efficient mostly because they offer all-in-one pricing.

According to Meister, "Cruises offer incredible value over land programs by offering inclusive pricing for accommodations, meals, entertainment, transportation, beverages, etc. For all our cruise meetings and incentives, we always add another beverage package, pre-paid gratuities, Wi-Fi and often onboard credit as part of the cruise package — so guests receive more value and do not have to spend out of pocket."

Gale also cites the advantages of all-inclusive cruise meeting packages. "With most traditional meeting locations, you are working with a blank canvas, and you build from the bottom up," says Gale. "Cruise ships offer you an incredibly diverse amount of options for dining, entertainment and activities that are already created and generally included in the base cost of your cruise fare."

"Even if there is the occasional surcharge, it is usually very reasonable and much less than you would ever pay on land," says Gale. "Options like live

bands, comedians, lecturers, cooking demonstrations, etc., are all onboard at all times. Your time on the ship is efficient and cost-effective.

"Realistically," Gale adds, "if you did nothing more than what the ship includes in your base fare, your group will have a great time. This makes planning and budgeting a breeze because you contract a set rate, and there really aren't any surprises."

"That said, once you start to customize, enhance or upgrade your events, you will pay surcharges, but they are generally surprisingly affordable," says Gale. "It really gives you the flexibility to make it what you need it to be."

### Attentive Service

Another plus of at-sea meetings: Attendees receive highly personal service because the staff-to-guest ratio is typically about three times that of most hotels and resorts.

Also, the self-contained environment of cruise ships encourages networking and tends to increase attendance at meeting functions. Wallack has seen how scores of meetings have benefited from cruise ships' settings.

"You don't have guests going 'off-property' when the ship is sailing," says Wallack. "The crew can account for passengers at all times. A hotel never knows who is on-property and who isn't. And consider that for evening events, dine-arounds and entertainment, your guests never need to be bussed to offsite venues. It's all right onboard, and it can all be included in the cruise fare."

"Except for stops at ports, attendees are all onboard during their free time at the pool, spa, theater, casino, restaurant, etc.," adds Wallack. "They are easy to find, and you know that no one has



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The new Royal Caribbean *Symphony of the Seas* features an open-air AquaTheater with a stage and Jumbotrons, and can seat up to 600 attendees.

left to go elsewhere. It's easier to get your group together for a meeting, party, meal or recognition event."

Meetings at sea also offer wider generational appeal, which is important as groups become more age-diverse due to the growing millennial population, which now makes up nearly half of the workforce.

### Millennials Love Cruising

A recent study by the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) notes that millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) are cruising more than ever and rate the experience as better than resorts and other land-based vacations.

One-fourth of millennials have taken a luxury cruise within the last five years, a record pace, according to CLIA. And, the percent of millennials who say they "definitely will" book a cruise for their next trip increased to 70 percent in 2018 from 63 percent in 2017.

Millennials favor cruising partly because it offers the wide variety of activities and entertainment options they seek.

Groups can enjoy every type of show found in hotels and resorts, including Broadway-style performances featuring state-of-the-art sound, projection and light systems.

For example, Royal Caribbean's, 18-deck, 2,775-room megaship, *Symphony of the Seas*, launched last year

with unique activities, entertainment and services. These include the open-air AquaTheater, which showcases high-diving performances; the Ultimate Abyss, the tallest slide at sea; and the Bionic Bar with its robot bartenders. Several new food concepts are available in *Symphony of the Seas'* 20 specialty and complimentary restaurants.

*Symphony of the Seas* also includes state-of-the-art mobile check-in technology that uses a combination of bar codes, beacons and facial recognition. Guests can check-in via an app and upload a photo to create an onboard account. After arriving, guests go through a security screening and then go to their staterooms.

The *Symphony of the Seas* also features seven distinct "neighborhoods," each with its own unique décor and ambiance. The neighborhoods are Boardwalk, Central Park, Entertainment Place, Royal Promenade, Pool and Sports Zone, Vitality at Sea and Fitness Center and Youth Zone.

Which activities did attendees of Gale's meeting on *Symphony of the Seas* enjoy most?

"Goodness, the list is endless," says Gale. "Pools, spa, rock climbing, zip lining, mini-golf, FlowRider (a surf simulator), sports court, ice skating shows, Broadway shows, concerts, comedy clubs, night clubs, parades, dance parties, dining, shopping and gym."

Aboard Norwegian ships, the *Norwegian Escape* and *Norwegian Breakaway*, respectively, offer Broadway hits "After Midnight" and "Rock of Ages."

*Norwegian Getaway* and *Norwegian Epic* feature "meals with amazement" — a unique dining experience featuring acrobats, aerialists musicians and audience participation. Fat Cats Jazz & Blues Club and Headliners Comedy Club are also available on *Norwegian Getaway*.

### Bigger Ships, More Options

Larger-than-ever cruise ships are driving an increase in meeting space size and flexibility options for planners.

Meeting space at sea has come such a long way that cruise ship companies now do something that was once unthinkable — tout their meeting facilities in a manner much like that of hotels.

For example, here's how Celebrity Cruises describes its meeting capabilities: "Perfect venues for larger conferences, presentations and ceremonies, our impressive theaters are modern, multifunctional and fully customizable for audiences from 200 to more than 1,000. Several adaptable conference rooms accommodate events of various sizes — intimate gatherings, meetings for 60 attendees, banquets for 100 diners, even conferences for 220 guests."

Regent Seven Seas Cruises, a luxury four-ship cruise company, has a similar pitch: "From spacious conference and meeting rooms to state-of-the-art multimedia facilities, the six-star ships of Regent Seven Seas Cruises have been designed with full business capabilities. RSSC ships feature comfortable meeting rooms and multipurpose lounges to accommodate groups from 10 to 700."

Regent urges planners to "think of our ships as floating conference centers furnished with sophisticated multimedia equipment to accommodate your business agenda."

Some of the new megaships can carry up to 6,000 total passengers and accommodate groups of more than 1,600 attendees — even more for

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Credit: Celebrity Cruises

Onboard Celebrity Cruises' newest ship, *Celebrity Edge*, groups can meet in Magic Carpet (left), the world's first cantilevered, floating platform that reaches 13 stories above sea level and includes ocean views, a full bar and live music; Celebrity Lounge (center) for smaller gatherings or outside on the pool deck for an evening event (right).

customized full ship buyouts, which allow planners to choose ports of call and cruise length. Another option is buying out a ship for an event.

### Witness to Progress

Gale has watched cruise ship meeting space come a long way.

"When I did my first cruise ship event in 2011, we were on the largest ship in the world at that time," says Gale. "That ship is still around but has been eclipsed by three others in the same category, and that's just within the Royal Caribbean family.

"Cruise lines are much more aware of the value of large groups and are creating purpose-driven space that works for meetings," says Gale. "Because it's a ship, everything has to fill multiple purposes. If you are flexible, the variety of options is surprising.

"The number of new ships that join the marketplace each year is staggering," Gale continues.

"Each ship seems to be bigger and better than the previous, and each offers a new level of offerings that

exceed the previous. Cruise ships are constantly innovating and pushing the limits of what's possible — much more so than you get from a traditional hotel."

Newer ships provide a variety of spaces for all types of meetings, events, incentives, board retreats, receptions, banquets, teambuilding, customer appreciation programs, new product launches and more.

There are dedicated conference centers with air walls, audio-visual and wireless capabilities. Most ships have theaters and some even have revolving stages.

For example, MSC Cruises' four newest ships offer 1,600-seat pillar-less theaters and dedicated meeting rooms, as well as lounges that can be converted into meeting space.

In addition, MSC's new private island can host customized concerts and teambuilding events.

Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines offers state-of-the-art conference centers, theaters, lounges and outdoor spaces that accommodate up to 1,394 guests.

### Cruise News

Cruise lines are rolling out new, meeting-friendly ships at a record rate.

According to CLIA, the industry launched five cruise ships in 2018 and will premiere 20 more this year. Another 32 ships will debut in 2020 and beyond. Additionally, Miami-based Landry & Kling Global Cruise Events says nearly 100 new vessels are expected to debut by 2025.

Gale is impressed by the amount of new ships coming on line.

"The number is staggering," says Gale. "Each ship seems to be bigger and better than the previous. Cruise ships are constantly innovating and pushing the limits of what's possible — much more so than you would ever get from a traditional hotel."

In terms of meeting space, new cruise ships are light years ahead of where they were a few decades ago.

According to Wallack, "Years ago, groups held cocktail parties on the pool deck and formal meetings in a theater. Cruise lines have become far more flexible in allowing public



Credit: Oceania Cruises

For more intimate gatherings, Oceania Cruises has both the luxurious 676-passenger *Insignia* (left) and *Regatta* (right). The sister ships offer meeting spaces with complimentary audio-visual equipment, as well as a wide variety of destination options.

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lounge and restaurant usage. The ones who can think more creatively are the ones who win the business.

"Royal Caribbean's Oasis-class ships offer Studio B, a 775-seat stadium that doubles as an ice rink," says Wallack. "We have held private ice shows there, as well as after-dinner 'glow' dessert parties for more than 1,000 guests."

The latest cruise line developments include the following:

Celebrity Cruises, which operates 13 luxury ships sailing to all seven continents, has launched a \$500-million fleet revitalization program called "The Celebrity Revolution."

The plan will transform Celebrity's entire fleet with reimagined state-rooms and spaces, redesigned restaurants and more destinations. Also, every ship will include The Retreat, a new addition for all Suite Class guests that includes The Retreat Sundeck and The Retreat Lounge.

Also last year, Celebrity launched *Celebrity Edge*, the company's first new ship in six years and the first of a new class of vessels in more than a decade. *Celebrity Edge* offers the cruise line's most comprehensive entertainment lineup ever, performing more produced shows than any ship in the company's history, all in technologically advanced main theaters.

## Sailing With Celebrity

Gale recently sailed on the inaugural cruise of *Celebrity Edge*, a 3,000-passenger ship, as it completed

its first-ever transatlantic crossing and docked in Port Everglades.

"This ship is very cutting-edge and is a great venue for luxury incentives and meetings," says Gale. "The ship is very modern and is beautifully designed with some dedicated meeting space, private club space, lots of nice-looking specialty restaurants for shows and nice areas on the top deck for outdoor events."

*Celebrity Edge's* sister ship, *Celebrity Apex*, will launch in 2020, and two additional Edge-class ships will follow in 2021 and 2022.

In other Celebrity news, *Celebrity Flora*, the first ship ever built specifically to sail the Galapagos Islands, recently introduced Glamping — a nighttime camping experience on the vessel's top deck, allowing views of spectacular night skies.

Oceania's *Cruises' Regatta, Insignia, Nautica* and *Sirena* are undergoing the transformation of every suite and stateroom with new furnishings, fixtures, lighting and color palettes. The upgrades are scheduled for completion by 2020. Oceania, a leading culinary- and destination-focused cruise line, has added new vegan menus and more than 80 land tour options in several countries, including Australia, Asia and Europe.

Regent Seven Seas Cruises recently had the best single booking day in the company's 26-year history, which was 32 percent higher than the previous one-day booking record in 2015. The record followed the opening of reservations of the first 10 voyages of Regent's newest ship, *Seven Seas Splendor*, which launches in 2020 with 375 suites.

Regent Seven Seas has also completed a bow-to-stern refurbishment of *Seven Seas Mariner*, marking the final phase of the company's \$125 million upgrade program. The improvements elevated the elegance of *Seven Seas Mariner* to that of *Seven Seas Explorer's*.

## Norwegian's Latest

Norwegian Cruise Line, which offers more than 65 itineraries in 52 countries, recently held a keel-laying ceremony for its newest ship, the 4,000-guest *Norwegian Encore*, which will debut this fall.

The ship features Galaxy Pavilion, a 10,000-square-foot, indoor virtual reality complex, an open-air laser tag arena, and it's the only company to offer a go-kart race track at sea.



The studio lounge on the *Norwegian Encore* is the perfect spot for attendees to meet for an after-hours drink.

In addition, Norwegian will premiere six Project Leonardo Class ships in 2026 and 2027. Each ship will accommodate 3,300 guests. Norwegian now has a total of seven ships on order through 2027.

Long gone are perceptions that meetings at sea are too expensive, lack meeting space and too complicated to plan. Gone also are stereotypes that cruise ship meetings are boring and confining.

In fact, meetings at sea offer a plethora of unique experiences. Most of all, at-sea meetings provide distinctive and memorable ways for planners to accomplish their goals for attendees. **C&IT**



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Hotel Xcaret Mexico is a new all-inclusive property in the Riviera Maya, near Playa del Carmen.

Credit: Hotel Xcaret Mexico

## Risk Vs. Reward

### The Benefits and Drawbacks of Utilizing New and Recently Renovated Hotels

By Sophia Bennett

Stacy Anthony, CMM, has plenty of good things to say about using new or recently renovated hotels for meetings.

"It's exciting because people haven't been there," says the vice president, meetings and events for NFP, an insurance brokerage and consulting firm. (And in the age of Instagram and experiential events,

letting people be the first to try anything new is a major plus.) "There's something to be said about going into a space and having everything brand-new. You know everything is going to be state-of-the-art."

Many hotels also offer a special opening rate, which is typically more affordable than the property's standard charges.

But there's a reason new and recently

renovated hotels offer discounted rates to companies that plan meetings soon after a property's opening date.

Booking a hotel that's mid-construction comes with the risk that the hotel won't be ready in time for a schedule meeting — leaving the planner scrambling to find another venue at the last minute.

And indeed, Anthony's recent experience with the Fairmont Austin, a 37-story hotel with 1,048 rooms, 60 suites and direct access to the Austin Convention Center, is the type of nail-biter that might give other planners heartburn.

When NFP booked the hotel for its annual strategy summit, which was scheduled to take place last March, they were told the hotel would be open by June 2017. New construction properties like the Fairmont Austin typically leave themselves a buffer of three to four months before they start booking events (although Anthony's person rule of thumb is to leave 10 months to one year between the opening and event dates), so she wasn't concerned about having a place for the estimated 1,100 attendees to meet and sleep.

But when the hotel still hadn't opened by December 2017, she started to worry. She went to her executive team and told them they had to make a decision. Did they want to stick with the Fairmont Austin and hope everything was ready in time? Or did they want to pull out and start looking for another hotel?

The staff at the Fairmont Austin had done a phenomenal job of keeping Anthony updated on the hotel's progress, she says, and they were confident they could get the property open in time for her event. In the end, the company management decided to take a risk and stick with the hotel.

It paid off. The Fairmont Austin officially opened on March 9. NFP arrived for its event a week-and-a-half later.

"The group thought it was the most amazing event," says Anthony. "People love Austin, and they loved the property. When they walked in, all the TVs and other stuff in the rooms were new. Sometimes you go to hotels and the décor is outdated, there aren't enough plugs or the internet is not working well. Here, the Fairmont thought about everything. They knew what people needed, and they took that information and addressed it in this hotel."

Guest amenities include five restaurants and bars, the largest pool and full-service spa in downtown Austin and a high-tech fitness center. People who stay in rooms designated as Fairmont Gold have exclusive access to lifestyle hotel benefits, including their own concierge service, private check-in and checkout, and a free continental breakfast and evening hors d'oeuvres.



**"There's something to be said about going into a space and having everything brand-new. You know everything is going to be state-of-the-art."**

**Stacy Anthony, CMM**, Vice President, Meetings and Events  
NFP, Austin, TX

The venue had also designed the meeting rooms with many modern amenities, which made those spaces comfortable, easy to use and filled with the latest technology.

Although the hotel was still working out a few kinks with the lighting and other systems while Anthony's group was there, she says the overall level of service was elevated because Fairmont had brought in their top teams from other properties across the country to work the opening.

Anthony's advice to other planners considering a new property or one

that's being renovated is to read the contract very carefully.

Review what flexibility the company has if the hotel is not ready in time. Ideally, the property should work with you on any relocation costs if the event must move within the city or to a new destination.

If you have any concerns that the hotel will not be ready in time, it's important to make the decision to move

the event before registration materials are disseminated if possible, Anthony advises. That way people don't have to change their airline reservations.

The Post Oak Hotel at Uptown Houston is another notable recent opening. The city's only AAA Five Diamond hotel offers all of the glamor one would expect from such a property. Accommodations range from 500-square-foot luxury rooms to the 5,000-square-foot Presidential Suite, which includes a media room and private elevator. Rooms have large windows with beautiful city views.

The 37-story Fairmont Austin's amenities include meeting spaces with the latest technology and direct access to the Austin Convention Center.



Credit: Fairmont Austin





Credit: Hotel Xcaret Mexico



Groups looking to relax can take advantage of Hotel Xcaret Mexico's infinity pool (left) and outdoor dining option (right).

Meeting spaces include large pre-function areas for receptions or casual conversations. There are seven dining and drinking options onsite, as well as a spa, salon and pool with private cabanas. The hotel has a luxury car dealership with plenty of Rolls-Royce and Bentley vehicles on display, and staff can even arrange for guests to arrive via helicopter.

The Conrad Washington DC, which is expected to open later this month, is another brand-new property that has

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many of the amenities modern planners and guests are looking for.

The 360-room hotel is conveniently located near many businesses, government agencies, stores and cultural institutions. A rooftop bar and other outdoor spaces will provide millennial-friendly places for receptions and other informal gatherings.

The larger event spaces include pillar-free ballrooms with floor-to-ceiling windows. Smaller rooms have private bathrooms and access to a well-stocked pantry. Sakura Club rooms on the 10th floor provide a VIP experience for guests that includes access to a curated Japanese whiskey collection and an afternoon tea ritual.

### Fun in the Caribbean

What better incentive than the lure of the warm sun and white-sand beaches of the Mexican Caribbean?

Designed with Mexican culture and heritage in mind, Hotel Xcaret Mexico is an all-inclusive resort in the Riviera Maya, very close to the center of Playa del Carmen. The property has 900 rooms distributed in "Casas," different buildings that pay special tribute to the Mayan region.

Fuego, Xavage, Xoximilco and Xenses parks, as well as tours to Xenotes and Xichen, food and beverages, transportation between parks and airport shuttle. Other luxurious amenities include infinity pools, three gyms and 10 restaurants.

### Renovated Hotels

Planning an event at a hotel that is currently being renovated or has recently undergone a remodel has many of the same benefits and drawbacks as new hotels, as well as some notable differences.

Many properties that are mid-renovation can offer special pricing to groups, which is a plus. Because the hotel has already been built, there's less of a risk that the entire property won't be completed in time, which would force an event to relocate.

Like a new venue, a renovated hotel can offer updated facilities and amenities — often in an environment with added charm.

The Grand Hotel Golf Resort & Spa has been a destination in Point Clear, Alabama, since it opened in 1847. It became part of the Marriott Autograph Collection last year after going through an extensive renovation.

Among the many changes are six new restaurants and lounges, a refurbished fishing pier, new beachside and pool cabanas and an updated spa. The 18-hole, 72-par Dogwood golf course has already been renovated and the Azalea course is being updated this year.

On the other hand, some things at the resort haven't changed in decades.

"People talk about farm-to-table or garden-to-glass, and that's nothing new at the Grand," says Kevin Hellmich, the property's director of sales and marketing. "We've been doing it for over 100 years. Our estate garden has 72 different edibles that our culinary team uses. The

agement firm based in Crown Point, Indiana, has been hosting events at The Venetian Resort Las Vegas and its recently remodeled luxury hotel, The Palazzo, for the better part of a decade.

"The (sales) team has grown with our group ... and has listened to our goals and helped us mitigate issues as a true partner," says Kristi Calhoon,

people to gather." (One of the biggest changes at The Palazzo is the addition of the Electra Cocktail Club, which is located on the casino floor and offers the highest-definition video display on the Strip, chic décor and furnishings and quality drinks.) "The flow is way better as well, capturing people on their way to their rooms, but providing many incentives to stop before heading up," she says.

Each of The Palazzo's suites got new wall coverings, lighting, flooring and fixtures.

"The hotel room refresh feels much more modern," Calhoon says. "The colors and new fabrics pull together the rooms and give an airy quality that

is hard to find in Vegas. The brighter color pops on both the casino floor and rooms and make the visitor want to stay longer."

Signing a contract with a hotel that's undergoing renovations still involves some caution, of course, because remodels can take longer than expected, just like new construction.

Calhoon recommends asking properties for their construction time lines and any limitations that will affect attendee movement if the renovation is not finished on time. Get a description of the changes the property is planning for the meeting space, common areas and sleeping rooms so you know what areas will be affected — and what you can expect from the updated property.

**"We didn't realize what we'd been missing. The renovations are like the icing on the cake. It's that much more beautiful."**

**Walter Ejnes, CHCP**, President  
Continuing Education Company, Palm Coast, FL



bartender goes outside every day and selects different herbs they can use in the cocktail of the day."

The culinary team does the same thing. Bucky's Lounge, which was named for an associate who worked for the hotel for 60 years, still has rare whiskey, cocktails and live entertainment daily. The jazz brunch is still available on Sundays, and a military cannon salute takes place every afternoon.

One of the advantages to utilizing a renovated hotel as opposed to a new one is that if the firm has been there before, there are existing relationships that can be built on to pull off a fantastic event.

i4D Event Services, an event man-

aging director, global conferences and CEO keynote programs. "They've worked with us to provide options to help get the best experience for our clients and attendees. We share feedback from our surveys, and the team works with us in partnering on how to create options to increase survey results year-over-year."

i4D recently traveled to The Palazzo for its annual conference, where approximately 8,000 customers, partners and employees came together for four days to learn about the company's offerings and mission. Calhoon says the results of the renovation were notable.

"The casino floor felt much more upscale and provided multiple areas for

The Grand Hotel Golf Resort & Spa in Point Clear, Alabama, recently added six new restaurants, a renovated fishing pier, beachside and pool cabanas and an updated spa. Right: The 9,750-square-foot Grand Ballroom can hold up to 1,400 guests.







The Continuing Education Company held its 6th Annual Primary Care Winter Conference at the Sheraton Maui Resort & Spa. Keynote speaker Christopher Moore, MD (right), addressed attendees in the medical industry.



Credit: Walter Ejnes, CHCP

"Ask about opportunities that are available for VIP experiences that were not available prior to the renovation," she adds. There may be new ways to wow your most important customers or executives.

That was the case when Walter Ejnes, CHCP, president of the Continuing Education Company, which hosts educational programs for the medical community, held a recent event at the remodeled Sheraton Maui Resort & Spa.

The company is a frequent visitor and has planned two events a year at the property for the past eight years.

"It's one of the oldest properties in the Kaanapali area of Maui, and it hadn't changed much in all those years that we had been there, although they always did a great job of keeping it well-maintained," he says. "You didn't notice or think, 'This place needs a renovation.'"



**"Ask about opportunities that are available for VIP experiences that were not available prior to the renovation."**

**Kristi Calhoon**, Managing Director, Global Conferences and CEO  
Keynote Programs, i4D Event Services, Crown Point, IN

But once the property was completed, "We didn't realize what we'd been missing. The renovations are like the icing on the cake. It's that much more beautiful."

The Sheraton Maui Resort & Spa's \$26.5 million remodel touched all 508 guest rooms and suites, bringing new furnishings, décor and artwork into each space. For Continuing Education Company's most recent event,

the property arranged to put a VIP in one of the recently completed overnight rooms. "He was raving about it," Ejnes says.

Other guests were impressed by updates to the 142-yard lagoon-style pool and the addition of ROCKsalt, a restaurant with a seasonal menu and cocktails featuring spirits produced on-island. The property also beefed up its internet access, which is a major plus for meeting planners.

"We stream our conferences, and we have heavy use of not just the Wi-Fi but the internet," says Ejnes. "We definitely noticed that system had been upgraded."

Maintaining regular, open communication with staff at any hotel undergoing renovations is his top tip for planners.

He really appreciated that the Sheraton's staff went out of their way to keep him informed of what was happening throughout the remodeling process.

"It's an important property for us," he noted. "We're contracted out with

them for the next couple of years every October and February. When we learned about the plans for the renovation, it was from the general manager. When they had their first model room available, he gave us a tour of it. He always kept us in the loop about the progression of the renovation. It was great to see how personally involved he was in the progress."

For his most recent event, Ejnes worked closely with the Sheraton's staff to ensure that both the sleeping rooms and meeting spaces were away from any construction taking place.

"We were concerned that any type of renovation would affect not only the

event but our guests," he says. "When they're not at our meeting, what's happening? Are they next to a room that's being renovated and they can hear drilling and banging? We were aware of that and wanted to make sure their experience was perfect."

From all accounts, it was, even as the hotel was being transformed into someplace even more enjoyable. **C&IT**

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# Influential Women in the Meetings Industry



## How Some of the Most Accomplished Females in the Business Found Success

By Keith Loria

**M**any people saw 2018 as the Year of the Woman, be it because of fighting back against injustice and gender inequality, achieving new heights in several industries or just being the incredible people that they are. Those in the corporate and incentive travel industry have long championed female leaders, and the industry possesses some amazing influencers. Here's a look at some of the great women who impact our industry every day.

### Chandra Allison

Senior Vice President, Sales, Venetian Resort, Las Vegas

Chandra Allison officially entered the industry when she was 18, taking a job as a front desk agent at the Reno Hilton while still in school.

"At the Reno Hilton, I spent approximately four years in different capacities, front desk, VIP front desk — and last, casino marketing special events, where I fell in love with events and working with guests in the hospitality/gaming industry," she says. "I then transferred to the Flamingo Hilton in Las Vegas, where I held a position as a salesperson that operated everything I sold. I learned a lot about selling and executing events."

Allison joined The Venetian preopening team in 1998 as an assistant, where she worked on contracts and was responsible for cold calling and working a trade show floor to identify prospective exhibitor companies to book their rooms and events at the hotel once it opened. Shortly after the resort opened in May 1999, she was promoted to sales manager developing the Northeast.

Today, she serves as senior vice president of sales, where her responsibilities include developing sales and marketing growth strategies for MICE segments, training and development, quota development, identifying new revenue opportunities, developing strategic partnerships for business growth and working with the corporate global strategy team to provide insight of its business to support the global growth and desire to enter key markets.

"There is no typical day, which is part of what I love about what I do," Allison says. "I've been very fortunate to meet some amazing people in my career that have truly influenced my life in such a great way, and I hope to be able to return that. I love identifying opportunities to grow our business, developing new strategies and working with creative people that have new ideas that we can bring to life. I don't like things to stay the same for too long, otherwise we will get passed by."

Finding success as a woman in the industry came from

building a strong network of people — both professionally and personally — for support, advice, resilience, preservation and hard work. Her advice for other women in the field is to find a company and a boss that will allow them to grow, gives them space to accomplish and fail, and flexibility to have a life and career — they are not independent of each other.

"Always find ways to learn new things or challenge your assumptions and be willing to take some educated risks — and assess along the way," she says. **"Get involved in the industry, and give back when you can. Provide an environment where other women can thrive and create a culture of diversity. The results are always better."**

It wasn't an easy path. In 1998, when she started working at The Venetian, meetings and events were not an easy sell.

"We had to convince companies that Las Vegas — known for only leisure — was a place to host meetings, events and trade shows, and that business would get done," Allison says. "We are one of the top destinations in the country, and our property is host to more than 1,000 meetings per year."

Allison is proud to be a successful professional woman, wife and mom — and to provide an environment for other professional women who may want the same. ■





## Christine Erickson

Senior Vice President, U.S. Event Solutions, BCD Meetings & Events



As senior vice president, U.S. Event Solutions at BCD Meetings & Events, Christine Erickson heads a team of 75 event specialists with expertise in planning, procurement, creative design, business development and operations, producing more than 300 events globally. She also sits on the company's global executive team and reports directly to the global president.

"I am accountable for the sales and operations of our event

solutions business," she says. "Under that umbrella, my key focus areas include: developing and executing our strategic growth plan, building and supporting a culture of happy, engaged and high-performing employees and enabling innovative and impactful solutions for all our clients. I'm also accountable for the financial health of our business."

Erickson knew early in life that she wanted to pursue a career in the service and hospitality industry; hence, her decision to get a degree in Hotel & Restaurant Management from the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

"At the time, there were not the same academic opportunities that exist today in the industry. I was lucky, I discovered the industry through word of mouth and knew

immediately that I wanted to dive in," she says. "It was definitely a calling. I loved the idea of expanding my horizons in not only the world of travel, but also with Fortune 1000 companies. I took a position as a trip director, and the role was the perfect gateway into the industry. That was the starting point in my career and through it, I experienced firsthand the value of incentives, sales meetings and all types of face-to-face events while gaining incredible exposure to various industries and functions with some of the biggest companies in the U.S."

Even today, she draws from those life lessons and applies them to her current role.

"In navigating my career, there is one commonality to be found: unpredictability. And, truth be told, I thrive in this type of environment," Erickson says.

"One day, I may find myself supporting the team and client with onsite operations, or I could be facilitating a workshop with a client, key stakeholders or in a sales pitch. On another day, I might be in back-to-back calls and meetings — action planning, brainstorming sessions, solving a challenge or HR/legal/finance-related items.

"I am very fortunate to be surrounded by the brilliant minds of our leadership and sales teams, and my role is often to help them accept new challenges and work through them."

The key to being a strong influencer as a woman in this industry, she notes, is finding your voice.

**"Take time to genuinely understand your purpose, your role and the impact your role brings to the business. That knowledge allows you to be thoughtful around your contributions and to set clear goals for yourself,"** she says. "Then, own your plan fearlessly. Seek support in your peers, management and senior leaders. Remember, attitude reflects leadership. Surround yourself in a culture that supports growth, mobility and brave conversations ... and share your aspirations. Take some risk, trust your intuition and speak up."

Erickson says there are many trends in play that the industry will need to be mindful of as it launches into 2019.

"Our focus continues to be on elevating the power of face-to-face experiences and impacting the way people think, feel, behave and perform," she says. "As such, the use of technology continues to be a key enabler for us in our space. It is essential for us to advance our work in this area."

"Data and analytics with a focus on audience segmentation is another area of increased focus that will allow for a more targeted and intentional approach to the attendee journey and the design of an event," she says. "Lastly, we continue to focus on personalization and our ability to connect with each attendee to create a DFY (do for you) experience similar with what we see in the business-to-consumer space." ■

## Charlotte Smith

Manager, Conferences, Incentives & Events, Giltedge DMC

Charlotte Smith has been working for Giltedge DMC for 10 years and is now the manager of the company's conferences, incentives and events. She's excited about Southern Africa's corporate and incentive travel industry and has been able to indulge her passion for travel since the 1980s.

"In the 1980s, I started working as a retail travel consultant and traveled around the world," she says. "After many years, I eventually found my niche in FIT inbound travel for Southern and East Africa. Nowadays, I manage the Giltedge DMC division based in Cape Town that is part of the award-winning Giltedge Group."

Over the years, she's worked with top brands like Old Mutual, Danone, BHP Billiton, Citroen, Amicorp, BMW and Toyota, among many others.

"I'm in charge of a team who specializes in organizing conference, incentive trips and events to Southern Africa, East Africa and the Indian Ocean islands," Smith says.

"My management of groups includes all aspects of travel from accommodations, transport, special events, client liaison, security, activities and VIP service. I often accompany groups and manage all onsite arrangements."

She understands that every event requires passion, energy and excitement, as well as care of and commitment for each client.

"To be a strong influencer, you need to pay attention to details and have the ability to see and solve problems before they even occur," she says.

**"You have to work as a team with the hotel/venue staff and**

**suppliers, ensuring open direct communication all the time. As a woman in this industry, I think it's important to empower my team to always give their best and to go the extra mile."**

Some of the things she is most proud of from her career include working on key corporate clients during the World Cup in 2010 and escorting a group to the semifinal game in Cape Town; hosting a mini children's World Cup soccer tournament in Langa, a township on the outskirts of Cape Town and donating soccer kits to each participant; and hosting the first Crystal AirCruises private jet charter in Africa with 84 guests on a private safari in the Maasai Mara in Kenya.

"I love helping groups experience the diversity of Southern Africa with its abundance of natural attractions, wildlife, friendly people and extraordinary cultures," Smith says. "I love a challenge! I also enjoy working with guests from different cultures and ensuring that every event is a success. My satisfaction from work stems from the certainty that guests will always return home with memories they will never forget."

Smith's view of the industry today is that multi-day conferences are becoming less popular, and clients are preferring to incorporate both work and pleasure in one location. She also sees wellness as a growing trend, and her clients are interested in healthy food options and offerings like yoga classes or spa sessions.

"Creativity is in the spotlight. Groups who come to Southern Africa and East Africa want to have fun, energetic and bespoke team activities that are tailor-made for their group's needs," she says.

"The emphasis is on unique and memorable trips. Less traditional conferences have been popular for a while, but now some groups/companies are integrating festivals or live music events into their trips." ■



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## Lauren Grech

### CEO and Founder, LLG Events



LLG Events is a self-funded international event planning and design firm striving to incorporate altruism in every aspect of its business. It has garnered industry-wide recognition by coding its own event-planning portal that streamlines the planning process and manages tasks, guest lists, budgets and proposals, establishing the ability to plan a destination event from anywhere in the world.

Lauren Grech, CEO and founder of the company, started in the business in a very unconventional way. She earned her degree in biology/pre-med at Binghamton

University, followed by an M.S. in forensic science at Pace University. Post-graduation, she began a career in research and development, studying autopsies, running toxicology reports and determining how people died.

"As I was planning my own wedding, I was planning my exit strategy from R&D to start my own business. I told my husband one month after we got married that we were going to start our own business, and he was 100 percent on board," she says. "We sat at my mom's kitchen table planning it all out. We agreed that our first step was to go back to the place where we got married and ask to shadow the maitre d'. It was brilliant. I would work 40 hours a week at my day job, and then volunteer every Thursday and Friday evening when they had an event, and every Saturday and Sunday when they had a wedding."

She admits it was exhausting, but they did this for four months until finally they went out on their own, succeeded in their first event, continued the momentum and

expanded into New York City. Today, she is a powerful influence in the industry.

"As CEO, I am responsible for delegating tasks among our senior staff, finding and pursuing new business opportunities, curating the strategic direction of the business and setting budgets for new initiatives and sales," Grech says. "On a day-to-day basis, not only am I responsible to all my clients and their planning tasks, but I have meetings with our creative director to discuss our brand, content strategy and what we're showcasing to our audiences; and our PR and marketing director to discuss and review press releases, media kits, social media strategy, new business opportunities and speaking engagements."

Additionally, she is always running from client meeting to client meeting. "Being a successful woman in any industry requires grit, and lots of it. It takes great courage and humility to continue pushing forward when every opportunity has just collapsed right in front of you," she says.

"I remember one year when I thought I was about to make \$100,000 in sales in just one week, and literally every single contract fell through."

But she was able to escape the mind-set of failure and kept going. The trick was accepting her shortcomings, learning from mistakes and recognizing when someone was doing it better.

**"Being a strong influencer requires constant hard work, determination and sacrifice. And unfortunately, this means choosing your business over anything else — that any spare moment you have, you are focusing on the company,"** she says.

"It's hard work, I'm not going to deny it. But I was determined to be successful, and that is what enabled me to wake up every morning to pursue my dream."

Looking ahead, Grech thinks experiential marketing will really take off this year.

"I think we saw exponential growth in 2018, but now that multiple companies have seen the benefits of interactive audience displays, more will continue and 'pop up,'" she says.

"I truly love how busy I am, and I thrive when I am constantly doing something. My job exposes me to so many exciting and new opportunities." ■

## Henrietta Balint

### Director, Global Meetings and Events Sales, Radius Travel

As director of global meetings and events sales for Bethesda, Maryland-based Radius Travel, the world's leading travel and meetings management network, Henrietta Balint has launched a proven, successful meetings and events business line.

"We have best-in-class agencies in our network who deliver superior meetings and events services, and the strategy involved pulling together their strengths in the aggregate to help organizations better manage their category, improve visibility and attendee experience," she says. "I am focused on further developing our global meeting and events offerings and creating innovative solutions for customers, as well as bringing insights and thought leadership to customers and the industry."

Balint started in the industry more than 25 years ago, when she was presented with the opportunity to do a one-week work experience program at a flight center store in Sydney, Australia.

"I immediately fell in love with the idea of helping people plan their trips and achieve their goals," she says. "A lot has changed since then in the industry. I have had the wonderful opportunity to work for amazing organizations and teams in many different roles and cities around the world in both business travel and meetings and events."

To be a successful woman in the industry today, Balint notes you must be active and have your voice heard.

"It takes self-confidence and believing in yourself that you can contribute and make a difference," she says. "It will make people listen and take notice."

In her career, there have been many achievements both personally and in developing team members that stand out as favorite memories.

**"In general, what continues to make me proud is that I am brave enough to get uncomfortable, and I am incredibly persistent in pushing through tough situations,"** Balint says.

"These attributes have presented many learning and growth opportunities."

Looking at 2019, Balint believes the convergence of the travel and meetings categories and the emergence of meetings technologies will continue.

"Our focus will be to continue to disrupt traditional global meetings management programs, help planners create better attendee experiences and organizations to achieve better ROI with direct linkage to their organizational objectives," she says.

"We are an incredibly creative, agile and flexible company and can truly create customized solutions." ■



## Danielle Babilino

### Senior Vice President, Global Sales and Marketing, Hard Rock Hotels & Casinos

Danielle Babilino is a fierce female leader in the hospitality industry, with nearly two decades of experience in various upscale brands, including Wynn and Encore Las Vegas, where she oversaw a sales operation that resulted in a great increase in sales revenue over a five-year period.

Today, she serves as senior vice president of global sales and marketing for Hard Rock Hotels & Casinos, critical to the success of expanding the Hard Rock brand. During her tenure thus far, Babilino has demonstrated a tenacious work ethic, with the ability to drive sales to a limit that was previously perceived as impossible.

"I grew up mostly in Las Vegas and was attending UNLV as a psychology major, but needed some cash flow, so I worked for a company doing meet-and-greets at hotels," she says. "As an outsider watching the hotel industry, it looked like a fun and exciting industry, so I decided to change majors."

Back then, it was a male-dominated field, and it took her a while to get into hotel sales, but she got her big break at the original MGM.

"They saw something in me — my persistence and desire to succeed, and a natural-born instinct to be a hospitality professional," Babilino says. "I spent 13 years at the property, and when I left, I was overseeing the sales and marketing for Bally's but also working on the preopening project of Paris."

Babilino was in demand around Las Vegas and was part of the opening of the Mandalay Bay Resort in 1999. She was instrumental in the opening of the convention center a few years later.

"I love working with an opening team and building something from the ground up," she says. "It's an incredible experience, and you build a special bond with those you go through it with."

At Hard Rock, the company is going through a large growth spurt, and she expects the addition of five to six hotels to the portfolio each year in the next five years.

"My team's responsibility, whether for group, leisure or corporate travel, is to grow brand awareness and, ultimately, drive business volume to the properties," she says. "In tandem with that, I am involved with all of the sales teams as we open projects."

At the core of what she does, Babilino says the industry is built on strong long-term relationships, and that has helped her to be successful.

"Those are built on integrity and built on solid business practices and professionalism," she says.

**"As someone who has been in this industry for a long time, I have had the good fortune of being around many great mentors, and I try to pay that forward as a mentor and coach."** C&IT







## Let's Get Physical

Energize Attendees by Incorporating Exercise and Activities at Meetings

By Derek Reveron

Meeting fatigue is common among attendees who sit too long and too often, especially during lengthy and tightly scheduled programs. Lethargic attendees are inattentive and less able to retain information. Providing endless supplies of coffee during meetings has been a customary solution. However, drained attendees need more than short-lived caffeine and sugar boosts.

They need to get moving. Physical activities and exercise, even in

moderation for short periods, can increase oxygen and blood flow, jump-start attentiveness, enhance attendee experiences and help achieve meeting goals.

More attendees are requesting physical activities ranging from stretching and yoga breaks to exercise classes and fitness-related teambuilding activities. The demand for new and unique physical activities is rising, especially among millennials, who make up about half the workforce. In

addition, older attendees, who have experienced years of traditional meeting activities, also want new options.

As a result, including a wider variety of physical activities has become a priority for planners. According to the Incentive Research Foundation's Wellness in Meetings and Incentive Travel Study, 87 percent of planners believe wellness is a key focus when planning events. Also, more than 90 percent of corporate planners feel enthusiastic about wellness.

### Increased Focus

Planners who are enthusiastic about the benefits of physical activities during or before meetings include Joanne Orlando, CMP, account manager of Schaumburg, Illinois-based, Total Event Resources, who says, "Physical activities will get attendees energized with increase blood flow between seated meetings. Attendees' focus will be increased after a physical activity resulting in higher information retention. They will be more willing and open to interact and network as physical activities are a good icebreaker and energizer."

Judy Meyers, owner of HPM Associates Inc., a Whittier, North Carolina-based meetings and incentive travel firm, agrees, especially when it comes to teambuilding.

"Generally, the goals of a corporate meeting or incentive program are improving communication, increasing motivation, identifying leadership and encouraging bonding," she says. "A well-planned, exciting and fun group physical teambuilding activity should help achieve all these goals."

"When people work together in a contained indoor and mostly sedentary setting, the scope of their interactions is limited," Meyers says. "Physical activities inside or outside the location

will let them see and experience themselves and each other in a new and different way. They will share the rewards that are inherent in these types of activities."

Jay Klein, CMP, COO, of Coral Gables, Florida-based A-plus Meetings and Incentives, adds that physical activities can improve attendees' attitudes toward their employers.

"The physical activities show attendees that the employer cares about their well-being enough to coordinate these programs," says Klein. "Beyond that, with the sedentary nature of most meetings combined with the volume of food and drink, means that attendees who can exercise during the program will be more alert and ready to absorb the content being presented. They'll also have more energy for evening networking activities."

Due to the many benefits of physical activities, Klein encourages corporations to include them during meetings and events. "Almost every program we plan these days includes some sort of physical activity," says Klein. "We'll usually have 10 to 20 participants for a program of 500 people, with many more utilizing the fitness center."



"Attendees' focus will be increased after a physical activity resulting in higher information retention."

**Joanne Orlando, CMP**  
Account Manager  
Total Event Resources  
Schaumburg, IL

### Robust Physical Activities

While some attendees prefer moderate activities during or between onsite meetings, others want vigorous workouts.

For Klein, "These programs typically involve early morning fitness programs. We try to vary it daily, but usually it will include yoga, kickboxing or boot camp workouts. Kickboxing and boot camp are definitely the most popular, along with early morning hikes or biking (depending on the location of the program)."

"The feedback is universally positive, both from the physical fitness aspect and for the teambuilding/networking," says Klein.

Cindy Lo, DMCP, president of Red



Credit: Judy Meyers

Judy Meyers' group activity combined fitness and teambuilding at the Academy for Coaching with Horses in Mexico City.



Velvet Events, finds that many corporate meetings want 1K runs. “These are typically for multiday conferences for corporate clients where they want to offer a physical activity before they start their standard meeting agenda,” says Lo. “For the runs, we can have anywhere from 10 to 50 participants. We typically encourage our clients to pre-register, so we know the interest level.”

“The runs are usually for meetings where everyone does not know each other and are attending for education or networking,” says Lo. “Overall, the runs have been enjoyable, especially in a city like Austin, where you can start your run from the hotel lobby and visit the Texas State Capitol, and see all the fun and colorful art murals we have that make us different.”

### Moderate Activity Helps

Even activities that require moderate physical exertion can improve attendee alertness, especially if they move constantly from station to station.

had a great time getting to know other employees while letting their competitive side show. The events were designed to create strong team bonding while pushing employees to meet their yearly goals.”

### Communicate for Turnout

Planners should schedule physical activities strategically and communicate details in advance for maximum benefit on attendees and meeting goals.

According to Lo, “I have found that it’s very important to communicate early and clearly on when these activities will take place, if there’s a sign-up required, what to pack and wear and if there’s limited capacity. Sometimes, people get so busy, they miss the initial sign-up and get upset if they do. It definitely helps

“The event would culminate in a healthy breakfast meeting in which they can debrief what they learned during the activity,” says Meyers. “Following the breakfast meeting, they should be energized and ready for a productive day.”

### Flexible Scheduling

Another option for Meyers is scheduling physical activities throughout the entire meeting agenda to give attendees a choice of times.

“During the event, schedule a morn-

ing break time and an afternoon break to take a brief walk or other activity,” she says. “It is always helpful to have your

last day of the program be a half-day in order to incorporate a physical activity as the last part of the overall event. This leads to additional comradery that will leave a lasting impression.”

Meyers also planned another event that included yoga sessions throughout the day so attendees could choose which time they wanted to attend.

Despite planners’ push for physical activities during meetings, some are cautious.

According to Lo, “I would say unless a company culture is all about physical activities, most companies want to play it safe and have minimal physical activities. We have to incorporate limited liability waivers for many physical activities and, depending on how large the

client is, they usually try to avoid these situations per their company policy.

“However, having said all this, I am a fan of getting out of the hotel ballroom and doing something that can re-energize your attendees,” she adds. “After all, that’s why physically interactive experiences are still top of the wish list when it comes to meeting planning and gets high marks from attendees.”

Even the most cautious planners can find several activities to make meeting agendas less sedentary. The options range from short fitness breaks to thrill-seeking activities.

### Active Teambuilding

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can combine physical activities and teambuilding that get attendees moving while fostering meeting goals and engagement.

Klein often suggests that corporate groups include active CSR teambuilding. “It has definitely taken over the teambuilding programs we do, either with something like a build-a-bike program for Boys and Girls Clubs or helping a school with painting, clean-up or other maintenance requirements,” he says.

“For teambuilding, we recently took a group of 100 leaders from a telecommunications technology company to a local school to paint it and build planters,” says Klein.

“This was exceptionally popular, especially at the end of the day when many of the young students joined our attendees to help. It was a great give-back to the host community and met the meeting objectives for networking and teambuilding.”

Meyers cites a unique example of active teambuilding.

“We have planned teambuilding programs with a company called the Academy for Coaching with Horses based in Mexico City,” she says. “New perspectives are gained because, when training and working with horses, you will see things as you never have before, which facilitates deep and true change.”

“This methodology takes teambuilding to an entirely new level,” adds Meyers. “This is not the typical

teambuilding activity that fits into one short session of a meeting. It is an unusual format in its time requirement.”

Meyers recommends another example of active teambuilding. “Full-day experiences, such as foraging for a culinary experience for glamping (an upscale form of camping) in hill country, can be incorporated for events that are less meeting-focused and can be customized for a unique attendee experience,” she says.

A growing number of venues offers activities that get attendees moving. Here are some examples:

- Cirque du Soleil’s Spark Sessions teambuilding activities permit groups of up to 40 to learn basic acrobatic moves and choreography from world-class acrobats. Spark Sessions are held in Las Vegas, Orlando and Mexico’s Riviera Maya.
- Topgolf, a chain of more than 35 golf-related theme parks in the U.S., accommodates groups of up to 1,000 within several spaces located inside giant multilevel complexes. The facilities are climate-controlled, and attendees don’t need their own golf equipment.



**Judy Meyers**, Owner, HPM Associates Inc., Whittier, NC

- Competitive ping-pong venues are opening in major cities nationwide. One ping-pong chain, Spin, offers a funky, lively décor along with comfort food. Games can be designed for up to 10 players.
- Food Truck Challenge allows teams to compete to develop a food truck concept. Teams create a truck name, logo, menu and cook the dishes

while developing a cardboard truck façade. Groups have two hours to complete the challenge, which is offered by TeamBonding, a teambuilding company.

### Light Activity Breaks

No-sweat activity breaks can be provided in meeting rooms by an instructor from a local fitness center or via video.

The breaks can consist of simple stretching and movements to get blood flowing. Make the breaks short and sweat-free so attendees can do the activities in their clothing and even while seated.

Other options: Distribute Fitbits to attendees and use the devices to encourage physical activities. For



**Jay Klein, CMP**  
Chief Operating Officer  
A-plus Meetings and Incentives  
Coral Gables, FL

example, have attendees compete to walk the greatest distance during an entire event.

Maintain and distribute rankings through an event app, and award prizes to the winners.

In addition, planners can email or text tips to attendees for using simple physical activities to keep themselves energized during meetings.

**“...have your last day of the program be a half-day in order to incorporate a physical activity as the last part of the overall event. This leads to additional comradery that will leave a lasting impression.”**



Outdoor games at Schaumburg Boomers Stadium in Illinois had 100 employees of a corporate company engaged in friendly competition and kept attendees alert.

ing break time and an afternoon break to take a brief walk or other activity,” she says. “It is always helpful to have your

last day of the program be a half-day in order to incorporate a physical activity as the last part of the overall event. This leads to additional comradery that will leave a lasting impression.”

Meyers also planned another event that included yoga sessions throughout the day so attendees could choose which time they wanted to attend.

Despite planners’ push for physical activities during meetings, some are cautious.

According to Lo, “I would say unless a company culture is all about physical activities, most companies want to play it safe and have minimal physical activities. We have to incorporate limited liability waivers for many physical activities and, depending on how large the

to have a plan B readily available if too many people show up.”

Klein believes attendees benefit best from before-breakfast workouts.

“We find that the programs should be scheduled in the early morning prior to breakfast, which is when many people prefer to work out, and it doesn’t impact the agenda,” he says. “For mandatory teambuilding exercises, usually later in the afternoon works well.”

Meyers also favors morning workouts. “One of my favorites is an early morning hike, bike ride or something out in nature that awakens the body, the senses and the spirit,” she says. “A group could be divided into teams with tasks or stops to make along the route.



For example, Orlando planned outdoor physical activities at the Schaumburg Boomers Stadium, where 100 sales employees of a payroll and human capital management software solutions company convened for some friendly competition.

“The activities we planned included a scavenger hunt, inflatable games, mini-arcade games and baseball-style carnival games,” she says. “Through strong branding, fun interactive activities and downtime out of the office, attendees



**“...physically interactive experiences are still top of the wish list when it comes to meeting planning and gets high marks from attendees.”**



**Cindy Lo, DMCP**  
President  
Red Velvet Events  
Austin, TX

“On a recent company incentive trip, we offered the group a choice between something that was active and less active and about half the team chose the more active, thrill-seeking option,” says Lo.

“It was extreme tubing (think white-water rafting but on a tube),” she adds.

“There were a lot of big rocks. We still tell stories about it today, and I had T-shirts made after the event to say, ‘we survived.’”

Some planners, including Klein, take a cautious approach to thrill-seeking activities.

“We rarely do truly thrill-

### Exercise Lounges

Set up a dedicated lounge or room where an instructor leads attendees through exercises, such as yoga, Zumba, aerobics, tai chi or spin classes. For example, last year, IMEX America set up a Be Well Lounge in a breakout room, where wellness experts led yoga classes and meditation sessions. More than 1,200 people attended the lounge, according to IMEX America.

### Thrill-seeking

Millennials have helped increase the variety of phys-



Options for attendees range from moderate fitness breaks, such as fishing (left) or archery (center), to thrill-seeking activities like zip lining (right).

Credit: Cindy Lo, DMCP

haven’t done it before. That’s why it’s crucial to know the group.

Planners suggest asking the following questions to determine attendees’ experiences with past physical activities.

- What physical activities have attendees enjoyed and not enjoyed in the past?
- Do they prefer indoor or outdoor activities?
- Is the group up to the challenge of a physically demanding activity if one is desired?
- What are the group’s interests?

More planners are doing what they can to include physical activities in programs to fight meeting fatigue and energize attendees.

Even minimal exercise or movement for short periods can stimulate attendee listening, learning and creativity. There are many simple and inexpensive options for including physical activities in meetings and many benefits to doing so. **C&IT**

seeking activities due to liability concerns, but on incentives, we’ll frequently offer zip lining or ATV riding,” he says. “We’ve also rented out a B-17 aircraft for rides. There is a small portion of our attendee base that might like the adrenaline rush, but it’s usually not for the full group.”

Meetings that require groups to spend most of their time onsite can take advantage of the increasing number of options offered by hotels and resorts. Some examples are:

Omni La Costa Resort & Spa in Carlsbad, California, allows Navy SEALs to lead group training sessions and competitions.

Gateway Canyons Resort & Spa in Gateway, Colorado, offers group cattle drives in which attendees help

cowboys gather cattle off several hundred acres and direct them to corrals.

Fairmont Scottsdale Princess in Arizona offers aerial yoga that suspends guests from hammocks, HoopFit resistance training on LED-lighted hula hoops and core-strengthening workouts.

Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate offers competitive Laser Skeet Shooting.

Planners looking to try a new physical activity should remember that it will not be a hit just because attendees



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# Better Safe THAN SORRY

## Every Planner Should Have an Effective Emergency Plan in Place for All Events

When people and data are threatened, when attendees are not safe at conferences or in public places, when terrorists attack crowds with assault weapons, who is to blame?

April Starkloff, DMCP, event producer with PRA Chicago, points to recent court filings and litigation for perspective.

"The world in which we live has changed," she says. "As planners, it's not only our responsibility to plan amazing events but to make sure the people attending them are safe. Across the United States, many criminal tragedies have taken place in very public spaces. In the aftermath, lawsuits have been filed against those who planned the events. The litigation has been filed referencing the planners' 'Duty of Care' or the 'Reasonable Foreseeable Risk.' Because of this, it has become more and more important to have documented and well-thought-out emergency plans."

Whether planners are truly responsible or could reasonably see ahead to the horrific acts of deranged individuals, or

even to the ever-evolving ingenuity of cyber criminals, could be debated. But what is absolutely certain is that every planner should have a comprehensive safety

and security plan in place for every event, as well as thorough knowledge of the safety and security protocols and procedures at host venues.

### Questions Are the Answer

"The most common safety and security issues we face are weather, civil unrest (i.e., protests), cyber security and traffic/transportation," Starkloff says. "Creating an effective emergency plan based on the elements of your program is key. What are the foreseeable and possibly unforeseeable situations that you can plan for? You have to analyze the program and determine the risks and the best way to mitigate those risks."

One way to do that is to ask a lot of questions early in the planning phase.

Among the questions Starkloff asks are: What has happened in the past?

By Christine Loomis

Are the attendees, speakers, subject matters or locations of the conference controversial? Are the attendees older or more likely to have medical issues? What weather-related risks are at the location? Again, what are the reasonable foreseeable risks, and what is the optimal mitigation plan?

Kristi Casey Sanders, CMP, CMM, DES, HMCC, director of community for MPI, agrees that planners must ask and answer critical questions in order to create truly effective plans.

"The best way to secure your meeting is to conduct a threat assessment and rank in priority what is most likely and what would have the biggest to least impact. Then, identify what risks you can mitigate with insurance or delegating liability and which ones you can minimize through best practices in risk management," she says.

Once you've identified those, she says, "You can create a crisis-management plan for that event that will instruct

"As planners, it's not only our responsibility to **plan amazing events** but to make sure the people attending them are safe."

April Starkloff, DMCP

Event Producer, PRA Chicago, Chicago, IL



your team on how to manage small and large threats that you are likely to face with that program. If you're not familiar with best practices, MPI just published *The Essential Guide to Safety and Security*, which has nearly 400 best practices for various situations that you can look up and include in your plans."

Sanders says weather is the most likely common hazard planners need to consider. "That's far more likely than a terrorist attack or first-person shooter to disrupt your event. Yet planners need to create plans based on all kinds of possible scenarios and that includes assessing the venues to be used."

To that end, Sanders has a comprehensive list of questions planners should ask personnel at hotels and event venues.

- What security protocols and procedures do you already have in place? What can you share with me? What can I share with my attendees?
- Can I speak to your head of security about this event?
- Do we need to bring any concerns to local law enforcement? (if protests, traffic issues or altercations are possible)
- If something happens, where are the nearest exits from this space?
- In case of fire, what do the building sirens sound like? Are there other warning signals for other incidents? What do they mean? What does the all-clear signal sound like?
- How far away is the nearest hospital? Do you have EMTs onsite? How would we get someone to emergency treatment if needed?
- Where are the defibrillators? Do you have epi-pens? How do I locate people who can use them?
- Do you have any materials I can share with my attendees?
- Can we create a cheat-sheet like an airline safety card to display during

our walk-in slides, place on tables during general sessions or include in my attendees' welcome bags?

- If meeting outdoors, what are plans B or C?
- If something happens and people can't get out of the city, where would they be sheltered?
- Will you be able to give me a real-time rooming list so I know where all my people are on your property?

Starkloff advises planners to always request a walk-through of a venue ahead of an event to ascertain the answers to critical questions.

When it comes to weather, planners can keep watch, but it's not always possible to know in advance how to react.

"Sometimes you just don't know what will happen," Starkloff says. "Yet it is the planner's responsibility to understand what weather-related issues could come up and to formulate a plan. It's important to make these calls ahead of time. Determine what circumstances would cause a venue change, cancellation or an evacuation and who will have the final authority to make the call. If these circumstances are agreed upon in advance, there will be no question on how to react."

Sanders notes that planners can get alerts from the National Weather Service if necessary, and if problems seem eminent, there are other options and steps, as well.

"Some planners I've talked with have actually had events where they positioned contacts at 150 miles, 100 miles, 50 miles and 20 miles from the event center, who would then relay real-time weather data so they would know when

"It's crucial that organizers **collect ... mobile numbers** from attendees when they register and let them know that is how they are going to communicate with them."

Elizabeth Glau, CMP

Customer Success Manager, Scienso, Hillsboro, OR



or if to evacuate. You have to pay attention to the reports, be transparent with attendees and overcommunicate if you have to," she adds. "You can also communicate with the local airport authority. If they're thinking about canceling flights, you don't want your attendees to get stranded."

And, if anyone related to the city says it's time to evacuate, she cautions, "don't delay that decision."

Meetings set on foreign soil have added safety and security concerns, not the least of which could be language issues in the middle of an emergency. Or a country might suddenly experience civil unrest although it wasn't indicated at the start of the planning process for a conference.

Additionally, planners have to think about common types of crimes that occur in some countries, or the presence of certain illnesses, which could be different than those that typically occur in the United States.

"Is civil unrest an issue or are there certain health concerns or prevalent criminal activities, such as carjackings, kidnappings or pickpockets? If so, communicate to attendees how to protect themselves and which facilities and organizations should be trusted," Starkloff says.

Sanders says attendees should also know how to register with their local embassy so they receive travel alerts and make it on lists for evacuation, should the need arise to leave the country.

"Depending on the location and the status of the attendees, you might need to have someone meet your delegates and help them get through customs. You

also might need to provide ground transportation if taxis are unsafe," she says.

### Cyber and Tech Dangers

"One of the biggest changes is that cyber and other security issues are on people's minds," Sanders says. "Before, people would just leave name tags hanging out or post a list on the website of everyone who was coming. You'll still see that happen, but it's no longer prevalent because people are aware now of how those actions create vulnerabilities."

Protecting attendee data has become a major concern, thanks in part to the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe, which is intended to protect delegates from data breaches or any unauthorized use of their personal information.

And it's not just relevant in Europe. "The first thing is to realize that GDPR is relevant globally," says Mariela McIlwraith, CMP, CMM, director, industry advancement, with the Events Industry Council. "If your events hold personal information about EU citizens, then GDPR applies to your organization. In addition, more jurisdictions are developing regulations on this topic; as an example, the California Consumer Privacy Act."

Handling data in general has become far more of an issue than it once was. As Sanders says, "You can't email out lists of attendees anymore because if an EU citizen tells you to delete all their information, how are you going to track down and ensure compliance from everyone who had access to that email or file?"

Beyond that, she says, "You need to have a privacy policy on your event

website and know how personal data is being handled, who has access to it and how it is used. Your IT or event-marketing partners need to be able to explain to you what steps they're taking to be compliant. The good news is that if someone requests to have their data deleted, there are ways to scrub all the personally identifiable information from a record and encrypt it so that the identity is anonymous. However, the data you need to look at for your event historicals doesn't disappear completely. Shifting the liability to your tech partners and letting them advise you is easier than trying to keep up with all of that yourself."

There are other cyber challenges, as well. "Phishing scams are probably the biggest issue," Sanders says. "Make sure your attendees know how to tell the difference between messages sent from you and imposter accounts. Train your staff to detect phishing so they don't click on corrupt links or files that could hijack their computers or compromise your networks."

Room-block poaching is one example of phishing. "Event professionals continue to be affected by room-block poaching, and it's now affecting other areas of our industry, as well," McIlwraith says. "This is related to cybersecurity in that poachers are using phishing practices to lure event participants and exhibitors into making bookings with fictitious room blocks."

Using USB drives is also tricky. "Collecting presentations on USB drives the day of the event can put your systems and those of your presenters at risk," McIlwraith says.

"Safety and security need to be **top of mind** and **incorporated in all aspects** of event management by all event stakeholders."

**Mariela McIlwraith, CMP, CMM**

Director, Industry Advancement, Events Industry Council, Washington, DC



Sanders agrees. "USB drives are another way that malware can infect your systems, so don't allow presenters to bring presentations on USB drives. Enforce the use of a presentation management system and make sure your AV team is wiping its computers every night," she says.

### Communication is Key

If there's one element related to safety and security that everyone agrees is critical, it's communication.

Starkloff notes that planners and key stakeholders should create a telephone tree in advance with clear instructions on who will call whom. Attendees should receive safety and security information in their registration information and they, too, should know where information will be coming from in the event of an emergency. An app would be one way to deliver emergency information, for example, and if that's the case, attendees should know that downloading and using the app is important.

Signage at events can provide onsite safety and security information, and emails can be sent out at an event to follow up on what attendees have previously received when registering.

Sanders' list of communication protocols includes early planning, practice plans and emcee announcements.

First, she says, collect emergency contact information and cell numbers at registration and let attendees know that you will only use the information in case of an emergency. Also, get attendees' food allergy and physical-challenge information at registration and explain that you need this to ensure their safety and comfort.

Next on her list, "Send out crisis plans and communications in the know-before-you-go. Have an emergency checklist/info on walk-in slides in rotation, on table cards and/or in the welcome bags. Do an orientation with attendees so they're prepared for what to do if something goes wrong. At one event, the emcee had people who knew CPR and how to operate defibrillators identify themselves and agree to help if something happened."

Sanders adds that it's critical to discuss emergency procedures with your staff, volunteers and vendors, and she suggests run-throughs with the pertinent teams.

"Practice your crisis plans with your internal and external team, and see if there are any vulnerabilities or holes before anyone gets onsite."

One area of technology that greatly benefits crisis communication is the use of chatbots. Elizabeth Glau, CMP, with Sciensio, notes that to use them effectively, steps must be taken first.

"Chatbots, or in our case, EventBots, are used in crisis communications. Once the team has determined there's a message that needs to go out to all attendees, using SMS (text messaging) is the only way it will reach all attendees. No one is checking email, and not everyone downloads the app or turns on notifications in the app," she says.

"This is why it's crucial that organizers collect (require) mobile numbers from attendees when they register and let them know that is how they are going to communicate with them (via SMS). It's also important to note," Glau adds, "that you want all of your stakeholders

in that communication system — staff, volunteers, vendors, etc., so they receive these important messages. Our platform allows you to text targeted messages as well if you're faced with a scenario where you only want to communicate with a segment of your stakeholders or attendees."

### Best Practices

"Safety and security need to be top of mind and incorporated in all aspects of event management by all event stakeholders," McIlwraith says.

In many ways, all of this seems obvious, yet it takes clear thought and attention to detail.

"You should plan your emergency policies and procedures with the same attention to detail as you do your events," Starkloff says. "What is your duty of care and what are the reasonable foreseeable risks? If you base your emergency plan with this in mind, you have done your due diligence."

Yet, it's not as simple as make a plan and you're done. "Communicate and practice it with your team and your attendees. And update it for every event," Sanders says.

The good news is that safety and security should be a group effort.

"Planners don't have to do it alone," Sanders points out. "In fact, their work will be a lot easier if they leverage internal resources, such as people from procurement, IT, legal and events, and external partnerships with the venues and service providers, to review potential threats and work together to create, review and test the event's risk management and crisis plans." **C&IT**



"The best way to secure your meeting is to **conduct a threat assessment** and rank in priority what is most likely..."

**Kristi Casey Sanders, CMP, CMM, DES, HMCC**

Director of Community, MPI, Sautee Nacoochee, GA



# Atlantic City: The New Frontier

Planners Searching For  
New Meeting Spots May  
Find Refuge in New Jersey

By John Buchanan

At a time when many meeting planners are looking for something genuinely new and different to do, Atlantic City, one of the most historic and iconic beach destinations in the country, is undergoing a renaissance. And planners who discover it are often very pleasantly surprised by its scope and sophistication.

"We have world-class casino resorts in a true resort destination," says Jim Wood, president and CEO of Meet AC, the city's convention and visitors bureau. "We have beautiful, pristine beaches that a number of our major resorts sit on. We have the world-famous Atlantic City Boardwalk. We also offer a broad selection of nighttime entertainment. And we offer some of the best culinary experiences anyone could ever expect to have at a meeting."

After a \$175 million renovation, the Ocean Resort Casino opened last June with 160,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space.

Credit: Ocean Resort Casino





The arrival of the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino to Atlantic City brings in a younger crowd and world-class entertainment.

Jennie Tis, director of business development at local destination management company, Roberts Event Group, A Hosts Global Member, based in Philadelphia, adds that because of its evolution and transformation over the last few years,

**"The thing that surprises some planners is the fact that we do have world-class casino resorts in a true resort setting that is truly spectacular."**

**Jim Wood**, President and CEO  
Meet AC, Atlantic City, NJ



Atlantic City is now a formidable competitor in the national meetings market.

"It's a fantastic meetings destination," Tis says. "You really feel like you're someplace that is special."

It's also unique and iconic, she says. The famous Atlantic City Boardwalk serves, in effect, as the trademark for a



One of the largest hotels in Atlantic City, Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa has more than 2,000 guest rooms and 18,000 square feet of meeting space.

nationally known tourism brand that has endured for a century. "So that gives us a sort of cool 'retro' appeal," Tis says.

Meeting planners who have recently taken groups to Atlantic City also give it high marks.

"Meetings at Atlantic City resorts are now seen in a much more positive light," says Mona S. Meretsky, CSEP, president of Fort Lauderdale-based COMCOR Event & Meeting Production and COMCOR Consulting Services. Meretsky, who has chosen the destination for several meetings, cites its infrastructure, especially its major casino resorts, as an important benefit.

"Many of the big resorts are self-contained," she says. "And there's so much to do that your attend-

ees never have to leave if they don't want to. In turn, that generates more interaction and networking. The major casinos have outstanding restaurants. The entertainment is very good. And there are great recreational opportunities available. You can also get great value in Atlantic City."

John Boyd, principal of Princeton, New Jersey-based The Boyd Company, one of the country's oldest and best-known site-selection firms, has brought more than 50 meetings and events to Atlantic City over the years.

"It's actually a multi-faceted city, with so much to see and do," Boyd says. "There's a great hospitality infrastructure. It also offers excellent accessibility from airports in New York



Credit: Steve Freilich

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Credit: Harrah's Resort Atlantic City



Credit: Meet AC

Harrah's Resort Atlantic City features 125,000 square feet of meeting space, including The Harrah's Concert Venue (right), which seats 1,200 and offers a state-of-the-art theater environment for special events.

City and Philadelphia. And now there is growing airlift from other cities, too."

Beyond all of those attributes, Boyd says, there is an even more important benefit for him and his corporate clients. "Atlantic City is a place where people have fun," he says. "And, among the senior executives with whom we work, that helps foster networking and improved personal relationships."

### Surprise, Surprise

Despite its long and illustrious history as a coveted East Coast vacation destination and a popular meetings destination for companies based in the northeast, Atlantic City surprises many meeting planners who visit for the first time.

"Until they actually come here, it's often lost on meeting planners that Atlantic City does sit right on the Atlantic Ocean and that we have beautiful beaches," Wood says. "The other thing that surprises some planners is the fact that we do have world-class casino resorts in a true resort setting that is truly spectacular.

"Another thing that surprises many planners is our size and capacity," he says. "We have four properties that offer more than 2,000 rooms each — Tropicana, Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa and Harrah's Resort. And

all four of those resorts offer very, very good meeting space and meeting-related amenities, like a variety of fine-dining experiences, nightlife and entertainment. So when I say that comes as a surprise to planners who come for a site visit, it's also a very pleasant surprise."



Credit: Meet AC

A popular oceanfront restaurant is The LandShark Bar & Grill, located near the observation wheel on Atlantic City's Steel Pier.

Tis agrees that planners are often amazed by the scope of the destination. "They're surprised by how big Atlantic City is, how many hotel properties there are and how many rooms we have." For the record, there are more than 17,500. "And there are a lot of options, including non-gaming hotels like The Claridge, for planners. That level of variety often comes as a real surprise to planners."

The biggest marvel, Wood and Tis say, is the extraordinary value that planners can take advantage of during the off-season.

"The most important thing about the destination when it comes to what meeting planners are looking for today," Tis says, "is that they're going to get luxury accommodations at a great value, as long as they don't come between Memorial Day and Labor Day, when every town on the Jersey Shore is full with vacationers. And if you plan a meeting here between Labor Day and Memorial Day, you're going to get beautiful



Credit: Resorts Casino Hotel

Resorts Casino Hotel's Superstar Theater is a more than 17,000-square-foot event venue that hosts meetings as well as shows and concerts.

rooms with beautiful views of the ocean at a fraction of the price you'd pay during the summer."

In addition to exceptional value, Atlantic City offers pleasant weather in the spring and fall that avoids the sometimes extreme heat of summer.

### New and Renovated Hotels

A key factor in Atlantic City's current renaissance has been the emergence of three hotels as pillars of its meeting infrastructure.

Last June, after an extensive \$175 million renovation, the former Revel property opened as the Ocean Resort Casino, a Hyatt-affiliated hotel. Ocean Resort Casino features 1,399 rooms and 160,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space, which offers complimentary Wi-Fi. The resort's trio of signature fine-dining restaurants are Amada, a tapas-style Spanish eatery that specializes in the regional fare of Andalucía; American Cut, an award-winning steakhouse and modern Italian restaurant Dolce Mare.

Other amenities include the 40,000-square-foot Exhale Spa and a Topgolf Swing Suite that overlooks the Atlantic Ocean.

"The great news about having Ocean open up," Meet AC's Wood says, "has been their commitment to reinvest into the property in order to keep improving it. For example, they are going to develop and complete the 500 rooms that were supposed to be located right in the middle of the hotel, but were not actually built as Revel because they lacked the capital to do it. Ocean already has 1,399 rooms open, so once the new rooms are completed, they'll be up to 1,899." Projected opening of the new rooms in summer 2020.

The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City also made its debut last June, on the site of the former Trump Taj Mahal, after a \$500 million makeover.

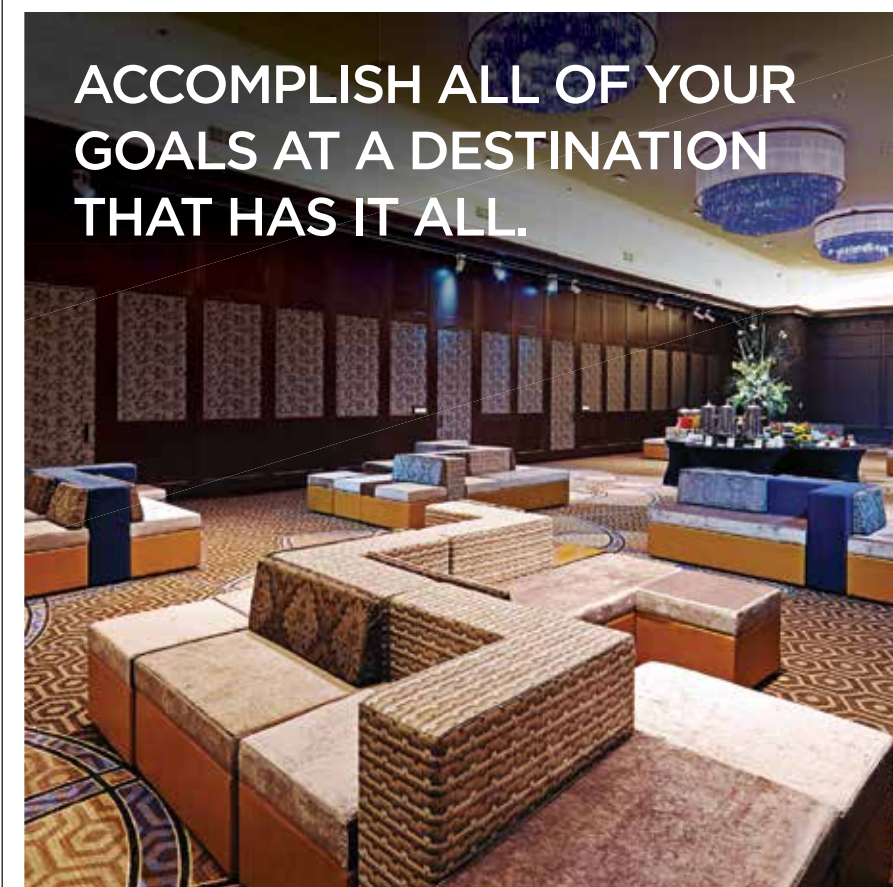
Meeting attendees can't miss the 60-foot-tall guitar outside of the hotel that has 2,000 guest rooms offering amazing views of either Atlantic City or the Atlantic Ocean and more than 150,000 square feet of meeting and event space. The 29,000-square-foot Seminole Ballroom can be divided into as many as six sections in order to accommodate everything from intimate



"Almost everything that's hot right now about Atlantic City dining has to do with the celebrity chef scene."

Jennie Tis, Director of Business Development, Roberts Event Group, Philadelphia, PA

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Credit: Tropicana Atlantic City

Tropicana Atlantic City has more than 2,000 guest rooms and the 200,000-square-foot shopping and entertainment complex, The Quarter.

concerts to large banquets. The Hard Rock Live at Etes Arena can stage general sessions for up to 7,000 attendees or be used for major concerts or other entertainment.

And speaking of entertainment, it's what clearly defines the Hard Rock experience, making this resort casino property comparable to some Las Vegas hotels. With more than 20 nightlife and dining options onsite, as well as a casino featuring slots and table games, "the party never stops" at this newly opened resort. Attendees can have fun until the wee hours at venues such as DAER Nightclub, Sound Waves and Howie Mandel's Comedy Club. When it comes to fine-dining, the hotel's three flagship restaurants are Council Oak Fish, which specializes in ocean-to-table seafood and offers table-side caviar service; Kuro, a contemporary Japanese restaurant that features artisanal dishes crafted from ingredients sourced locally or imported from Japan; and Il Mulino, which serves classical "Old World" Italian cuisine, including home-made pastas and cheeses.

And there is, of course, a Hard Rock Cafe for more casual and fun dining. This 400-seat restaurant with the unique music memorabilia décor serves the savory fare guests know and love, plus some special dishes exclusive to this destination.

**"There's so much to do that your attendees never have to leave if they don't want to. In turn, that generates more interaction and networking."**

**Mona S. Meretsky, CSEP**, President, COMCOR Event & Meeting Production and COMCOR Consulting Services  
Fort Lauderdale, FL



If shopping is on the agenda, Hard Rock Hotel & Casino has that covered, too. A wide variety of shopping options are onsite, including a chic boutique, art gallery and Hard Rock gift shop. Attendees can get what they need without leaving the hotel.

Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City boasts one of the largest music memorabilia collections in the United States featuring one-of-a-kind items from artists such as The Beatles, Elvis Presley, Madonna, KISS and Bruce Springsteen.

Highlights of the collection include the handwritten lyrics to "Imagine" by John Lennon, a black tuxedo from Dean Martin's personal wardrobe and Elvis' 1963 Rolls-Royce Phantom.

The arrival of the Hard Rock property marks an important milestone for Atlantic City. The appeal of the brand demographically will help bring to town younger, hipper groups, Wood says. "The curb appeal of the Hard Rock is definitely to a younger demographic. But what we're also seeing with the new hotel, which is very important to the brand and the destination, is a major commitment to world-class entertainment. And that means we will rival any destination anywhere, including Las Vegas, when it comes to big-name entertainment."

The third major pillar of the city's hotel infrastructure is the 2,590-room Harrah's Resort Atlantic City, located in the exclusive Marina District. It features 125,000 square feet of meeting space, including the \$125.8 million, state-of-the-art Waterfront Conference Center, now ranking as the largest meeting facility between Boston and Baltimore.

The three flagship fine-dining restaurants at Harrah's are the new Gordon Ramsay Steak; Martorano's, which serves classical Italian fare and what actor Al Pacino has called "the best meatballs on the planet" and Veracruz, which specializes in tapas and tacos.

Harrah's is now completing a \$56 million renovation of its 507-room Coastal Tower. The project is the latest phase of a \$125 renovation and expansion undertaken over the last four years, in addition to the development of the conference center.

Harrah's is vital to Atlantic City because of its long-standing, globally established parent brand, which represents the best of gaming, Wood says. "And on top of that, you have the incredible views in the Atlantic City property because of its location in the Marina District. The vistas are just gorgeous, and it's also very relaxing."

### The Dining Scene

Yet another element of Atlantic City's evolution has been the growth and increased sophistication of its local dining options.

"Almost everything that's hot right now about Atlantic City dining has to do with the celebrity chef scene," Tis says. "For example, Stephen Starr has Buddakhan and The Continental. Buddakhan serves modern Asian cuisine, and The Continental features a global tapas menu and a fantastic ambience that includes a sunken fire pit lounge and an outdoor patio. Newer restaurants include Olón by Jose Garces, which opened at The Tropicana about two years ago. It features wonderful fresh seafood. And another great new restaurant is Gordon Ramsay Steak at Harrah's Resort. The Claridge, which is a non-gaming property, has a restaurant on its top floor called The VUE. It's a more casual place, but the view is breathtaking. It

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**ATLANTIC CITY**





Credit: Meet AC

A fun activity for attendees is the Stockton Seaview Golf Club, which is a magnificent golf course for groups who want time to play golf.

also offers outdoor seating you can use at night for a spectacular experience."

An oceanfront restaurant that Tis favors is The LandShark Bar & Grill, part of Jimmy Buffet's dining and entertainment empire. "It's located right on the beach," Tis says. "So you get a sensational view, and it's also a lot of fun." Buyouts are available for groups of up to about 250 attendees.

Located just off the Boardwalk is the Orange Loop, which covers three beachfront blocks and features unique local restaurants and bars, as well as coffee shops and live music venues. Among its most popular establishments are Bourre,

**"There's a great hospitality infrastructure. ... Atlantic City is a place where people have fun."**

**John Boyd**, Principal  
The Boyd Company, Princeton, NJ



which features Cajun barbecue, and the recently opened Tennessee Avenue Beer Hall.

"The locally owned restaurant scene in Atlantic City is eclectic," Body says, "especially in ethnic neighborhoods like Ducktown, which has great little Italian restaurants."

Among the city's other best restaurants are three major-brand steakhouses — The Palm Atlantic City, Morton's The Steakhouse and Ruth's Chris Steak House — as well as local Italian favorites Carmine's and Il Verdi. Two of the most beloved and highly rated seafood restaurants are Harry's Oyster Bar & Seafood and Chart House.

#### Offsite Venues and Activities

Although its day-to-day meeting infrastructure is dominated by the major resort hotels, Atlantic City offers a pair of eclectic offsite venues that Tis often recommends to her clients.

"One venue we really like is the Noyes Arts Garage of Stockton University," she says. "It's truly something unique and different. It has arts exhibits that cycle through over the course of the year, and it shows Atlantic City in a way that most people don't think of it because it doesn't have anything to do with casino gaming. It has to do with culture and especially with pop art."

"Another venue we like very much is One Atlantic, located over the water on the boardwalk. It's a private event venue that is also unique and different. It's part of The Playground, which was formerly known as The Pier Shops. It has nice amenities like hardwood floors, as well as sweeping ocean views and beautiful space. And it can be customized to do smaller functions, like intimate cocktail parties, or lunches or dinners for as few as 50 people. Or you can go as high as 500 people for a seated dinner."

Whenever Roberts Event Group submits a proposal, it also typically recommends activities that get attendees out on the water.

"So we recommend things like sunset boat cruises or deep-sea fishing charters," Tis says. "We also can set up morning yoga classes on the beach, or at Ocean Resort we can do that in a ballroom overlooking the beach. We also now have a great local winery scene on the Jersey Shore. One we like is The Renault, which is about 15 minutes outside of town. Another fun activity is the Stockton Seaview Golf Club, which is a wonderful golf course for groups who want to work in some golf."

Given everything that Atlantic City offers, Meet AC enthusiastically urges meeting planners who've never been to town to come for an exploratory site visit.

"We spend a lot of time bringing planners here," Wood says. "We're open to site inspections, by any planner, at any time. We'd love to show you around and show you what Atlantic City has to offer. And we're confident that once you see it, you'll want to come here for a meeting or conference."

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# Louisiana Far and Wide

Planners Will Find Southern Hospitality Across the State

By Christine Loomis

It's not uncommon to close off streets in New Orleans for everyone — including meeting attendees — to join a parade!

New Orleans celebrated its 300th anniversary last year. For a city that lives to celebrate anything and everything, that's a big deal.

New Orleans is a jewel that can't be duplicated. It's diverse and historic with music, food and deeply rooted traditions that sets it apart, all providing huge appeal for meeting planners and groups.

Yet, there are planners who feel just as strongly about Shreveport-Bossier in the northwest corner of the state. And, that's good news. Louisiana offers choices.

## New Orleans

The city's joie de vivre, superb meeting infrastructure and the fact that attendees love it are just a few reasons the 2018

International Roofing Exposition with 10,076 attendees was set in New Orleans.

Tracy Garcia, CEM, show director with Informa Global Expositions, says, "Our exhibitor and attendee base love the multitude of activities New Orleans has to offer, from award-winning restaurants to art, architecture and live music. We survey our audience to see what cities they would like us to

bring the show to, and New Orleans has been one of the top cities they've selected."

Added to that, Garcia says, is the overall hotel product. "There is a property type, location and price point for everyone."

In total, the group used a large block of hotels, the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center and other venues for its February expo.





**“Our exhibitor and attendee base love the multitude of activities New Orleans has to offer, from award-winning restaurants to art, architecture and live music. We survey our audience to see what cities they would like us to bring the show to, and New Orleans has been one of the top cities they’ve selected.”**

**Tracy Garcia, CEM**, Show Director  
Informa Global Expositions  
Irving, TX

“We hold a welcome party the first night for all attendees,” Garcia says. “This year, it was at the historic Generations Hall, built in the 1820s as a sugar refinery. It combines a glimpse into the past with a state-of-the-art sound system that created a great backdrop to mingle and dance.”

Garcia calls the city’s convention center a superb facility. “From the director of sales to the convention service manager down to the folks working in the food courts, they understand the convention and meetings industry. They are always willing to help any way that they can. The facility is one of the most advanced in the country,” she says.

In addition to the team at the convention center, Garcia also lauds the staff at New Orleans & Company, the city’s CVB, for

making planning easy. “They are very responsive and always on top of every detail. Their hospitality industry partners went out of their way to meet and exceed our expectations,” she says.

With a convention of this size, meeting and exhibition space are paramount.

“We use most of the capabilities offered by the convention center. The Wi-Fi capabilities are top-notch with a system of 183 Ximus APs and multiple bands. In addition, Wi-Fi was free in the public space of the facility,” Garcia notes. “The center also has cool digital products that can be used as sponsorships or show branding, including 52-inch monitors in the public space, an outdoor LED sign at the shuttle drop-off area and large, high-resolution signage at the entrance.”

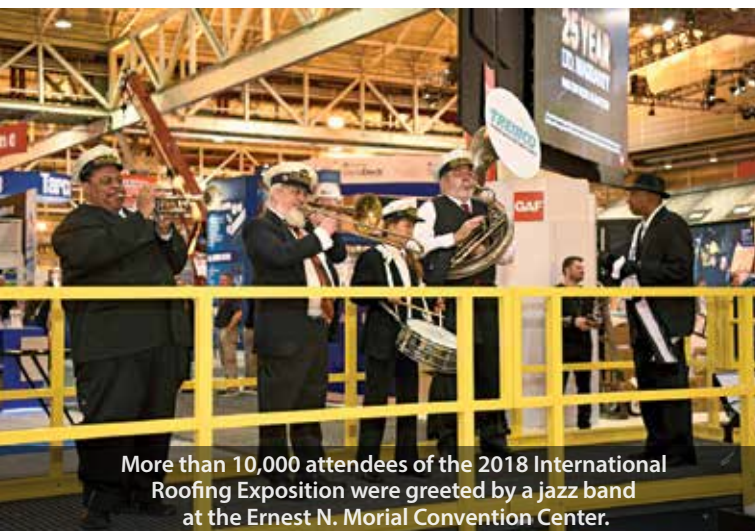
Marketing assistance from New Orleans & Company also helped. “One challenge we have is that in our industry there is not a lot of drive-in traffic,” Garcia says. “However, the CVB went out of its way to help us market. A New Orleans & Company representative attended the prior year’s meeting to promote the city. They provided marketing assistance with custom promotion flyers, email address based on SIC codes and more.”

For some groups, the core hotel is meeting central. That was the case for the RenWeb Power Conference in July. Ginger Reed, director, value-added services with RenWeb, has high praise for the Hyatt Regency New Orleans, where the event with 1,100 attendees took place.

“Hyatt Regency New Orleans was a great location for us due to the size of the facility — the number of breakout rooms, size of those breakouts and number of sleeping rooms,” she says. “A large percentage of our customer base is located in the south, so location and ease of access made for a great fit, as well. We loved the fact that the hotel was close to the ‘action’ but not right in the middle of it. And, New Orleans has a great deal to offer as a destination.”

In addition to the variety of meeting space options, Reed liked the layout of space and the expertise of the hotel staff. “We appreciated how stacked the meeting space was for easy access between breakouts,” she says. “And, in nine years of hosting this conference, this team was the best! They were extremely visible and ahead of our needs at all times. There was great communication and availability pre-con, during and post-con.

“The sales and event management teams were on it,” Reed continues. “Their organization, communication and commit-



More than 10,000 attendees of the 2018 International Roofing Exposition were greeted by a jazz band at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

Credit: David Altemani/stop Photography

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Groups often choose to take over a restaurant or funky music club for an event to experience New Orleans' joie de vivre.



Credit: Terry Epton

ment to every detail put me at ease throughout the process. During the conference, PSAV knocked it out of the park, as well, with internet connectivity in the meeting space. They also set up a table in one of the foyers to assist clients with connectivity on their devices."

Connectivity is a critical issue for Reed. "This was our ninth annual conference, and up to this year, we had internet issues every conference. This year was different," she says. "PSAV worked with us on delivering a conference with no connectivity issues at all. When you're a software company training users on your system, and there are no outages during that training, that is huge."

Reed says the group utilized a total of 34 meeting rooms — 30 breakouts, rooms for lunch and general-session and two conference rooms. "All rooms were set and refreshed without issue throughout the conference," she says. "The catering team provided lunch. They moved people through seven to eight station locations very quickly. I don't believe we've ever served lunch so quickly at any conference, not to mention the food quality was excellent. The staff in all areas worked with us to ensure the conference kept moving smoothly."

Reed says there were no challenges in planning the event, but there were some uncertainties. "A few months out, we worked with the hotel on flipping some meeting rooms around

**"I suggest staying organized, communicating often and expressing concerns and compliments as they happen. People get busy, and events are a team effort that require focus. I am extremely blessed to work with many people that are willing to share their various talents."**

**Leah Strickland**, Customer Service Representative  
Omni Specialty Packaging, LLC  
Shreveport, LA

for us to better meet our needs. After final approvals from another pending group, we were able to make those changes. It wasn't a challenge, but a 'what if' in our planning," she says.

The smoothness of the planning process was facilitated by the Hyatt's staff. "They deliver on a quality experience and great customer service," Reed says. "They're a friendly team that loves their city and wants to make sure you and your attendees leave feeling like you're family."

To planners considering the Hyatt Regency New Orleans, Reed says, "Do it! You won't regret your choice in property or city location. You'll have amazing service, people, food and music."

No one knows a city better than an experienced DMC and that's certainly true of Hosts New Orleans, a Hosts Global member, headed up by president Terry Epton, CIS, CITE, DMCP.

"We have a broad selection of meeting hotels for groups of all sizes, but that's not necessarily remarkable," he says. "We've got a 1-million-plus-square-foot exhibition hall with its huge complement of meeting rooms for breakouts, spacious and well-appointed ballrooms, a theater and more. We've got ample and growing lift for a city of our size, with a new airport opening in early 2019. We're well-known for the walkability of our popular visitor areas. You can check all the boxes. But there's more."

**The Hyatt Regency New Orleans staff "deliver on a quality experience and great customer service. They're a friendly team that loves their city and wants to make sure you and your attendees leave feeling like you're family."**

**Ginger Reed**, Director, Value-added Services  
RenWeb  
Burleson, TX

There is something magical about New Orleans, Epton says, something that's irresistible to the people who know the city, and that is why New Orleans is a "bucket list" place.

"People want to come here, and they return repeatedly because it is uniquely authentic. It's so instantly comfortable, generous and freewheeling; people give themselves permission to loosen up because it is not only OK but expected here," he says. "It's as if people's personalities shift gears to a new reference frame ... one where they stay up a little later than they normally do. They likely eat a little more than normal and drink a little more, too. This all adds up to being less inhibited, less guarded than usual. It's liberating. Isn't that the magic we all crave — permission to lighten up, relax and find personal joy?"

Then there's the fact that planners have so many choices. "There are endless variations to develop a jaw-dropping program," Epton notes. "We have so many more themes and one-of-a-kind venues that planners must often decide what not to do because there is so much. Just choosing restaurants here is a wonderful challenge. It's all so delicious."

There are 1,550 restaurants in New Orleans, Epton says. "The most per capita by far in the USA, because 'we live to eat!' We also have a music scene that is world-renowned. Several areas around the city feature live music clubs. Taking over a funky music club or restaurant for an event is something groups often choose to do."

One of the city's most well-known venues is Mardi Gras World, which Epton says is a favorite with all kinds of groups. "Many groups choose to go with a familiar theme and venue complex that can host all sizes and in a wide range of budgets," he says. "This would be at the venue complex that comprises the River City Venues, more commonly known as Mardi Gras World. We've used it for groups ranging in size from thousands to smaller incentive events for a few hundred. Mardi Gras packs a punch, and when you're looking for a party, it's a natural."

More popular lately, Epton notes, is the National WWII Museum. "It, too, is a complex of venues that can all be used for groups of all sizes. Smaller venues, such as the Stage Door Canteen, a WWII-themed USO club, is good for intimate gatherings. Sections such as the US Freedom Pavilion: The Boeing Center, with its WWII-era airplanes hanging from the ceiling

and tanks and other vehicles on the floor, work for larger groups. The entire facility can host thousands," he says.

There is much more to be said about hotels, venues and infrastructure. But the bottom line, Epton says, is simple. "New Orleans is inspirational."

Think about it, he continues. "Jazz, the root of all modern music, was invented here and is evolving to this day. Famous writers came to New Orleans to be inspired and find their words. Truman Capote and William Faulkner wrote here. So did Mark Twain, Ann Rice, Ernest Hemingway and Tennessee Williams. Artists and musicians have been here for hundreds of years finding their sound ... their inspiration."

What stands out about New Orleans? Epton asks. "People who come here are inspired, including groups who meet and travel here today. This is an added value that you cannot put a price on."

Indeed. It's also hard to put a price on a name, but the New Orleans CVB is betting that a change will yield positive results. As of May 2018, the organization became New Orleans & Company, a name, they say, that "better reflects the work that we do and the people we serve."

In addition to the new terminal at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport, scheduled to open in May, the city is spending many millions on the historic riverfront redevelopment projects, which will provide access to 3.2 miles of contiguous space from Spanish Plaza to Crescent Park.

Over the past few years, the Omni Royal Orleans has been upgrading various parts of the hotel, from two luxury suites to all guest bathrooms, carpets, linens and furnishings. On the horizon: a reimagination of the rooftop pool area.

The Hyatt Regency New Orleans recently completed a technology upgrade. It now offers a state-of-the-art system with up to 2 Gbps of internet bandwidth, the largest within the city. With more than 850 wireless access points, attendees are now guaranteed to stay connected.

## Shreveport-Bossier

Located in the northwestern corner of Louisiana, the dual communities of Shreveport and Bossier City flank both sides of the Red River and offer excellent meeting and entertainment options for attendees and planners.

Omni Specialty Packaging, LLC, based in Shreveport, held its Omni-STIHL "Bayou State of Mind" seminar for two weeks at Eldorado Resort & Casino, drawing 50 attendees in each one-week session.

Leah Strickland, customer service representative with the company, says of the event: "Omni Specialty Packaging blends and packages a wide variety of two-cycle engine oils, passenger car motor oils, hydraulic oils, etc. We hosted a training seminar for territory managers, product managers and technical managers from one of our customers, STIHL, Inc., last year. This event was based in Shreveport, so our guests could tour our manufacturing plant and our research and development laboratory. These guests were from all over the country, from Hawaii to New York."





**"People want to come here, and they return repeatedly because it is uniquely authentic. It's so instantly comfortable, generous and freewheeling; people give themselves permission to loosen up because it is not only OK but expected here."**

**Terry Epton, CIS, CITE, DMCP, President**  
Hosts New Orleans  
New Orleans, LA

In addition to touring Omni's plant and warehouse facilities, event attendees were treated to a welcome reception at the Eldorado's Allure Ultra Lounge, as well as breakfast and meeting functions in the hotel's ballrooms, meetings and lunch at the Regional Commerce Center at the Port of Shreveport-Bossier, a sunset roof function at the Remington Suite Hotel & Spa and dinner in the Remington's Royale Ballroom. A day of tours and activities included guided fishing on Caddo Lake, golf at Southern Trace Country Club and sightseeing via limousine. The group also toured Shreveport's new aquarium, just across the parking lot from the Eldorado, followed by a dinner on the patio of Salt, the aquarium's restaurant.

Strickland has a multitude of recommendations for local expertise that planners can tap into.

"I highly recommend the Regional Commerce Center. Marilyn Haley and Michele Duet are fantastic to work with. The Remington Suite Hotel & Spa rooftop and Royale Ballroom have a warm, historical feel that our guests really enjoyed," she says. "Kameron Simpson was a joy and had several great recommendations in utilizing the available spaces. This is a beautiful location, intimate yet spacious."

Catering was also an important element. "We chose Maison Louisiane out of Natchitoches for our catering service for lunch at the Regional Commerce Center and for dinner at the Remington," she says. "Keri Fidelak has a unique selection of menus. Everything they prepared was delightful, and all of Keri's assistants were professional and friendly. In addition, Keri provided tablecloths for all offsite events."

Strickland likes the indoor/outdoor spaces at the relatively new Shreveport Aquarium. "The rollup garage doors provide additional under-roof dining space with access to the fenced-in courtyard for a comfortable indoor/outdoor dining experience," she says. "Charlene Mahoney and her team were very accommodating and also provided a wide variety of menu choices."

In addition, transportation was critical. "We contracted with iShuttle for smaller groups and transporting them to and from the airport," Strickland says. "Philip Maxwell and his team go the extra mile to assist with any transportation needs. For the larger groups, we contracted with Peter Ramsey at Red River Trailways and Charlotte Stephens at Tri-City Charter. We had positive experiences with both companies."

Strickland calls the day of recreation a huge success, thanks in large part to the guides. "The guided fishing trips

were coordinated by Mike Echols. He knows how to run a bass tournament! Many of these guest anglers had never wet a hook before, and Mike paired them with seasoned, successful and patient fishing guides," she says. "They also knew the history of Caddo Lake, which added to the great time our guests experienced fishing there."

Local step-on guide Johnny Wessler led the sightseeing tour. "We highly recommend Johnny," Strickland says. "He has a wealth of knowledge about our area and makes tours fun and exciting. Our guests rode in style in a limousine from Shreveport Limousine. The company provides quality, customized service. The sightseeing group was also impressed with a tasty lunch at Abby Singer's Bistro inside the Robinson Film Center. The food and service is always on point."

As for golfing at Southern Trace, Strickland says, "Nathan Barrow always aims to please guest golfers and never disappoints."

Staff at the Eldorado Resort & Casino went above and beyond. "We have worked with Jessica Ray and Laurie Green and their teams many times. They are professional and go the extra mile. For example, on the day of departure, some of our guests' flights were very early in the morning. As part of our company's southern hospitality and customer service, we had an Omni employee and an Eldorado employee, Moe, in the lobby as early as 3 a.m. to send the guests off with a hug or handshake and a continental breakfast. Moe was very helpful in assuring that this small gesture was successful," Strickland says.

Planners, she adds, should definitely consider the Eldorado and enlist the help of Ray, sales and catering manager. "Express the expectations and wishes up-front. Jessica will let you know if it's possible. Honestly, she has not told us no yet!"

As with any event, Strickland notes, "I suggest staying organized, communicating often and expressing concerns and compliments as they happen. People get busy, and events are a team effort that require focus. I am extremely blessed to work with many people that are willing to share their various talents."

New Orleans and Shreveport-Bossier City are just two Louisiana options. Other possibilities include Baton Rouge, Lafayette, the Northshore and Lake Charles.

Wherever groups choose to meet, however, one thing is certain: Southern hospitality will be front and center, as it is arguably the most deeply rooted tradition of all across the entire state.

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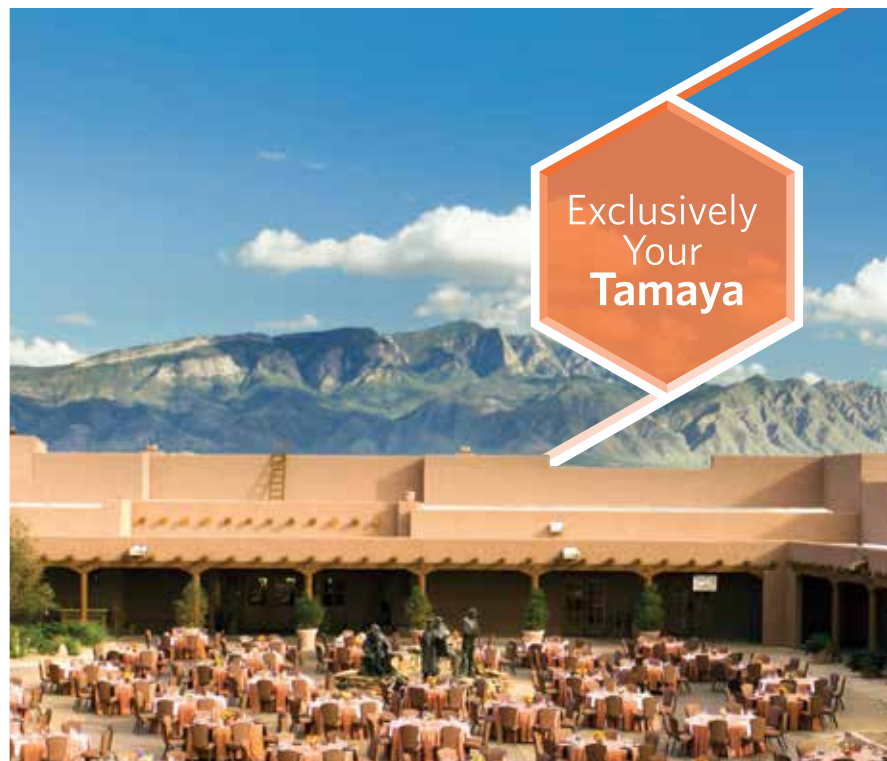
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Streamlinevents, a full-service meetings and events management company, welcomed **Tracy DeMario** as vice president of sales and marketing. Prior to this, DeMario worked with companies offering solutions to hoteliers for the effective management of their reservation systems and operations, including Pegasus Solutions, Aventri and Lanyon.

The Brown Palace Hotel and Spa in downtown Denver has named **Ann Sutherland Lynch** as director of sales and marketing. Most recently, Lynch was the director of sales and marketing of The Jacquard Hotel & Rooftop in Denver.

L'Auberge de Sedona, A Destination Hotel in Sedona, Arizona, named **Julie Sokol** director of sales. Most recently, Sokol was the associate director of sales at Sedona's Kimpton Amara Resort and Spa.

Associated Luxury Hotels International (ALHI) has appointed **Jamie Lee Tiffany** as director of sales within the company's western U.S. sales team. Prior to joining ALHI, she served as senior sales manager at L'Auberge Del Mar in Del Mar, California.

Hilton Palacio del Rio in San Antonio, Texas, has hired **Daryl Montalvo** as sales manager. Montalvo started his career in hospitality working as director of group sales with Hilton Hotels. **C&IT**



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