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EVENTS**

**MEETING  
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**PROFESSIONAL  
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A COASTAL COMMUNICATIONS CORPORATION PUBLICATION

APRIL 2019 VOL. 37 NO. 4 \$12.00

# CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR GLOBAL MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

## CVB *Leaders*

Remarkable Women  
Share Their Insights  
and Wisdom

Food &  
Beverage  
Trends



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Credit: Know Forte LLC



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Credit: Business Events Canada



Miami is regaining its popularity as a hot spot. **PAGE 60**

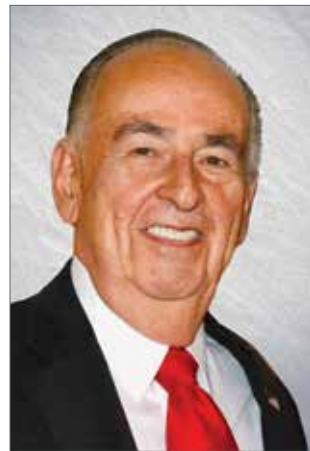
Credit: Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, MiamiandBeaches.com



# Publisher's Message

## Honoring Women Leading the CVBs

Welcome to *Corporate & Incentive Travel* magazine's April issue dedicated to honoring 12 outstanding women who lead CVBs. Don't miss the in-depth article "CVB Leaders" that recognizes their achievements starting on Page 18. Their work is making a lasting impact on their destinations, and as leaders of their CVBs, they have agreed to share their experiences.



I am highlighting these talented women in our industry who serve as an inspiration and motivation to others. I hope you will find their comments solid examples of success, and I thank these women for their willingness to share their experiences.

As a leading meeting planner publication serving the industry since 1983, *Corporate & Incentive Travel* magazine covers meaningful topics monthly to serve the industry and work toward a time when our industry will represent full gender equality, diversity and inclusion.

Also in this issue, our article "Food & Beverage Frenzy" on Page 30 recognizes that trends are moving fast and planners and chefs are working together to satisfy changing appetites. Culinary education

as part of the meeting experience is increasing, with chefs weaving in options for education and interactive food and drink experiences. You can read how planners successfully provided new experiences for attendees by including exciting and innovative F&B concepts.

Last, but not least, planners looking for interesting global destinations will appreciate our story "Foreign Destinations Can Fit the Bill" starting on Page 12. It features foreign destinations that offer affordable options. While tried-and-true domestic destinations such as Las Vegas and Orlando still dominate, some global destinations are gaining in popularity. Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand are among a few that lead the way for distinctively different options.

On the domestic scene "Miami Makeover" on Page 60, and our neighbor "Canada: Foreign Yet Familiar" on Page 54 also continue to gain in popularity.

Safe travels!

Harvey Grotsky  
Publisher

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# News & Notes

## Company-Wide Expansions Reflect MGM Resorts' Commitment to Grow

LAS VEGAS — MGM Resorts is leading the way in meeting expectations in Las Vegas with expansions designed to accommodate client growth and unique requests. The company has invested in the expansions of its convention space, adding 875,000 sf of technologically advanced, flexible meeting space across ARIA, MGM Grand, Park MGM and Mandalay Bay. As MGM Resorts International developed its vision to grow the convention market in Las Vegas, the company saw demand that warranted expansion of the MGM Grand Conference Center. With the completion of the \$130 million, 250,000 sf expansion, MGM Resorts now offers 4 million sf of meeting and convention space within a two-mile



stretch on the Las Vegas Strip. That's more than all the convention space in Manhattan combined. Coming on the heels of expansions at sister properties Mandalay Bay, ARIA and Park MGM, the award-winning MGM Grand Conference Center's

new space connects to the existing space on all three levels. With added booking flexibility, the new space allows the resort to grow with the needs of its clients and attract new business, including associations. [www.mgmresorts.com](http://www.mgmresorts.com)

## Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort & Spa offers "Wine & Watercolor"



SANTA ANA PUEBLO, NM — Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort & Spa is offering Wine & Watercolor classes. The activity takes advantage of the resort's stunning location beneath the 17-mile Sandia Mountain range to offer a creative journey led by local New Mexico artists. "Wine & Watercolor" takes place on the resort's back patio featuring unobstructed views of the bosque cottonwood forest and mountains. A local artist greets participants, provides them with supplies, and teaches them how to use watercolor paints. Guests let their creativity flow to create a one-of-a-kind piece of art while sipping a glass or two of their favorite wine. [www.hyatt.com](http://www.hyatt.com)

## Loews Chicago O'Hare Hotel Soars to New Heights Following Renovation

CHICAGO — Loews Chicago O'Hare Hotel has completed a multimillion-dollar renovation including newly revamped meeting and event spaces as well as newly designed guest rooms. Chicago's history and texture — its industry, parks and art, influence the elegant and dynamic design. Conveniently located minutes from Chicago O'Hare International Airport, and a short train ride from all that Chicago has to offer, Loews Chicago O'Hare Hotel is positioned to be the top choice for meetings in the Midwest. With top service, split ballrooms on both sides of the property, innovative food and beverage offerings, creative meeting breaks and more, Loews Chicago O'Hare Hotel is the ideal meetings destination. [www.loewshotels.com](http://www.loewshotels.com)

## Sheraton Los Angeles San Gabriel Earns 2018 "Hotel of the Year"

LOS ANGELES — With more than 144 Sheraton franchises under the Marriott USA umbrella, the luxurious, world-class Sheraton Los Angeles San Gabriel has earned the prestigious honor of Marriott's 2018 "Hotel of the Year" award.

This distinguished award is bestowed upon a hotel that demonstrates excellence across a stringent array of criteria that encompasses brand, business and corporate culture goals as set forth by Marriott International, the global leader in hospitality and hotel offerings and encompassing a portfolio of more than 6,700 properties in 30 leading hotel brands spanning 130 countries and

territories. These criteria include high standards of personal service, exceptional staff training and mentoring, dominant market share, a high social reputation and high guest satisfaction rates.

"This award is truly a testament to the talented team of associates who go above and beyond the needs of our guests in order to deliver outstanding service in the burgeoning San Gabriel-Los Angeles area," said Wanda Chan, general manager of the Sheraton Los Angeles San Gabriel. The Sheraton Los Angeles San Gabriel hotel, located just 25 minutes from downtown Los Angeles, hosted its grand opening in February 2018, unveiling 288 elegantly appointed rooms and suites,

EST. Prime Steakhouse, with top-quality, imported steaks and fresh seafood, Opal Chinese Cuisine, which hosts special events for up to 120 people, the area's first Starbucks, a 24-hour fitness center with yoga space and Sheraton Club Lounge for Marriott Rewards Guests.

The property has quickly established itself as a market-leader and a destination for wedding, business, and leisure travelers in its first year of being open.

The hotel's elegant dining, cutting-edge technology and resort-style amenities have delivered an exciting new level of luxury to one of the United States' fastest-growing cities. [www.pyramidhotelgroup.com](http://www.pyramidhotelgroup.com)

## Hilton Americas-Houston Receives World-Wide Recognition for Excellence in Guest Service

HOUSTON, TX — Hilton Americas-Houston received the 2018 Hilton brand Award of Excellence, the only Hilton property in the world to have earned this distinction for eight straight years. The annual award is bestowed on hotels that embody excellence by providing superior guest

service through Hilton hospitality. Since 2011, Hilton Americas-Houston has been recognized as a top-performing hotel among all Hilton Hotels & Resorts properties, demonstrating the highest level of quality and service throughout the brand.

Hilton Americas-Houston was

also recognized as Hotel of the Year during the awards presentation that took place at the recent 2019 Hilton Americas Leadership Conference. Criteria for the award include team member engagement, guest service scores and financial performance. [www.hilton.com](http://www.hilton.com)

## Atlantic City Convention Center Awarded Prestigious LEED Green Building Certification

ATLANTIC CITY, NJ — Spectra, the provider of Venue Management and Food Services & Hospitality to the Atlantic City Convention Center, announced that the venue has been awarded LEED GOLD certification. The LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating system, developed by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), is the foremost program for buildings, homes, and communities designed, constructed, maintained and operated for improved environmental and human health performance.

More than 92,200 commercial and institutional projects are participating in LEED, comprising more than 2.2 million sf of construction space in all 50 states and 167 countries and territories. [www.meetac.com](http://www.meetac.com)



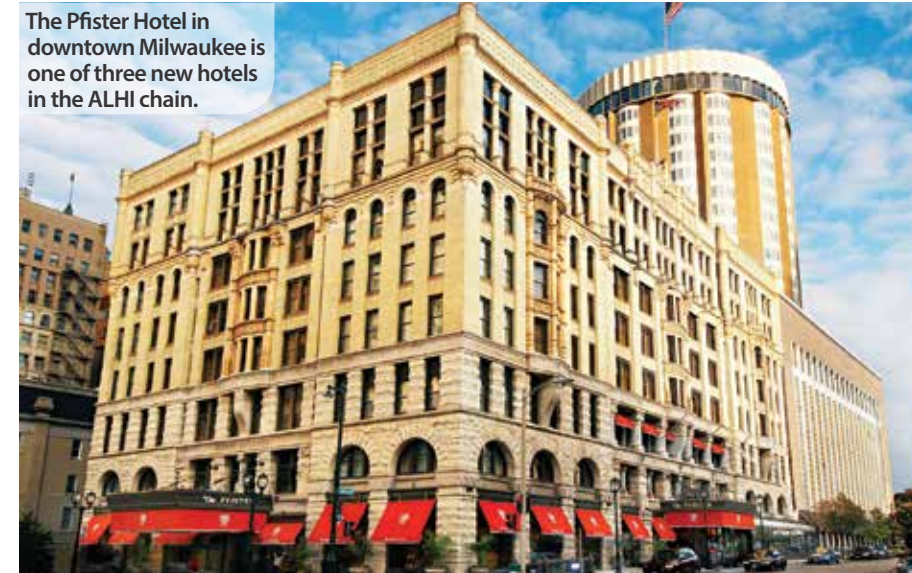


# News & Notes

## ALHI Expands its Midwest Portfolio With the Addition of Three New Hotels

BOSTON — Associated Luxury Hotels International (ALHI), which serves as the global sales force for an elite collection of luxury independent hotels and small luxury brands, has

increased its domestic portfolio with the addition of three new properties in the Midwest. In downtown Milwaukee, the AAA-Four Diamond iconic Pfister Hotel joins the ALHI City Collection,



and the soon-to-open Saint Kate — The Arts Hotel will be added to the ALHI Boutique Collection. In Lake Geneva, the AAA-Four Diamond Grand Geneva Resort & Spa joins the ALHI Golf Collection. All three Wisconsin properties are owned and managed by Marcus Hotels & Resorts, a leading hotel management company based in Milwaukee, WI. The Pfister Hotel was built in 1893 and has served as the premier downtown Milwaukee hotel for more than 125 years. On the seventh floor sits its 24,000 sf of conference and event space. Named for Saint Catherine, the patron saint of artists, Saint Kate — The Arts Hotel is expected to open in late spring. It will offer 13,000 sf of flexible meeting and event space. The Grand Geneva Resort & Spa offers 62,000 sf of flexible meeting and event space.

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

## The Langham, New York, Fifth Avenue Supports Sustainable Meetings and Events

NEW YORK CITY — The Langham, New York, Fifth Avenue participates in green meeting and event initiatives that bloom all year long. As a leader in sustainability, with EarthCheck Silver Certification, The Langham not only focuses on being green from within, but also on educating attendees at meetings and events held at The Langham to be more environmentally conscious through a variety of offerings as part of the hotel's CONNECT Conferences program. CONNECT Conferences is a brand-wide program from The Langham Hotels & Resorts that offers planners the option of selecting sustainable solutions to offset the environmental impact of any meeting or event held at The Langham. Some of the CONNECT Conferences offerings available to meeting planners at The Langham, New York include:

- The choice to use locally grown, organic and ethically farmed ingredients for inclusion in banquet menus.
- An online Event Carbon Footprint Calculator to measure the environmental cost of that particular event.
- House-bottled, triple-filtered water in reusable bottles for all meetings and events, in place of individual glass or plastic disposable water bottles.
- Integration of green lighting solutions from SoLight, a line of distinctively designed solar lighting that combines the power of the sun with innovative design aesthetics.
- The option of donating flowers from each event to a local hospital after the event is completed.

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

# Snapshots



**1** Members of the Greater Orlando Chapter of Meeting Professionals International (MPI) celebrate Global Meetings Industry Day (GMID) 2019. **2** Also celebrating GMID in Orlando are David Buckalew, of Buckalew Hospitality; Selina Mullenax, of CORT Events; and Jo Truett, of Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steakhouse. **3** On GMID 2019, Libby Anderson, of Visit Orlando, center, was named an MPI Greater Orlando Chapter Rising Star recipient. She is pictured with Jenna Fox, left, of Imprint Group DMC and Emily Smith, right, of The Pub Orlando. **4** Attending the RPI Experience Conference are Amy Hurley, Scott Russell and Steve Richardson.

# News & Notes

## Wynn Resorts Named Highest-Scoring Hotel Company in the World

Wynn Resorts announces that it has earned the distinction of being the highest-scoring hotel company in the world as rated by Forbes Travel Guide, outranking all other luxury hotel brands the company rates, and representing a total of 1,105 hotels in 58 countries.

Wynn Resorts exceeded each and every other luxury hotel brand, including The Ritz Carlton Hotel Company, The Peninsula Hotels and Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group, among others.

Each resort in Wynn Resorts' global portfolio was rated individually and their combined scores contributed to the top distinction.

Resorts include Wynn Las Vegas, Encore at Wynn Las Vegas, Wynn Tower Suites, Encore Tower Suites, Wynn Macau, Encore Macau and Wynn Palace.

"Wynn Resorts is the highest-scoring hotel company in the world for one reason and one reason only — we have the most dedicated

and talented employees," said Matt Maddox, CEO of Wynn Resorts. "Our teams in Cotai, Macau, Las Vegas and Boston are second to none, and I am grateful to work alongside them. Remarkable people yield remarkable results."

Forbes Travel Guide's stringent and anonymous rating evaluations are based on more than 500 objective standards, with an emphasis on exceptional service. [www.wynnresorts.com](http://www.wynnresorts.com)



# Perspective

## Knowing How and When to Select a Prospective Client

By Jeff O'Hara

**A**s a business owner, you look at many metrics specific to your business to determine if you are progressing toward financial goals. Is one of those metrics the profitability of your client base?

When we first started our corporate events business, we jumped at every new lead that came in the door, hungry for revenue and resume-building opportunities. This was great in the short term, because we didn't have anything else competing for our time. But time is a precious resource, and one that is not renewable. As our company moved from start up mode into growth mode, our lead-chasing became a hard habit to break. After all, who wants to turn away business? And all of our clients loved us! So certainly more loving clients is a good thing, right?

### More Is Not Always Better

More of the right kind of clients is a good thing. The kind of clients that drain your resources — especially your time — and don't provide the relative amount of profitability are a hindrance on your growth. And when you are growing fast, your time and your human capital are at a premium. Continued growth will depend on how well you steward these resources of time and human capital.

### A Startling Revelation

In the business events world, it is common to look at the profitability of an event by the gross margin it produces. That is, the revenue associated with the event less the costs of producing the event. A valuable metric for our business, though, and one that has made a world of difference is cost of sales on an event. My own analysis turned up some startling information: We were spending a lot of time in the sales process on clients that were not producing a ton of profit. This was preventing the sales team from prospecting better clients. So I set out to change that.

In our business, an enormous amount of labor goes into creating a sales proposal customized for each client's specific objectives, and in many cases that cost isn't considered when the client looks at your value proposition. They look at what we charge for full service compared to what they can

piecemeal on the Internet. Certain segments of the market are high maintenance and low margin, and others understand the value that business events companies bring to the equation and understand the costs involved with that.

I made a decision to identify the market segments that understand our value and are willing to pay for it, and to focus our sales efforts there. We would not pursue any players I identified as low margin, and, if they came looking for us, we would politely decline to bid on their business. This was not always well-received. However, in my view, if I approach a provider and they tell me they don't want or cannot take my business, they have saved us both time. I call this the "Thanks, but No Thanks" (TBNT) approach.

### TBNT (Thanks, But No Thanks)

Here are just a few identifiers that would trigger a TBNT response:

- Client requests proposals from too many companies. If you're in a high-touch service business, clients who know what they are looking for will do research before sending a request for proposal (RFP), narrowing it down to two or three companies at most that are the best potential fits for them. When that list is longer than three, you know they have not done their due diligence and they may simply be looking to do just that in speaking with you. That's not a good use of your time.
- Client refuses to schedule a call to discuss the RFP. Every event is unique, and the better our business understands your goals and objectives, the better our proposal will be. If you can't take 30 minutes to discuss it with us, you are likely just shopping price.
- Client's budget is unrealistic. This speaks for itself. We are a high-level service provider, and we will never be the low-cost provider in any bid situation. We are wasting our time with any work spent in the low end of the pool.
- Client's deadline to create a proposal is unrealistic. A quality



In my view, if I approach a provider and they tell me they don't want or cannot take my business, they have saved us both time. I call this the "Thanks, but No Thanks" approach.

proposal requires sufficient time for the provider. Clients who don't understand the process or don't respect our time may not be good partners in the short or long term.

### Communicating TBNT to Your Team

While these markers are specific to my business, there are some sales universals that translate across industries. Salespeople hate saying "No" to anybody, and they naturally want to win every opportunity that comes in the door. But it is worthwhile to analyze how costs play out in the sales process and to condition your team to the concept of sometimes saying "Thanks, but No Thanks." The fact is, every minute they spend on a low-profit group is a minute they are not spending on a high-margin group.

Ensuring your sales team is aligned with your goals may require a change in your incentive plan. In our case we added a metric to incentivize client profitability in addition to top line revenue. Voila! The team's focus was clear so that when we had to TBNT a client, we were not derailed for long. The only thing you cannot get back once it is lost is time, so invest your time with the preciousness it deserves. Lead your team to understand this, and you will see your profitability grow.

### Proof That TBNT Can Lead to Profits

In 2016, our corporate events business was named to the Inc. 5000 list of the fastest-growing, privately-held companies

in the United States. Prior to this, we had received plenty of recognition within our industry. But this first-time honor from Inc. 5000 gave me an opportunity to take stock of all that had happened and all that my team had overcome. As we had learned to identify the right clients, and to manage our cash flow, we were able to recover from major hits including Hurricane Katrina and the Great Recession, and not only survive, but thrive.

Then, in 2017, we were once again named to the Inc. 5000. The notification letter indicated that fewer than one in three Inc. 5000 recipients receive the award again. It is an honor for fast growth — something that is by definition hard to maintain.

Being honored as a member of the Inc. 5000 two years in a row was, to me, more than just a recognition of successful years. It was a culmination of having overcome all of the challenges it takes to create a successful business over two decades of hard work, buoyancy in the face of some seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and a commitment to strategy that may include saying "Thanks, but No Thanks" to certain prospects.

Whether this is your rookie year or you have cultivated a long tradition in your industry, you will never go wrong by sharing your vision with your team, being savvy about the clientele you pursue, and celebrating with your team members when they produce results well beyond expectations. **C&IT**



### Jeff O'Hara

Jeff O'Hara, author of *Have Fun, Fight Back and Keep the Party Going: Lessons from a New Orleans Entrepreneur's Journey to the Inc. 5000* (Greenleaf, 2018), is president of PRA New Orleans, a business event management firm creating unique experiences for corporate groups. Learn more about Jeff at [www.jeffreyohara.com](http://www.jeffreyohara.com)





While Italy remains a popular foreign destination, planners are also interested in alternative destinations a little more off the beaten path.

## Foreign Destinations Can Fit the Bill

### Planners Say Many Overseas Destinations Offer Affordable Options

By David Swanson

**P**roving that overseas meeting and incentive events are no mere exotic sideshow, a new report by Allied Market Research projects that the global Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions (MICE) industry is growing at a rate of 7.5 percent annually. The group market wing of the tourism industry is rising from \$752 billion in 2016 to \$1.2 trillion by 2023.

Tried-and-true sites such as Las Vegas and Orlando still tend to dominate lists of top destinations overall, but places such as Cancun, Toronto,

London and Singapore are grabbing an ever-growing piece of the pie. With demand for U.S. hotels exceeding supply and costs rising apace, foreign destinations may offer attractive opportunities.

American Express M&E projects a 2.41 percent increase in North American hotel room rates for groups, but just 1.6 percent in Europe, 1.1 percent in the Asia-Pacific region and less than 1 percent in Latin America. Also of note: The CWT Meetings & Events 2019 Trends Report expects that costs per attendee/

day will actually decline 4 percent in the Asia-Pacific region in 2019.

But for U.S.-based meeting planners accustomed to the accessibility, logistics and ease of planning a meeting or incentive close to home, an international destination is not for the faint of heart.

#### Seek Advice from Seasoned Professionals

"Get with someone who knows what they're doing," says Kim Hester, senior account executive for Irvine, CA-based JNR Incorporated. "Make no assumptions that things will run the way they do at home."

Hester knows from firsthand experience the kinds of unique circumstances a program in a foreign country can spark.

Hester was aboard a Windstar Mediterranean cruise two years ago when a member of her group suffered a massive heart attack just as the ship was sailing out of the harbor at Kotor, Montenegro. The captain dropped a tender boat for a two-minute trip to a nearby hospital, but as it reached shore, the guest died.

"I knew if it was established that he

died on land it would take weeks to get him out of Montenegro," Hester says. "But if he died on the ship, it would be in international waters, and no problem. So I got the ship doctor to document that the guy died on the water, not on land. We had the remains out of Montenegro and on the way back to the family funeral in Texas within 48 hours."

"If you don't know how to get a body out of Montenegro, don't be afraid to ask," Hester adds. "If you have true expertise on your side, you'll have the resources to guide you through those kinds of situations."

#### Destinations for Unique Experiences

Patricia Silvio, global marketing manager for the international DMC Pacific World, says that interest in new destinations and unique experiences has increased significantly during the past few years.

"The appeal for U.S.-based companies to host events overseas is the chance to experience different cultures and unique offerings from around the world," says Silvio, whose company works with a wide range of industries, such as technology, insurance, healthcare, education and finance. "They continue to value the importance of face-to-face meetings and events (M&E), but every industry sector is looking for out-of-the-box and localized

"... [P]rice-conscious clients can look to the Asian brands for value. Harbour Plaza Hotels & Resorts and Regal Hotels International are two examples of really good solutions in Hong Kong for planners with a tighter budget."

**James LaValle**  
Manager, MICE  
Hong Kong Tourism Board  
Los Angeles, CA

experiences in M&E. For example, meeting attendees are showing a growing desire to connect with the local culture and experience the destination through the stories and experiences of the locals."

Peter Lombard, CEO and founder of Globe Guides, concurs.

"Getting people outside of their comfort zone changes the way they engage with one another; how they engage with learning," Lombard says. "And a couple of my clients have said that just having their team in a different time zone allows them to disconnect from home and focus on the content or the experiences at hand. They're not checking their cell phones. Instead, they're trying food they've never had before."

Hester says despite bubbling trade wars and diplomatic tussles, the climate is right today for international meetings and incentives. "There's always going to be a certain number of people who are afraid of travel outside the country. But

there's also intense curiosity; the younger generation is less timid. Most people want to get out there and experience the world, and they're wanting more and more off-the-beaten-track destinations."

#### Getting There

What makes for a good international meeting or incentive destination? Several factors should play into the final choice, starting with where the attendees are based.

"If it takes two stops to get there, they're not going," Hester says. "It's really important to have good air access." Having a group fly halfway around the world for an event means people will be exhausted for the first day or two. "I make sure they understand flight distances. People get excited about going to Australia, but if they want to do an incentive for four or five nights I tell them the flight time has to be proportionate to the amount of time for the program."



"Get with someone who knows what they're doing. Make no assumptions that things will run the way they do at home."

**Kim Hester**  
Senior Account Executive  
JNR Incorporated  
Irvine, CA





Monaco, home of Le Casino Monte Carlo, has done a major renovation of the Casino Square area, including the Hotel de Paris Monte-Carlo.

For Michael Lambert, travel account manager, operations with Maritz Travel, airlift to Australia was an important consideration for an incentive he plans annually for a financial institution catering to the Latin market in the Americas. Fortunately, air service to Sydney has grown considerably over the last decade.

"We had 350 attendees coming from the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as from the U.S. But I could funnel them through Dallas, L.A. or even Santiago, Chile."

Australia is still a long flight, and a bucket-list destination for many. In addition to recommending at least four nights,

Lambert says planners should expect a lot of requests for extensions. "I think that's something a lot of us don't anticipate."

It's also important to understand the culture of the company and how it relates to the destination, Lombard says. "It's not about whether Morocco is better than Italy — one might work for one company, the other works for another. Some groups may want a more remote experience someplace like Cambodia or Myanmar, or I can give you a more polished experience in downtown Singapore or Bangkok."

Clients need to understand that many destinations do not operate the way they

may be used to at home. Cuba is currently trendy, but amenities to which travelers are accustomed, such as air conditioning or cell phone and internet access, are not widely available.

James LaValle, LA-based manager of MICE for the Hong Kong Tourism Board, recommends meeting planners researching their first overseas event should start with a user-friendly destination.

"Hong Kong certainly is," LaValle says. "They can go into Hong Kong with a little more sense of familiarity. It's a user-friendly destination but has enough unique cultural appeal to be very exciting for its visitors. And with the increased focus on China lately, Hong Kong provides access to China without being in China, with all of its limitations. Negotiating and contracting in Hong Kong are very easy, there's no taxes, VAT, GST or otherwise, and there's no visa required. Those visas can not only take a lot of time, but can also require a lot of funds to secure."

### Costs of Various Destinations

"In New Zealand, the U.S. dollar is very strong, so it's a great value for us," Hester says. "Ireland and Thailand also offer great value. Vietnam and Cambodia are just plain dirt cheap. There are some places that are expensive, such as Scandinavia, but you get a lot for your money."

Airfare can be a particular concern for planners looking overseas, but with a glut of seats flying over the Pacific today, some far-flung destinations can

"A couple of my clients have said that just having their team in a different time zone allows them to disconnect from home and focus on the content or the experiences at hand. They're not checking their cell phones. Instead, they're trying food they've never had before."

**Peter Lombard**  
CEO/Founder  
Globe Guides  
Freeport, ME



LaValle recommends that planners looking to shave costs work with the Hong Kong Tourism Board.

"We're here to help planners identify lower cost options, if necessary" says LaValle, who suggests planners look beyond the brand names they know. "National brand hotels in international destinations can be of a higher standard than their domestic counterparts with prices reflecting that. Instead, price-conscious clients can look to the Asian brands for value. Harbour

be cheaper than stateside options. One example: Thailand.

For sheer exoticism on a big-city scale, Bangkok is hungry for business and wants to showcase its meetings options. Software provider SDL weighed several options for a leadership summit held last year. Following events in the Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) and North America-South America (NASA) regions, Jessica Connolly, senior manager, corporate events & marketing with SDL, says cost was "the outstanding factor" in selecting Bangkok as the host for the 150-person meeting.

"Coupled with the quality and cost of the location, Bangkok was a top choice," Connolly says. The city provides attendees a decidedly foreign place where English is a common second language,

there's a vibrant culture, and five-star hotels offer excellent value for money."

Sumate Sudasna, president of the Thailand Incentive and Convention Association (TICA) agrees that Bangkok is a great destination.

"Thai hospitality is second to none," Sudasna says, adding that Bangkok is known as the city of smiles. "Bangkok is ideal for people who want something different but also desire American-style comfort."

LaValle acknowledged that Hong Kong is at the upper end of the pricing sphere for the Asia-Pacific region, with Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok at the lower end. "But we are also a Tier 1 global financial center," LaValle adds. "Compared to similar Tier 1 cities like London or New York, we're relatively affordable."

Plaza Hotels & Resorts and Regal Hotels International are two examples of really good solutions in Hong Kong for planners with a tighter budget."

Another area where planners can find unpleasant budget surprises is currency fluctuation.

"You've got to time your currency buys correctly," Hester suggests. "You can get caught buying [in] the wrong direction."

But sometimes the best-laid plans can still go awry, and Hester says one country stands out for her as overpriced.

"Without a doubt, Iceland. It's a wonderful, wonderful place, but their success in tourism has exploded. A decade ago it they received just a few hundred thousand visitors, last year it was 2.3 million. That demand has driven prices up astronomically, and it's now one of the



The Sydney Opera House is a popular venue in Australia. Planners say Australia is a "bucket-list destination" for attendees, some of whom may seek to extend their stay.



Hong Kong offers affordable options via Asian hotel brands. Excursions include a ride on the Aqua Luna Chinese junk in Victoria Harbour.



most expensive places in the world. I took a program to Iceland last summer and everyone had a great time — but it was insanely expensive. We went way over budget.”

### Popular Destinations

Spain, Thailand and China sit atop Pacific World’s 2019 list of the top destinations based on the number of requests received. Silvio says her company finds that the destinations ranking highest all have strong convention bureaus and a

clear destination development strategy as well as modern infrastructure and convenient access.

“For example, motivated by the upcoming 2024 Olympic Games, the Paris region committed to enhancing the visitor experience backed by a 23-million euro investment plan which will greatly boost France as both a tourist and MICE destination,” Silvio says. “Nearby Monaco has recently completed a major renovation of the Casino Square area, including a restored 5-star Hotel de

Paris Monte-Carlo and the addition of the One Monte-Carlo conference center. Monaco also attracts incentive programs due to its location between France and Italy, giving attendees the opportunity to visit three countries in one trip.”

To look ahead for emerging MICE destinations, Silvio says Pacific World follows government investments in infrastructure and development, leisure travel trends, social media and more.

“The goal is to find emerging destinations that satisfy the needs of a new generation of planners as well as re-energize the interest of experienced travelers, all of whom are looking for new, exceptionally curated experiences.”

One country Silvio says has been showing steady growth, particularly from the U.S. market, is Peru, a country that offers three diverse regions: the coast, the highlands and the jungle, creating a range of climates, landscapes, textures and flavors.

“They’ve made important infrastructure changes and investments and have proactively courted MICE planners in the U.S.,” Silvio says. “The opening of a new convention center in Lima in 2015 was a game-changer and the city is now able to host large-scale events.”

Other places Silvio identifies as tomorrow’s emerging MICE targets include Bhutan, Namibia, the Greater Bay of South China, Bordeaux in France and Bodrum, Turkey.

For planners like Hester, up-and-coming options such as these are ripe for discovery.

“When it comes to the classic European cities, more and more people have ‘been-there, done-that,’” Hester says. “Quite a few places in France and Italy are getting loved to death. People are getting away from classical Europe and the traditional capitals. They want to see more of the countryside. Today people want to see Puglia, on the heel of Italy’s boot, which is like Tuscany on the ocean — beautiful, but not as crowded.”

Other European destinations Hester recommends include Northern Ireland and Malta. For meeting and incentive planners with open minds, the world is truly your oyster. **C&IT**



Spain is still a popular spot, according to Pacific World’s 2019 list of top destinations. The list is based on the number of requests received. Thailand and China are also atop the list.

Credit: Photo by Aleksandar Pasarić from Pexels



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# Feature Story

## CVB Leaders Remarkable Women Share Insights and Wisdom on Leading a CVB

By Christine Loomis

### Tammy Blount-Canavan, FCDME

President & CEO, Monterey County Convention & Visitors Bureau



An early career in hotel sales and operations gave Tammy Blount-Canavan the foundation to succeed in the industry she's been part of for 30 years.

"I started in hotel sales and operations and then was recruited into the CVB arena, where I started in an entry-level position and worked my way around different departments and levels of responsibility. It was a good path in that I had an excellent understanding of our primary stakeholders before venturing into the CVB world, and I have walked in the shoes of nearly all the team members I now ask [them] to walk in themselves."

The way she sees challenges in her career says a lot about her. "The

primary challenges were probably that there are more opportunities to do meaningful, cool things than there is time to do them all properly."

Like others, she's faced some "resistance" as a woman in the industry, but that has done little to diminish her and perhaps even made her stronger and more resilient. "Certainly there are some circles that are male dominant and female resistant," she says, "but those circles have reduced considerably over the span of my career. At first I asked for help to open conversations from established men in those circles. Now that I'm more established myself, I feel quite comfortable bringing attention to such situations. At that point, if they're not remedied or interested in my contributions, I simply make them elsewhere."

In terms of her own success, Blount-Canavan thinks she owes it primarily to three critical traits: "Being a good listener, empathy and the power of persuasion."

She sees differences in how men and women may lead a DMO, but says good leadership isn't about gender. "I think women and men are very different, but I don't think leadership styles are gender specific. We all want to operate in an environment of respect regardless of gender, sexual

orientation, race or other factors that people sometimes think are more differentiating than they truly are."

Her advice to the young women who may eventually walk in her shoes is straightforward: "Be patient, persistent, understanding and claim mentors. Even the most powerful of people will often take time to help someone who respectfully asks for it."

A native of Vancouver, British Columbia, Blount-Canavan has been president and CEO of the Monterey County Convention & Visitors Bureau for the past seven years. She served on the executive committee of Destinations International, and in 2017 became the fifth woman in 100 years to become Destinations International's chair.

She has been recognized as one of the 25 Most Influential People in the meetings industry and as one of the Top-25 Most Influential Women in the industry. In 2015, she was named CEO of the Year. Her background includes the executive leadership position as CEO of the Tacoma Regional Convention & Visitors Bureau, where she was also the architect and inaugural chair of the Washington Tourism Alliance. Additionally, she was on the leadership team of Tourism Vancouver for more than a decade.

Corporate & Incentive Travel magazine is proud to recognize and honor some of the amazing women who lead CVBs across the country. These 12 women are highly successful in the tourism industry and highly valued as outstanding members of their communities. Congratulations to all!

### Tania Armenta

President & CEO, Visit Albuquerque



Tania Armenta's road to the CVB began in hospitality while still a student at the University of Nebraska.

"I worked in the hotel industry throughout college, which gave me a great introduction to the hospitality industry. Then, early in my career, I decided to move back to my home state of New Mexico. I had a background in marketing and public relations and was just about to go to work for an agency when someone mentioned that the Albuquerque CVB was looking to create a new public relations division. I had no idea what a CVB was, but I loved the concept of getting PR experience while promoting my home state. I thought I'd be here two or three years, but I fell in love with the industry, our organization, mission and the team."

It's creating successful teams that Armenta lists as one of her most significant accomplishments and a measure of her success. "I am very proud of the team we've assembled here. It's a combination of veterans and new industry professionals. Their determination is undeniable, and Albuquerque and our organization are prospering due to their passion and perseverance."

Like other jobs, she says this one comes with some challenges. "The DMO world is one of many, many stakeholders and I had to learn early on not to let the

sometimes negative voices and opinions of the minority influence me too much. To stay in this industry, you definitely need resiliency and thick skin. Many of our stakeholders benefit directly from our work, so at times the lines are blurred between what is good for them and what is good for the destination."

Armenta doesn't see her gender as a critical factor in her career. "I've had moments where I've felt that I was not being taken as seriously as the men in the room. I think it was a combination of being female and typically the youngest in the room as well. However, I have also been fortunate to have some amazing and generous male mentors who believed in me and opened doors for me."

While she thinks women in leadership may more readily bring inclusivity to the table, she says the core traits of leadership are the same for men and women.

"I think the best leaders, regardless of gender, know their audience, speak the kind truth, are persuasive, adaptable, team-oriented and have tremendous grit and strength," Armenta says. "At Visit Albuquerque, we have a core set of values that we strive to exhibit and share each day."

To young women she offers this advice: "Believe in yourself, identify great mentors, stay focused and prioritize work to make the greatest impact."

Armenta has been with Visit Albuquerque for 20 years and has led the organization for the past three. She also serves on the board of U.S. Travel Association's Destinations Council, the Destinations International DMAP Board and the Jennifer Riordan Foundation Advisory Board, and she chairs the New Mexico Hospitality Association.

In 2012 she was named Tourism Professional of the Year in New Mexico and is a former recipient of the 40 Under Forty awards by Albuquerque Business First. She has a BA in journalism and mass communication with an emphasis in advertising and public relations and a minor in Spanish from the University of Nebraska.



## Kathleen M. 'Kitty' Ratcliffe

President, Explore St. Louis



"I've never really felt there was an obstacle or challenge I couldn't overcome. It's always just a question of how," says Kathleen Ratcliffe, who has been at the helm of Explore St. Louis since 2006.

"My first job in the industry was director of the Carbondale, IL convention and tourism bureau, which was a start-up organization. For women just getting into the industry, it's probably a good path for developing many skills that can be applied to positions in larger organizations and other sectors. As the director of a start-up CVB with no other staff and extremely limited resources, I had to be creative and fearless in moving the organization forward."

One major challenge, she says, is that she didn't have any real training for that job. "Every step I took was a learning experience, either one that was successful or one that was an educational opportunity for me in how to do things differently. I see obstacles as things to work around, not things to stop me."

Ratcliffe recalls many times when

gender came into play — and sometimes still does. "I could name hundreds of times where I have been the only woman in the room negotiating a deal or discussing a difficult subject within the community. I've also had many instances where someone around the table should be talking to me, but instead talks to someone who works for me because that person happens to be a man. It's quite funny, actually. I've also faced some challenges at times with the 'sports guys' in the community who assume that a woman doesn't know anything about sports or doesn't understand how sports are so much more important than a business event (of course, they know nothing about business events if they think that!). They'll go to my male board chairman, members of our board or members of our staff who are men in order to try to get something when they should be talking to me. That tactic doesn't end up working for them."

Yet Ratcliffe says of gender differences among leaders, "I don't think there are any hard and fast distinctions between men and women; we're all unique beings. However, generally I think women tend to be a little more detail focused, which can lead to an organization that has more structure and established measurable goals. Certainly, that's not always the case, nor is it always the case that women leaders tend to be a little more perceptive about the people around them. But I think that is also often true."

The ability to hire well and build great teams, like the one she currently has, is something Ratcliffe counts among her accomplishments as a leader. "I also worked with great

teams in New Orleans, Jacksonville, Baltimore and Denver and still maintain many of those relationships years later. The most significant instance was halting the widespread cancellation of meetings for future years in New Orleans after Katrina. That effort required every ounce of will power in my body and the enormous heart and soul of every member of our team. I still tear up when I think of all of them."

Her advice for women entering the industry now is twofold. First and foremost, she says, they should know that the new generation of women have it easier in business than my generation had, and my generation had it easier than the generation of women before us. "So, don't take things for granted. Make sure you carry other women forward. Remember that you're standing on the shoulders of women who have gone before you and paved the way for you. Work hard, always be ethical, be fearless but not foolish."

Ratcliffe is the president of Explore St. Louis, responsible for the sales and marketing of St. Louis as a destination for visitors and the operations of both the Cervantes Convention Center and The Dome at America's Center. Ratcliffe is a past international chairwoman of MPI and has served on the board of Destinations International, receiving awards from both. She serves on the board of PCMA, and most recently, she received the Apex Award from Black Meetings & Tourism. She was named one of the Most Influential Businesswomen in St. Louis by the *St. Louis Business Journal*, a Leader of Distinction by the YWCA of Metro St. Louis, and she received a Regional Leadership Award from the St. Louis Community Empowerment Foundation.

## Maura Gast, FCDME

Executive Director, Irving Convention & Visitors Bureau



Maura Gast is nothing if not hands-on. She led the team that delivered the architecturally distinctive Irving Convention Center at Las Colinas on-time and under budget and has oversight of its day-to-day operations. She's been with the Irving, TX CVB for 28 years, becoming its executive director in 2003.

Getting there was hardly a straight line. "My path, like that of most of my peers, was accidental. I had prior careers in publishing and retail, but it was active involvement in an advertising trade association that was the connection that ended up opening the doors that brought me to the Irving Convention & Visitors Bureau."

Gast's "building blocks" for DMO/community shared success are strategic. "Build a place where people want to visit, and you'll build a place where people want to live. Build a place where people want to work, and you'll build a place where business has to be. Build a place where people have to visit. It all starts with the visit, and the visit starts with us."

She says her own success has largely been defined by "tenacity, persistence, stubbornness and a willingness to continue learning, including learning from my mistakes."

Those traits no doubt helped when issues of gender put obstacles in her way — "many places, many times," she says. "But that's just a fact of life. You 'woman up' and just do your job and you do it to the very best of your ability."

She has pondered the question as to whether female and male leaders

are different. "I really wrestle with this distinction about how women lead vs. how men lead. We all have individual skills and abilities, which we temper or top with knowledge and experience and that's what we bring to the table. Our experiences along the way shape us much more so than our genes. That said," she notes, "we encounter different experiences and there are different standards and rules set for us as women — the expectations and assumptions are different than they are for men. So it's what we do with our experiences, as well as our experience and skills, that shape how we lead."

Gast is proud of the positive growth in Irving during her time at the CVB, but some successes stand out. "I'm proud of the things we've been able to get done in Irving, thanks to a long-tenured team and long-tenured community leaders and volunteers," she says. "Certainly the convention center, Toyota Music Factory and The Westin Irving Convention Center at Las Colinas hotel, which just opened, are key to those."

She advises the young women entering or rising in the tourism industry to not wait to be asked to the table. "Pull up a seat for yourself. Volunteer for the messy, hard work that no one else wants to take on. Don't be afraid to make mistakes — but make sure you learn from every one of them."

Gast has lived and led by her own words for many years. Her chairmanship of the (then) DMAI 2008 Futures Study pushed to the forefront that which she continues to champion — a seat at the tables that matter for the industry.

Gast is a former chair of Destinations International and currently chairs

its Certified Destination Management Executive Board of Directors. She also serves on the Destination Marketing Accreditation Program board as its chair-elect and is a member of the DestinationNEXT task force as well as a DestinationNEXT facilitator. Additionally, she serves on boards for the Heritage Society, Rotary, La Cima Club, Salvation Army Advisory Council and Chamber of Commerce, and she's a past chair of the Dallas Advertising League/AAF-Dallas. Gast has earned the designation of Fellow, Certified Destination Management Executive (FCDME). In 2016 the *Dallas Business Journal* recognized her in its inaugural Women In Tourism Awards. In 2015, she was honored with the La Cima Legacy Award for her contributions to the Irving community. She has also been named a Top-25 Extraordinary Mind by the Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International. She's the recipient of an Irving Schools Foundation Fellow, and in 2017 was recognized by the NAACP Irving-Carrollton Branch with the Fletcher Yates Community Service Award.



## Julie Coker Graham

President & CEO, Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau



Julie Coker Graham has been in her present position since 2016, and before that held other positions at the CVB. But she says it was her first job in the industry that helped shape her career.

"My first job in the industry was as a server at Wilmington, DE's Mister Steak, which truly helped inform my customer-first focus. I believe everyone should serve food at some point; the perspective it provides within the service industries is invaluable."

She went on to graduate magna cum laude from Johnson & Wales University in Providence, RI and during 20 years with Hyatt worked her way up from management trainee to general manager of Hyatt Penn's Landing. Like many leaders, she sees challenges as learning opportunities.

"Often, women leaders believe if you keep your head down and work hard you'll achieve success. The lesson I learned is that it's not about working harder but working more strategically," she says. "Hard work is part of the equation, but equally important is networking and being strategic about business relationships and personal and professional growth."

She also thinks that challenges, whether related to gender or something else, make you stronger. "I believe anytime you're in the minority there will be challenges. You have to work a little harder to be heard. You're not always afforded the same opportunities as others. You often have to fight for a seat at the table. Those challenges make you stronger and more competitive. In my career, all obstacles, temporary diversions or setbacks have made me the leader I am," she says. "They have motivated me to think more strategically, fight harder and most importantly, prove others wrong. They've also made me more focused on creating a path forward for those who come behind me."

While she acknowledges that women are often considered more nurturing and better communicators than men, she says those are characteristics all leaders should have. Moreover, differences are good. "I'm a firm believer in the power that diversity of thought brings to teams, and to achieve this you need all voices and resources at the table" she says. "I work hard every day to cultivate a culture of mutual respect for differing thoughts and dissenting opinions. I've worked for some outstanding bosses — men and women — and we all bring our unique selves to the table."

A passionate football fan, Coker Graham names the 2017 NFL draft hosted by Philadelphia as an event she's truly proud of. "I've never been prouder than when Adam Schefter of ESPN said, 'Props to the people of Philadelphia. That's how you host a draft. No other city has injected that much energy, electricity, excitement in a draft.' It was an amazing experience for me and my entire team to work with the NFL, and it was an incredibly prideful moment for the city of Philadelphia."

Success, however, is about the team. "The team around me is the stick by which I measure success. It comes down to collaboration and inclusivity," she says. "Throughout my career, I've been laser focused on ensuring I surround myself with people who think differently, come from different backgrounds and approach problem solving from different priorities and perspectives."

As a role model and mentor, Coker Graham advises, "Bring your true self to the work environment. Often we fall into the trap of becoming someone others want us to be. Trust in your talent and natural abilities and bring those assets to the table. Know your worth and accentuate your positive attributes."

She encourages young women to always ensure they have a seat at the table. "But for those moments you don't," she says, "identify an advocate who knows and understands your goals and vision."

As president & CEO, Coker Graham oversaw the CVB's role in the 2017 NFL Draft and the 2016 Democratic National Convention, which together had a combined economic impact of \$325 million for Philadelphia. She serves on numerous industry boards, including the Executive Committees for U.S. Travel Association and Destinations International. In 2018, she began her tenure as co-chair for U.S. Travel's Meetings Mean Business Coalition and began serving as the Secretary-Treasurer for IAEE's Executive Committee. She serves on multiple boards and committees in Philadelphia, including the Philadelphia International Airport Advisory Committee and Mayor's Cultural Advisory Committee, and she co-chairs the Mayor's Shared Spaces Initiative to combat homelessness.

## Rachel Sacco

President & CEO, Experience Scottsdale



Rachel Sacco joined the Scottsdale Area Chamber of Commerce in 1986. In 2001, she became the first president and CEO of Scottsdale's CVB, overseeing its name change to Experience Scottsdale in 2016. Serendipity, she says, launched her career in tourism.

"After graduating from Arizona State University, I began hosting seminars at a communications company. Following a presentation one day, a gentleman approached me. He was leaving his current job and thought I would be the perfect replacement. I gave him my phone number, went through an interview and landed the position. That's how I found my life's work because that's when I was hired by the Phoenix Convention & Visitors Bureau."

Sacco says the tourism industry is one she'd absolutely recommend for women because it offers so many opportunities for creativity and collaboration. "This industry requires hard work and discipline, but on so many levels it's about connecting people through travel, changing their lives and opening them up to the world. It's magic."

She had few role models at the start. "In the 1970s and '80s there were very few role models for women who worked outside the home. I made the mistake of thinking that strength came in a suit with a loud voice. When I first became a leader, I tried to emulate my male counterparts, which didn't work for me or my staff. After a challenging few years, I started anew. I had the same title and worked in the same office environment but changed my perspective and began to lead through kindness and openness. When I made that shift, I began to see transformational changes that led to a strong, connected corporate culture and many successes in business."

Sacco thinks women are 'hard-wired' for leadership. "Women, in particular, come into the world with qualities of compassion, intuition and inclusiveness, all important leadership qualities at work and home. We lead through openness, and we often surrender to the greater good in situations that require us to lead from behind rather than in front."

Inclusiveness has been Sacco's hallmark. She's especially proud of bringing together diverse community entities to work together toward shared goals. "Early on we convinced competing hoteliers to participate, for the first time, in a joint marketing campaign. Our hoteliers still understand the importance of collaborating to promote the destination as a whole. Several years ago, I organized a consortium of DMOs. Together we've worked on supporting and leveraging successful bids for Super Bowls, Final Four Championships and other mega events. We've joined forces to make our cities and state shine, including attracting new international air service. We all may be friendly competitors, yet we can help each other be more successful."

Sacco links her success to solid research, strategy and partnerships. "Every program and initiative Experience Scottsdale tackles is grounded in industry research, trends and strategies. As a membership-based organization, we rely on partnerships with area tourism and hospitality businesses. As a non-profit entity, we depend on relationships with government officials in the city of Scottsdale and town of Paradise Valley. My team and I work hard to maintain these relationships, to ensure that our partners receive a strong return on their investment and our citizens benefit from tourism's contributions."

Her philosophy sets the stage for

success across all areas. "I tell every employee I hire that I expect them to operate as if they were CEO of their own area, whether they're in the mailroom, a cubicle or a vice president's office."

That means, she says, letting go of who they think they're supposed to be and embracing who they really are, being creative and unafraid of making mistakes and being responsible not just for themselves but for their team.

Sacco is a national board member for the U.S. Travel Association and sits on the Arizona Lodging & Tourism Association board. In 2016, the Past Presidents' Council of the Scottsdale Area Chamber of Commerce inducted Sacco into Scottsdale's History Hall of Fame, recognizing her contributions to the hospitality industry. She was also inducted into the Arizona Governor's Tourism Hall of Fame. In 2015, the Rotary Club of Scottsdale honored her with the Corporate Club Member Service Above Self Award for her outstanding service and volunteerism. In 2018, Arizona Foothills recognized her as one of the Most Influential Phoenixians and Most Influential in Valley Tourism.



## Julie Calvert, CTA

President & CEO, Cincinnati USA Convention & Visitors Bureau



Julie Calvert loves her job. "I'm a Cincinnati native. I was born loving Cincinnati and have such pride in my hometown."

Early work as a journalist helped shape Calvert's career. "After receiving my degree in English (concentration in journalism) from Miami University (Ohio), I began working as a reporter in Boston, and then Cleveland. Experience in media gave me perspective in terms of what makes a good story, how the public responds to certain topics and how communications professionals get their messages across. I came back to Cincinnati and, through a variety of experiences, found my way to the Cincinnati USA Convention & Visitors Bureau. Since then, I've been hooked. My entire career has been focused on driving awareness, building reputation, mobilizing resources and celebrating the various voices, backgrounds and viewpoints that make a community."

Calvert thinks adapting to change is part of leadership. "The tourism and hospitality industries have been changing and evolving, as has Cincinnati,"

she says. "Through my career, it's been important that I adapt and evolve as well, whether it's in setting priorities, managing different leadership styles or understanding the real needs of our community. Change can be seen as a challenge, but I think it's all about perspective. For me, change has continued to bring new opportunities, has opened doors and has led to experiences that have helped define my life, and in turn, my career."

When faced with challenges or criticism, she says it's attitude and colleagues that make the difference. "I believe it's critical to empower, foster and support the advocates and embrace critics. In the end, the desired outcome is the same — to be the best version of ourselves and of our community," she says. "Many of the leaders and colleagues I've had throughout the years have helped shape my experience and have had a hand in getting me to this point. I've been fortunate. Now, as the CEO of the CVB, I feel it's my responsibility to pay it forward and be that same type of leader for the people that I work with."

While Cincinnati was once under the radar, that's no longer the case. "There's a sense of reinvigorated pride that's spreading beyond our region. I'm proud to be part of this Cincinnati 'moment in time' where we're realizing the true impact that tourism, meetings and conventions are having on our destination. We are so honored to play our part."

Success for Calvert isn't an individual accomplishment. "If we as a CVB and community are performing at a high level — if we're continuing to see real progress, attracting business and visitors, standing together as a unified

industry and region — then we will be successful. From a personal standpoint, success means continuing to learn, striving to make a place, whether a city or an office, better than it was, and helping and supporting good people along the way."

For young women in the industry today, Calvert says opportunities abound. "There are so many opportunities for young, passionate women to be impactful, meaningful leaders in this industry," she says. "It's important to find your true passion and be willing to work for it. A strong, committed work ethic is the difference between good and great. Leadership also requires a thoughtful balance between confidence and humility — the strength of character to be firm in your beliefs and to be self-assured but also understanding that there is always something to be learned."

Prior to her appointment as president and CEO of Cincinnati USA CVB in 2018, Calvert served as executive director of Source Cincinnati and was vice president of communications and strategic developments at Cincinnati USA CVB from 2001-2016. Appreciating and building on diversity is a hallmark of her career. She helped build the CVB's Supplier Diversity Program and multicultural marketing channel and made diversity a key part of Source Cincinnati's strategic vision. In 2019, Calvert was included in the Cincinnati 300, a compilation of the city's top 300 business leaders, along with a spot in the Power 100, a list of the 100 most influential business, political and community leaders in the Cincinnati region. She serves on the Hamilton County Commission on Women and Girls and the Cincinnati Music Festival board.

## Cassandra Matej, CDME, CTA

President & CEO, Visit San Antonio



Cassandra Matej is a dynamic leader who has brought significant changes to San Antonio's \$15.2 billion hospitality industry since becoming Visit San Antonio's president and CEO eight years ago. One of her first jobs brought her to the world of CVBs.

"An entry-level position in hospitality was the foundation for my career," she says. "After graduating from the University of Texas in Austin, I joined what was then the Dallas Convention & Visitors Bureau, where I gained my first experience with hotels, CVBs and meeting planning. Later in my career, I had the opportunity to work with Hyatt Hotels and Starwood Hotels & Resorts and learn from great leaders at those companies before eventually going on to serve as senior vice-president of sales and services for the Dallas Convention & Visitors Bureau. These diverse industry experiences were crucial in preparing me for my current role."

She says she'd absolutely recommend this journey for anyone, male or female, looking to move up in the industry. "Compile as much experience as you can, cultivate a heart of service and keep aiming to improve and grow," she advises.

Being ready to take advantage of opportunity is something Matej is passionate about. "I learned throughout my career to be flexible in relation to the opportunities before me. For instance, six months after I started at the Dallas CVB, I was offered a position in Washington, DC. It was a big move for me, but I knew it was important. I took it, and it was a challenge that paid off. In this industry, you need to seize those chances."

Although Matej notes that the hospitality and tourism industries can be

male dominated, she hasn't experienced that as a major obstacle. "I think many other women leaders paved the way, and I will be forever grateful," she says. "I'm not easily intimidated and haven't allowed myself to be held back by gender, and here's my real motivation: I have two young children, including a 10-year-old daughter. It's important to me that she sees that if she aims to be a leader, she can do whatever she wants. I'm an example for her, and I try to be a mentor and example for younger professionals as well."

Whether leaders are male or female, Matej says the mission is the same. "Every leader has to establish a roadmap for success. We do that by leading by example and cultivating respect and loyalty from those throughout the organization and beyond. Simply put, an executive, male or female, has to have everyone working on the same page for the mission to be accomplished."

Matej was instrumental in effecting major changes at San Antonio's CVB, and that's something she takes pride in. "I'm proud of our organization's evolution from the former Convention & Visitors Bureau to Visit San Antonio, a public-private nonprofit. With this shift, we're more streamlined and can serve our customers in a more efficient and impactful manner. With this shift, our city has also made major upgrades to the Henry B. González Convention Center and the Alamodome, and we've formed more meaningful relationships with community partners, all designed to provide a better experience to our clients."

Like other leaders, she thinks it's important for anyone coming up in the industry to find mentors, advisers

and supporters along the way. Beyond that, she says, "Be passionate. Be driven to succeed. Command respect from everyone around you. And, hey, it's the tourism and hospitality industry. We sell fun, and we have fun doing it."

Matej has more than 25 years in tourism. Among her many accomplishments are joining Visit San Antonio and the San Antonio Hotel & Lodging Association and launching the city's Certified Tourism Ambassador Program — among the largest in the nation. In 2014, she spearheaded the creation of Synchronicities, a partnership with Baltimore, MD and Anaheim, CA, designed to assist meeting professionals in maximizing return on investment. She is currently secretary for the board of directors of the U.S. Travel Association, immediate past chair of the Texas Travel Industry Association board and a member of the Texas Association of Business board. She's also in the 2017 Class of the Texas Lyceum.

Matej received the 2015 San Antonio Business Journal's Women in Leadership Award and the LGBT Chamber's Ally of the Year Award in 2018.



## Carrie Westergard

Executive Director, Boise Convention & Visitors Bureau



Carrie Westergard has been executive director at the Boise Convention & Visitors Bureau for four years. In her more than two decades in the hospitality industry, her work has included everything from hotels and property management to public transportation and the chamber of commerce.

"While in college I was a waitress at a resort and ultimately went into sales there when an opportunity presented itself. Hospitality is one of those industries that gets in your blood — I think those who are in the industry know what I'm talking about. I would recommend that anyone explore the hospitality and convention world, without a doubt. There's no right or wrong way to get started. Many avenues will allow you to meet others in the industry, and that connectivity is one of the most valuable assets to develop along your path."

As a woman in this industry, Westergard says, "Other than having to get used to handshakes instead of hugs, I'm sure there has been pay inequity

over the years. But my philosophy has always been to dive into work, show results and prove my value. No matter where I am in the industry, I've needed to be OK with learning from the ground up while also keeping my eye on what I wanted to accomplish and keeping my goals in mind."

Her challenges along the way relate to doing her job to the best of her ability. "I have two primary challenges: transition and funding. Navigating the many different personalities that change as terms expire and people move on is a constant challenge in this industry. In this line of work, we're predominantly funded through hotel taxes, municipalities and/or agencies that have boards and oversight. As board members, council members and directors' terms expire and new people arrive, we're left to re-educate them on our program and its value."

She describes her leadership style as one of open communication, transparency and camaraderie. "I believe that egos need to be left at the door and everyone needs to pitch in if we want to get anything done. I value the wonderful team I've built around me that all collaborate and contribute to the success of this organization."

And the organization is definitely succeeding these days. "When I joined the Boise CVB, our organization was extremely underfunded and understaffed. Since then, it has become a viable business that has a healthy position in the marketplace and a defined culture of collaboration and transparency. In four years we've doubled the staff and nearly doubled

the budget, without adding waste. We've been strategic and scrappy. Those attributes have allowed us to reconnect with community partners, develop local visibility and even create a national profile through our concentrated media relations work."

But success, Westergard notes, is ultimately defined by the success of the community. "If the community is vibrant, sees economic impact and my team has the tools needed to do good work, that is success to me. I love hearing how great Boise is doing and I smile knowing that we had a small part of making that happen."

The message she passes on to a new generation of women coming up through the ranks is straightforward: "Don't be afraid to go after what you want. You'll need to work hard, ask for help from others, show your worth and stay connected. But if you do, you'll get there."

Most of Westergard's career in tourism and hospitality has been in Idaho. She was the marketing director of the Sun Valley/Ketchum Chamber & Visitors Bureau for 15 years. For four years she facilitated programs, events and constituent relations for the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce as community relations director. In her first year at the Boise CVB, she oversaw the rollout of a new website, the merger of the organization with the Boise Metro Chamber, and growth of the sports event marketing function of the CVB. Westergard serves on the boards of the Girls on the Run Treasure Valley and the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Idaho and is a mentor for Junior Achievement.

## Janet Zaldua

CEO, Marina del Rey Convention & Visitors Bureau



Janet Zaldua has been CEO of the Marina del Rey Convention & Visitors Bureau for six years. She discovered the tourism industry via a job as a marketing manager in a museum.

"I enjoyed the creativity and community relations aspects of the job and looked for opportunities to collaborate with community partners, volunteer, build relationships and network. From the museum, I moved to Los Angeles County and transitioned into a role in city government. I was involved in sponsorship development, marketing and events. That experience allowed me to showcase my abilities and talents, which opened doors. Eventually, I began working for a CVB, where I was able to strengthen and develop my skills in destination marketing, communications and tourism. I established meaningful relationships with industry leaders and mentors along the way, and each step was a learning opportunity that led me to a growth opportunity."

There's no single route to a career, and Zaldua encourages others with words that apply to any career path. "Bloom wherever you're planted. Give 110 percent, maintain a positive attitude and a strong work ethic. Build relationships with community partners and industry leaders. Establish your personal brand and reputation. Never compromise your standards and think long term. The right opportunity will come for the next transition in your career. And if things don't happen as quickly as you'd like, have faith. In every step of your career, there's a lesson to be learned that will make you better equipped for the next level."

Starting out in a career isn't without challenges. "When you're first starting

out, at the bottom so to speak, and you're striving to grow and learn and leap to the next step, some people may feel threatened by your achievements and success," Zaldua says. "Some may try to hold you back and that can be discouraging. As you move forward to the place you want to be, those conflicts become fewer. Having a mentor early on with whom to discuss challenges and solutions is helpful. Eventually, as I became more involved in the industry and began meeting more leaders, those mentorship relationships were developed and were incredibly valuable. There were times when I bounced challenges off of them to get their perspective. It was helpful to hear about their similar experiences and how they handled it. I cherish those relationships."

Zaldua believes that men and women communicate differently. "Women often have a strong intuitive and nurturing sense. Both [men and women] bring something valuable to the table, and finding the right balance of strengths, communications styles and talents from the staff that make up the overall team will ultimately determine the success of the organization. Building the right team and striving toward the same mission and shared goals is essential."

Zaldua credits her predecessor at the Marina del Rey CVB with creating a strong foundation and reputation for the organization, and she's proud of building on that foundation. "I'm most proud of working to increase our budget by more than 163 percent in five years, which has allowed us to triple our full-time staff, increase our marketing efforts, develop a dedicated group sales effort for the Marina and

develop a stronger cohesive brand for the destination. I'm looking forward to continued growth."

Everyone defines success differently. Zaldua says one measure for her is, "Being in the right place for the season you are in, in life and having passion for what you do," she adds. "But equally important is doing something in your day-to-day life that has an impact on others — showing kindness, giving to causes that have a positive impact in the world, using your influence and success for the greater good and to strengthen and mentor others. Having balance in life and making time for friends, family and my faith are also key for my happiness and success."

Under Zaldua's leadership, Marina del Rey's brand has been refreshed with vibrant and active imagery and messaging that boasts a new trademarked description, "L.A.'s Marina." The organization has grown to include a dedicated sales effort aimed at bringing group business to the Marina's hotels and event venues.



## Meg Winchester, CMP

President & CEO, Visit Spokane



Meg Winchester took on the role of president and CEO of Visit Spokane in January 2019. A certified meeting planner (CMP), Winchester understands the important role of meetings and conventions in a city's economy firsthand. She's been in the industry for 30 years, starting just after college.

"I was one of the lucky ones who fell into this industry after college," she says. "I started in the catering field and was honored to be asked to join the citywide sales team in San Diego in 1998. I feel that being in the operations side of the hospitality industry gave me the ability to understand the holistic nature of our business, and it has made me more well-rounded in understanding all sides of our industry."

We may all forget that once there

wasn't an internet, but Winchester points to the introduction of the internet as an early challenge, and one that continues to create the need for an ongoing learning curve. "The introduction of the internet was a challenge. It's also amazing how fast everything now changes in every sector, which makes it a challenge to keep up with and/or ahead of positioning in terms of marketing your destination."

And like many women in the field, Winchester also points to the challenges of creating a true work/life balance. But in terms of gender itself being an issue, she doesn't see it that way. "I tend to put my head down and work hard at whatever challenges me," she says. "I feel that I was fairly treated throughout my career based on work ethics and determination."

When it comes to leadership, though, Winchester thinks women often have the edge. "I feel that women are more compassionate by nature and will sometimes not own their leadership value. With that said, however, in my opinion, women tend to work harder in these areas and make amazing leaders."

Working with a successful team is a theme for many in leadership positions and Winchester is no exception. She thinks her accomplishments and success are very much tied to teamwork. "Working with a team that consistently

meets and exceeds goals and instilling a culture of teamwork and job satisfaction" is high on her list of accomplishments. She sees her successes as very much part of that same team effort, noting that, "It's the team and stakeholders and all the great accomplishments we reach every day" that define that success.

Like others, Winchester advises young women coming into the industry to work hard. But also, she says, "Always enjoy your journey and be grateful. Find smart women to follow and never lose sight of who you are — never, never compromise that."

Prior to joining Visit Spokane, Winchester was the director of the Galveston Island Convention & Visitors Bureau. During her tenure there, she led a staff of 17 sales and marketing professionals, welcoming more than seven million tourists to Galveston each year.

Her career path also took her to the Greater Houston CVB and San Diego CVB sales teams. Being involved with the tourism industry through partnerships and innovative collaborations has always been a priority.

Winchester graduated from Southwest Texas State University with a BA in Journalism. She attained her CMP designation in 1998 and has been an active member of Destinations International, PCMA and many other industry associations throughout her career.

This is Martha Sheridan's first year as president and CEO of the Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau, but she's been in the industry since 1987, most recently as CEO of the Providence Warwick Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"I got hooked on the tourism industry during college when I was a tour guide at one of the magnificent Newport mansions. I started my destination marketing career at a small DMO in southern Rhode Island in the late '80s, and from there worked my way up through various roles at CVBs in Rhode Island. Starting at a small CVB is a great way to learn the industry and make contacts."

Sheridan says early on gender definitely impacted the acceleration of her career. "I was a mother of three and in interviews I was often asked about balancing motherhood and career aspirations. I'm certain this question never comes up for men. Willingness to relocate was also a challenge as I didn't want to uproot my young family."

That said, she has no regrets about her choices, wouldn't change a thing and highly recommends this industry to other women.

While she says leadership styles vary based on many factors, Sheridan doesn't necessarily see those variations as gender related. "I have to say that from what I've observed in my extraordinary network of CVB leaders, both

male and female, each one brings a different style to their organization, but they are all highly effective and successful in their roles."

In terms of her own success that has come with leadership, she says it's grounded in always understanding that everything that one accomplishes is the result of teamwork and hard work. "While in Providence, I was once told that my agency was the most effective economic development agency in the state. That's what I have always strived for and hearing others acknowledge that was huge validation for the efforts of my team and board."

Of all her accomplishments, however, it's this new role that is at the top. "Taking on this role as president and CEO of the Greater Boston CVB is the pinnacle for me. Leading the team that sells and markets this iconic and revolutionary city is an honor and a privilege. I look forward to working with industry leaders in this community to take this organization to new heights."

There will undoubtedly be many young women who will follow in Sheridan's footsteps in the tourism industry, and to them she says, "Be humble, listen, learn and don't be afraid to take risks. Oh, and have thick skin because you will need it."

A graduate of the University of Rhode Island, Sheridan has over 25 years of experience in destination marketing.

## Martha Sheridan

President & CEO, Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau



She is past chair of the Destination Marketing Association International. She holds or has held leadership positions with local, regional and national organizations including the U.S. Travel Association, Destinations International Foundation, the RI Hospitality and Tourism Association Education Foundation, MPI New England Chapter and the New England Society of Convention & Visitors Bureaus. Sheridan is the recipient of the Rhode Island Hospitality Association's (RIHA) Mary Brennan Tourism Award for outstanding achievement in tourism promotion, and in 2010 was named RIHA Woman of the Year. In 2014, she was presented with the Morris J. Gaebe Profile in Excellence Award from Junior Achievement of Rhode Island, that organization's highest honor. **C&IT**

**//The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.//**

— Eleanor Roosevelt





## Food & Beverage Frenzy

Whether It's Vegetarian or Vegan, Cocktails or Mocktails, Planners are Offering Variety

By Christine Loomis

**T**rends come and go, and that's as true for food and beverage (F&B) as anything else. Remember when kale and cake pops were king and using liquid nitrogen to wow attendees was everywhere?

So what's trending today, and does it matter to chefs and planners? In a word — yes.

Edward Perotti, CMP, CMM, director of global events with Pure Storage, says, "100 percent, yes. It's important to keep up with the latest food trends," adding that he depends on venue chefs to keep on top of them.

"I communicate the look and feel of the event to the chef, then give him/her free reign to show me what can work that aligns with the event and is within the budget, etc." One caution, he adds, "is to not go toward a trend at a business event without making sure it fits the goals of the event or even culture of the organization."

### Creativity is Returning

What really excites Perotti, however, is the creativity chefs and mixologists

are bringing back to the art of entertaining. "For so long, F&B events were turnkey, and rarely did you do something out of the box. Today, 'out of the box' is becoming an everyday thing. I'm beyond excited and inspired."

Like others, Perotti sees changes in special-request meals. "Vegetarian options have evolved to the level of fabulous meals. Now if we can just get the other special-meal options to that point. When hotels have a chef that's creative and open, and they let him/her do what they do best, the product is an experience," he says. "Take Chef Michael at the Hilton San Francisco Union Square. He's so creative and driven by the guest experience, and his dining experience shows it."

And there's no reason, Perotti notes, not to serve "special" foods to everyone. "As a work- and cost-saving measure, how about doing halal beef for everyone or gluten-free pasta as the choice for all meals? Special-request foods are at a point where the product is really good, so you can serve it to everyone

and take the notion of specific food areas off the table, so to speak."

Seafood, too, is changing. "The go-to seafood in my mind is out. I believe the popular, done-to-death fish like salmon, swordfish and tuna will fade away and we'll see fish entrées made with less common catering-world fish such as cod, trout or even triggerfish. These are more sustainable and the preparation options are fun."

"And give me bread," Perotti says. "I'm glad to see it back. With the heritage grains, high-quality flours and ingredients and artisanal bread preparation, the idea of minimal bread options, or the notion that it's a boring add-on, is going away."

### Chefs are also Teaching

Culinary education as part of the meeting experience is also increasing. "I'm thrilled that many chefs are weaving in options for education and interactive food-and-drink experiences. There's a price tag for this, but it is a great way to engage guests, give

them an up-leveled F&B experience and, with a little imagination, weave it into your event messaging."

Perotti says craft cocktails as part of the dining and engagement trend at events has gained momentum but has challenges. "It's a costly line item in budgets. And many venues don't have the catering/mixology talent or capacity to create craft cocktails for large-scale events. Additionally, in the corporate world, shying away from full open bars to just beer and wine is on the rise due to corporate liabilities. Get guidance from your legal and human resources teams on where they stand," he cautions, "before you give that CEO his open bar."

As for sustainable practices, that's core to Perotti's job. "I'm not seeing guests or attendees asking for local. I believe they don't because, as a planner, it's part of my professional brand to advocate and provide local and sustainable foods. I don't believe guests or attendees should ask, it should just be. I see this as part of my role to make it a priority for my guests, attendees and organizations. I'm a huge supporter of the communities and locations in which we host our events. We, as the planning community, have the ability to do much to help local economies as well as the environment, just within our food programs. I don't, and will never, see a reason to NOT follow sustainable practices."

### Planner Relies on Chefs for Ideas

Jessica Rife, CMP, senior events manager with E Source, also believes in delivering new experiences to attendees, including exciting and innovative F&B concepts. "I absolutely rely on chefs and hotels to guide this discussion and bring new ideas to the table."

She calls the Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel among the best at that. "I'm always excited to sit down with them and hear their ideas for our events."

The top five trends Rife sees are



Some chefs are seeing a newfound focus on beverages such as bourbon and scotch, craft beers, molecular drinks, mocktails and cocktails with pearl caviar and infused and injected drinks.

farm-to-table, locally sourced foods, new plant-based proteins, mocktails and a demand for flavored sparkling waters. Additionally, requests for vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free meals are up, but she doesn't see a decline in meat. "People like to have options," she says. "They want more proteins and fruits and vegetables, but balance is important. They still enjoy a fun treat such as a doughnut wall."

As for global foods, she says they can be risky to serve to a large group, yet people are branching out and embrac-

ing more global options. "Last year, we had a ramen station created by Chef Skomal at the Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel; people loved it and were lining up."

Sharon Purewal, DMCP, managing partner at 360 Destination Group, a San Francisco-based DMC, says her clients are generally sophisticated and well-traveled, and one way to surprise them is via technology.

"We now have options like drone delivery of beverages, robot-made coffee, edible cocktail printing and molecular bites. We're also seeing a trend in 3D dining and projection mapping on dining tables. It's all about heightening the senses in new ways."

Requests for special meals are up at Purewal's events as well. "At times we may be asked to provide up to 30 percent special meals for seated dinners. If we're doing an event with food stations, we have to make sure to have a diverse enough menu to satisfy most needs — and make sure everything is labeled."

### There's Still a Place for Meat

While creative non-meat options are up, meat, she says, has not disappeared. "Many chefs are designing more complex and unique plant-based offerings. However, we have yet to have a group not offer a meat course. But when we do food-station events, we can take more liberty in offering a creative vegetarian station and really showcasing the skills of the chef."

"I'm always excited to sit down with [the culinary staff at Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel] and hear their ideas for our events."

Jessica Rife, CMP  
Senior Events Manager  
E Source, Boulder, CO





While not new, connecting people to local purveyors of food is still on trend. “From the attendee perspective, there’s definitely a greater interest in where the food is coming from,” Purewal says. “We partner with organizations like The Cheese School of San Francisco to offer interactive, immersive food experiences where guests can ask questions and learn about their food from origin to plate.”

Purewal also likes to invite local producers — farmers, wine makers, brewers, etc. — to events to mingle with the guests. “They may be at a food station to answer questions one-on-one. Or they speak to the group as a whole as their course is being served,” she says.

### Cocktails, Mocktails and Beer

Learning about beer and cocktails is increasingly important to attendees, too. “We’re still serving a lot of wine,” Purewal says, “but there’s interest in expanding the palate and learning how to pair other beverages. For example, The Cheese School offers a wonderful beer and cheese pairing. It’s a great education and allows us to showcase local artisan cheesemakers and brewers.”

Additionally, Purewal notes, there’s a trend of offering creative non-alcoholic drinks including “mocktails made with the freshest ingredients used in unexpected ways to create fusions people wouldn’t think of on their own.”

Rheanna Binkley, venue and events manager at The Cheese School of San Francisco, which offers hands-on,

interactive, educational corporate and team-building events, does see an increase in meat requests.

“Some of our regular clients keep requesting additional meat items for their groups. This may be due to the ‘keto diet’ trend. What we’ve noticed about vegetarians is that they’re being more curious about the source of food items and inquiring about animal byproducts such as rennet, which is in a lot of cheese. It seems the trend may be the emergence of the more educated vegetarian.”

Additionally, she says, the definition of “healthy” has changed. “For decades ‘healthy’ meant low-fat, low-salt and veggies. With the rise of slow food challenging the industrialization of food and the value we now see in knowing where our food comes from, many of our clients are embracing whole fats, animal products and real sugar.”

It’s storytelling, however, that really excites Binkley. “We’ve noticed an upswing in themes and requests for stories to be told through food,” she says. “Whether it’s a six-course meal based on a revolutionary product launch or recreating a ‘magical cheese moment’ a client had while traveling, the opportunity to give guests a unique experience with food is what gets us excited.”

### A Chef/Planner Bond is Ideal

A planner’s relationship with a creative chef can drive more than menus. Shannon Wilson, owner of Know Forte, LLC, says Chef Ken at Loews Ventana

Canyon Resort in Tucson, is the reason she set a second meeting at the hotel. “He created a break [meal] with pecans multiple ways as we had a keynote speaker from [Green Valley Pecan Company]. Next day he did beef jerky five ways for break food. He was a huge hit with the attendees.”

The resort also offers F&B-related interactive activities, which fits well with Wilson’s clients. “What makes people want to come to events I organize is based on how they remember experiencing it, which is often a combination of activities focused around eating and drinking. If I don’t provide something fun, exciting and creative, something they haven’t previously experienced, their impression and takeaway reflects that.”

Chefs, she says, play a major role in providing lasting impressions. “I need chefs to be creative and adventurous while tailoring to local flavors and the audience. If the first meal/beverage starts on the wrong foot, it’s hard to overcome that.”

Wilson says the concept of alcohol pairings has also changed. “There are new flavors evolving, such as more interest in global cuisine, adding whiskeys to sauces and international flavors to provide a whole pairing experience and depth of flavor beyond traditional uses.”

She’s also seeing creative ways to use cuts of meat rarely found in grocery stores but that previous generations used, and more interest in smoking and curing.

Attendees, too, are interested in keeping up with the latest trends, Wilson notes. As an example, she organized a hands-on cooking demo based around the sous-vide cooking method, something most home cooks don’t use. It was a hit.

“People have more interest in knowing where their food comes from and how it’s prepared. They pay attention to flavor profiles,” Wilson says. “It’s fun to learn something new with a familiar ingredient.”

And her clients want healthy options. “The days of ‘doughnut/pas-



Credit: Rheanna Binkley, The Cheese School of San Francisco



Chefs and planners are now working together at an earlier stage in the event-planning process. The end result is a blending of food and events in which attendees have more variety than ever. Drinks, whether alcoholic or non-alcoholic, are now an important step in planning. Rheanna Binkley, venue and events manager at The Cheese School of San Francisco, says planners also want stories told through food.

try’ breaks are gone for the level of attendees I organize. They don’t want pre-packaged snacks or foods. Attendees expect fresh foods and more often they want protein — foods that satiate and fuel them rather than a quick-fix that causes a sugar spike and then a crash. I can select lean beef choices, which have unlimited flavor opportunities, so they never get boring.”

Wilson is a strong believer in drawing from the region when creating meal and break menus. More than locally grown, she says, her attendees want local flavor. “If attendees arrive at my event and are presented with the same food they have at home, it’s not a destination experience for them. Ingredients don’t have to be sourced within a certain radius to provide local flavor. Food and beverages can be prepared to add a local flavor or touch without being grown right there. It’s more about providing a destination experience and relying on chefs to know and understand local food flavors.”

### What the Chefs Say

**David Daniel, executive sous chef at JW Marriott Orlando, Grande Lakes**

Storytelling, Daniel says, has become increasingly important. “Locally inspired is not enough anymore. It needs to be story-driven also.”

Other trends he sees include more plant-based substitutions, nutritional notes on menus and cleaner presentations. As for beverages, he sees a focus

on bourbon and scotch, craft beers, molecular drinks, cocktails with pearl caviar and infused and injected drinks.

Interactivity also continues to trend. “I believe we have a great opportunity in focusing on executing events with an interactive and social approach of guest perspective, involving the guest being a part of the meal and interacting with the food.”

Sustainability is paramount. “Anything disposable should be compostable.” Daniel says the property partners with Harvest Power, which converts food waste to energy. In the past, the program has diverted as much as 195 tons of food waste from landfills.

**Michael Vaughn, executive chef at Hilton San Francisco Union Square**

Vaughn also points to storytelling, “It’s about customization. We ask more questions to learn about the concept, the purpose and end goals for the event. We then translate the information into the décor and cuisine, etc. We like to say, ‘Your story, our flavors.’”

He sees an intersection of global cuisine, healthy eating and environmental responsibility. “Our menu designs have an intensified healthy balance to them, offering cuisine from around the world with an emphasis on plant-based accents and environmental responsibility. As an example, we’ve developed a vegan, gluten-free cauliflower ravioli that’s extremely versatile to design around.”

He says air frying, dehydration, algae, mocktails with a creative culinary component and ghee, a clarified butter used in Indian cooking are on the rise, while use of traditional food stations is declining. With his region so tech driven, his team has tapped into that. “We’ve worked in some fantastic performances. We’re using infrared grills, NuWave ovens, siphons and handheld smokers to name a few. Gone are the days of simple carving stations.”

By partnering with a local grower, Vaughn says, farm-to-table evolves. “We design what we want for a flavor profile, search the world of seeds they plant and 12-15 days later we have incorporated these in our menus for guests to enjoy.”

As for sustainable practices, Vaughn notes a team sorts through all discards at the hotel, resulting in an award-winning program of landfill diversion.

**Chris Clark, F&B director, Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel**

One trend that’s increasing he says is buying and using unusual but usable fruits and vegetables. Blemished produce is perfect for pies, purees and sauces, and, Clark says, helps decrease food waste. “One reason for the trend is that this produce is now much easier to get from national suppliers.”

Mushrooms have a new popularity according to Clark, including mushroom jerky, which he calls a great



“[Chef Ken at Loews Ventana Canyon Resort ] created a break [meal] with pecans multiple ways . . . [and the] next day he did beef jerky five ways for break food. He was a huge hit with the attendees.”

**Shannon Wilson**  
Owner  
Know Forte, LLC, Canyon, TX





"When hotels have a chef that's creative and open, and they let him/her do what they do best, the product is an experience. Take Chef Michael at the Hilton San Francisco Union Square. He's so creative and driven by the guest experience and his dining experience shows it."

**Edward Perotti, CMP, CMM**  
Director of Global Events, Pure Storage Pacifica, CA

stand-alone break food. Mushroom- and truffle-infused spirits and cocktails are also on the rise, as is growing mushrooms in-house. "They're not only a cool display piece but a great show when your action-station chefs are clipping and cooking in front of guests."

Infusions are also trending. Clark says butter infusions and CBD-infused snacks and drinks, such as sparkling waters, are also gaining popularity. "And no, these will not get you high."

As for global cuisine, Clark is seeing a rise in authentic Oaxacan and Michoacán cuisines from Mexico, which notably pair insect protein with spirits. "There's mezcal and insect pairings and

the taste is way better than you can imagine," Clark says. "Dried and seasoned crickets — 'chapulines' — and pisco are another trending pairing."

Among the front-and-center beverage trends are low- or non-alcohol options, flavored seltzers and local cold-pressed juices. Additionally, he says, IPAs are out, lagers are in and milk bars are a thing. "Almond, cashew, coconut and oat milk sharing real estate with half-and-half, low-fat and skim milk will soon be the new norm."

One sustainable practice gaining traction is straw alternatives — straws made of bamboo or durum-wheat pasta. Clark notes, "Some places are making their own pasta straws now."



Planners expect venue chefs to keep up with the latest trends, and many give the chefs the ability to come up with a meal plan that follows those trends.

Credit: Yellow Door Photography

**Doug Connor, senior vice president, Centerplate**

Chefs at venues managed by Centerplate are seeing an increase in special-request meals. "Our guests are more diet-conscious than ever before, and it's our responsibility to offer something delicious for everyone. In time, the market for plant-based meat will not be just vegans or vegetarians; it will be meat-eaters, too," Connor says.

Among the major trends Connor is seeing include fermented foods such as kombucha; adding more seeds to foods; exotic citrus including yuzu, bergamot and pomelos; and herbs such as lemon verbena, savory and caraway flower.

**Matt Walbaum, executive chef, Levy Restaurants**

Walbaum says convention center menus have evolved in keeping with expectations. "Before you might have seen the same vegetables on your plate year round. We now bring in local and seasonal ingredients and prepare them with real care and expertise. Meeting planners want their guests to get a true sense of the city they're in, so we keep that in mind when designing our menus and seek to celebrate the local market in our menus."

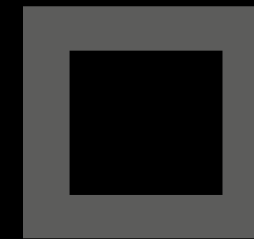
He says he's also seeing more Thai, Vietnamese and Indian foods. "Plant-based protein options are growing among vegetarians but also among those who are thinking about the health and environmental impact of their diets," Walbaum says. "Craft beers and coffee roasters with signature proprietary blends are popular in our centers. Fresh-baked goods from in-house bakeries are a point of difference at Levy's convention centers."

Walbaum also notes that some Levy centers have gardens or bee farms onsite — living walls are a trend and reducing food waste is a priority.

While keeping up with trends is important, he says, "There's something magical about taking classic dishes and adding a new twist. Turning those dishes into something new and spectacular is truly rewarding and a whole lot of fun."

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# Sustainable Events

## Going, Going... green!

'Sustainability' is the New Buzzword as Planners are Working to Reduce the Environmental Impact of Meetings and Events

By Maura Keller

Turn on the television or open a newspaper, and you will be hard-pressed not to find information on "sustainability." The green movement has embraced the business world and captured the attention of the corporate meeting and events industry like never before. From sustainable presentation strategies to "farm-to-table" menu options to eco-friendly material distribution, "going green" is causing meeting and event planners to take notice and change the way they're doing business.

### A New Business Model

Casey Carignan, meeting and event planner at Exact Sciences in Madison, WI, sees the concept of sustainable meetings growing — not only through increased communication between companies and event venues, but through heightened awareness of the carbon footprint company events can leave behind on host sites.

"Convention centers are also working towards a brighter future by hiring

dedicated sustainability staff members to increase accountability," Carignan says. Whether it's recycling or donating leftover materials or purchasing more generic materials to reuse for multiple events, many companies and event centers are taking steps in a more sustainable direction.

Sustainable events also are becoming more prevalent in the events community. In fact, the growing awareness of the importance of sustainability is one of the biggest trends Rachel Andrews, director of meetings and events, marketing for Cvent, has seen in recent years. As sustainability practices have become more commonplace around the world, Cvent has seen these practices blend into meetings and events as well.

"Business events involved more than 1.5 billion participants across more than 180 countries in 2017 alone and the industry is not slowing down. Think of the global environmental impact that events can have at that kind of scale," Andrews says. "If we don't start

thinking sustainably now, meetings and events can have a detrimental impact on our future."

There is a much more prevalent desire to address the environmental impact of our events — both as event planners and from the hotel and venue side as well, Andrews explains.

"Beyond the obvious things like plastic cups or bottled water offered onsite, the travel and commuting involved to shuttle attendees, and the energy needed to host large conferences and events is astronomical," Andrews says. "As this awareness has grown, so has the willingness to make adjustments to how an event is organized and executed."

Trends such as reusable water bottles, water bottle filling stations, and prominent recycling centers and containers are popping up throughout event venues. Additionally, food stations are now offering smaller portion sizes in an effort to combat food waste at large events.

According to Julie Blank, director,



strategic accounts at Brightspot, more clients are inquiring about ways they can ease into sustainability. While many clients are quick to note that no additional budget is available to support the effort, many like the idea and want to participate in small ways.

And while five to 10 years ago "going green" felt like a fad, as Blank explains, today we have a better understanding and a greater public focus on the importance of reducing waste, conserving natural resources, improving both air and water quality and protecting ecosystems and biodiversity.

"The biggest trend is that people are

acknowledging that events can produce a lot of waste and a large carbon footprint, and they are starting the sustainability conversations with event partners," Blank says.

### The Art of Giving Back

Companies recognize that incorporating environmental elements into a meeting or event is more than just 'green' business — it's good business. Exact Sciences is a great example of the many companies focusing on community service both in their local communities and in the communities surrounding their larger events.

"Companies looking to incorporate more community service components should consider using the arrival or departure day for engagement opportunities since attendees might not always have set plans," Carignan says. "A morning or afternoon of picking up trash from local parks, serving food at a homeless shelter, or compiling bags of necessities for individuals in need can offer an excellent opportunity to engage with and give back to the host community."

Cvent partners with both local and regional nonprofits at many of the company's events. For instance, at the company's user conference, Cvent Connect in 2018, attendees worked with

Clean the World and put together hundreds of hygiene kits for a great cause.

"We've also seen area event organizers host donation drives as part of their events," Andrews says. "Adding a corporate social responsibility element to our events is a major focus for us. Not only does it offer your attendees a great way to give back, but the opportunity allows for more engagement and networking among them as well. It's a win-win."

Sarah Sebastian, meeting planner and owner at Rose Gold Collective, an experiential agency, says finding a local charity to tie into an



"If we don't start thinking sustainably now, meetings and events can have a detrimental impact on our future."

**Rachel Andrews**  
Director of Meetings & Events, Marketing  
Cvent, Tysons Corner, VA





**“Companies looking to incorporate more community service components should consider using the arrival or departure day for engagement opportunities since attendees might not always have set plans.”**

**Casey Carignan**  
Meeting & Event Planner  
Exact Sciences Corporation  
Madison, WI

event is a nice way to give back and share social impact.

“Choosing local vendors, minority businesses and other specialty vendors are also great ways to help support the community or town you are in and are proven to help keep the money in the community and support jobs,” Sebastian says.

Sebastian stresses the important role that meeting and events planners play in incorporating sustainability into the meeting and events they plan — regardless of the size. “We should all consider the waste and ways we can leave a space or community better after an event,” Sebastian says. “Even if our clients aren’t asking or bringing it up, it is up to us and our business to be aware and thoughtful of the impact we have. We have buying power.”

Sebastian always ensures the meetings or events her firm plans don’t have Styrofoam products being used. “We are producing higher-end events

so we have control on what the glassware looks like, what items we are asking for — so I think we should all have that mentality and ask questions to our venues and vendors. What are they doing to cut waste?” Sebastian says.

One of Carignan’s favorite sustainability examples was when meeting attendees were offered a stainless steel water bottle — both as a welcome gift and as a method to reduce the use of plastic water bottles. By implementing this with a group of 100 attendees at a three-day meeting, with the average attendee consuming 2.5 bottles of water per day, Carignan and her team could prevent the use of 750 plastic water bottles.

“This strategy presents a great opportunity for increasing logo awareness while potentially saving money through the one-time cost of an environmentally friendly water bottle,” Carignan says.

### Go Paperless

Many of Brightspot’s clients have implemented paperless meetings. Advances in technology have made it easy to get rid of the 100-page binder full of speaker bios, agendas and PowerPoint printouts. And, as Blank explains, an ‘app’ is a great way to ensure that everyone has the most up-to-date meeting information and no reprints are needed as agendas change.

Not sure your audience is ready to go paperless? Blank

recommends printing a small agenda that can be folded and slipped into the back of a name badge as a baby step. Also print an app download instruction card that can be sent with pre-event documents or handed out at check-in.

“My favorite way to help ease people into app usage is to set up an onsite app concierge desk,” Blank says. “When getting checked in, we ask if the attendee has downloaded the app. If the answer is no, we direct them to the app concierge desk where we have staff available to help download and navigate the app. People want to participate, they just need someone to help make it less intimidating.”

At Cvent’s recent internal companywide event, the company gave away customized S’well bottles that more than 1,400 employees could use throughout the day to fill with water rather than using plastic and paper cups. “Conference or event swag is also a big ticket item. Many of these swag items are cheap and end up in the trash and landfills,” Andrews says. “By giving our employees the S’well bottles rather than other less expensive branded tchotchkes that wouldn’t be used, we were able to reduce our waste, while also giving our team something that they would use every day.”

And because food waste is a considerable issue for meetings and events of all sizes, at Cvent CONNECT, the meeting planners also work closely with the catering and banquet teams to present buffet items in a way that

reduces overfilling — and thus, wasting — of food during meal breaks.

Luckily, more hotels and venues are offering other programs to avoid food waste. For example, hotels will take food that hasn’t made it to the show floor and will package and distribute it to approved providers who deliver to local area food banks. “Such programs are increasingly becoming a priority for venues and planners alike,” Andrews says.

### Ask the Right Questions

Working with suppliers, vendors and destinations who are using “best practices” in greening meetings also is important to many meeting and event professionals’ overall sustainability vision. Whether it’s a facility, ground transportation, use of rental goods, audio/visual and even entertainment, stewardship is key to being as carbon-neutral as possible.

“Collaboration throughout the industry is also helping drive growth — other individuals in this field can help you determine what materials and/or goods your meeting may be able to donate after the event,” Carignan says. “It’s a question I believe every meeting planner should be asking to see what options there may be.”

When choosing a ‘green’ locale some key questions that should be asked include:

- 🌿 Going ‘green’ with the 3 Rs [Recycle, Reuse and Repurpose], means meaningful goals — What are your next action steps?
- 🌿 Have you transitioned overhead

lighting and A/V equipment to ‘green bulbs’ to reduce impact on energy consumption?

- 🌿 What percentage do you recycle, and are containers visible for guests to use and sort waste?
- 🌿 Do you research and source locally grown produce, goods and products during menu planning?

Shel Horowitz, owner of Going Beyond Sustainability and author of *Guerrilla Marketing Goes Green*, specializes in green and ethical marketing strategies. He recommends meeting planners include green features in the venue evaluation criteria such as:

- 🌿 Does the venue promote using solar, wind and geothermal for water heating and/or electricity?
- 🌿 Does it promote using water-saving faucets and shower heads?
- 🌿 Does it have windows that open?
- 🌿 Does it have key-activated, in-room electricity that shuts off when the room is empty?
- 🌿 Does it have super insulation?
- 🌿 Does it have lots of oxygen-releasing plants in the atrium?
- 🌿 Does it use natural rather than chemical pest control?
- 🌿 Does it have earth-friendly landscaping with walking trails?
- 🌿 Does it use full-spectrum LED or compact fluorescent lighting?
- 🌿 Does it utilize natural sunlight where possible?

“Attendees will actually feel better at a venue like that, too,” Horowitz says. “Fresh air and natural light create a

sense of well-being — and they’ll want to come back for their next conference.”

Blank suggests checking with CVBs and choosing a destination that supports sustainability, has great access to public transportation or allows attendees to walk to local restaurants and shopping areas. “Choose a hotel that recycles. Better yet, choose a green-certified hotel,” Blank says.

Other suggestions include placing recycling bins in the meeting space, collecting and recycling name badges, not using pre-set water at the functions and using water bottle refill stations.

Horowitz also recommends meeting planners encourage transportation sharing. “It’s pretty easy for meeting planners to set up a web page to match people needing and offering rides,” Horowitz says. “A car consumes almost as much fuel with one person onboard as it does with four, and the other resources consumed, such as time, impact on traffic flow, parking, etc., are constant no matter how many passengers are in the vehicle. Thus, if a driver gets three riders, the environmental impact is reduced by nearly 75 percent. If people are flying in for the event, coordinating airport pickups to maximize vehicle occupancy is another green option.”

Horowitz suggests planners also put “green” on the agenda. If the event theme lends itself to it, encourage the organizer to incorporate green speakers into the platform — and green messaging in the program. “This could include all the steps they’re taking to reduce the footprint of the conference,

**“The biggest trend is that people are acknowledging that events can produce a lot of waste and a large carbon footprint, and they are starting the sustainability conversations with event partners.”**

**Julie Blank**  
Director, Strategic Accounts  
Brightspot Incentives & Events  
Irving, TX





“Fresh air and natural light create a sense of well-being — and [attendees] want to come back for their next conference.”

**Shel Horowitz**  
Owner  
Going Beyond Sustainability  
Hadly, MA



and everything else the organization is doing beyond the conference, as well as things the attendees can do to reduce their own impact at the conference and when they get home,” Horowitz says. “And suggest green side trips such as a local organic farm or recycling center.”

### Down the Road

Meeting planners who take steps to become more environmentally friendly often find that the benefits of “green business” go far beyond contributing to a healthier planet. They also make for a healthier bottom line.

And while consumers may be getting tired of the green speak continually being discussed throughout a myriad of industries, experts agree the green movement is here to stay.

Also, if handled correctly, embracing the sustainability within the meeting and events industry can be a powerful advantage in today’s environmentally focused economy.

While strong environmental initiatives are beginning to gain the upper hand within the meetings industry, attendees also are demanding companies show the steps they are taking to become more sustainable and renewable. How can they do this? Companies can train meeting and event planners to think about sustainability through all facets of the meeting and events planning process or be trained to put sustainability frameworks into practice to capitalize on current demands for “green” products and services.

“Sustainable practices are now

often the norm in our everyday lives,” Andrews says. “We are used to dividing trash into multiple bins at the local Starbucks. Food and beverage labels at grocery stores highlight sustainable practices to encourage awareness. It often takes that kind of broad implementation for something to find its way into other industries such as meetings and events. When we expect a certain level of sustainability in our personal lives, we then expect that in our professional setting as well.”

Of course, with growing awareness about the effects of humankind’s current habits on wildlife and oceans, hotels and venues are becoming more interested in committing to new initiatives to help reduce waste. “If every company eliminated just one unsustainable component from their meetings, such as plastic straws, plastic water bottles or Styrofoam cups, we could significantly impact the carbon footprint of corporate events,” Carignan says.

And while the meetings and events industry is still in the very early stages of making meetings and events truly sustainable, Andrews says event planners need to drive awareness and ask for more sustainable options from our partners and vendors. “Many hotel and venues offer a variety of green initiatives — it’s our social responsibility to ask about them,” Andrews says. “There is so much opportunity and as sustainability practices become even more ingrained into our daily lives, I have no doubt that it will continue to positively impact the meetings and events industry.” **C&IT**



## AN **ALL-NEW** PERSPECTIVE ON MEETINGS AND EVENTS



All-New Walt Disney World Dolphin Lobby

The Walt Disney World Dolphin lobby has undergone a \$12 million re-design, the final stage of a \$150 million renovation project, the largest makeover in the resort’s history. It has completely transformed into a sleek, contemporary space featuring new food and beverage options and offer an inviting area for guests to relax or network. A recipient of the prestigious Meetings & Conventions Hall of Fame Award, the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin is a nationally respected and recognized leader in the convention resort arena. The resort offers more than 331,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, 86 meeting rooms, and 2,270 guest rooms and suites which feature the Westin Heavenly® Bed. Attendees can also relax in the luxurious Mandara Spa, indulge in one of our 17 world-class restaurants and lounges or enjoy our unique Disney Differences.



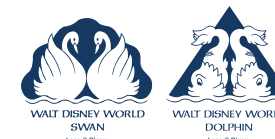
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# Meeting Technology



## Planners Look Forward to the Meeting Technology of Tomorrow

By John Buchanan

For years, partly because of its ever-increasing ubiquitousness and complexity, and partly because of the value of their always-limited time, meeting planners have had a love-hate relationship with technology. Today, however, meeting technology is in the midst of an innovation revolution that will ultimately transform the meeting industry from an isolated, business byproduct to a core element of its bottom-line success.

And that result will hopefully prove the credibility of a slogan in use since the Great Recession: "Meetings mean business."

What meeting planners want most today, both in terms of their own needs and the needs of their companies, is greatly improved integration of individual technological components, or tools, into a fully functional, seamless platform.

The fact that such integration does

not yet exist to the extent it should is a "frustration point," says Carolyn Pund, CMP, CMM, senior manager, Global SMM & Technologies, at San Jose, CA-based enterprise technology giant Cisco Systems. "A challenge we, as meeting managers face now is that we don't have full integration of event data into our marketing tech stack so that information can be shared across business systems. So there is a lot of event data sitting in a lot of disparate systems across the company. And I do not believe that the vendors in the event tech space fully understand how important this is."

"For example," Pund says, "a vendor might sell the same product into six organizations of the same company, but [the vendor doesn't] have the capability of tying that data together on the back end for them. So things like data integration across multiple systems within the same product, and

then moving that data into the company's tech stack are real issues that need to be addressed."

Allie Magyar, a former meeting planner who founded and now serves as CEO of the Vancouver, WA-based event technology provider Hubb, whose major clients include Microsoft, Tableau and Kronos, agrees with Pund's assessment.

"As meeting planners adopt more and more technology, having easier to use software, where information and data can be transferred back and forth, is of utmost importance."

Why has it been so difficult to accomplish that kind of integration? "Technology innovation has actually been very slow in our industry," Magyar says. "So there are a lot of companies with legacy platforms that were built before the evolution of application programming integration (API) was a thing. And that helped meeting

technology companies with their sales. Until now, we've had a closed system that said, 'You have to use us for everything. There is no other option.' And what meeting planners are now starting to find is that all-in-one solutions aren't focusing across [the integration of] 10 different products, because they can't. They're finding, too, that while all-in-one solutions might meet their needs with half of their products, they're not meeting their needs with the other half. They're also finding that the process is more complex and takes more time than it needs to if you have the right solutions in place and just need to integrate them."

### The Key to Progress: Open-API

As a result, Magyar says, the trend now is toward open-API solutions that allow individual technology components to function more seamlessly with each other within a custom-tailored platform that consists of best-in-breed tools. For example, Hubb works with open-API Swoogo as the best-in-breed staff registration tool.

As a veteran global meeting manager at one of the world's top technology enterprises, Pund points out that in order to be effective, an API integration "is most valuable when data is shared bi-directionally."

"Complimentary data sets need to be collected and mapped between the integrated tools for the information to be valuable in both systems and offer conclusive reporting. That's the best practice for shared data," she says.

Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, Brian Ludwig, senior vice president of sales at meeting industry technology leader Cvent, agrees that improved integration of tools and functions is a valid and important objective.

"Right now," Ludwig says, "planners can get something for registration, something else for a mobile app and something else for keeping track of the budget, but what they really want is an integrated system. They don't want to import and export data from place to place. They don't want to have to work in multiple systems. They want

"... [A] vendor might sell the same product into six organizations of the same company, but then [the vendor doesn't] have the capability of tying that data together on the back end for them."

**Carolyn Pund**  
CMP, CMM, Senior Manager  
Global SMM & Technologies  
Cisco Systems  
San Jose, CA



fluidity of data, so there is less manual manipulation of it. That's what they do today. The bottom line is they want more stuff connected. And that's what we'll see in the next generation of API, which will allow different systems to talk to each other."

The urgent need for full integration is "a big burden," Ludwig says. It also now relates to compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). "We're now in a GDPR world."

Chris Soto, president of CTC Events and Productions in Fairfax, VA, is a Cvent customer. And he agrees that better integration of technology tools across the meeting industry is badly needed. "That would save us a lot of time because even though our different events are each unique, there is a lot of overlap in terms of planning," he says. "And better integration of functions would definitely be an improvement. That's really what is most needed right now. For example, we need to be able to reduce the amount of data entry required to use technologies like Cvent. And often, you have to re-enter the data for multiple meetings. The need to repeat yourself is time consuming, so we definitely need to reduce the duplication of effort that we see now."

### Related Issues of Functionality

Along with a need for integration of functions into a platform is a need to also have technology do more than it has so far.

"The most innovative corporate users of meeting technology now use it for far more than just efficient

planning or an improved attendee experience onsite," Ludwig says. "They use it in order to assess and improve upon the bottom-line business results of their meetings and events."

He continues: "What we're seeing now is a deeper form of integration into business operations. For example, you'll see people from the marketing side want things like information on registrants at a customer conference integrated into their customer relationship management (CRM) systems or marketing automation systems. They want to be able to do things like ask, 'Of the thousand people who went to my conference, what did that yield? How did that impact our new customer pipeline?' More and more companies are realizing that integrating meeting activity data, such as engagement levels, increases business success."

That kind of innovation, he says, will be a major driver of the future of meeting technology.

Pund, meanwhile, sees a need for easier deployment and use of meeting tools. "What we're seeing is app fatigue; people just want to have them web-enabled, so that they're not constantly having to download another app taking up space on their device," she says. "They want everything on the cloud. That means instant access. It means you don't have to wait for your software to update every time you open it. And that's something that is starting to happen now." It, too, she says will revolutionize how other meeting technologies work.

And a third issue of debate is the





**"As meeting planners adopt more and more technology, having easier to use software, where information and data can be transferred back and forth, is of utmost importance."**

**Allie Magyar**  
Founder and CEO  
Hubb  
Vancouver, WA

"all-in-one" technology platform versus one that is custom-created by the corporate user from an array of best-in-breed components. Again, somewhat surprisingly, Cvent does not take the position that it will be all things to all people. It is focused on building a system that allows for integration, and even working relationships, with innovative niche providers of specific new tools that enhance the overall process.

However, Pund notes, for now at least, the well-established, consolidated platform trumps the idea of one-off proprietary tools. "Until we get to a place where there is a way to merge data from multiple tools easily, being on a consolidated platform is best," Pund says. "And from an enterprise perspective, when it comes to brand and security compliance, when you've got different business units using separate technologies, and building multiple different websites on multiple tools

and apps, it becomes a maze. All of these aspects play into the need for a consolidated platform for the purpose of brand alignment and safety and security of [personally identifiable information], versus everybody doing their own thing. In enterprise event technology, the No. 1 reason for consolidating to common platforms is for security and data privacy."

### **The Holy Grail: Big Data, AI and Analytics**

In the long run, the single-biggest and most important innovation in the use of meeting technology will be the deployment of big data, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to literally transform the meeting industry with knowledge derived from analysis. Meeting planners and their corporate superiors will be able to know, with certainty, whether a particular meeting was successful and why. And that

knowledge will be based in attendee data so granular and complex it can only be imagined today.

Meanwhile, the attendee experience onsite will be taken to levels that also transform meetings for them.

"Those kinds of capabilities are ever evolving," Ludwig says. "You see more and more technology offerings now that have them as their cornerstones. But we've just seen the tip of the iceberg so far. There are just so many cool things that are going to come along in the next few years that they can't even be imagined yet."

Examples include the use of augmented reality (AR). "We've just barely scratched the surface of what AR can do at meetings," Ludwig says. "For example, what if I was able to hold my phone up at a live event and as I'm looking at a speaker, or the trade show floor, or at other attendees passing by, get real time contextual information about [that person or] those things? That is game-changing stuff in terms of how meetings can be conducted and the experience attendees can have. That kind of capability is already happening. It's just not happening in the meeting space yet."

Another example Ludwig cites is the use of AI. "For example, you now see things like a chat box inside an event website or a mobile app or even onsite," he says. "In the future, AI will allow you to provide even more kinds of live contextual help to attendees.

That sort of capability relies on pretty sophisticated technology, but because it's constantly becoming more talented, it's only a matter of time until we see it being used around meetings and events."

Ultimately, such technology will allow attendees to find directions within a convention center, or get information in real time about an upcoming session, or get information on a speaker while he or she is on stage. The possibilities are almost unlimited in terms of practical benefits to attendees.

Cisco and other large technology companies are also doing those kinds of things at its meetings. Meanwhile, Hubb introduced such capabilities at a major meeting last year for a Fortune 100 company.

Magyar sees an ever-increasing focus on the quest for and use of data. "Every time I talk to a client, I ask them 'What data have you collected and why?'" she says. "I always ask 'Why?' And what they tell me is they've been collecting all of this data, but they don't know what to do with it. So I think that in looking at the evolution of the meeting industry over the next few years, we won't just be focused on data, but we'll also be focused on the intelligent use of it. And that responsibility can't be put on meeting planners. It has to be put on experts who know how to convert that data into business intelligence. That's one of the biggest changes we're going to be seeing over the next five years to 10 years."

In the short term, however, Pund says, "In my opinion, AI actually compounds the complication of all this. And that's because of the amount of data that you collect in an AI environment. It is an area of innovation and growth, and there is no doubt it is changing the landscape of how people attend meetings and consume information. But it's a matter of how you use it. And right now, it's an emerging era of technology."

She agrees that some practical uses of AI, such as chat bots and onsite concierge services, are innovative today, but will soon become commonplace.

"They've been a great benefit for attendees," she says. "But there is just so much more to come with AI."

She cautions that the big issue related to AI, aside from its remarkable capabilities, is the growing conflict between the accumulation of personal data and attendee privacy.

"That's a big deal," Pund says. "When you're trying to understand someone's behavior, or predict it, and you're getting so much information about what that person needs from a 'personalization' perspective — which is a good thing — there are some attendees that say, 'I want you to know what I want.' But then there are others who say, 'I don't want you to know anything about me. Stay away.' So especially in light of the privacy [debate] that's going on right now, there needs to be a balance between how and what you gather and permission to use that data. And the crux of the whole thing is what people opt in for. In other words, when you opt in for one thing, it doesn't mean you're giving a company carte blanche to assume you're opting in for endless offers, invitations or marketing messages. They have to give you permission for specific uses."

### **Managing Tech: The Dedicated New job**

Given the ever-widening entrenchment and complexity of meeting technology, there is also a purely practical trend in terms of its use. And it is based on the understanding that meeting planners are not technology experts, nor do they want to be. Their basic role

in planning and sourcing a meeting has not changed much in the last 50 years.

As a result, more large companies and large third-party independent meeting planning organizations are opting to designate a meeting technology manager or team that functions on behalf of all meeting planners within the enterprise.

That is happening because using technology can seem too difficult for someone who doesn't have the technical chops to manage it," Ludwig says. "And it is a genuine trend now."

Magyar sees it as a major trend with her clients. "We're involved with a lot of high-tech clients, so it's just more natural for them to think in terms of doing that," she says. "So at this point, almost all of our large enterprise clients have had a digital strategist or event tech team in place for years. And that will start to trickle down now into all other industries."

And once again, Cisco was at the forefront of that innovation. It has had meeting technology teams in place for a decade, Pund says.

### **The Final Frontier: New Capabilities**

Although there is now at least one meeting tool or app available for any imaginable kind of need, there are still a few things planners would like to see that have not come to full fruition yet.

One is related to the production side of meetings, Soto says. "We now see things like projection masking. With that technology, you can transform a ballroom with video technology



Cvent CEO Rajeev K. Aggarwal spoke at the Cvent CONNECT Europe event in October 2018. Cvent specializes in meeting and event software that planners use at their events. Planners are looking forward to improved technology that better helps collect and interpret meeting data.

**"More and more companies are realizing that integrating meeting activity data, such as engagement levels, increases business success."**

**Brian Ludwig**  
Senior Vice President of Sales  
Cvent  
Tysons Corner, VA







"Right now, we have to get on a plane and go to Barcelona to do a site visit. I think, and I hope, that in the future, technology will allow us to do a site visit from our desks."

**Chris Soto**  
President  
CTC Events and Productions  
Fairfax, VA

and create an experience, whereas before you had to spend a tremendous amount of money on physical design and decor." In other words, projection masking creates virtual decor. And, Soto says, the use of projection mapping is already a bona fide trend. It will just get better as next-generation technology evolves.

On his wish list is a greatly improved capability to do virtual site visits to hotels and other meeting venues around the world. "We do some international events, and we have one coming up in Barcelona," Soto adds. "Right now, we have to get on a plane and go to Barcelona to do a site visit. I think, and I hope, that in the future, technology will allow us to do a site visit from our desks. And what that means is going beyond the floor plans and other site data that is available online now. Using things like 3D technology,

we should be able to 'see' the venues and go through the meeting space or a ballroom in detail."

Convention centers and hotels, he says, should be doing a much better job than they are so far at providing access to such technology. "For example, I should be able to see where the hang points are for rigging, and so on."

One company aggressively addressing that largely unmet need is Concept3D. Its software platform provides immersive digital experiences with 3D modeling, interactive maps, and VR-enabled virtual tours that brings any physical location into an intuitive and navigable digital format, the company says. "Conventions centers, hotels, resorts and other meeting locations that are enabled with Concept3D's 3D mapping and planning platform make it easy for corporate meeting planners to explore the space, request proposals

and work with the onsite staff to rapidly develop and revise room and breakout space options in either 3D or 2D," the company said in a statement. "The platform easily filters space by type, capacity, desired layout and square footage, and gives event planners the ability to explore the entire event space, as well as nearby hotels, attractions, restaurants and transportation. Before and during the event, attendees can use the platform to navigate the area with point-to-point directions to breakout sessions, concessions, restrooms and other needs. The platform also includes in-app notifications that can be triggered by activity or timing so visitors can be presented with the most relevant information."

### Knowledge Is Power

The most important aspect of the future of meeting technology will be the ability to use data to transform events from a bottom-line business perspective, Magyar says. "Instead of basing your events on whether attendees smile when they leave or not, you'll actually have real data on how you're moving the business forward through sales momentum, integration of marketing tools and so on. Technology will be perceived as a business-impact tool. And that's the thing that will really start to demonstrate the value of meetings and events to the organization."

Ludwig concurs with that sentiment. "Ultimately, the future of meeting technology lies with actionable data on attendees," he says. "And that horizon is tied to big data and artificial intelligence. If you look at Google or Amazon or Facebook, they now know everything there is to know about you and what you do. One day, and it will be probably a decade from now, meeting planners will be able to know that much about their meetings and their attendees. And once you can get that information and make it actionable, the value of meetings and events will increase dramatically. And if we can prove that meetings are working, then companies will hold even more meetings."

C&IT



Planners say eventually that big data, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning will literally transform the meeting industry with knowledge derived from analysis.

Credit: Cvent



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## Networking to Win

Why Meeting Planning Affiliations Make a Difference

By Ron Bernthal

**B**usiness and professional networking is widely recognized as the lifeblood of the meetings industry," writes Joan Eisenstodt and Mitchell Beer, CMM, from a chapter in *Professional Meeting Management* (Kendall-Hunt), a textbook from the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) Educational Foundation. The textbook is used not only by many industry professionals, but also by thousands of students in university management programs. Other industry professional organizations may offer their own educational materials.

"At its best, networking is about bringing colleagues and professional partners together to share information, ideas and opportunities, secure in the knowledge that if the substance is sound, commercial success will follow," Eisenstodt and Beer say.

### Join a Planning Organization

There is no better way for planners to begin to network and exchange ideas than by joining professional organizations within the meetings industry, many of which are listed at the end of this

article. These organizations offer many of the opportunities mentioned above, as well as educational components and accreditations that can be very important to a planner's career.

"Meeting planner certifications demonstrate that a professional knows the critical core competencies needed to be successful in his or her role," says Prof. Amanda Cecil, Ph.D., CMP, director of the Tourism, Events and Sports Management graduate program at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. "It should give colleagues the confidence and peace of mind that individuals with certifications and designations value career development and education/training."

"It is important to note that certifications require continuing education," Cecil explains. "In order to continue using the CMP designation, for instance, one must dedicate time and resources to evolving with the profession. 'I am currently not a planner, but an academic who teaches meeting management. However, I continue to see many job postings with 'CMP Preferred' or 'CMP Required' in the position requirements. Obtaining a CMP

from a professional organization will give planners a significant advantage when looking for a position or promotion."

Cecil went on to say that "having a CMP puts you in a unique peer-group, and in a community that genuinely values professionalism and wants continued personal and professional growth. It a great goal to achieve for planners at any stage of their career."

### Designations Can Boost Pay

According to a recent salary survey, event organizers with a CMP increase their salaries by 11 percent. Several organizations, including Meeting Professionals International (MPI) and PCMA, offer products designed to help planners study on-the-go and on their own schedule.

"I believe that meeting planner affiliations are important as it keeps meeting planners up-to-date as to what is going on in the industry, provides continued education and networking opportunities available among professional planners and suppliers," says Elizabeth A. Kretchmer, CMP, CMM, HMCC, a strategic meetings manager and positive thinking coach and speaker with Strategic Meeting Manager, LLC. "Professional affiliations/organizations are an important asset to both planners and suppliers because the focus is within the industry and provides information that no other industry is able to offer."

Kretchmer says being an active member of MPI has definitely been a big

"Not everything is a home run, but what is great is that [as a PCMA member] we get to see what works, what didn't work and learn how to either make adjustments or implement it for our size of budgets."

**Heather M. Seasholtz, CMP**  
Director, Meetings and Events  
Talley Management Group  
Mt. Royal, NJ



advantage as her career progressed. "My local MPI chapter has provided me with a wonderful network of meeting and connecting with a variety of planners and suppliers who I can collaborate with both on volunteer committees and work with professionally," she says. "I consider my industry contacts my friends, and I find that if I am ever in need of seeking an industry planner/supplier for assistance or advice, I can easily contact them. I find that serving on MPI committees both nationally and within my local chapter, enables me to expand my network of contacts plus work with the best industry professionals within the MPI community."

She says attending events and conferences gives her another way to link up.

"... I reconnect with so many industry contacts/friends due to my affiliation with MPI, and on the committees or projects we have worked on," Kretchmer says. "It is always fun to catch up with my

industry people at industry events to catch up on what is going on within their lives, plus exchange ideas or information on a professional level."

One of the major milestones for many corporate meeting planners has been the accreditations received through the various organizations to which they belong. "Having obtained my CMP, CMM and HMCC has allowed me to be more respected and recognized in the industry. With these three accreditations, I have been able to use my knowledge and experience to move forward in my career as a strategic meeting manager, plus serve on MPI international committees," Kretchmer says. "I also find that throughout my career, people recognize me as an accomplished meeting professional, and I find myself more credible within the industry. Therefore, being an active member of MPI has helped me tremendously throughout my career in the meeting planning industry in enhancing



"Meeting planner certifications demonstrate that a professional knows the critical core competencies needed to be successful in his or her role."

**Amanda Cecil, Ph.D., CMP**  
Professor and Director  
T.E.S.M. Grad Program  
IUPUI, Indianapolis, IN



my continuing education, the networking opportunities available plus the friendships I have gained.”

### Lifelong Contacts and Friends

Even for the many men and women working for the professional organizations, working with outside suppliers and corporate meeting planners for private firms brings an opportunity to form lifelong friendships. “Finding the right-fit industry affiliation is like finding a best friend, or several thousand friends,” says Jessie States, CMP, CMM, director of MPI Academy at MPI’s Dallas office. “For many corporate planners, as well as the staff of meeting organizations like MPI, the organization is your family, your confidant or your support system. It’s your career path and your educational and professional development. It’s your friend-rate on a service, product or venue. It’s your future boss, next client or new employee. And most importantly, it’s your advocate, giving you the tools you need to prove your worth to your organization and measure the business value you drive for your business, organization or group.”

States continues, “When I think of our industry’s fearless leaders; men and women who have worked their ways to the tops of great companies or who have started their own successful businesses, I see people who volunteered for, and actively participated in, their professional associations and who have been rewarded with massive networks and communities, necessary and timely education and, ultimately, the leadership training that propelled their careers.”



“Professional affiliations/organizations are an important asset to both planners and suppliers because the focus is within the industry and provides information that no other industry is able to offer.”

**Elizabeth A. Kretchmer, CMP, CMM, HMCC**  
Strategic Meeting Manager  
Positive Thinking Coach & Speaker  
Strategic Meeting Manager, LLC  
Highlands Ranch, CO

“Finding the right-fit industry affiliation is like finding a best friend, or several thousand friends.”

**Jessie States, CMP, CMM**  
Director, MPI Academy  
MPI, Dallas, TX



“Attaining the CMP certification, for example, verifies your professionalism in our industry,” States says. “You may have all the skills, and more, to deftly design experiences of all sizes and scopes, but the CMP lets the world know about it. CMP-preferred and CMP-required jobs are proliferating because hiring managers see the benefits of bringing on meeting professionals who are not only certified by a globally recognized certification, but who think investing in their professional development is important.”

### Each Planner Has a Story

Every corporate planner has a different story about their experiences with professional organizations. Heather M. Seasholtz, CMP, director of meetings and events for the New Jersey-based Talley Management Group, became a PCMA member in 2011 after working in the corporate sector as a planner either in-house or as a third-party meeting planner. “To have an organization where I could network with meeting managers, exhibit managers, decorators, audio visual providers, venues, hoteliers and CVB’s was important to my growth and

development within the association for my work” Seasholtz says. “I went to my first PCMA Convening Leaders in 2012 and have been going ever since, along with the PCMA Education Conference and any other event where I can ride on the PCMA coattails. PCMA has given me the tools to become an ‘Event Boss’ and the opportunities to give back through volunteerism. Along the way I have grown my circle of colleagues and friends, which is invaluable.”

Seasholtz appreciates having the opportunity.

“What is great about PCMA is they take the risks that some planners are sometimes afraid to take. Staging at Convening Leaders, breakouts offsite away from the host hotel, mixed seating room sets, meal creativity, corporate social responsibility (CSR) opportunities and volunteerism. Not everything is a home run, but what is great is that we get to see what works, what didn’t work and learn how to either make adjustments or implement it for our size of budgets,” Seasholtz says.

For Seasholtz, the international component of her own business, and with the PCMA organization, is what she thrives on. “PCMA has a fantastic forum for members to use when they need to ask a question. It is international brainstorming between planners and partners. Using the forum has helped me with understanding cultural nuances, find supplier partners that are recommended by industry colleagues and seek feedback on questions in regards to sponsorship,” she says. “For example, I may have the opportunity to assist with an event in Kenya. Utilizing the forum has given me a network of individuals



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"[By volunteering] you will develop personally and professionally, which will move your career in ways you may not have even imagined yet."

**Sarah Pinkowski, CMP**  
Meetings Supervisor  
Enterprise Holdings  
St. Louis, MO

who have planned or may be planning an event there in the future so we can share knowledge with one another. Further, at the 2019 Convening Leaders, I was honored to serve as a moderator for a panel discussion on contract clauses that are above and beyond what is in the typical contract with an amazing group of industry professionals. That opportunity has elevated my profile and Talley Management Group, which has afforded us opportunities for name recognition and consulting."

### Advice for New Planners

As a meeting planner, Seasholtz offers her recommendations to those just starting out in the industry, on how to get the most out of your exciting career.

- Get involved on the local level. This will help grow the network of professionals around them. That network will be great for career development and ongoing support. Getting involved is as simple as attending local events.
- If you are attending a national conference for the first time, such as Convening Leaders, sign up for a mentor program. This program gives new attendees a mentor who has attended the conference in the past or repeatedly. By partnering, the new attendee has a contact and connection right away. Also, the mentor can introduce them to their circle of colleagues, check in with them during the conference to ask how it is going. It also gives the attendee a contact so they are coming to the conference knowing someone.

- Lean in. Young professionals should feel empowered to introduce themselves at events, strike up conversation and work outside of their comfort zone.

- PCMA and other meetings organizations offer scholarships to attend various events to which I encourage young professionals to apply. This will automatically put them in a group of similar individuals and therefore a great way to build a network.

Approximately 4,000 industry professionals from around the world gathered for PCMA Convening Leaders 2019 in Pittsburgh January 6-9 for three days of education and inspiration aimed at driving economic and social progress through business events. Sessions covered innovation, design, leadership and technology. Celebrities Billie Jean King, Geena Davis and Steve Pemberton were among 138 experts, advocates and industry leaders to address the group.

"We built this conference around the theme 'Disrupt + Deliver' because that's what the industry needs and wants," says PCMA president and CEO Sherrif Karamat. Convening Leaders was held at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center and generated an estimated \$6 million for the Pittsburgh region. The PCMA Foundation raised more than \$300,000 through onsite fundraising projects, including its annual Party With a Purpose.

### Remember to Volunteer

Corporate planner Sarah Pinkowski, CMP, meetings supervisor at Enterprise Holdings, says meeting planners can gain a lot of knowledge and make

additional industry contacts through volunteering at headquarters or local chapters of whatever organizations to which you belong.

"Through volunteering at your local chapter level or through the global organization, you meet and work with people in a different way that allows you to connect with them on another level," Pinkowski says. "Friendships, partnerships and relationships form that provide potential for longer term business and interaction. Volunteering can build skills that you might not find in your day job, like presentation skill development by introducing a speaker at a chapter luncheon or a supplier putting on a planner 'hat' for a trivia night."

"The opportunities are endless so figure out what you want to do and go for it," Pinkowski says. "When I joined, I was involved with the MPI St. Louis Chapter's education committee to impact chapter programming, which led to other committee and director positions. Before I knew it, I was president of the local chapter. It was an amazing learning experience, so I'll say it again. Get involved! You will develop personally and professionally, which will move your career in ways you may not have even imagined yet."

### How to Join

For corporate planners interested in affiliating with one of the major professional meetings organization, contact information is below:

**Global Business Travel Association**  
(GBTA) [www.gbta.org](http://www.gbta.org)

**Meeting Planners International**  
(MPI) [www.mpiweb.org](http://www.mpiweb.org)

**Professional Convention Management Association**  
(PCMA) [www.pcma.org](http://www.pcma.org)

**International Association of Professional Conference Organizers**  
(IAPCO) [www.iapco.org](http://www.iapco.org)

**International Congress & Convention Association**  
(ICCA) [www.iccaworld.org](http://www.iccaworld.org)

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## Canada: Foreign Yet Familiar

Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise offers 36,000 sf of flexible meeting and event space as well as stunning views and world-class skiing in the winter. In the summer, attendees can participate in activities such as hiking, canoeing and more.

### Our Neighbor Brings to Mind a Single Idea for Planners, But it Has a Lot More to Offer Than Clichés

By Sara Churchville

**W**e had to change from Mounties — [they're] not sexy enough," says Chantal Sturk-Nadeau, executive director, Business Events Canada, says of Canada's image. "It's not just the landscape and nature. That was not resonating enough with [attracting] meetings. We had to change the story: Why would you choose Canada over the US? Why and how?"

So Business Events Canada (BEC), a division of Destination Canada, set out to organize strategic partnerships with meetings organizations such as Meeting Professionals International (MPI), the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE) and incentive houses. BEC also created priority economic sectors to align with certain cities and lure meetings that would lead to foreign investment — and the other way around.

"It's a long game to attract the C-suite, not just the day-to-day of where meetings are hosted to grow business in Canada," Sturk-Nadeau says.

#### Montréal

Just an hour and a half from New York City by air, Montréal feels like a European getaway but with a much more favorable exchange rate. Even in the heart of winter, the 2.5-mile Promenade Fleuve-Montagne walkway calls on attendees to bundle up for a walking tour from the river to the mountain thanks to clear signage all along the route.

For foodies, there is dry-aged beef at Maggie Oakes in Old Montréal, longtime favorite Schwartz's Deli for smoked meats and Au Pied de Cochon for an upscale, playful version of Québécois specialties beyond poutine. The restaurant offers an especially popular traditional sugar shack meal during maple syrup season.

"It's an electric city that's got a great vibe," says Jeffrey M. Weinman, principal, Summit Event Management, Inc. His client

of 17 years, a Fortune 100 company, in August was looking for a "new and exciting destination that would motivate, be easy to work with and have cultural areas" for an incentive meeting of some 400 attendees and their spouses.

Montréal fit the bill, and not just anywhere in Montréal: Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth. "We did a site inspection, and it was the best value for that fit. One property would have been a better value dollar-wise, but the flow wouldn't have worked. It was important to get that 'wow' factor."

That factor involved, as it so often does, getting the food and beverage (F&B) right by spending time with the chef to "touch on things Montréal is famous for and that we know our people like." Results: buckets of fresh, hot French fries made with different types of potatoes; a make-your-own poutine station with several gravies, cheese curds and pulled pork; and a grilled cheese night with various cheeses and fillings in a panini maker.

At the welcome reception, performers from Montréal-based Cirque Éloize put on a show in the hotel's 21st-floor C2 Space, with its windows that overlook the city, a roof deck, patio and removable furniture for an arrangement that can accommodate up to 220 attendees.

"We set it up reception-style, with a stage, a contortionist and juggler. The entertainment right away as you walk in was a woman with a giant Hula-Hoop, then a rolling skating duo on a 6-foot [high] circular stage."

For the general welcome reception, Weinman and the hotel agreed to combine rooms with multimedia takes on old and modern Montréal on pillars, walls and ceilings. "They were wonderful in making it appetizing for us," he says. "It just set the weekend; it was the exclamation point on the weekend."

He also provided attendees with a Passport MTL card good for 48 hours so they could experience the city in their own

way, with free unlimited transportation and 28 attractions discounted or free.

Weinman says the people of Montréal, both in the meetings industry and the residents themselves, seem very welcoming and open. "They immediately change to English from French; no attitude about not speaking the language," he says. "[I'm] hearing from the C-levels what a great job we've done and how much people are enjoying it; watching people's reactions to everything that's going on — that makes all the work worth it."

#### Québec City

The Vieux-Québec area's undisputed shining city on the hill continues to be the Fairmont Le Château Frontenac, which under various management has been wowing visitors since it opened in 1893. For a 250-attendee convention of doctors in June 2018, the F&B team whipped up a themed menu where each course and cocktail was based on a Beatles song. There was soup in a 1970s beer can, Sergeant Pepper beef, Lady Madonna trout and a cake the shape and color of a yellow submarine. The G7 meeting of seven industrialized democracies, as it happens, was in town at the same time, creating more security without actually interrupting the festivities.

"I used to work with the Canadian Embassy in Paris; this evening reminded me of this," a planner summed up. "If you think it's something a hotel can't do, Frontenac can do it."

Also in Old Québec is the Hôtel Manoir Victoria, with 156 rooms and meeting/banquet space for 175 attendees. The onsite restaurant, Chez Boulay-Bistro Boréal, serves cuisine it describes as "Nordic" — local Québec fish, duck terrine, blood pudding and bison tartare.

Another hotel, The Relais & Châteaux Auberge Saint-Antoine has several meeting rooms as well as jazz nights at its Bar Artéfac.

The Québec City Marriott Downtown is, like the rest of Old Québec, within walking distance from the Québec City Convention Centre. The center can accommodate up to 9,000 attendees and connects by underground walkway to the Hilton Québec and Delta Hotels by Marriott Québec. After a day of

meetings, attendees can amble over to the Plains of Abraham or Le Musée du Chocolat, which offers history and artifacts of chocolate making going back 200 years. Get the chocolate, of course, at the adjacent chocolatier, Érico.

Planners looking for an unusual incentive space can do as a Portland, OR-based IT start-up did for its September 2018 annual retreat of 65 attendees: stay at a monastery. Le Monastère des Augustines is a converted monastery built in 1639 that offers a complimentary breakfast, yoga and meditation, and "cozy" monks' cells. It has Wi-Fi, but no TVs.

"[The IT start-up attendees] were looking for something a little more exotic, boutique, with a full buyout, that has more character than a generic hotel," the planner says of the group. "They chose Québec City as the right mix of a small, walkable place but at same time enough variety about the property."

Some of that variety included La Revanche, a snacks, beer and board games spot in the old city, as well as a nearby BeaverTails food truck serving up Canadian "queues de castor" — large, flat pastry in the shape of the rodent's tail to which any number of sweet topping and/or fillings can be applied. As a team-building exercise, curling was the sport of choice, with a rink, workshop and tournament outside; in September, that was still possible.

The monastery has a chapel area that can be used as a

"We had to change from Mounties — it's not sexy enough. That was not resonating enough with [attracting] meetings."

**Chantal Sturk-Nadeau**  
Executive Director  
Business Events Canada  
Vancouver, BC





meeting space, along with a restaurant, catering and banquet menus that can provide, as it did for this group, a poutine station.

"We were surprised how affordable things were," the planner noted. Still, he acknowledges that the language barrier, lack of "lift" comparable to other cities and weather unpredictability can be a challenge for some. "Québec has a very rich and palpable personality; take advantage of the fact that it's a unique destination — language, food, people, history — do the best to unearth and share that." Planner tip: "The safety net of a local DMC helps with transfers, so you don't have to do it in Québécois French."

## Ottawa

With 192,000 sf of meeting space 20 minutes from Ottawa International Airport, and a bridge leading directly to the 492-room Westin Ottawa and gigantic CF Rideau Centre shopping mall, the Shaw Centre is probably Ottawa's most obvious draw for meeting planners. It can and will host anything from a Parent & Child Show to a Cannabis and Hemp Expo (complete with a bake lounge) with the same degree of verve. The center's four levels all overlook the city's Rideau Canal, which during Canada's frigid winters famously transforms into the Rideau Canal Skateway. Attendees can glide along the world's largest skating rink — it's 4.8 miles long — for 24 hours a day in season.

The Delta Hotels by Marriott Ottawa City Centre provides just more than 24,000 sf of meeting space. Though it's not specifically offered as such, an enterprising planner might find the outdoor rooftop terrace just the thing for a small gathering in kind weather.

Cher, Def Leppard and Michael Bublé are just a few of the 2019 headliners at the Canadian Tire Centre, about a 15-minute drive from the downtown area. Among the sports bars and casual dining spots at the hockey arena is The Vault, the private dining space in the members-only Club Red steakhouse that promises select attendees some face time with the chef and sommelier. The nearby Sens House Sports Bar & Grill in the Byward Market offers fans who can't make the hockey match an authentic arena experience; this one complete with a 1,500-sf portion of the dining room with a retractable roof and floor-to-ceiling windows.

Ottawa is also home to the National Gallery of Canada, which

will soon exhibit among many other things, the portraits of Paul Gauguin and International Indigenous Art Exhibition 2019, and home to the National Arts Centre, celebrating 50 years.

Tips from a planner who has met often in the city: "Morning runs along the Ottawa River over the bridges are what makes Ottawa, Ottawa. The airport is well-designed but busy; consider flying to Montréal and driving in."

## Toronto

Home to Canada's three largest hotels — the 1,590-room Chelsea Hotel, Toronto; the 42-story, 1,377-room Sheraton Centre Toronto Hotel; and the 1,365-room Fairmont Royal York — Toronto has also become a kind of watchword for "multicultural."

That's one of its many draws for Brianna Mark, CMP, senior event planner, Internal Communications, with Mozilla Corporation. "Even if not backed by fact, people feel safer traveling into Canada than the U.S.," she says, an especially important consideration for Mozilla, where some 50 percent of employees work remotely all over the world.

To keep people connected, Mozilla holds an "all hands" event every June and September, remassing its far-flung workers for five days of togetherness. In June, some 1,400 attendees will converge in Toronto, where Mozilla has one of its nine offices.

"The exchange rate is always in our favor," Mark says. "There's really good airlift from most of our destinations, the airport to the core is easy and the city is walkable and safe. Toronto is on our list every single time we source. It's a natural fit; a cultural match for flying people from all over the world."

She says she appreciates how responsive Tourism Toronto is, and is a fan of Sheraton Centre Toronto Hotel, where she convened the semiannual meeting a few years ago. "When we did a site visit, they pulled out all the stops with a bunch of people in fox outfits (Mozilla's logo) greeting us and specific elevators with branding. It showed that they took time to know us and our brand."

For Mark, who has food allergies, negotiations about food come foremost. "We want everyone to eat something they want and something they can [eat]. Part of that is working really closely and making sure we understand the ingredients and things are properly labeled." She offered build-your-own buffets at every meal and specified a gluten-free buffet with dedicated accoutrements.

Isn't this rather expensive? Not necessarily. "I go in with my budget, and I let them propose something. I find that hotels want to deliver as much as I want them to deliver, so the more info I give them up front, the better. You'd be surprised what they can come up with when you allow them to be creative."

Elsewhere in Toronto, the 65-story, 260-room former Adelaide Hotel Toronto has been up-marketed to The St. Regis Toronto. The hotel has more than 100 new suites, a new design of the common spaces and an ornate restaurant, LOUIX LOUIS, serving craft cocktails and a sumptuous take on American cuisine such as a burger topped with brie, foie gras and tomato compote while overlooking Lake Ontario from its perch on the 31st floor.



Credit: Deposit Photos

Toronto is home to Canada's three largest hotels — the Chelsea Hotel, Toronto; Sheraton Centre Toronto Hotel; and the Fairmont Royal York.

The CN Tower's LookOut Level observatory has a new glass floor one level up from the original that offers a vertiginous look straight down to complement the floor-to-ceiling "Window Walls."

In other venue action, the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto recently moved into a 55,000-sf former industrial space, and Four Seasons Hotel Toronto remains a hot spot thanks to its Café Boulud and, from the same chef, a bar and charcuterie space called d|bar.

## Edmonton

Two words: Aurora Sky. The 800,000-sf space is the world's largest legal cannabis production facility — 100,000 kilos per year when fully operational, and it has recently moved into producing hemp as well. The city views this facility as part of its next wave in economic expansion.

Edmonton EXPO Centre, with 522,000 sf, and the now-named Edmonton Convention Centre (known for decades as the Shaw Conference Centre until its naming rights ended in 2018), with 150,000 sf, are the city's convention hubs. The city's 12,000 rooms in 55 hotels offer plenty of options for meetings of all sizes.

The La Ronde restaurant on the 24th floor of the 307-room Chateau Lacombe Hotel offers attendees a revolution every 88 minutes, accompanied by views of the Saskatchewan River and, if diners choose, a Chateaubriand for Two on Wednesdays or, on Thursdays, Steak Diane and Cherries Jubilee. Planners have 14,000 sf of event space to manipulate.

Another venue within walking distance of the Edmonton Convention Centre, the Quarter Note Hotel Edmonton Downtown, features 150 blockable rooms for a total of 255, and nearly 9,000 sf of meeting and event space, including banquet space for 240.

Winters see the Silver Skate Festival in Hawrelak Park. Along with the expected skating and ice sculptures, highlights of the festival include the opportunity for attendees to cook "bannock" — a Native American fry bread — over an open fire.

Between a four- and five-hour drive south and a little west — about 470 km — sits the venerable Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise. Built more than 100 years ago as a base for outdoor enthusiasts and skiers, the resort offers 36,000 sf of flexible meeting and event space.

## Vancouver

"I would live there. If it were up to me, I would hold every meeting there." That's how Jason Gross, assistant vice president, travel, Captive Resources feels about Vancouver, where he regularly holds meetings at Fairmont Waterfront, Fairmont Pacific Rim and Rosewood Hotel Georgia. But a group of some 350 entrepreneurs — nearly 600 attendees including spouses — who meet every January and June wanted to visit St. Thomas in the Caribbean for their January 2018 meeting. Hurricanes Irma and Maria had other plans, so as Gross scrambled for a new place, he naturally looked north. Available was the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver, a venue he'd seen years ago, and not with great excitement.

"At this time, we had no other options. We were a little hesitant; we're used to being on the waterfront, not the city center, so it wasn't something that we jumped at," Gross says. What began as a last resort soon became a favorite. "They blew it out of the park," he says. "It was as close to a perfect meeting as we've ever had. We are now choosing them over the [Fairmont] Waterfront."

In the planning stages, the hotel didn't take advantage of the bind he was in, he says, and he didn't feel put upon even though the hotel had the upper hand in negotiations. They were responsive, contracting went completely smoothly and they returned emails. It also didn't hurt that the hotel looked completely different — "night and day" — from when he'd last seen it in 2015, thanks to a \$55 million renovation of the common areas, lobbies, restaurants and the addition of 8,000 sf of meeting space in a dedicated wing, all within walking distance of the Vancouver Convention Centre.

And on the attendee front, no long lines at the check-in,



"We did a site inspection, and [Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth] was the best value for [our] fit."

**Jeffrey M. Weinman**  
Principal  
Summit Event Management, Inc.  
Schaumburg, IL





Credit: Business Events Canada

Fairmont Hotel Vancouver recently completed a \$55 million refresh which added a new lobby, 507 guest rooms and 8,000 sf of function space. One planner says a stay at the hotel was “close to perfect.” Attendees also enjoyed activities such as Grouse Mountain gondola tours.

no complaints about the rooms — even though the rooms were of varying layouts and square footage. “They must have been that good, that clean, that fresh,” Gross speculates.

He organized a president’s dinner onsite in the British Columbia ballroom for 400 people using standard menus with only slight changes — “there was zero push back when we asked for surf and turf.”

The group also ate at the onsite restaurant, Notch8 Restaurant & Bar, which serves “very modern/slightly upscale, Canadian-geared farm to table,” including fresh Dungeness crab. “I heard the greatest compliment: ‘I would go to it even though it’s in another hotel,’” he says. He also steered attendees to Chambar, a Belgian and seafood restaurant in Downtown Vancouver; and the sustainable seafood restaurant Blue Water Cafe.

Attendees had plenty of time to take in many of the sights of the region. They took the North Shore tour, visiting Stanley Park with its rainforest, Grouse Mountain, and Capilano Suspension Bridge Park; went on a Discover Vancouver bus tour that included the Olympic Village and some popular craft beer spots; made time for the Sea to Sky Gondola sightseeing tour; and browsed in the Museum of Anthropology and the Botanical Garden at University of British Columbia. By far the most popular outing, requiring

a second round for foodies, was the tour of the Granville Island Public Market.

Now, there’s talk of returning in 2022.

“Vancouver as a destination; go for it and don’t look back,” Gross says. “When it comes to activities, live music and nightlife, it’s the best total package destination we go to. They really understand group business.” Most of his attendees are not from big cities, he says, so a place like Toronto strikes them as too big. But “nature in Vancouver with a strong urban core really speaks to people.”

### Calgary

“Nothing says Calgary better than the Stampede,” says one planner who held his annual convention there in August 2018 with 900 franchisees and families of a U.S. auto industry company.

The ‘hot-diggity-dog’ excitement of the rodeo held in this city in the Mountain Time Zone infects some 1 million people every July. His group stayed in three hotels connected via walkway to the Calgary TELUS Convention Centre — the Hyatt Regency Calgary, the Fairmont Palliser and the Calgary Marriott Downtown Hotel.

His group does a charity 5K walk every year, working closely with Tourism Calgary to find “a safe and interesting route” that included the Calgary Tower, home of the Sky 360 Restaurant & Lounge, which revolves once per hour 510 feet up, the scenic walking path along Bow River and Canada Olympic Park. The dream of the Olympics is still alive as the city mulls bidding to host the 2026 Olympics.

BMO Centre at Stampede Park, the larger of the city’s convention centers, offers 500,000 sf of event space. Plans in 2016 to create even more meeting space by demolishing the Stampede Corral have so far come to nothing; one of the local hockey clubs plans to play a “Corral” series in the space this year.

And the \$245 million, oval-shaped architectural marvel that is the Calgary Central Library opened late last year, levitating over a public plaza below and beckoning with meeting spaces and conference rooms.

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“When we did a site visit, they pulled out all the stops with a bunch of people in fox outfits greeting us . . .”

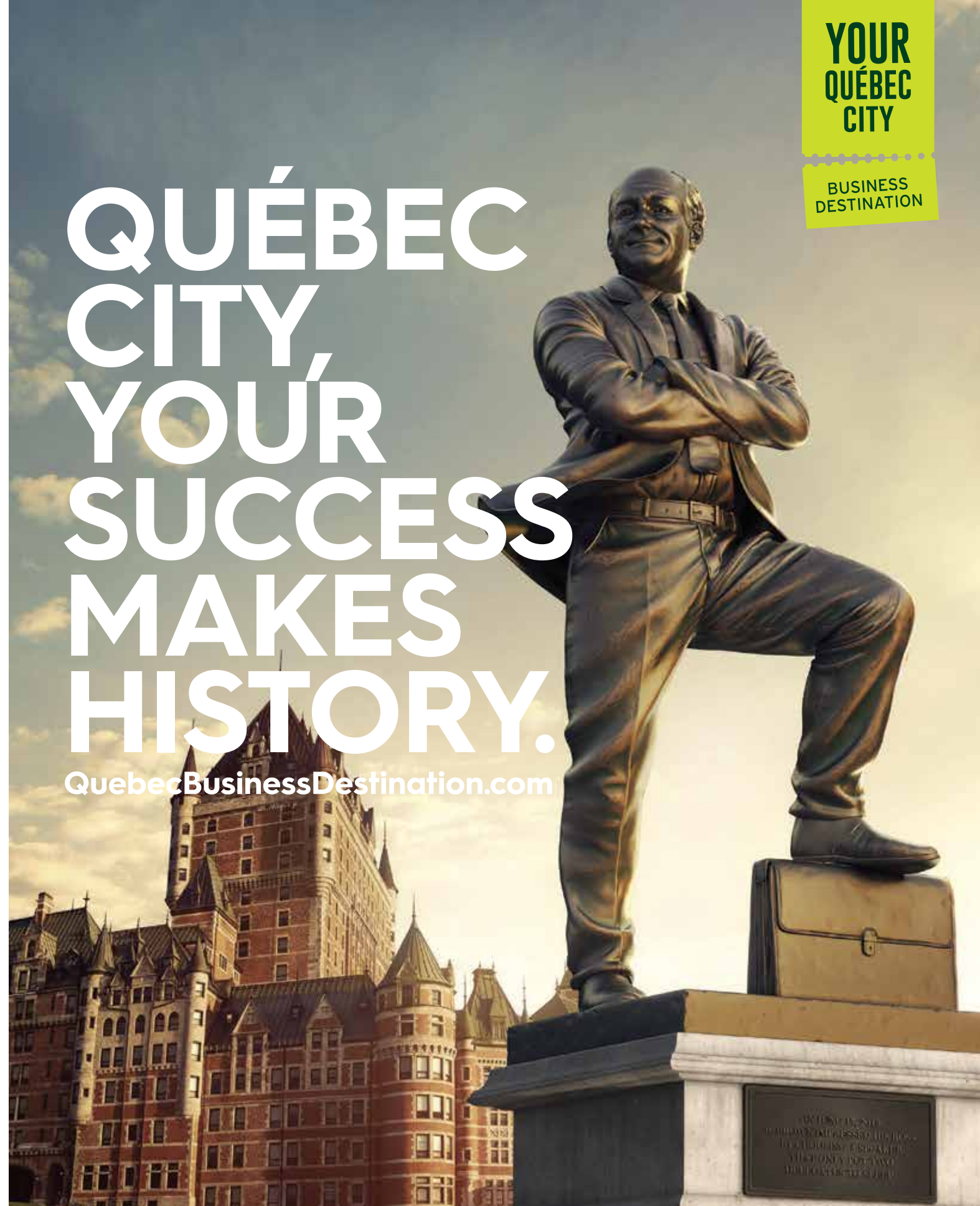
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**William Talbert III**  
President and CEO  
Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau  
Miami, FL

"The new [Miami Beach Convention Center] is a totally reimagined facility . . . [N]ow you have a sense of place. You have a world-class facility that lets you know you're in a place called Miami Beach."

Miami, with new hotels and a rebuilt convention center, is sizzling as planners are again choosing the city to host events.

## New and Refreshed Venues Put This City Back Atop the List For Some Planners

By John Buchanan

Over the last decade, Miami has been transformed into a wildly popular meeting, convention and incentive destination that generates robust enthusiasm from both planners and attendees. Today, it offers a world-class combination of first-class hotel rooms, dining options, offsite venues and activities that add up to a memorable experience.

"Miami is unique as a meeting destination," says William Talbert III, president and CEO of the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau (GMCVB). "We offer year-round good weather. We're the easiest destination to get into and out of. We also have venues nobody else has. We're on the water. The city of Miami is on Biscayne Bay. Miami Beach is on the bay and the Atlantic Ocean. So we have unique waterfront venues that no one else has. We have 25 miles of beautiful beaches. But we also say, 'We're more than a beach.' There's no other place like Miami. For a long time, we were clearly a cultural wasteland. But today, we're one of the top cultural destinations in the world. We're a world-class city and a world-class meeting destination."

One factor strongly in Miami's favor as a meeting destination is the convenience of Miami International Airport (MIA) and the formidable airlift it delivers. "A lot of meeting

planners who have not been here don't really know that MIA is a 'downtown' airport," Talbert says. "If you're going to downtown Miami, the first spotlight you see is when you're in downtown. If you're headed to Miami Beach, the first spotlight you see is when you're in Miami Beach. How many destinations can say that?" And, he adds, the convenience and brevity of airport transfers are more important than ever before to many planners. In addition, Talbert stresses, MIA is served by 109 airlines, meaning it offers convenient airlift from virtually anywhere in the U.S. or around the world. "It's the only airport that is served by more than 100 [airlines]."

### "A Bustling City, Perfect for Meetings"

One planner chose Miami for the first time to host an annual sales meeting in January.

The planner chose the 615-room Hyatt Regency Miami, which features more than 100,000 sf of meeting space, including the 16,000 sf of space in the adjoining James L. Knight Center. The City of Miami owns the center, but Hyatt manages it.

The planner used the hotel for breakfast and lunch buffets daily, as well as a welcome reception and awards banquet

on two evenings. The planner also staged a welcome reception and awards dinner on the hotel's outdoor terrace, which overlooks the Miami River and offers sweeping views of downtown Miami and the upscale Brickell district.

A highlight of the meeting was a team-building exercise on the beach in Key Biscayne, after which attendees dined at landmark local seafood emporium Monty's in Coconut Grove.

"[Miami is] a bustling city. It's very popular, especially during the winter. It's just a perfect location for a meeting," the planner says.

Surprise! Miami can be budget-friendly, says Andrea Kinney, the St. Augustine, FL-based director of global accounts for site selection/sourcing provider HelmsBriscoe. She has,

on average, used Miami as the destination for a meeting once a year for the last six years. Her most recent was a four-day, three-night healthcare meeting for 75 attendees in October.

"This particular client is based in Florida and they do all of their meetings in Florida," Kinney says. "So they rotate destinations throughout the state."

For their Miami meeting, they used the new 275-room Atton Brickell Miami.

"The primary reason for the selection of the hotel was that the client needed a hotel that was particularly budget-friendly," Kinney says. "And the Atton really fit the bill for them because the client wanted to get a lot of value for their money, even though budget itself was not an issue. The Atton is not



The Atton Brickell Miami has six meeting rooms, including one on the top floor with dazzling views of downtown Miami and Biscayne Bay.





“The Atton is not only brand new, but it’s beautiful. And the prices are fantastic, because we were holding the meeting in October, before the high season starts.”

**Andrea Kinney**  
Director of Global Accounts  
HelmsBriscoe  
St. Augustine, FL



The pool deck of the Versace Mansion, now called The Villa Casa Casuarina, on Miami Beach can accommodate as many as 130 attendees.

only brand new, but it’s beautiful. And the prices are fantastic because we were holding the meeting in October before the high season starts.”

Kinney points out that Miami, despite its reputation as expensive, can be budget-friendly. “One of the things I love about Miami is that it can accommodate all kinds of budgets, especially if you’re meeting in the off-season,” she says. “But there is still a perception among a lot of meeting planners that Miami is too expensive. But that’s just not true. You just have to know the market and go at the right time of year.”

Kinney and her client were very happy with the Atton, which characterizes itself as designed with “an air of Miami cool and seaside elegance.”

“The room product is excellent, partly because the hotel is new,” Kinney says. “But the design, which is sort of minimalist-modern, is very interesting and trendy. So my client loved the property.”

The hotel hosted all meals, whether a buffet or plated. “Attendees were very pleased with the food,” Kinney says. “The hotel has limited meeting space, so the maximum group size it can accommodate is probably 100 attendees. But the space they have is excellent. And again, it’s new. They have a meeting room on the top floor that has fantastic views of downtown Miami and Biscayne Bay.”

### The Big News — Miami Beach Convention Center and a New Convention Center Hotel

Although Miami is in the midst of a genuine renaissance as a destination, both in terms of its eclectic hotel inventory and its new status as a genuine culinary capital, the most important news for meeting planners is the \$620 million

makeover of the Miami Beach Convention Center. The reimagined and updated facility reopened in September.

“It was a very old, out-of-date building,” says GMCVB’s Talbert. “It was a box, with no sense of place, with an asphalt parking lot with no trees across the street. The new facility is a totally reimagined facility. In addition to [a completely renovated structure], we’ve added a 60,000-sf ballroom, which also has 20,000 sf of pre-function space. And now you have a sense of place. You have a world-class facility that lets you know you’re in a place called Miami Beach.”

In November, voters approved construction of a new convention center hotel. The 800-room property will be the next step in the total transformation of Miami as a destination for major meetings and citywide conventions. There is no flag designated yet, but Talbert says, “I think the flag will have an ‘H’ in it.”

Local development powerhouses Terra and Turnberry Associates are overseeing the hotel’s development. Turnberry Associates owns the legendary Fontainebleau Miami Beach and acclaimed JW Marriott Miami Turnberry Resort & Spa. The grand opening of the convention center hotel is scheduled for 2022.

### A “Miami First” Hotel Evolution

Perhaps the single-best indicator of Miami’s status as a meeting destination is what Talbert calls its unique “Miami first” preeminence. It applies to the new EAST, Miami, the Faena Hotel Miami Beach and Atton Brickell Miami. “Ours is the first EAST hotel outside of Asia,” Talbert says. “The Faena is the first outside of Argentina. And the Atton is the first property from that brand outside of Chile. What that means



The Villa Casa Casuarina, one of several recommended offsite Miami venues, boasts a courtyard perfect for mingling.

is that three major and very prestigious international hotel brands chose Miami as the location of their first properties outside of their home regions. And that means that Miami is red-hot as a destination.”

The Forbes Five-Star, AAA Four-Diamond Faena Hotel Miami Beach is the most acclaimed of Miami’s new hotels. The 169-room property, with 22,000 sf of meeting space, was designed by Hollywood director Baz Luhrmann, who directed *The Great Gatsby*, and his set designer wife Catherine Martin. It combines old Hollywood glamour with Art Deco elegance, executed with a tropical beach ambience. An adjacent \$1 billion Faena Arts District also features a Faena Forum venue and an amphitheater, as well as a more intimate Casa Faena boutique hotel.

The EAST, Miami features 255 rooms, eight suites, and 89 one-, two-, and three-bedroom residences, as well as 20,000 sf of meeting space. The EAST serves as an anchor of the new Brickell City Centre, which features upscale shopping, dining and entertainment.

“The EAST is a fantastic property,” says Brian Whitt, vice president of sales at local destination management company CSI DMC. “And Brickell Center is one of the most gorgeous shopping areas I’ve ever seen, anywhere in the world. And there are a lot of great food options. For meeting groups, it offers a unique experience.”

### Offsite Venues

To truly take advantage of Miami as a meeting destination, Whitt says, planners should stage a meal or event at one of its unique offsite venues. “One that really delivers the ‘wow factor’ for smaller groups is the legendary Versace Mansion





**"The EAST, Miami is a fantastic property. And Brickell Center is one of the most gorgeous shopping areas I've ever seen, anywhere in the world."**

**Brian Whitt**  
V.P. of Sales, South Florida  
CSI DMC  
Hollywood, FL

A third offsite venue Whitt cites as sensational is Wynwood Walls, a privately owned art installation in the Wynwood art district near downtown Miami. "It's just beautiful," Whitt says. "And again, it's a very unique Miami experience. It indoctrinates you into the culture of Wynwood and the Miami art scene. The great thing about Wynwood Walls as a venue is that again, it's divided into three distinct sections, so it can accommodate everything from small groups to large groups, up to at least 500 attendees. And there are wonderful dining options located right around it in the Wynwood neighborhood."

### World-Class Dining

Just as important as the evolution of its hotel inventory in lifting it to top-dog status as a meeting destination is Miami's now internationally celebrated culinary scene. Whitt also has a short list of his favorite restaurants.

"For something that's new and also intimate," he says, "there is nothing better than Stubborn Seed, Jeremy Ford's new restaurant. Ford was the winner of season 13 of TV's *Top Chef*. His eight-course tasting menu is absolutely off the hook; an absolutely incredible dining experience in a very intimate space that only holds about 50 people. But you can also do a buyout of the entire restaurant and create a really memorable experience for a larger group."

A little-known local landmark Whitt singles out for praise is The Forge on Miami Beach. Among well-heeled citizens of Miami, it is a landmark. "The Forge enjoys legendary status in

Miami. It's primarily a steak house and it has the most famous wine cellar in Miami. It also has classic old school elegance. And it's a hidden treasure, since it's not well known to anyone who doesn't live in Miami. You can do a group of 90 or 100 there if you use the main dining room, but if you want a truly special and memorable experience, you should do the Wine Room in the basement wine cellar for about 20 people. You're surrounded by incredible bottles of wine that are actually owned by celebrities who spend time in Miami and come to The Forge for dinner."

Whitt's third choice for a truly memorable meal and unique Miami experience is Juvia, located in the Lincoln Road Mall pedestrian dining and entertainment complex in Miami Beach. It offers a fusion of French, Japanese and Peruvian cooking styles, studied and meticulously crafted as a result of decades of training within each culture by its trio of chefs. "For its view, Juvia is incredible," Whitt says. "The patio is just absolutely amazing for a dining experience. And the food is exceptional."

### Activities

When it comes to things to do, Whitt also offers a short list of personal favorites.

"A really cool activity unique to Miami is the Pan Am International Flight Academy pilot training facility, where meeting attendees can spend time on flight simulators that train commercial airline pilots," he says. "You can book up to two dozen individual simulators for Boeing 737s, 757s and 777s. You get to be an airline pilot for a day. And we've had people do things like ditching with a raft into the water. Then they had lunch with airline pilots. Attendees flipped out over the experience."

CSI DMC also touts shark-tagging as a unique Miami experience. "It's incredibly memorable," Whitt says. "We work with the University of Miami and the best shark experts in the world. And attendees actually get to go out and put satellite tags on sharks." Ideal group size is 20.

Given all that Miami has to offer, Kinney, of HelmsBriscoe, urges meeting planners who have not been there recently to go on a site visit. "Planners who haven't taken a look at Miami lately should definitely do it, because

an opinion that was applicable years ago is no longer applicable," she says. "And that is particularly true of cost and budget concerns. It is no longer out of reach. And it is a fantastic destination that is very exciting."

Whitt, for his part, highlights the multicultural sizzle of Miami as its primary allure.

"Miami is a melting pot of cultures," he says. "It's an international destination. And you get that kind of feel here that you just don't get in most other major U.S. cities. And you also get an incredible energy and flavor that are conducive to having a great meeting that attendees will remember."

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LaKota Hotels & Resorts recently named **Christine Imbrogno** director of sales and marketing at LaKota Oaks in Norwalk, CT. Imbrogno brings 23 years of hospitality sales and marketing experience to the operation. Imbrogno's mission is focused on accommodating conferences and celebratory social events from the surrounding Fairfield and Westchester County areas and from Manhattan.

PRA is pleased to announce leading industry veteran **Bill Drew** has joined the PRA San Diego team as the general manger. Drew is responsible for local strategic direction and developing new business opportunities, increasing revenue streams and managing the San Diego team.

Visit San Antonio welcomes three new employees to its Destination Sales and Experience teams. **Colleen Buchanan**, CMP, CTA, has accepted

the role of destination sales manager. Buchanan joined Visit San Antonio in January 2017 as a destination experience manager. **Molly Hernandez** will serve as a destination experience manager, while **Estelle Rodriguez** has joined the Visit San Antonio team as a destination experience coordinator.

The San Francisco Travel Association has named **Rory Davis** as senior manager of sports and entertainment sales. His primary responsibility is securing new sports- and entertainment-related business for the San Francisco Bay Area, venues and hotels.

The Los Angeles Airport Marriott has added **Ryan Wollman** as director of group sales. In his new role, Wollman maximizes group revenue and profitability through the sale of guest rooms, catering and tours, and for directing, managing and coordinating all group sales activities.

Incentive Solutions, Inc. has promoted **Mandy Freeman** to vice president of account management after 11 years with the company. She began her time at ISI in sales in 2007 before transitioning into account management.

Roberts Event Group, a Hosts Global member, hired **Rachele Canazaro** as program & event coordinator. Canazaro's experience in coordinating and planning events stemmed from multiple internships, student government events and numerous private outings.

CSI DMC welcomes **Maureen Carter** to its National Sales Team as vice president of national sales for the West Coast region. Carter brings with her more than a decade of client relations and meeting management, with her most recent role as national sales director of the five-star, five-diamond resort, The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, CO. **C&IT**



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