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# CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR GLOBAL MEETING & INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

Life Lessons From  
an Industry Leader

Anne Hamilton,  
Vice President, Global Travel,  
The Walt Disney Company

ANNE  
HAMILTON



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**SELECTING  
SPEAKERS**

**WOMEN  
LEADERS**

**EMERGING  
DESTINATIONS**

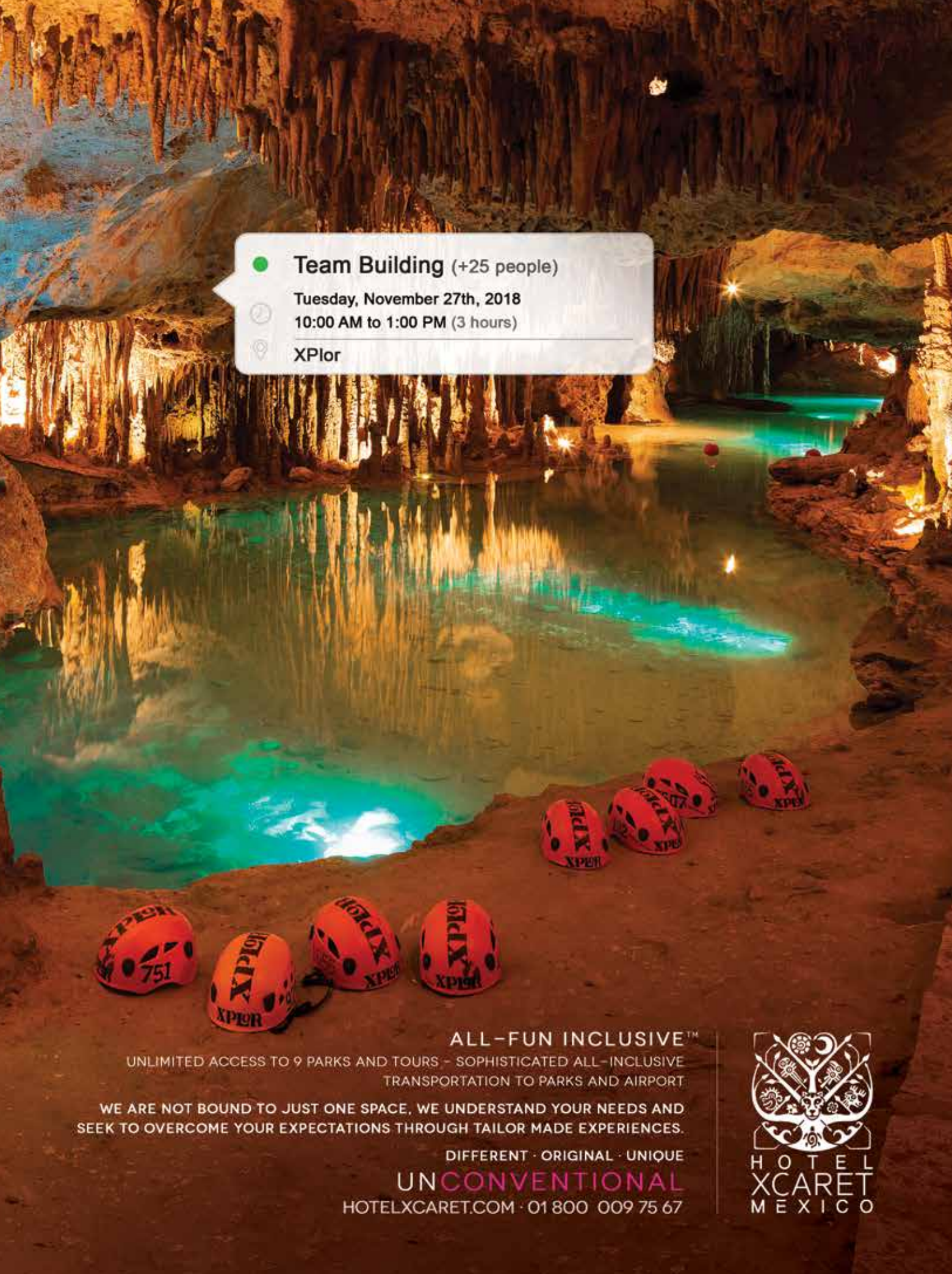
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## Honoring An Industry Legend

Our cover this month features Anne Hamilton, vice president global travel, the Walt Disney Company, recently honored with the MPI Industry Leader Award at the MPI WEC in Toronto. The award is presented to individuals who through their personal and organizational commitments have made a significant, lasting and positive impact on MPI and our community.

Hamilton says, "I have a saying: Why be ordinary, when you can be extraordinary? I want my teams and leaders to be extraordinary so that they stand out."

Anne is a fierce advocate for the value of meetings and events, leading the way for women in leadership and a mentor for future generations. To quote Christine Duffy, president of Carnival Cruise Line, "Anne is to be admired for her courage, strength and resilience."

Also in this issue, all-inclusive resorts offer planners a pricing structure that could make budgeting easier. All-inclusives today offer every type of accommodation, with destination choices in the U.S., Caribbean and Mexico.

While some planners have never considered all-inclusives, bids often show tremendous value. In fact, working with an all-inclusive resort can be easier, especially with F&B considerations.

If you are looking for an appealing destination that you haven't considered before, take a look at our selected emerging destinations that are asking you to bring your business to them. While not necessarily undiscovered, a destination like Savannah, Georgia for example, offers a meeting-friendly destination providing attendees with new experiences in a truly Southern environment. Check out our other selected emerging destinations and discover meeting values to accommodate your budget and excite your attendees.

As our ongoing magazine redesign continues, your comments would be helpful and greatly appreciated. Please email me at [harvey.grotsky@themeetingmagazines.com](mailto:harvey.grotsky@themeetingmagazines.com) and let me know your thoughts and suggestions.

Harvey Grotsky  
Publisher

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PUBLISHER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**Harvey Grotsky**

[harvey.grotsky@themeetingmagazines.com](mailto:harvey.grotsky@themeetingmagazines.com)

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

**Kristin Bjornsen**

[kristin.bjornsen@themeetingmagazines.com](mailto:kristin.bjornsen@themeetingmagazines.com)

MANAGING EDITOR

**Henry Fitzgerald**

[henry.fitzgerald@themeetingmagazines.com](mailto:henry.fitzgerald@themeetingmagazines.com)

EDITORIAL COORDINATOR

**Heather Ballis**

[heather.ballis@themeetingmagazines.com](mailto:heather.ballis@themeetingmagazines.com)

DIGITAL CONTENT COORDINATOR

**Christine Smith**

[christine.smith@themeetingmagazines.com](mailto:christine.smith@themeetingmagazines.com)

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

**Sophia Bennett**

**Ron Bernthal**

**Sara Churchill**

**Cynthia Dial**

**Maura Keller**

**Christine Loomis**

**Keith Loria**

**Derek Reveron**

**Mark Rowh**

**Patrick Simms**

**David Swanson**

PRESIDENT & CEO

**Harvey Grotsky**

VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS

**David Middlebrook**

[david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com](mailto:david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com)

ADVERTISING SALES OFFICES

2700 N. Military Trail, Suite 120

Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394

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

[advertising@themeetingmagazines.com](mailto:advertising@themeetingmagazines.com)

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800-440-0231 • [fox@themeetingmagazines.com](mailto:fox@themeetingmagazines.com)

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## NEW CONSTRUCTION

## Caesars Entertainment Celebrates Milestone for Caesars Forum

LAS VEGAS — Caesars Entertainment Corporation reached an important milestone recently, topping off its new state-of-the-art 550,000-sf conference facility, CAESARS FORUM.

More than 450 construction workers as well as meetings and conventions customers joined Caesars Entertainment executives for the monumental moment of placing the final steel beam atop the structure. The \$375 million conference center will carry a LEED Silver rating and feature the world's two largest pillar-less ballrooms, anticipated to open next year. "CAESARS FORUM is one step closer to offering this one-of-a-kind option in the meetings and conventions industry," said Michael Massari, chief sales officer at Caesars Entertainment. "The interest and bookings for our world-class facility has exceeded our expectations and we look forward to serving a variety of clients when we open the doors to CAESARS FORUM next year." CAE-



Massari

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Caesars Entertainment recently topped off its new, 550,000-sf conference facility, CAESARS FORUM.

SARS FORUM will be the first facility of this size built on one level. It will also feature FORUM Plaza, the first 100,000-sf, dedicated outdoor meeting and event space in Las Vegas.

## DINING

## Award-Winning Lip Smacking Foodie Tours Welcomes Dining Experiences in Las Vegas and Beyond

LAS VEGAS — Innovative Lip-Smacking Foodie Tours has raised the bar again, this time by being the first tour company to offer a 12% commission to any meeting planner who books one of its VIP culinary tours in its home base of Las Vegas or three new cities of San Jose, Seattle or Santa Monica, or any other venue to come. Each tour, tailored to the exact needs of corporate groups from 15 to 100 guests, includes stops at four

**Lip-Smacking Foodie Tours is offering a commission to meeting planners who book a VIP culinary tour.**

top restaurants to indulge in as many as four signature dishes at each venue, all the while providing ample time for easy mingling and networking. These tours take group dining way beyond just sitting down to a plate of food. Lip Smacking Foodie Tours does all the work, so clients are whisked to the top tables at each restaurant, with absolutely no waiting in line or need for reservations.

## RENOVATIONS

## Sanderling Resort Reveals Renovated Beach Chic Venues

DUCK, NC — Sanderling Resort, the quintessential coastal Carolina getaway, is shaking things up for groups and events with newly renovated beach chic venues, including the Ocean Side Event House and the sound facing Pavilion. Sanderling is committed to providing their guests with the best place to host meetings, events or group gatherings. Continuously named as a top event destination, Sanderling Resort just unveiled its newly renovated Oceanside Event House & Deck, which features sweeping views of the Currituck Sound and Atlantic Ocean. This multipurpose, two-story event space comes complete with boardrooms, breakout spaces, an indoor reception area and outdoor

fire pits and lawn games. Dedicated to providing guests with the best waterfront venues in the Outer Banks, the sound facing Pavilion, complete with its own private dock and over-water gazebo, was also recently renovated.

## CONFERENCES

## Registration Now Open for SITE Young Leaders Conference

The SITE Young Leaders Conference, "Breaking Barriers, Building Young Leaders", which takes place Sept. 8-9 in Las Vegas, provides education and networking opportunities for incentive travel professionals new to the incentive travel industry. The mission is to create a strong group of individuals who will become leaders in SITE, their local SITE chapters and the greater industry. To help build this next generation, the program awards a scholarship to qualifying participants so they can travel to and attend the SITE Young Leaders Conference for free. The event takes place annually in Las Vegas, prior to IMEX America. SITE members who are industry professionals 35 or younger, or have less than five years of experience, are encouraged to participate.

## AWARDS

## Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort Honored as Eastern Region Hotel of the Year

LAKE BUENA VISTA, FL — The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort was recently named a Marriott Eastern Region Hotel of the Year — the first time the resort has received the distinction. The resort was awarded the accolade in the Full-Service Distinctive Premium category. The resort joined Marriott International Inc. following the company's merger with Starwood in 2016. The recognition follows a \$150 million transformation of nearly the entire resort.

## Team-Building That Builds Teams

**Good team-building activities help create a strong bond between employees.**



DepositPhotos.com

A strong team that works cohesively can be one of the most important elements of a successful business. Learning how to communicate and cooperate lays the foundation for a healthy, productive workplace. One way to accomplish this is through team building — fostering a better work relationship by sharing in a common tasks during your meeting or event.

From health and wellness activities and food-and-drink challenges to networking activities and philanthropic teamwork, here are some unique, interactive team-building ideas for corporate groups and meetings.

## For Adrenaline Seekers

Speed Vegas — Experience the thrill of driving an exotic supercar on a real racetrack at speeds up to 150 mph. This state-of-the-art motorsports complex hosts team-building options to explore the need for speed where guests have their pick of any shiny, new car to take for a spin. Can your team handle a day of hot laps?

Dogfighting Days — Take your team back to the pioneering days of early flight. The mission? Fly high-performance airplanes under the supervision of an expert fighter pilot and engage in an actual aerial dogfight with your group. This aviation-related attraction will take your guests breath away in more ways than one.

## To Give Back

BOOMERANG! — Honor those who help make meetings happen. Through

the Above and Beyond Foundation's CSR program, groups can recognize and reward outstanding hospitality individuals working onsite for meetings and incentive programs in progress. With meeting attendees' input, one or more outstanding individuals are awarded a life-changing, \$10,000 cash grant.

Joy Jars — Engage your employees. Spread Joy. Help kids fighting cancer. The Mobile Joy Factory is a national and global corporate engagement opportunity for compassionate companies and employees. Teams gather to stuff Joy Jars, full of hospital-approved toys every child loves to play with.

## F&amp;B Challenges

Mix It Up — Host group cocktail battles at popular bars and nightclubs. Attendees put their knowledge to the test through a mixology training followed by a competition to stir up the tastiest cocktail. Drinks are served and judges pick a winning team based on the best creations.

Sushi Showdown — Participants feel like they're a part of everyone's favorite cooking competition in this adrenaline-pumping Sushi Showdown. In this technique-driven, team-building activity, guests are divided into small teams and face off in a timed sushi battle. For those who are not fish fans, switch it to a chef challenge where teams are armed with three basic ingredients and a stocked pantry and face off in a timed competition to create the winning dish.

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## CAREERS

### Michael Dominguez Named President and CEO of ALHI

BOSTON — Associated Luxury Hotels International (ALHI) has appointed hospitality industry veteran Michael Dominguez as its president and CEO. For the past seven years, Dominguez has served as senior vice president and



Dominguez

chief sales officer for MGM Resorts International (MGM-RI). Prior to his tenure at MGMRI, he directed sales development for Loews Hotels' growing portfolio as their vice president of global sales. In both roles, Michael provided strategic leadership, innovative business development, hands-on sales oversight and implementation of effective sales strategies in the MICE and transient segments. "Michael is highly respected and actively involved in leadership roles in our meetings and events industry. He is the ideal person for this position, with the right experience and industry network to lead our organization to new heights as we continue to focus on serving our distinguished members and valued customers," says Bill Dyer, chairman of the board of Associated Luxury Hotels, the parent company of ALHI.

## OPENINGS

### Universal Orlando Opens Surfside Inn and Suites

ORLANDO — Universal's Endless Summer Resort – Surfside Inn and Suites recently welcomed its first guests and added 750 rooms to the growing, world-class destination. Universal Orlando and Loews Hotels & Co. come together to provide planners with an unparalleled meetings and events experience within its 295,000 sf of meeting space. Universal Orlando offers a variety of amazing themed venues, unparalleled enter-



Universal Orlando  
Surfside Inn and Suites

tainment and award-winning catering for groups of all sizes. Surfside Inn and Suites' sister property, Universal's Endless Summer Resort – Dockside Inn and Suites, is scheduled to next March. Universal's Endless Summer Resort will add 2,800 rooms to the destination — bringing the total room count at Universal Orlando Resort to 9,000 rooms by the end of next year.

## AWARDS

### Direct Selling Association (DSA) Honors Buy The Sea With the Partnership Award

PLANTATION, FL — Buy The Sea was honored by the U.S. Direct Selling Association (DSA) with the Partnership Award for its exceptional performance in incentive travel sourcing and operations. The award was presented to Shari Wallack, the company's founder and president, at the association's awards gala during the DSA's annual meeting in Austin, Texas. "We're humbled and honored to be the first travel company to be recognized by the Direct Selling Association for the prestigious Partnership Award," Wallack says. Joseph N. Mariano, president and chief executive officer of DSA says, "DSA Award winners' programs demonstrate excellence, creativity and innovation in responding to the needs of the public, our consumers, our sales force, our members, and our communities."

## NEW VENUES

### Offshore, the Largest Rooftop Deck, Offers Unparalleled Views of Navy Pier's Fireworks

CHICAGO — See views of Chicago's magnificent skyline at Offshore, the nation's largest rooftop venue built for Chicago and its locals atop one of the city's most iconic buildings, Navy Pier. Offshore, a chic 36,000-sf, all-seasons/all-weather venue, offers Chicagoans a full-service luminous bar and world-class kitchen, terraces, seven cozy fire pits, an entertainment and gaming area and multiple large social gathering spaces. On Wednesdays at 9:30 p.m. and Saturdays at 10:30 p.m., guests can experience Navy Pier's fireworks with Offshore's unobstructed and unparalleled views.



Shari Wallack, center, with award.

## CAREERS

### Beverly Nicholson-Doty named CEO of Saint Lucia Tourism Authority

SAINT LUCIA — The Board of Directors at the Saint Lucia Tourism Authority (SLTA) has appointed Beverly Nicholson-Doty as the organization's CEO. Nicholson-Doty has more than three decades of industry leadership experience, including most recently serving as Commissioner of Tourism at the USVI Department of Tourism from 2007 to



Nicholson-Doty

2018. She brings significant experience in marketing, sales and strategic planning in Caribbean travel, tourism and hospitality. The CEO will be responsible for overall management of the Saint Lucia Tourism Authority, including oversight of the development of the Authority's marketing, destination services and general administration.

## CONSTRUCTION

### Gaylord Palms Resort Breaks Ground on \$158 Million Expansion

KISSIMMEE, FL — Osceola County Commissioners joined representatives of Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center for their "groundbreaking" ceremony. This expansion project will add 302 guest rooms in a new tower located across from the resort's pools, connected to the Everglades Atrium. The expansion will add 90,000 sf of carpeted meeting and pre-function space. This includes a 30,000-sf ballroom; 30,000 sf of breakout space; and 30,000 sf of carpeted, pre-function space. There are also plans to include a new multi-level parking structure, a new lazy river feature for the resort's pool, and a new 12,000-sf event lawn outside the convention center. The expansion project is expected to be completed in 2021.

## INDUSTRY NEWS

### Incentive Research Foundation Welcomes 500 Top Industry Professionals to its Annual Education Invitational

MIAMI — The Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) hosted its 26th Annual Education Invitational at Loews Miami Beach Hotel. More than 500 sponsors, buyers, trustees, hosts, media and speakers attended the sold-out event. The elite event attracted hosted buyers from more than 145 incentive travel and Fortune 1000 companies with 64 percent VP level and above. Attendees represented over 13,500 meetings, incentives and events annually with a collective annual spend of nearly \$1.2 billion. The IRF Education Invitational provided attendees direct exposure to an im-



Van Dyke

pressive roster of thought leaders and influencers. Education offerings were focused on insightful analysis of the IRF's research, reports and signature studies. Melissa Van Dyke, president of IRF, said, "The IRF Education Invitational is the IRF's most important annual fundraising activity supporting our research and education."

## MILESTONES

### Caesars Atlantic City Celebrates 40th Anniversary

ATLANTIC CITY — Caesars Atlantic City is celebrating its 40th anniversary this summer to commemorate four decades of achievements and milestones. Achieving the 2019 TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence in this milestone year, Caesars Atlantic City



Caesars  
Atlantic City

is also a proud Hall of Fame recipient, recently earning the Certificate of Excellence for the past five years consecutively. "With three resorts in the market, Caesars has viewed Atlantic City as critical to our success over the past 40 years," said Tony Rodio, CEO of Caesars Entertainment.

## UPGRADES

### The Roosevelt New Orleans Celebrates 125th Anniversary

NEW ORLEANS — The Roosevelt New Orleans, A Waldorf Astoria Hotel, announced the near completion of a massive \$20 million renovation. To celebrate the historical hotel's 125th anniversary, The Roosevelt, in the heart of downtown New Orleans, remodeled 60,000 sf of meeting and banquet space, spending \$5 million on those renovations. It now offers three grand ballrooms; 23 distinctive meeting rooms, with 20,000 sf being divisible into five sections; a full-service business center; an onsite full-service audio/visual company; and online catering and events menus. All 504 guest rooms are scheduled to be renovated by the end of this year.



## MPI WEC Snapshots

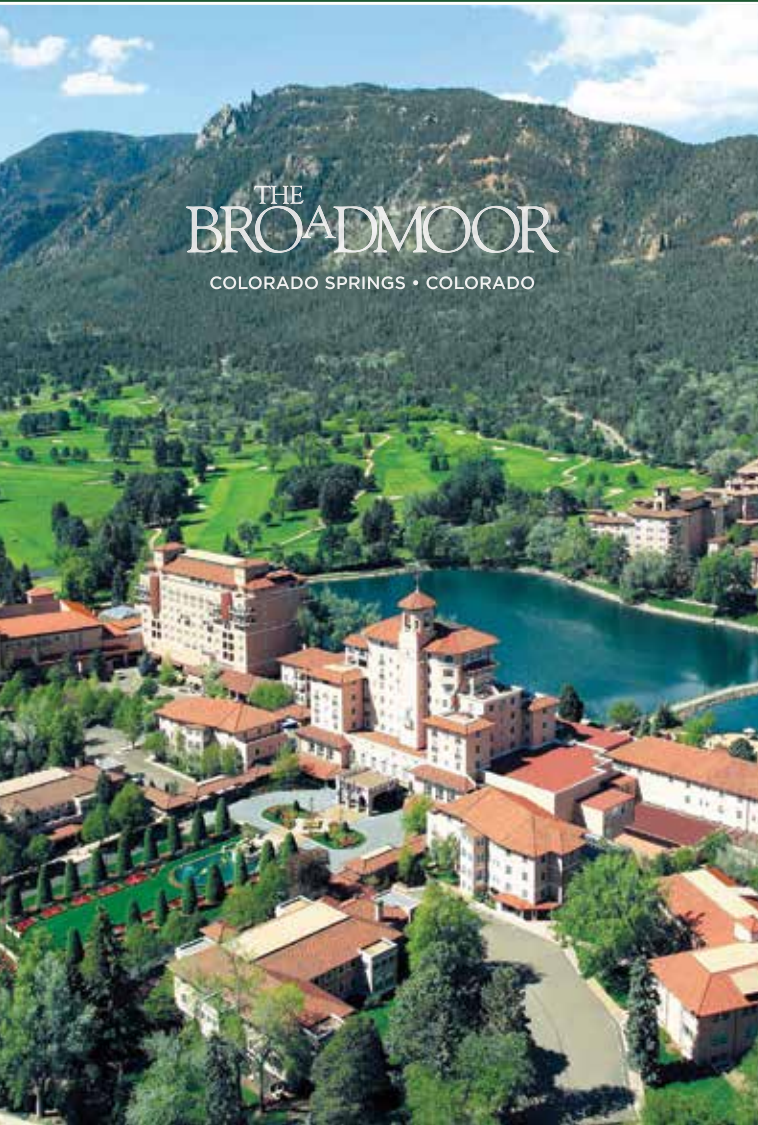
TORONTO — More than 2,550 attendees gathered at MPI WEC last month in Toronto for a shared experience centered on thought-provoking education from the main stage to intimate breakouts throughout the Social, Leadership, Experiential and Innovation villages.



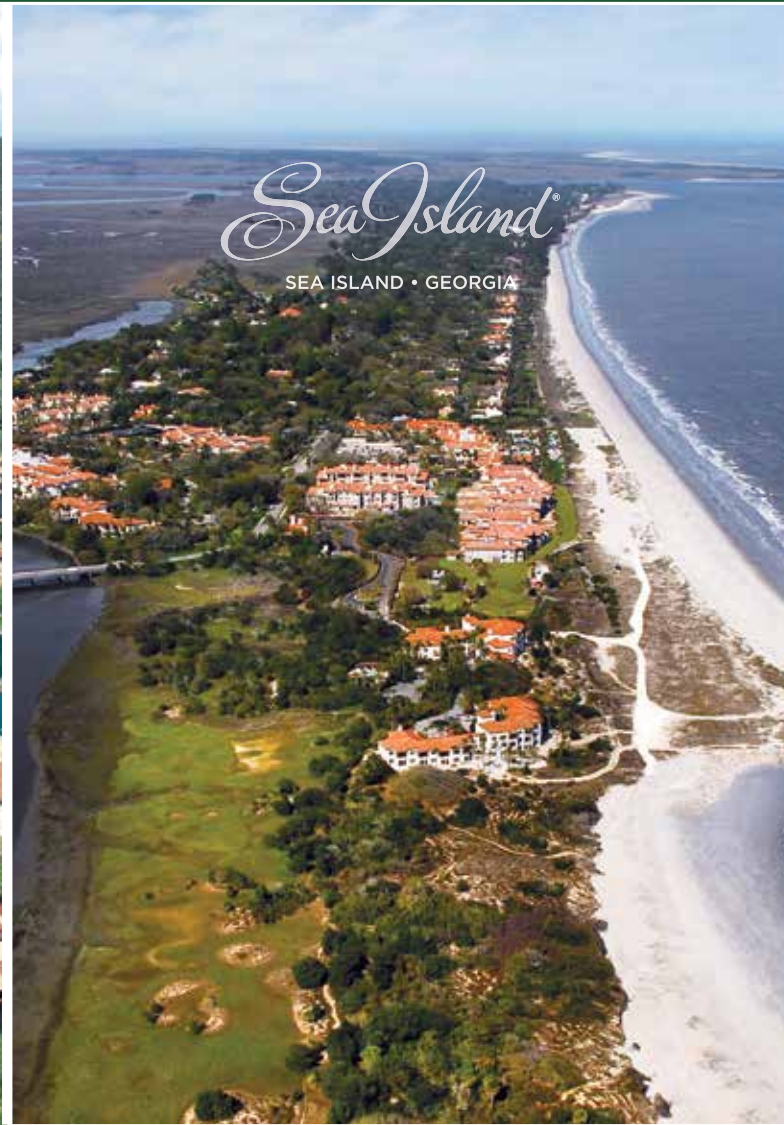


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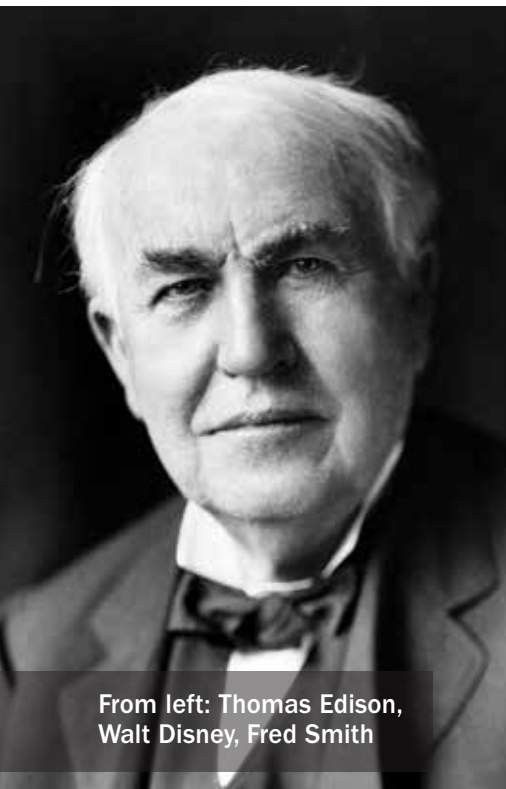
### **Accommodations— Choice**

Our 400 rooms and suites ensure we have a room type to meet your needs from The Cloister, nestled between the Black Banks River and the Atlantic Ocean to The Lodge, overlooking golf and the ocean, to The Inn, our select-service property. Or for those seeking outdoor adventure, we offer Broadfield, our 5,800-acre sporting club.



# When Things Don't Go Your Way

BY JOHN TSCHOHL



From left: Thomas Edison, Walt Disney, Fred Smith



*"Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time." — Thomas Edison*

**T**he journey toward your goal may not be as easy as expected, but the twists and turns you are facing is what makes it worthwhile. Some of the greatest successes are by the people who dared to fail ... but they did not give up!

Thomas Edison's teachers said he was "too

stupid to learn anything." He was fired from his first two jobs for being "non-productive." As an inventor, Edison made 1,000 unsuccessful attempts at creating the light bulb. When a reporter asked, "How did it feel to fail 1,000 times?" Edison replied, "I didn't fail 1,000 times. The light bulb was an invention with 1,000 steps."

*"Our greatest glory is not in never failing but in rising every time we fall." — Confucius*

Many people respond to a crisis by being overwhelmed by stress, which turns to fear. It is easy to be afraid when you have a crisis situation in your business, but if you remain brave, your employees will be too, and together a strong team is able to turn around anything.

For example, Fred Smith, the founder of FedEx, received a "C" on his college paper detailing his idea for a reliable overnight delivery service. His professor at Yale told him, "Well, Fred, the concept is interesting and well formed, but in order to earn better than a "C" grade, your ideas also have to be feasible.

And Walt Disney was fired by a newspaper editor because "he lacked imagination and had no good ideas."

*"If we are willing to try, to get back up after falling and*  
**WE TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES,**  
*those bad moments can be*  
*nothing but a footnote in our success story."*

He went bankrupt several times before he built Disneyland. In fact, the city of Anaheim rejected the proposed park on the grounds that it would only attract riffraff.

From rejection to workplace screw-ups, everyone has experienced that all-too-familiar, gut-wrenching numbness. The great paradox is that the people who enjoy the most successes often endure the greatest failures.

#### A few common sense things to remember:

Don't lose confidence in yourself when things don't go as planned. I cannot stress this enough, and I talk about this in my book "Moving Up." We are all a work in progress. But if you don't take the time to critique yourself and your behaviors along the way, you run the risk of becoming complacent.

Improve your relationships with people because it is

your relationship with people that make you successful in both life and business. If you discover that the same issues continue to arise, it's time for some tough self-examination.

It takes hard work to make dreams into reality. If you set clear goals, have self-confidence to act and believe you will succeed, over time you will get where you want to go. Sitting still is easy. Make sure you look at all aspects of your life and make some changes.

**Get regular exercise.** The benefits are a sense of health and youthfulness, increased physical and mental energy, well-being, productivity and success.

**Out-learn the competition.** Be obsessed with learning and be a voracious reader.

**Get plenty of rest.** A habit of successful people should include an early start that will also allow you to get more done.

**Ask.** There are always people from whom we can learn. Everyone has a mentor who helps them on their path to success. If you believe in yourself, there is no one more qualified than you to jump on opportunities that come up!

**Make time for your family.** You don't have to give up your personal life and enjoyment completely. Make a schedule that includes time for work and time for weekends away, hobbies and family life.

To reach for success and to overcome hardships or failures, we have to strive for the best we can be in every aspect of our lives, including how we feel about ourselves and how we treat others. If we are willing to try, to get back up after falling and we take advantage of opportunities, those bad moments can be nothing but a footnote in our success story.

C&IT



#### JOHN TSCHOHL

John Tschohl is a professional speaker, trainer and consultant. He is the president and founder of Service Quality Institute, the global leader in customer service, with operations in more than 40 countries. He has written several books on customer service, including "Moving Up, A Step-by-Step Guide to Creating Your Success." Tschohl is a self-made millionaire who travels and speaks more than 50 times each year. He is considered to be one of the foremost authorities on service strategy, success, empowerment and customer service in the world. His monthly strategic newsletter is available free online. He can also be reached on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.



# Innovate or Cease to Exist

BY CHRISTOPHER KAI



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**T**he McKinsey Global Institute released a report where they studied 46 countries and 800 occupations and found that by 2030 there will be 800 million workers in the world — that's more than two times the size of the entire U.S. population — who will be replaced by automation. And, they aren't just retail clerks or Uber drivers who will lose their jobs. It would include jobs you might not think would be automated, such as radiologists, lawyers and pharmacists. Directly or indirectly, automation will affect everyone. The report states

that up to one-third of the U.S. workforce in the U.S. will need some form of job training to prepare them for other forms of employment.

The only way we can all keep our jobs, businesses and clients is to innovate how we individually do things as employees, teams and companies or our jobs, companies and clients will cease to exist. We often think of the word "innovation" when we think about technology companies like Apple creating the iPhone but the very definition of "innovate" is much more simple and it pertains to all of us. Innovate simply means to "make changes in something established by intro-

ducing new methods or ideas." We can all be more innovative and creative in our jobs so that work isn't a chore, but a career we choose that is fun, fulfilling and massively rewarding. Here are 3 simple ways we can be more innovative:

## Innovate as a Person

Do you eat the same breakfast each day? Take the same route to work? Have the same work routine every single day? According to author Steven Kotler in his book "The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance," we are all hardwired to seek novel experiences if we want our brains to be stimulated and perform better. So whatever you are doing in your daily

tively, "Do I sound convincing?" Just because you say you're passionate about something doesn't mean others will hear and see that passion if you aren't communicating with the right tone of voice or body language. If you don't sound convincing to yourself how can your team members believe anything you say?

## Innovate as a Company

According to a Gallup poll, 87% of U.S. employees are either disinterested, dislike or hate their jobs. And beyond the monetary gain of a bigger check, Daniel H. Pink, author of "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us" found that the three most basic things that really motivate us are:

“We can all be more innovative and creative in our jobs so that  
**WORK ISN'T JUST A CHORE,**  
 but a career we choose that can be fun,  
 fulfilling and massively rewarding.”

life, mix it up a little. Try a new breakfast, take a different route to work or challenge your boss or employees to offer different solutions at a meeting. These simple changes will help you become more innovative at home and work.

## Innovate as a Team

For more than seven years, MIT's Human Dynamic Laboratory studied thousands of employees in various departments in different companies around the world. They found that team building indeed is a science that can be measurable, observable and most importantly improved. By just changing how you communicate to co-workers you can be 50% more effective in a team setting. The words you use are only 7% of your effectiveness, which means 93% of your effectiveness as a communicator is based solely on your tone of voice and body language.

Try this simple exercise: Record a video of yourself for 1-minute talking about one of your favorite passions. Now watch that video of yourself and ask yourself objec-

**Autonomy:** You want to have the freedom to do the work as you see fit if you achieve the desired results.

**Mastery:** You want to feel like you are learning, growing and improving at your job.

**Purpose:** Your job can't just be about a paycheck. If you don't believe in a shared purpose, you won't be very motivated to work at all.

As a company create a clear, inspiring vision. For example, Amazon is obsessed with serving their customers. Howard Schultz, the former CEO of Starbucks, wanted people to have an Italian experience when they walked into a Starbucks. It was never about selling a cup of coffee, but about creating a memorable experience. Elon Musk wants us all to be a multiplanetary species.

When we all individually as employees and collectively as teams and companies focus on being more innovative, we will be more successful as professionals and our very satisfied clients will keep hiring us for decades to come.

C&IT



## CHRISTOPHER KAI

Christopher Kai is the world's leading authority in story-based leadership and a Fortune 100 global speaker. His main keynote topics are about story-based leadership, team success, sales, connection and persuasion. He is a former business strategist and executive speechwriter at American Express. Elon Musk once exclaimed during an interview, "Wow! You really know a lot." Kai can be reached at christopherkai.com



# Anne Hamilton

## Life Lessons From an Industry Leader

BY RICK SYLVAIN

**L**ife is all about chapters. Anne Hamilton has written her share. There was the chapter that became her first foray into marketing — at age 10.

There was the chapter of growing up (Anne has six siblings) and family tradition was for everyone to gather around the dinner table every evening. More than buttered carrots were passed. Every topic under the sun was discussed, dissected and — if the topic was yours — defended.

the Sales and Services organization for Walt Disney Parks and Resorts. In the meetings and events industry, Anne Hamilton is the gold standard, earning such accolades as the recent Meeting Professionals International Industry Leader Award for many significant contributions, including advocating for women in leadership and serving as a mentor to future generations. Her industry leadership reads like alphabet soup — MPI, PCMA, ASAE — and she never stops extolling the creativity of

in San Francisco. At the time, she was director of sales for a Hilton partner hotel on the property of Walt Disney World Resort. The passenger in the next seat struck up a conversation.

“I was all decked out in my Disney attire which caught his curiosity,” she remembers. “I told him that despite appearances I didn’t work for Disney.”

That seat mate happened to be then Vice President of Resort/Park Sales & Services for the Walt Disney World Resort, George Aguel, who is now

### HER BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS IS MARKED BY PILLARS OF LEARNINGS — CALL IT A LIFETIME OF LESSONS LEARNED — ALONG THE WAY

There was the chapter of post-graduation enlightenment. After getting her degree in Business Administration from Florida State University, Anne immersed herself in the businesses within her industry — what was on the minds of clients — whether it was food & beverage, sales or marketing. At 50, she felt the need to again challenge herself and think differently, so she went back and earned an MBA from Stetson University.

There is the chapter she writes today as vice president, Global Travel, for The Walt Disney Company, which follows more than two decades leading

the Disney Meetings & Events teams at the Walt Disney World Resort in Florida, Disneyland Resort in California and Disney’s Aulani resort in Hawaii.

There is another chapter she’s writing now — the fight of her life but one she approaches as she does everything. With hard-as-nails tenacity.

After an already illustrious career that included executive positions with Hilton, Hyatt, the Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau and Miami’s iconic Jockey Club, Anne began her Disney career in 1996 — unceremoniously enough on a routine flight returning from an industry conference

President and CEO of Visit Orlando.

“Three weeks later I was working for George and never looked back,” Anne recalls. “George took a chance on me, a single mom, how many would have done that back then?” She quickly proved her business savvy, promoted to the executive ranks only 11 months after hiring on as a sales director.

“George gave me an opportunity to join the best company in the world and for 23 years it’s been nothing but great moments, one after another. Extraordinary people define the company. They love what they do and they work together.”

Anne Hamilton,  
Vice President, Global Travel,  
The Walt Disney Company



There was even more from that chance meeting with Aguel.

“He also understood family first as a part of Disney culture,” Anne says. “If I wanted to leave early to watch my son Ian play sports, nobody stood in the way. That really resonated with me.”

Born in Miami the oldest of seven kids, Anne says learning has always been a cornerstone of her life. In fact, her blueprint for success is marked by pillars of learnings — call it a lifetime of

lessons learned — along the way. They follow no particular order but each will help shape the successful career in the meetings and events industry.

### HAVE A PASSION FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN - BE PREPARED TO BACK IT UP

Anne recalls one non-negotiable from growing up. “Our family had a rule that everyone had to be together for dinner. My parents set a table for

12 because someone was always joining us, whether friends or a client of my dad’s. You never knew who would show up. Topics came up every evening — politics, religion, diet fads, whatever. We were expected to weigh in with our opinions and back them up. Around so much diversity of thought, it would sometimes get heated. Our parents always loved to stimulate our minds and thoughts. That upbringing fostered my work ethic. It gave me confidence in being able to articulate a point of view and back it up. My mantra is always have an opinion whether it’s welcomed or not.”

### YOUR JOURNEY OF LEARNING NEVER ENDS

“Always remember your journey of learning will never end. Learning feeds the endless fascination about the various businesses you touch and how they operate and the people attached

Dr. Deborah Breiter, professor at Rosen College of Hospitality Management; Ann Williams, General Manager of Food and Beverage at Disney’s Animal Kingdom; and Hamilton join Walt Disney World Cast Members to celebrate women in leadership roles during an event at Epcot.



(Left) Popcorn: Hamilton “pops” into a role serving guests at a Disney Theme Park. As part of the program, executives and other Disney leaders occasionally staff frontline positions. (Right) Hamilton is joined by representatives of 7 x 24 Exchange for the June 2001 grand opening of World ShowPlace, the largest private-event facility ever created inside a theme park.

to them. In what other industry can you meet so many different people and businesses and kind of have an ownership in part of their success?”

“Throughout my career I have worked with brilliant industry leaders and not only were they supportive in growing my career, they were kind, generous and understanding. I have been fortunate, and from that learning is how I’ve tried to be as a leader and as a person.”

“Surround yourself with people smarter than you are and learn from them.”

### LOVE WHAT YOU DO

“For me that started when I was 10, stuffing envelopes with hotel brochures

and rate cards for my dad (a hotelier in Miami Beach). That was considered marketing. At the end of my first day, I got paid \$1 and thought ‘Wow this is what I want to do.’ My father’s advice, which I have followed throughout my career, was that if you’re going to be in this industry, you have to work hard. I don’t think you can give your all 100% of the time unless you’re in love with what you do. I’m happy that there was never a day when I woke up and didn’t want to go to work.”

### NEVER REST ON YOUR LAURELS

“There was never a time in my career that I could rest on my laurels and say I finally climbed to the top of

the mountain. There just isn’t a top, ever, it just keeps going. That’s what makes it so exciting! I was fortunate to have so many great leaders throughout my career and diverse roles which gave me the opportunity to keep developing my leadership and knowledge skills. I sought out leaders who I’d learn from and who had a complete commitment to excellence. Because if they were going to be excellent, I would be excellent. It was always about excellence.”

### CELEBRATE YOUR VICTORIES AND LEARN FROM YOUR FAILURES

“Sitting at a table with my team and partners and understanding what’s working and what isn’t re-

## ANNE HAMILTON: IN THEIR OWN WORDS ...

With decades of success to draw on, Anne Hamilton puts a can-do attitude to everything she touches. It’s an attitude she has always instilled in the teams under her. And family, friends and her industry peers take notice.

“We’d have a lot of events on the golf team in high school and she’d show up in a full business suit because she had come straight from a meeting. But she made sure she was there. She’s never going to be the person who wants pity or sympathy. You know, I cut my finger and I don’t want to go to work. She’s battling cancer. She’s doing all these great things for people. She is so selfless.”

— Ian Hamilton, Anne’s son

“She is an individual who is generous and enormously thoughtful — not only for the dedication she gave to our

company when I was there and what she did for our clients and her team but also because she voluntarily wanted to give more of herself to help the industry. She didn’t have to do those things. They weren’t required of her. But she saw that the benefits that came to the industry would also be good for everyone involved.”

— George Aguel, Visit Orlando

“Back in the day I would say there were very few women in the hotel industry who were rising to the ranks of management. I admire most her courage, her strength and her resiliency. Anne has always set high goals for herself and I can’t think of anything Anne can’t do when she puts her mind to it.”

— Christine Duffy, Carnival Cruise Line

“Anne is one of those executives who is always there. She’s engaged, she makes stuff happen. She does her job

to advance the industry to a better place than it is today. When I think about Disney I think of Anne and the culture they have. She epitomizes what it is. She cares about her industry and she cares about her company.”

— Roger Dow, U.S. Travel Association

“When we worked together at Hilton, Anne earned the nickname “roadrunner” because she was this ball of energy and constantly on the go. She is like that in every aspect of her life, and I’m always in awe of the quantity and quality of what she accomplishes.”

— Amy Pfeiffer, Walt Disney World Resort

“She’s so giving of her time and resources. Whatever anybody needs, Anne Hamilton will deliver.”

— Jamie Murdock, Experient

“She gives her heart to everybody every day. Everybody receives a little bit of Anne every day.”

— Leslie Menichini, Rosen Hotels and Resorts

“One of those people who spots talent, hires talent and then she has this unique ability to almost allow people the freedom, if they can grow beyond her, to let them free.”

— Brian Stevens, ConferenceDirect

“There’s no barriers for Anne. Anne’s a driver and she keeps things moving. Whatever she is wanting to do or to achieve, she is going to achieve.”

— John Ferrer, Disney Institute

“She doesn’t let anybody down, ever. And it makes you want to do the same thing.”

— Theresa Tamer, The Walt Disney Company

“She’s one in a million. She’s one you can relate to. Ask her for counsel. She is so accessible, she is there for you at work she is there for you at home. She’s real, she’s human, she’s a part of you and invested in you. There’s not that many people left in the world like that.”

— Victoria Hardison-Sterry, Luxury Edition Travel





(Left) An Oscar-worthy performance: Hamilton holds one of Walt Disney's many Academy Awards while visiting The Walt Disney Company Archives in Burbank, CA. (Right) Anne and Mickey: Anne and her boss, the Big Cheese.

enforces my belief that feedback is a gift. Sometimes you gotta swallow your pride. Your idea may be great or not so great but if you have an open environment you are all winners because of diversity of thought and everyone in the room feeling their opinion is valued. Take a shot and go for it. It doesn't matter whose idea it is, we're going to celebrate as a team. You're never going to win every time. Take time out to celebrate the victories because it feels good — and don't be afraid to examine your failures and say, "Hey, what could we have done differently?"

### DO NOT BE SWAYED BY CRITICS OR FANS. STAND WHERE "RIGHT" IS

"That's where the ethics and morals come in. Always do what's right."

### BEING ORDINARY IS EASY, BEING EXTRAORDINARY TAKES ONLY A LITTLE MORE

"Be uncommon. It's something I've always lived by. It only takes a little bit more effort to be extraordinary."

### BE ENGAGED 110%

"I love thrill rides and I'm a gamer. Those who can play the game win. If you're not engaged it's all but impos-

sible to win. Engagement is a critical attribute that people need to have to be successful."

### UNDERSTAND AS A LEADER YOU ALWAYS VALUE HERITAGE BUT ARE WILLING TO CHANGE TRADITION

One of our creative directors at the Disney Event Group, says it's important to know the difference between heritage and tradition. Disney is a company with a rich heritage. And we have lots of traditions but one thing we have learned is that traditions can change but not the heritage. Heritage is who you are, how you present yourself and the culture you want to have. Traditions says we may have done it that way 10 years ago but we have to change how we do it today. Traditions evolve but heritage is your core."

### CHAMPION LEADERSHIP AND CONSISTENCY

"Be a leader who can make decisions. Be accountable for your decision. It's all about consistency. Disney has always had a diversity of leadership. The day I walked in I thought this is where I belong. My life has been touched deeply by Disney and the extraordinary people who are at its heart."

### YOU CAN'T BE A HOVER LEADER. EMPOWER AND SUPPORT YOUR TEAM

"I delegate to my team. You can't be a hover leader. Have the best people



(Left) Anne is flanked by her family as she accepts the prestigious MPI Industry Leader Award. Front row: Christy Cain, sister-in-law; Julie Burke, sister; Hamilton, Laura Tweddle, sister-in-law; and Kevin Tweddle, brother. Back row: Ian Hamilton, son; Jamie Tweddle, brother; Christy Tweddle, sister; Eric Tweddle, brother; and Dr. William Hold, husband. (Right) Deborah Sexton, former President and CEO, PCMA; George Aguel, President & CEO, Visit Orlando; and Hamilton pose at a PCMA gala.

around you, support them so they are comfortable making the decision. You have to empower people or they are not going to grow. So many pieces and parts are moving so fast. You have to empower your people and then support them."

### BEING EMPATHETIC TO YOUR TEAM AND LISTENING TO THEM CREATES LOYALTY

"How you treat people and listening to them is important. If I have to leave work on a family matter I will pay that

and declared war on what a diagnosis turned up in 2017. Melanoma cancer.

"I was so sick, I couldn't eat and was at the point of giving up," Anne says. "Doubt was pulling me down. I had these 'Why me?' feelings."

A revelation for her came during a visit to Lourdes, France, where faith holds that miracle healings can occur.

"There were 10,000 sick people like me," Anne remembers. "They weren't in a down place, they were celebrating life. And I found joy in those people

I'm going to keep moving forward."

Anne returned from Lourdes determined to fight the disease.

"Three weeks later, my son Ian announced that I was going to be a grandmother. So miracles do happen!"

She is determined to write this chapter on her time and her terms.

"Whatever the doctors can learn from me they can make somebody else's life better in the future. There will come a time when I can't do what I want to do but until then I'm just

## "I HOPE MY LEGACY IS THAT I MADE A DIFFERENCE IN PEOPLE'S LIVES THAT I INSPIRED THEM IN SOME WAY"

ANNE HAMILTON, THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY

back to my leader 150% because he or she let me do what I needed to do. They supported me and that's always paid back in the work effort. That was a big lesson for me."

The unwelcome chapter in Anne's life put her resilient spirit to the test and nearly broke her. It took all the inner strength she could muster but eventually she shook off the doubts

and the realization that this is my life and I just need to learn how to live with it." It all crystallized when my spiritual counselor sat me down and said, 'Anne, you know how your story will end. How are you going to write the last chapter?'

"When you have a life-changing event you have two choices. You can roll up in a ball and go away or say, 'You know what,

going to keep moving forward."

"I'm a fighter. Failure is not an option for me."

With Anne Hamilton, was there ever a doubt?

### ANNE ON ANNE...

"I hope my legacy is that I made a difference in people's lives. That I inspired them in some way." **C&IT**



Grand: Anne pauses at Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa, flagship of the Disney convention resorts.



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# All-Inclusive is All Right

The Pricing Structure at These Resorts

Often Makes Things Easier for Planners

BY CHRISTINE LOOMIS

**T**here are many reasons for planners to consider all-inclusive resorts as a setting for meetings, events and incentives. Today's all-inclusives are not the typically downscale properties of yesteryear. All-inclusives today can be found in every hotel category, including uber luxe with amenities enough for upscale incentive programs and in every type of lodging and destination, from traditional and historic resorts to guest ranches and from Arizona and Michigan to the Caribbean and Mexico.

Perhaps best of all, all-inclusive resorts inherently take some of the work of planning an event off the shoulders of meeting planners, which is especially nice when a company's planning department consists of a staff of one.

## AN ANNUAL CHOICE

Cathy Vestrand, owner of Vestrand Consulting Services, has set her company's annual dental meeting at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, Michigan, every

year since 2012. Like other grand, historic resorts, the Grand Hotel runs primarily on a Modified American Plan — meaning breakfast and dinner are included in the room rate even for meeting guests — but other packages are also available. The Grand is also a great choice for meetings to which attendees bring family along, and Mackinac Island serves up a special ambiance as no cars are allowed.

"This is an historical, iconic destination meeting place for Michiganders who return year after year and make the meeting a tradition," Vestrand says. "The quality of lodging is superior and with all of the lovely color and touches, just sitting in the lobby watching people dressed for dinner listening to the harp is a treat."

Vestrand says attendance at her meeting has increased each year "because of the value of the rooms with our discount and what the island has to offer visitors in the early fall. Mackinac Island is a wonderful, magical place with only horses and bicycles, so people come here to experience another place and time."

A plus for Vestrand is that the resort includes A/V, a champagne reception, coffee and tea as part of the meeting package. "Grand Hotel is top-notch as far as customer service and treating the meeting planner with grand appreciation."

Vestrand's group uses Brighton Pavilion, part of the resort's Woodfill Conference Center. "Our function was held mostly in the Brighton Pavilion, complete with colorful chairs and chandeliers, where we had a champagne welcome reception with hors d'oeuvres on Friday and coffee and pastries on Saturday morning," Vestrand notes. "One year we were in the Theatre, also part of the conference center, and had a small orchestra play during our reception. In the Brighton Pavilion we have had a piano playing — all very nice details to create a wonderful event."

Vestrand says her attendees appreciate starting the day with the included breakfast. "That's the package I buy, which includes hotel guest rooms at a special discount and the meeting room. You could have breakfast and dinner but I prefer to let them be on their own for dinner. There

are restaurants in the Grand Hotel or they can walk 10 minutes into town and find a place to eat on the island. Or if they prefer, they can take a carriage ride to The Woods, a lovely old hunting lodge with wild-game entrees."

Vestrand doesn't buy lunch either because the timing doesn't work with her seminars. "People are OK with that," she adds. And she calls the planning "easy." For one thing, she points out, "So much is here on property — regardless of the weather — it's always lovely inside."

Developing relationships at preferred hotels is always the goal for planners, and Vestrand has that at the Grand. "Jane Thomas is super to work with. She really cares about me as a planner and thinks about ways she can assist. She has even linked me with other dental sales people who have attended my classes. Ashlea Flores is a top-notch meeting planner who executes my events with every detail and also anticipates my needs and makes it easy for me," Vestrand says. "The Grand Hotel staff have this down to a science. I've done this meeting for so many years it runs like clockwork. I don't have prob-



lems up there. One time I left my laptop power cord at home. They bent over backward but we couldn't find one to fit."

Vestrand's advice to anyone planning a meeting at Grand Hotel is to advertise early so attendees can plan for it. "I have them pay separately for the meeting and the Grand handles the hotel reservations," she says. "Have the hotel reservation form handy for attendees in all emails to make it easy to make a reservation. I also got the Grand to create a very cute postcard to advertise my meeting and I send it out to all of my clients every year."

Vestrand says Once they experience the Grand Hotel, "People will come back. It's a 'bucket list' kind of place."

## ANOTHER REPEAT FAVORITE

White Stallion Ranch in Tucson, Arizona, is also a place people return to year after year. John Severson, president of Severson Compass & Associates, has set his annual Structural Connections conference at the ranch every October since 2001.

Severson describes the ranch as a "great environment. It's very different — it feels like another world," he says.

Among other things he likes is that the Tucson area is warm in late fall and that the city is easily accessible. And there's White Stallion Ranch itself. "The ranch reinvests in the property every year, upgrades rooms and amenities and the service is world class."

Which is not to say that he's normally a fan of the all-inclusive model. "I hate most all-inclusives," Severson says. "They inflate choices and what's offered really are watered-down options of the real thing with too many guests all competing for the same resources. But the ranch does things differently. They're after an experience for each guest. You never feel hurried, rushed, crammed or have to wait in line. It's quite remarkable."

And the planning is easier. All meals are set at the ranch. Although it's on the outskirts of Tucson, White Stallion feels a world away as there's nothing conveniently close for attendees to go to on their own — and why would they want to?

That doesn't mean a lack of choices. "There are lots of



Grand Hotel, on Mackinac Island, was built in 1887 and claims to have 'the world's longest porch.'

choices with F&B," Severson says. "You just have to be vocal and active about your dietary needs. The kitchen can accommodate you, you just have to speak up."

The ranch's function and conference space is also included in the package and there are folks on staff who can lighten the burden for planners. Carol Moore is one staff member who stands out for Severson. "She knows how to make things simple and reliable for your group. Sometimes staff can't facilitate every request because they have to balance your needs with the needs of the rest of the guests," he says, "but if they can work with you they will."

Really, Severson adds, "It's all about the environment. You want to work with this amazing environment not against it. Work with Carol and with Russell True, one of the owners, at the ranch. Let the ranch do what it does best — your guests will be pleased."

## MEXICO OFFERS GREAT VALUE

Mexico and the Caribbean are well known for all-inclusive resorts, so it's no surprise that Cancun, on Mexico's Caribbean coast, is often a first-choice for corporate and incentive groups looking for a tropical destination.

Nell Nicholas, senior director, global accounts, with HelmsBriscoe, calls Cancun a terrific destination, "for so many reasons — breadth of airlift both domestic and international, affordable fares from all major origination points, a variety of properties from boutique to large and a plethora of beachfront properties."

Moreover, she adds, "You can always count on great value for money in Cancun, which has something for every budget and every type of program from large-scale incentives to small board retreats."

The DMCs in Cancun, Nicholas notes, "are also top-notch professional and priced appropriately. And contrary to what some may think," she says, "the food and beverage possibilities onsite are excellent. The food is very fresh. Much of our U.S. 'off season' fruits and vegetables come from Mexico, so a U.S. winter program in Mexico will offer your attendees some of the freshest ingredients."

Nicholas brought an annual incentive trip to the Paradisus Cancun in 2018 with approximately 70 in attendance. While she says attendees at all-inclusives typically stay on property, this group was a bit different. "Our group

likes to venture out primarily on a group catamaran ride or perhaps an afternoon shopping trip. Cancun is unique in that there are also multiple cultural choices for excursions as well, including the Mayan ruins at Tulum; Rio Secreto, a natural park featuring an underground river; and Xcaret, a park combining nature and culture."

Paradisus Cancun was the client's choice. "The client chose Paradisus Cancun for the access of the destination, proximity to the airport and value for money," Nicholas says. "We were able to upgrade all attendees at the highest category of room product at Paradisus. If we did the same program in Playa Del Carmen, for example, our attendees would not have been able to enjoy a high-end room product."

Additionally, she says, "I particularly enjoy the added service of an onsite DMC. It eliminates the guessing game of DMC selection."

Nicholas has several clients that prefer all-inclusives, in part because setting a meeting or program at an all-inclusive makes their job a bit easier. "Many corporate meeting planners are a one-person department, so anywhere we can one-stop shop, as at an all-inclusive resort, the better from a planning standpoint. One company I work with doesn't have the budget to send the planner to the incentive, but with a quality all-inclusive she has peace-of-mind that attendees will be well cared for. The best part? No meal planning for the attendees."

While some program details are taken care of in the all-inclusive model, planners still have to be on top of things. "Ask about the liquor brands in the package you're purchasing for the attendees," Nicholas advises. "I find I need to upgrade the liquor brands for my clients from call brands to top shelf."

Nicholas says she had no real challenges in the site-selection process for her 2018 group. "My NSO, Beatriz Kazusky, for Meliá Hotels, always does a great job and is always on top of the negotiating and contracting process."

That said, she does have a strategy suggestion for planners looking at Cancun for their corporate meeting or incentive program. "Send the RFP to several brands across the board to show your stakeholders the variety of options,"

"The ranch reinvests in the property every year, upgrades rooms and amenities and the service is world class."

## JOHN SEVERSON

President  
Severson Compass  
& Associates



Nicholas says. "Your stakeholders may never have considered an all-inclusive, but when you put an EP hotel bid and all-inclusive bid in front of the stakeholder, you can show tremendous value for money."

Heidi Stevenson, global sales manager, CIS, with Destinations Inc., also went to the Riviera Maya for a February 2019 incentive trip with 188 in attendance. The chosen hotel was UNICO 20° North 87° West, just south of Cancun in Puerto Morelos.

Stevenson says the area has many benefits. "The Cancun/Riviera Maya area is a fabulous destination for groups with year-round favorable weather and a wide range of properties to select from. Most of the attendees for this program come from the West Coast and the lift to Cancun is ideal. The area has countless properties that can accommodate incentives and meetings, including many of the large all-inclusive properties."

There's also ample meeting and function space. "All of our events were handled onsite at UNICO 20° North 87° West," she says.

The choice of UNICO 20° North 87° West was ideal for this program. "It's a newer property only having been open for the last two years," Stevenson says. "And it is without a doubt one of the higher-end, all-inclusive properties in the area. The service, lodging and food are all top-notch. The resort has great event space that can accommodate large groups."

Like other planners, Stevenson says working with an all-inclusive property can be easier, especially on the F&B front. "There is not as much to contend with," she says, adding that many all-inclusive properties also don't charge extra fees for group functions, which can be a great cost savings for a group. That is the case with UNICO.

"Our CSM was amazing," Stevenson says. "This resort does not charge fees for group events or meetings. It was part of the all-



Paradisus Cancun can host events for up to 1,200 attendees and offers very good value for the money, planners say.



White Stallion Ranch ranked #1 on TripAdvisor of 130 Hotels in Tucson for 7 consecutive years.





Grand Velas Riviera Maya's 539 spacious suites all have balconies that offer fantastic views.

inclusive price.”

And the property works well with groups. “From the sales process all the way through execution of the program, this property is great with groups,” Stevenson says. “They’re extremely detail oriented and quick with responses and planning.”

While there were no bumps in the road in the planning process for this program, Stevenson advises planners to see the property firsthand. “Definitely include a site visit so that you can map out your group’s needs. This property really can accommodate most any group and it will also do buyouts. This should absolutely be in your considerations,” she says, “especially for an incentive program.”

Another ultra luxury all-inclusive Riviera Maya resort in Mexico for meeting and incentive planners to consider is the Grand Velas Riviera Maya, set on 206 acres of pristine jungle and mangroves and within the finest white sand beach. All 539 designer-like suites are exceptionally spacious, all with balconies and some with private plunge pools.

The AAA Five Star resort recently unveiled new meeting offerings for groups that puts an emphasis on the history, gastronomy and culture of the region. Groups can pick and choose among the options a la carte or opt for the entire experience in a Mexican fiesta program. Locally made tequila, a tasting of another ancestral drink, cooking classes, a showcase of traditional pottery and a curated welcome amenity of an Olinalá box and amber bracelet — traditional artisanal crafts — are among the possibilities.

Velas Resorts has catered to planner’s needs for over 25 years with resorts that feature excellence in service, world-class hospitality, beautifully appointed accommodations, signature luxury all-inclusive superb facilities and expansive convention centers.

Another resort operator with a proud history of satisfy-

ing meeting and incentive planner’s needs is Barceló Resorts. With the opening scheduled for December this year, the adults only Barceló Maya Riviera is perfect for meetings, conventions and incentive programs.

The resort offers 850 rooms that are junior suites and full suites, all fully equipped. The crown jewel of this resort is its convention center, which is the largest in Riviera Maya with 190,000 sf of meeting space and a capacity for 7,000 people. Additionally a 3,400-sf terrace is available for gala receptions. With a wide range of excellent facilities, the resort will offer a choice of restaurants, bars, pools, spa and gym. The resort also has its own theme park,

Ventura Fly & Ride Park, offering high altitude and other rides. Attendees will discover everything the new Barceló Maya Riviera all-inclusive resort has in store. Located only 47 miles from Cancun International Airport and its amazing surroundings on a more than 1 mile beach make it a perfect resort to host any type of event.

Another exciting new destination resort in Mexico is Hotel Xcaret Mexico, which has an exceptional approach to architecture. Meeting and events attendees can enjoy spectacular views of the turquoise sea, white sand beaches, underground caves and rivers among the Mayan Riviera. The meeting spaces include an impressive convention center, useful for

both large and small groups, and a Mexican Hacienda. Multifunctional rooms and venues, private beaches and the spectacular events room located in the hotel’s pyramid-shaped hill provides everything necessary to achieve a successful event.

Xcaret offers unparalleled outdoor facilities that are perfect for team building and other activities, including new product launches. Outdoor venues



“You can always count on great value for money in Cancun, which has something for every budget.”

**NELL NICHOLAS**  
Senior Director, Global Accounts  
HelmsBriscoe

such as Hacienda Henequenera in Xcaret, a unique venue, will make events stand out. The hacienda has a sliding roof and its patio can accommodate 500 attendees for cocktails, dinners and endless function possibilities. The hacienda also has a room with a capacity for up to 1,420 attendees divided in to four spaces.

Hotel Xcaret Mexico has everything to make for a successful event. The resort’s experienced team specializes in coordinating everything for planners, perfectly covering every detail to make events memorable.

Whether a group prefers U.S.-based grand hotels, a rustic but amenity-filled ranch stay or a sojourn in the tropics, all-inclusive resorts should be in the mix of considerations. For some groups and planners, they are in fact the perfect answer for a meeting or incentive program. **C&IT**



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Savannah, GA, as an emerging destination offers hundreds of new and refreshed hotel rooms while still holding on to its rich Southern heritage.

# Bring on the Business

These Destinations Are Getting Ready for More Attention From Planners

BY RON BERNTHAL

Emerging destinations aren't necessarily undiscovered places. Savannah, Georgia, one of our selected destinations, was founded in 1733 and Columbia, South Carolina, in 1786. But the seven cities listed here all share a common thread as their recent urban revitalization plans are now coming to fruition, resulting in new or expanding convention centers, hotels, creative mixed-use facilities and vibrant downtown neighborhoods.

These exciting new urban environments, along with an increase in airlift and a business-friendly attitude, are attracting corporate meeting planners interested in providing their attendees with new experiences in new surroundings.

The local CVBs are more than ready to assist planners with organizing large or small conferences,

meetings, events and offsite experiences. These cities are open for business, and proud of their product.

## SAVANNAH FOR SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

"The final hotel data from last year tells us that the previous two years have been the best two years in Savannah's tourism history," says Joseph Marinelli, president of Visit Savannah. "Even with the addition of a number of new hotels throughout the market and an increase in short-term rental inventory, the occupancy and average rates continue to hold their own. We are extremely encouraged by this, especially with several new properties planned to open later this year. It also tells us that all of the increased non-stop air service from around the country is making a difference."

"The final hotel data from last year tells us that the previous two years have been the best two years in Savannah's tourism history."

**JOSEPH MARINELLI**

President  
Visit Savannah







The Telfair Academy in Savannah, the oldest public art museum in the South, can host hundreds for corporate meals in its rotunda.

Randy Thompson Photography

Hotel development includes several new luxury properties. There were also major renovations of each of Savannah's four largest hotels: The Westin Savannah Harbor Golf Resort & Spa, Hyatt Regency Savannah, Savannah Marriott Riverfront and The DeSoto.

Savannah's low cost of living, 14% below the national average, makes it a cost-efficient destination, while the city also is also frequently selected for its well-preserved historical heritage and laid-back Southern lifestyle.

"The popularity of Savannah as a leisure destination is now carrying over nicely for us in terms of attracting future conventions, meetings and trade shows," Marinelli says. "Locally, a designation like this helps to boost business levels for area businesses, restaurants, tour companies and attractions, while increasing traffic on all of the new flights coming in and out of town."

The Telfair Museum's Jepson Center is a great venue for corporate planners. A distinctive, state-of-the-art museum building designed by internationally acclaimed architect Moshe Safdie, it can accommodate large groups with its soaring, three-story atrium, expansive galleries, and on the third-floor, outdoor sculpture terraces. The Jepson Center features a sweeping, three-story central staircase, a 225-seat auditorium for presentations and small performances, a fully equipped boardroom and a prep kitchen.

"I did a corporate event in early 2019 with about 175 attendees," says Julie

Ford Musselman, president and event planner for Hostess City Celebrations Inc. "It was a conference to discuss current happenings in the industry, strategically plan for the year, network and, of course, to have some fun in a great city."

She adds, "Our host hotel was The DeSoto, a beautiful, iconic property located in the historic district, and with 246 rooms, it was perfect for our group," Musselman says. "Basically, Savannah offers corporate planners

"I love the feel of the crisp modern space at the Jepson while you're overlooking historic Telfair Square, the feeling of old meeting new."

#### JULIE FORD MUSSELMAN

President and Event Planner  
Hostess City Celebrations Inc.

serve as interactive components to get conversations started during a cocktail hour and they are always featuring great exhibits."

#### COST EFFICIENT COLUMBIA, SC

Few cities in the country have emerged as a new meeting destination as quickly as Columbia, the capital city of South Carolina, with its big-city amenities and small-town feel. There are numerous new hotel properties catering to every budget, good highway and airport logistics and friendly, Southern hospitality inherent throughout the state. Add in a major state university and a business-friendly attitude among city officials, and meeting planners can introduce attendees to a relaxed and fun-filled meeting experience.

Experience Columbia SC is the DMO that will help corporate planners with research and options for off-site venues as well as introductions to hotel personnel. Attendees will enjoy the city's walkable downtown, including the 142,500-sf Columbia Metro-



politan Convention Center, located within walking distance of 1,500 downtown hotel rooms and hundreds of restaurants and shops.

For offsite venues, there are numerous options, including the Riverbanks Zoo & Garden, The Columbia Museum of Art and the South Carolina State Museum.

Columbia's downtown growth and development, driven by a large student population, a resurgent Main Street and more food and beverage venues, has helped downtown hotel occupancy



rates rise, but average room rates are still very attractive to planners. University of South Carolina "Gamecocks" footballs games bring in fall weekend visitors, state government and business travelers arrive mid-week, and local culinary and music festivals take place throughout the year.

Many hoteliers are seeing big increases in meeting bookings. "It's a real combination of things, such as the banking and insurance sectors and law firms," says David Erbacher, director of sales and marketing at the Hyatt Place Columbia/Downtown/The Vista property. "That's in addition to the university, government visitors and of course the military. And when many of those folks come here, they like what they see and want to return for a weekend. So many companies are using Columbia as a starting point." He also noted that Columbia's proximity to Charlotte, Charleston, Greenville and even Atlanta make it a good central location for business meetings.

Bill Ellen, president and CEO of Experience Columbia SC, says demand for meeting space in local hotels and at the convention center often exceed capability. "We need additional hotels that can accommodate a large block of rooms," Ellen says. "The hotels work great with us now, but they have so much business they sometimes don't need to offer discounted group rates. We need more room availability for group blocks, but that will be coming as more hotel projects get into the pipeline."

#### DAYTONA BEACH, A FLORIDA FAVORITE

Once known as one of America's most famous "Spring Break" destinations, the Daytona Beach area has development investments of more than \$2 billion, and additional hotels, attractions, dining and shopping options are becoming available every year as more planners are interested in Daytona Beach.

ONE DAYTONA is an accommodations, dining, shopping and entertainment destination project about a 10-minute walk to the beach. The mixed-use ONE DAYTONA project, now almost completed, includes two hotels. Daytona International Speedway is within a 5-minute drive of both properties and Daytona Beach International Airport is also only minutes away.

The area's culinary scene is experiencing a growing number of new restaurants, from small and casual to high-end waterfront dining. There are also about 24 local breweries, including the Daytona Beach Ale Trail, a favorite for some groups

New and expanded hotels in Daytona Beach include Daytona Beach Convention Hotel & Condominiums, a \$192 million, 501-room, oceanfront complex under construction just north of the Ocean Center convention center complex. It is expected to be completed next year. The 200-room Hard Rock Hotel Daytona Beach, a luxury oceanfront resort, opened last year. Also late last year, the 744-room Hilton Daytona Beach Oceanfront Resort

Hard Rock Hotel Daytona Beach has 20,000 sf of adaptable indoor and outdoor meeting space.

completed a \$25 million renovation and The Shores Resort & Spa completed a multi-million-dollar renovation project. The Daytona Beach Resort & Conference Center reopened earlier this after a \$12 million renovation.

Three years ago, a \$400 million overhaul transformed

Daytona International Speedway into a state-of-the-art motorsports facility known as the 'World Center of Racing.' These days the Speedway features premium amenities on three concourse levels spanning the front stretch; five expanded fan entrances; 11 social areas called 'neighborhoods,' each the size of a football field; dozens of video screens to capture the on-track action; more than 60 luxury track-side suites with patios; and 101,500 new grandstand seats with backs and arm rests.

In addition to car and motorcycle racing, the stadium is also home to a growing number of events and shows as well as unique meeting and convention space for corporate groups. For planners who want to include golf in their agendas, Daytona Beach is a rising golf destination with more than two dozen courses.

"We've had several company meetings at the Daytona Beach Hard Rock property," says Cindy Tyminski, executive global support manager for Teledyne Marine. "The company is based here in Daytona Beach, but we have locations around the world, and we tend to have most of the group meetings right here, with about 60 attendees."

She adds, "While at the property, we used the meeting rooms, dining venues and of course the hotel rooms for usually 2-3 nights. Sometimes, if the group was smaller than the normal 60 persons, we would go offsite for dinner, but usually we were at the Hard Rock, in one of their dining venues or as a private, catered dinner," Tyminski says.





She says holding the meeting in Daytona Beach is a win-win for everyone. “The Teledyne Marine home office is located in Daytona, so it’s convenient for the executive staff as well as the almost 400 locals who work for the company.” The company makes subsea connectors for the oil and gas industry in the U.S. and globally. “However, it is also great for those who aren’t local and come from around the world. The Hard Rock is an outstanding and fun hotel, located on the ocean with fantastic customer service. If there are any issues, they are taken care of seamlessly. Both Miami and Fort Lauderdale have lots of international flights, and the Daytona Beach Area Convention & Visitors Bureau always provides very helpful assistance with our groups,” Tyminski says.

## MEMPHIS MAKES IT MEMORABLE

The proposed Union Row project in downtown Memphis would be the largest mixed-use development in the history of the city. When the \$950 million Union Row was announced last year, it was called transformational for downtown Memphis.

The largest mixed-use development in Memphis history is promising to revitalize the city’s center with new residential housing, retail, restaurants, a hotel, office towers, green spaces and even a half-acre park built over a roadway.

For planners, it is expected that

380 new deluxe hotel rooms will be added to the city’s inventory. Another plus for corporate groups is that the new project would invigorate the east end of the Beale Street entertainment district, where the nightclubs and restaurants have not experienced the same success as the west end. This new project will open up more options for corporate groups.

If all goes to schedule, construction of the first Phase 1 buildings would be completed by August 2021. Although the project’s name, Union Row, conjures up Civil War thoughts, the name has nothing to do with the Civil War. Rather, Union Row was Memphis’ southern border until 1850, when the city merged with the rival municipality of South Memphis. “The street was named to commemorate the union of the two cities,” states a marker erected by the Center City Commission many years ago.

Even before the Union Row project was announced, Memphis was working on a \$10 billion, nine-year city project that included expansive convention center upgrades and 17 new downtown hotels, which all started, or will start or be completed by the end of 2019. The media, has taken notice. Food & Wine magazine put Memphis in its Top 50 Places to Go and Eat 2019; Frommer’s named the city the Best Place to Visit in 2019; and TravelChannel.com lists Memphis as the hottest Southern destination in 2019.

Memphis is embarking on the \$950 million Union Row project, which will transform its downtown, revitalize the city’s center and invigorate the east end of Beale Street.

The Memphis Convention Center (MCC) is undergoing major renovations and enhancements, including interior and exterior improvements. The vision is for meeting spaces to offer river and skyline views along with outdoor terraces, glass-enclosed concourses, pre-function space, 46 breakout rooms, and a column-free, 118,000-sf main exhibit hall. The MCC will complete its renovations and expansion by fall 2020.

Although Memphis has lots of great meetings properties, including the Sheraton Memphis Downtown Hotel, directly connected to the MCC, the Crowne Plaza Memphis Downtown, the Hilton Memphis and others, it is the iconic The Peabody Memphis that attracts not only tourists coming to view its famous lobby ducks, but corporate planners as well, from international multinationals to local companies.

The Peabody’s history dates back to 1869 when the original hotel opened and immediately became the social and business hub of Memphis. In 1925, a grander Peabody was built at its present location, well deserving of its reputation as the “South’s Grand Hotel.” In 1933, ducks were placed in the hotel’s lobby fountain, setting in motion an 86-year tradition that continues today with the daily March of the Peabody Ducks.

Of course, the Peabody is as creative and traditional with its meetings services as they are with their five Mallard ducks. They hosted their first meeting in 1869, their opening year, and the property has remained as the city’s best-known business and social hub, with historic exterior and interior architecture and space for a variety of functions, from small breakfast meetings to large conferences, with 80,000 sf of flexible meeting venues.

Jim Jacobs, co-founder and chief commercial officer at Memphis-based

Green Mountain Technology says although he is familiar with many other U.S. destinations, he always holds his annual GMT Parcel Summit in Memphis, and most often at The Peabody. “I really love Memphis. There is no city like it in the country, so I always want to introduce the attendees at the Parcel Summit to this wonderful destination,” Jacobs says. “The staff at The Peabody always does a phenomenal job; they play a major role in making this event first class and a truly Memphis experience. We greatly value our partnership with The Peabody. We look forward to many more years with the property as the home base for the GMT Parcel Summit.”

Another Memphis-based corporate planner chose their home city for both the annual National Sales Meeting and Vendor Summit is Lani Glancy, vice president, talent development, diversity and communications for AutoZone Inc. “We hold our National Sales Meeting in September/October, and a Vendor Summit in May/June,” she says. “The NSM is a celebration and recognition of the accomplishments of the prior and a launch event for the programs and work planned for the current year. Peak attendance for the NSM is around 3,000. The Vendor Summit is an invitation-only event that combines information sharing and relationship building with our company’s product and parts suppliers. Peak attendance for this program is approximately 800.”

Glancy says their space needs are different for each group, but there is never a problem in Memphis with accommodations available for groups of varying sizes. “For the NSM, we use

“We have been, and continue to be, very pleased with the affordability of the location and the wide variety of venues that are available for our programs.”

### LANI GLANCY

Vice President, Talent Development, Diversity and Communications  
AutoZone Inc.



Portland has seven hotels under construction in the Central City district and seven additional properties have been recently completed.



the entirety of the Memphis Convention Center, as well as meeting space in six different hotels” Glancy says. “We have one evening where everyone is together at an offsite location, perhaps in AutoZone Park, the FedExForum, Beale Street or Mud Island. We also have smaller groups that will go to dinner together at one of Memphis’ many terrific downtown restaurants.”

She adds, “For training and team-building, we have held events at the National Civil Rights Museum, at Tom Lee Park and in our own Store Support Center, which faces the Mississippi River. Memphis is AutoZone’s hometown, and we are very proud of the opportunity to host our attendees in the city where our company was founded. We have been, and continue to be, very pleased with the affordability of the location and the wide variety of venues that are available for our programs. Easy access to downtown

from the airport, the close proximity of the venues we use to our convention center and the great hospitality and service we receive from the CVB, hoteliers and event staffs are just a few of the reasons we stay in Memphis.”

## PORTLAND, A PREMIERE MEETING DESTINATION

Rising from the corner of Southwest 11th Avenue and Southwest Alder Street, the new Hyatt Centric Downtown Portland hotel will offer 220 rooms, 3,000 sf of meeting space and a restaurant and bar from a soon-to-be-named Portland restaurateurs. The hotel is expected to open for business in January next year.

These days the Hyatt Centric is just one of seven hotels under construction in Portland’s Central City district, and seven additional properties have been recently completed. With over 4,000 hotel rooms added in the past six years, Jeff Miller, president and CEO of Travel Portland, says many of those new rooms already have leisure travelers and corporate group attendees waiting to check-in.

“Downtown Portland has seen a significant number of new hotels open over the past three years,” Miller says. “Even with the new inventory, occupancy rates remain high, signaling that Portland remains a premiere travel destination for the more than 8.6 million visitors who traveled here last year.”

Another new hotel scheduled to



open early next year is the 600-room Hyatt Regency. The hotel will offer corporate planners a block of 500 rooms right across the street from the Oregon Convention Center. The property will be Hyatt's first full-service hotel in Oregon.

Like many other downtown properties, it will be within walking distance of shopping, dining and professional sporting events, and the MAX Light Rail system takes riders from downtown directly to Portland International Airport.

A renovation of the Oregon Convention Center is also underway. The project includes numerous upgrades to the center's public spaces and ballrooms, as well as a reconstruction of the exterior plaza on the northeast corner.

The new designs, inspired by Oregon's landscape, will include lichen-like carpets and forest canopy ceilings. The north plaza will be renovated to provide more flexible and usable space and to improve access for adjacent hotel guests and transit commuters. Renovations are expected to be completed by year end.

### SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA'S CAPITAL DESTINATION

This is one of California's most affordable and accessible cities, served by 150 flights daily. The soon-to-be-expanded Sacramento Convention Center currently offers 384,000 sf of event space and 31 meeting rooms. Construction is expected to be completed next year. There are more than 2,000 hotel rooms within walking distance of the convention center, and with a total of 4,000 hotel rooms within a 3-mile radius of downtown, Sacramento offers corporate planners plenty of accommodations options.

The Sacramento City Council approved an expansion and renovation plan for the convention center that will transform the building and add more exhibit space, an additional, flexible ballroom and an outdoor plaza. The newly expanded Sacramento Convention Center will reopen in the fall next year.

Just steps from the convention center, the 505-room Hyatt Regency



and 503-room Sheraton Grand Sacramento Hotel offer plenty of rooms and event spaces for corporate conferences and meetings. Another 1,100 hotel rooms can be found within a few blocks of downtown.

Expected to open later this year is a new 170-room Hyatt Centric, located next to the Golden 1 Center, six blocks from the convention center.

### SIoux FALLS, A SOUTH DAKOTA FAVORITE

This city continues to grow its hotel occupancy with new hotels each year. Two Marriott properties with conference center space are scheduled to open in Downtown Sioux Falls next year and BNSF Railway reached an agreement with the City of Sioux Falls to sell 10.25 acres of land downtown for future development. While no plan has been announced at this time, the land could potentially support hotels. Village on the River will be a new 11-story development that will house AC by Marriott when completed next year.

The Arc of Dreams is a resounding steel structure that will span the width of the Big Sioux River 70 feet above the water. The Arc, which will be a cornerstone piece of the SculptureWalk, is expected to debut soon.

Earlier this year Rosenbauer America's South Dakota office hosted 500 people for its annual Dealer Meeting in Sioux Falls. The Rosenbauer Group is one of the world's largest manufacturers of fire-service vehicles and firefighting equipment.

**The soon-to-be-expanded Sacramento Convention Center now has 384,000 sf of event space.**

"During our Dealer Meeting we hold classes about our products for our sales staff and employees," says Callan Jarabek, meeting planner and marketing manager for Rosenbauer South Dakota, LLC. "We have industry vendors display their products and attend our banquets, and we have guests from Sioux Falls and surrounding area businesses that we also conduct business with on a daily basis, which includes local banks, manufacturing supply companies, shipping companies and state and local political representatives."

Jarabek says she booked several Sioux Falls' meeting properties for three-to-five nights, depending on attendee needs. "We rented out the entire Sheraton Sioux Falls & Convention Center with covered access to Premier Center for our dealers, as well as some of the surrounding hotels for our vendors and employees. All of the activities were onsite, including classes, training and meals."

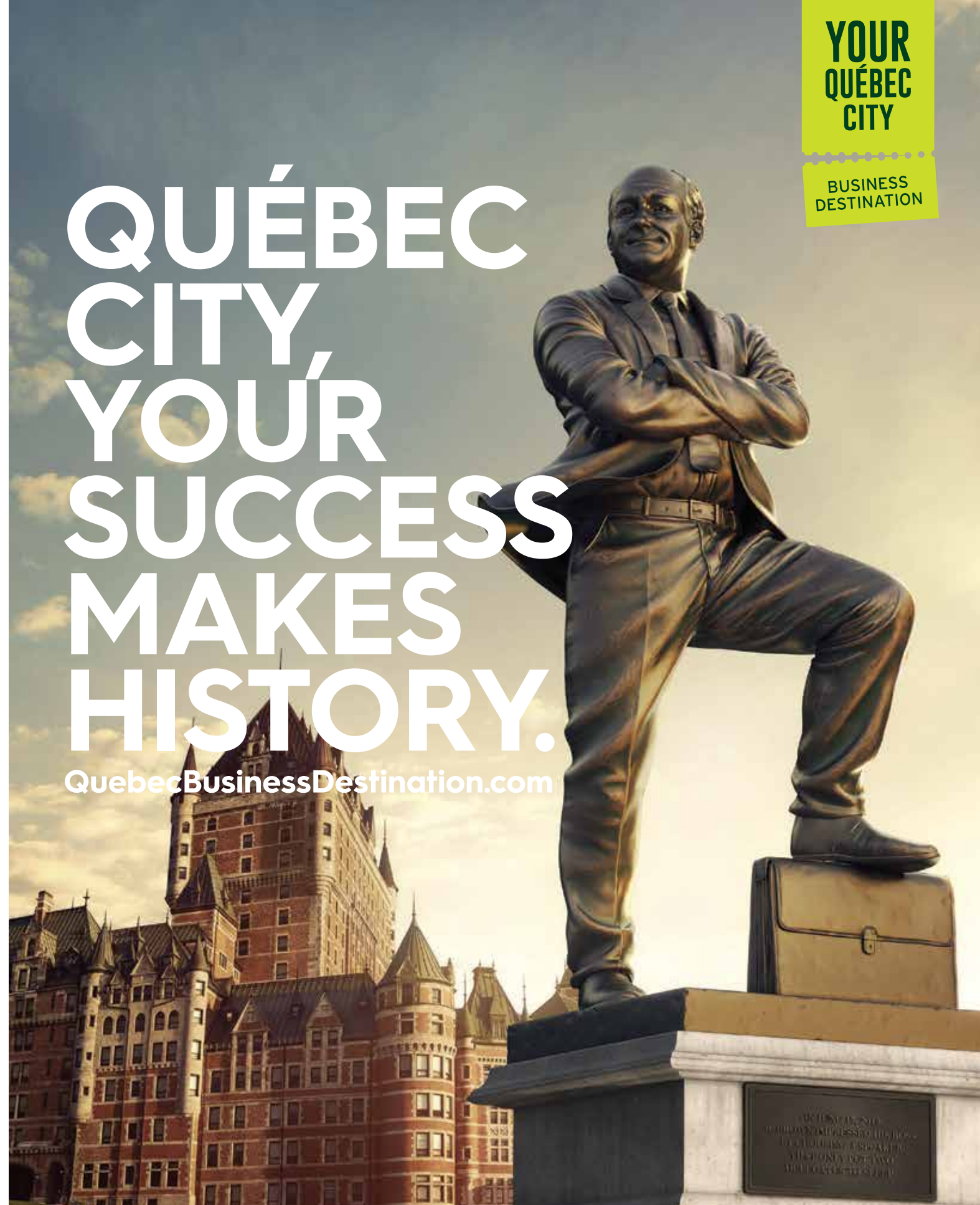
She adds, "Sioux Falls was chosen because our North Dakota office is based in Lyons, just north of the city, and it is a central location for our plants in Nebraska and Minnesota. Sioux Falls is simply the best place to host. The city and the hotels are affordable and they are so easy to work with, I just can't imagine us ever trying a different location again." *C&IT*

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# SAGE ADVICE

5 Women Share Their Success Stories

**W**hy do some people rise to leadership positions while others do not? Are there common practices that leaders engage in, common thought processes? And what makes a woman leader stand out? We found five incredible women to tell us what they think.

BY CHRISTINE LOOMIS

## AMANDA ARMSTRONG, CMP

**O**ne thing Amanda Armstrong, CMP, assistant vice president at Enterprise Holdings Inc., has learned in her career is to “Become an expert in areas that excite you on a daily basis.”

She says leaders shouldn’t be afraid to make an informed decision even if it turns out to be wrong. “If you’re wrong, course correct and move on.” And she points to the importance of effective communication, which she calls critical “in terms of influencing, inspiring and empowering others.”

Armstrong’s path to leadership included the decision to not let fear be a factor. “I remember being a meeting coordinator and recognizing that I could do the job above me. But did I want more responsibility and to be held accountable for major outcomes? I didn’t let fear of failure creep in and the answer was — ‘Yes!’”

Armstrong is adamant in her view that everyone brings different skills to the leadership table and that inclusion should be our focus. “While we can group skills by gender,” she says, “I prefer we don’t. It can reinforce stereotypes that already divide us. If inclusion is our larger goal in the workplace, we need to be careful about grouping skills or characteristics by gender, age, race or sexual orientation.”

She lists her own critical skills as recognizing the contributions of others on a regular basis, clearly articulating the vision and bringing people back to it when needed and actively listening. “It’s critical to remove obstacles, find solutions and attain goals.”

Of all she’s accomplished, she’s most proud of being the 2018 chair of the international board of directors for MPI. “MPI played a major role in my career development; I gained leadership training, education and a trusted supplier network. Being elected by my peers and serving as MPI chair was a true honor.” However, she adds, last year was no cakewalk.

“Our industry faced commission cuts, GDPR compliance and the #MeToo movement. I’m particularly proud

of the chapter leaders, MPI staff and the board for demonstrating agility and decisiveness to address sexual harassment in our industry. We created tools, training and resources to increase awareness and provide support. Our membership is 80 percent women and studies show 60 percent of women have experienced harassment in their careers. With those stats, you don’t just shrug your shoulders and move to the next agenda item ... you mobilize and that’s what we did.”

Like others, Armstrong lists unrealistic self-expectations as a hindrance. “I wanted to hit a home run every time I was up to bat. When I didn’t, I used to self-critique pretty harshly. I still want the home run, even with new endeavors,” she notes. “Now I gather feedback, course correct and apply what I’ve learned. I removed emotion and judgment from the equation and celebrate the effort, rush and never-ending learning curve.”

Armstrong prefers to assess opportunities rather than challenges. She’s grateful for being able to address the social issues she cares about in the workplace. “Unconscious biases creep into our everyday decision-making and are obstacles to inclusive and harassment-free work environments.

As a leader, I have a responsibility to address it when and where I encounter it. I think we can agree we all want safe, productive and healthy work environments. What are we doing in our day-to-day lives to achieve that mutually beneficial goal?”

Young women, Armstrong adds, expect more from their leaders these days but are also taking things into their own hands. “From what I have experienced, they’re less tolerant of workplace banter that floats ‘close to the line’ and have zero tolerance for harassment. I think new planners are already leading the way in this area; their expectation for equal treatment and equal pay has empowered other generations to speak up and speak out.”

If there’s one thing she wishes she knew earlier in her career it’s this: “Titles don’t make leaders. Great leaders don’t set out to be a leader; they set out to make a difference.”





# DANA BARTLE

“Treat everyone like they’re the CEO as you never know if the most casually dressed person in the room actually owns the company,” advises Dana Bartle, vice president of sales and events at Brooklyn Bowl, a combo event and music venue, bowling alley, restaurant and bar.

Bartle’s wide range of experience includes being a sommelier for a Manhattan restaurant and owning her own video production company. She recalls a turning point in her career when she had to wait 18 months for a large NYC ad agency to pay her for her video work although she was on the hook for paying the additional five people she brought in to work on the complex project. She decided to shut down her production company and look for a full-time position. She was recommended for the job of event director at Brooklyn Bowl and it turned out to be a perfect fit.

She thinks her key leadership skills are thinking outside the box to find creative solutions to execute events and a strong ability to collaborate. “Every day I work with multiple departments to produce events. This collaborative effort helps me to see our events from every facet and gives me a better understanding of how to make events a success.”

One thing she’s proud of accomplishing was having Brooklyn Bowl chosen as the only Brooklyn event venue to do a live broadcast with VH1 for the Super Bowl. “This was our first-ever live television broadcast. We had Fall Out Boy performing live, Stacy Kiebler hosting, a marching band marching down the lanes, two Steadicams on the

dance floor, plus a full house to watch the show. It was a two-day load in, 18-hour day and not a single thing went wrong. The client was thrilled and we all walked out of the venue at 3 a.m. high-fiving each other.”

Bartle says occasionally male clients question her ability to answer specific questions related to an event and she’ll have to pull in a male counterpart to reiterate what she’s already said.

“But ultimately,” she adds, “at a certain point you have to push forward and let them know you’re the expert in the field. At the end of the day when you execute their event flawlessly, your expertise is palpable.”

Bartle notes that her entire team is comprised of women, and her goal is to set them up for success. “When you work with a close team you’re responsible for giving them the tools they need to succeed in their current position and in the future. I take the mentoring aspect very seriously and it’s important to me to help them grow in their positions so they can grow in the industry.”

Likewise, she says, “My team is so supportive of me and any accomplishment I achieve on the job.”

One thing that’s been a challenge is finding that balance between being an effective boss and also being friends with the team. “It’s crucial to effectively manage your team to get the job done right,” she says.

To young women in the industry she advises, “Find good female friends in leadership roles and connect with them regularly. So much of my success has been about having a network of female friends in various industries whom I trust for professional advice.”



“So much of my success has been about having a network of female friends in various industries whom I trust for professional advice.”

# DEANNA GRIFFITH-HOUSE, CMP, CMM, PMP

Deanna Griffith-House, CMP, CMM, PMP, director, strategic initiatives at Charlotte, North Carolina-based Spectrum Reach, says trust is the No. 1 quality of a valued and successful leader. “Trust provides individuals, teams and colleagues with a starting point of belief.”

Communication and transparency are also key. “By being as transparent with your team(s) as the situation provides, you gain the team’s confidence and their dedication to success,” she says.

Griffith-House thinks it’s important for leaders to “put themselves out there. By being curious and staying curious, you gain volumes of knowledge and solidify your position within the organization.”

She has followed her own advice to be involved, which stems from her mother. “My mother was a staunch advocate for volunteerism and by default, so now am I. Over the years, I’ve joined and volunteered for several organizations whose mission spoke to my core. Through volunteerism, I’ve met so many amazing people and have been provided tremendous opportunities for networking, training, leadership and just leaning in!”

One thing is that there’s no one single path or set of attributes that make a leader.

“I think my most critical skills,” Griffith-House says, “are to see the connective tissue or thread connecting systems, processes and practices. I can easily see the proverbial forest for the trees and lead a team to greater success accordingly.”

Is there a difference in what men and women bring to leadership? Griffith-House is among those who say yes. Women, she says, have “the ability to easily see most angles of a situation and separate the possible from the plausible, moving forward accordingly and getting to results faster.”

As a leader, she puts high value on her team and its

successes in evaluating her own success. “I’m always most proud of the success of my team, collectively and as individuals. I am most proud when members of my team exceed their own expectations and gain the trust, respect and loyalty of others in the organization simply by performing their job duties well above the norm.”

In addition to identifying time, or lack thereof, as an ongoing challenge — as in finding the time to do all she wants to for herself, her team and her organization — Griffith-House says making a shift from “doer or taskmaster” to “leader” is tricky. But one way to move past that is to have trust in the team.

“Our industry demands that we excel at managing the details and delivering a quality effort with that emphasis. As a leader, you truly should not ‘sweat the small stuff,’ but rather leave that in the very capable hands of the team you trust. Let go and lead, let the team excel as you excel,” she says.

Griffith-House is among those who think women in the industry have different expectations for female vs. male leaders. “I firmly believe we’re most hard on ourselves due to the expectations, realistic or not, we have set for ourselves. We often more harshly judge those whom we see as a challenge to our own success. Unfortunately, we often don’t see males as challenging to us, which they are for sure.”

As for what she wishes she had known early in her career, Griffith-House says, “To be intentional about the industry you choose, not just your career path. The meetings industry is enormous and provides many opportunities. For example, I wish I would have known to choose healthcare meetings or technology meetings, to not only hone my expertise, but that of the company’s industry.”

To the young women hoping to rise to leadership she says, “Raise your hand. Get involved. Volunteer. There are opportunities all around you to grow, learn and give back.”





# ANNE MARIE ROGERS, CIS, CITP

# JACQUELINE MARKO, CMP, DMCP

**A**nne Marie Rogers, CIS, CITP, director, meetings, incentives, events at Direct Travel, Minneapolis, Minnesota, which provides corporate travel, meetings and events among other services, has been active in sales, marketing, travel and event planning for more than 20 years. Along the way she's learned a lot about what it means to be a leader, including that it's important for leaders to surround themselves with good people and empower them. Among the things she's also learned is to be a good listener, ask a lot of questions and to not be afraid of making a mistake — own it, learn from it and move on, she advises — and the importance of education and certification, which she says helps planners evolve and increase their expertise.

Rogers says her varied industry experiences, working at a hotel, a CVB and an incentive house, has given her a great blend of skills to use on her job now. And while she thinks it takes both genders to be impactful in the industry, she does think women may be more willing to mentor other women.

"They're also often very good at cultivating relationships, building teams and 'understanding the quest for balance in work and home life as many have struggled with this issue, she says."

Rogers lists her strengths as being curious and asking a lot of questions, always wanting to learn, good people skills, gathering good people around her and the ability to see the big picture.



"There are so many more opportunities than in the past. I think it's important to find good mentors and not be afraid to bring up new ideas and perspectives."

Among the things she's proud of in her career is being part of the SITE International board of directors. She was a SITE Minnesota board member for 10 years.

"After being part of the local board for several years," she says, "it's exciting and stimulating to look at things from a global perspective and see how it all fits together."

Rogers thinks it's a great time to be a woman in the hospitality industry.

"There are so many more opportunities than in the past. I think it's important to find good mentors and not be afraid to bring up new ideas and perspectives."

That said, she notes that "this is a career that evolves," she advises. "This is a career that involves long hours and a lot of energy. It's important to delegate and work smarter, not harder."

For that and other reasons, she echoes the other women highlighted here in encouraging young planners to find good mentors, whether male or female.

"I think it is important to look in many different places for people with good experience who can teach or help you," she says.

Her best advice to those coming up in the industry now is, "Seek out people that are successful at what you want to do, but don't be afraid to look outside your industry for different perspectives. Get involved with industry associations, which often have a career-building

path and certifications that can help you and be open to feedback and use it to better yourself."

Adding something she wishes she had understood earlier, she says, "Trust your gut and don't be afraid to speak up, while of course being respectful."

**R**egional general manager of PRA Nashville and PRA Louisville, at PRA Events Inc., Jacqueline Marko, CMP, DMCP, says, "As a leader your top priority is to create an atmosphere that people want to work in. While normal job stressors are inevitable, your team should be excited to come to work every day and feel that they work in a supportive environment."

She puts emphasis squarely on teamwork. "An effective leader should always promote a team-focused mentality and ensure that praise is directed to the team."

Moreover, Marko says, "It's imperative to clearly define your company culture, ingrain its principles into each team member and adhere to it. Defining a company culture means nothing if you don't act on it and live it."

At 28, Marko started in this industry at her own wedding-planning company. An aunt, who owned respected DMC Destination Nashville, recognized Marko's skills and business acumen and made her an offer to move to Nashville and take over leadership of the company. "This was the turning point in my career and what set me on a leadership path," she says. "An important skill of being an effective leader is instilling confidence in others to believe in their abilities and guide them to fruition. 'Women are traditionally good listeners, which is perhaps the most important skill to perfect as a leader — knowing when to lead and when to listen.'"

Among her top skills, she says, is organization. "I have lists for everything and write down all discussion points with my team members so that I always follow up with them in a timely and thorough manner. Additionally, I am an 'over-communicator' and believe that communication is the key to any successful relationship, both personal and professional. I'm quick with responses to my team members and our clients, striving to set the example on expecta-

tion of our level of communication."

Marko points out that many of the strong leaders in the industry are women. "I learned from my aunt, Rhonda Marko, CMP, DMCP, CMM, who owned Destination Nashville for 24 years before selling to PRA Events Inc., which is currently owned by a private equity firm but was founded in 1981 by industry pioneer Patti Roscoe. We are a female-dominated industry and the only foreseeable challenge women in our industry may face is any personal apprehension that holds them back from achieving their own leadership goals."

And, she notes, it takes grit to succeed. Although some may expect women to take a "softer" approach, Marko says, "In our industry, and especially when working on behalf of our clients, we have to be tough. While I don't think the expectation is necessarily different for men, I think it can be surprising to some to see that women are not afraid to put in the long hours and roll up our sleeves to do the hard work needed to produce successful events."

Marko says mentoring is extremely important. "It's our duty to mentor current young professionals, pushing them to become the leaders that will take this industry into the next century."

What she wishes she had learned earlier is that being an effective leader is not about doing everything yourself. "Being an effective leader is learning the art of delegation, trusting in your team's abilities with the delegated tasks and empowering them to have confidence in their actions and decisions."

To new planners she advises, "Don't be shy and don't be a 'yes' person. 'Yes' people are regarded as nice and will always be employed, but leaders ask challenging questions. They assert themselves and their opinions when they know they have merit and because of that they gain respect. Start acting like a leader and you will become one!" **C&IT**





Rory Archibald, Business Development Manager for VisitScotland Business Events, suggests planners use a CVB to find a speaker.

# PICKING THE PERFECT SPEAKER

The Right Message Can Get an Event off to a Great Start

BY DAVID SWANSON



**A**ttractive destination? Check. Great venues, a solid lineup of sponsors? Check, and check.

Pulling a successful conference together should be as easy as ticking off a checklist. But as almost any meeting planner knows, the boxes rarely get checked off in a neat order. And one of the bigger tasks that can easily get shunted to the side during the months of planning is speakers.

It shouldn't be, because a solid keynote speaker can set the tone for an entire conference — for good or ill.

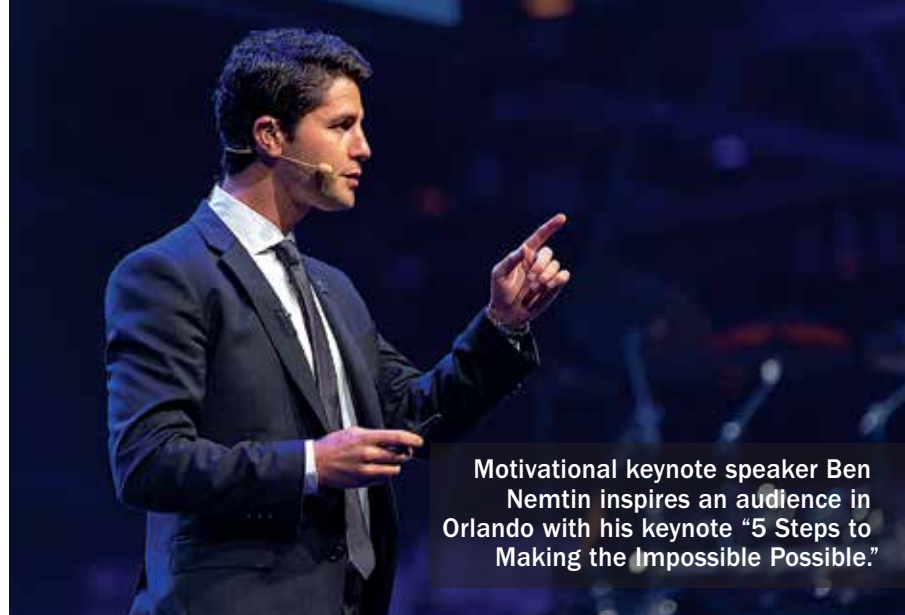
"A great speaker can set the stage as far as theme is concerned," says Richard Schelp, president of the International Association of Speakers Bureaus (IASB) and CEO and owner of the Executive Speakers Bureau. "They also help establish the level of energy the event is going to have and maybe the direction it's going to take on the front end. A conference might be blasé without having that speaker involved or maybe there's a level of excitement because that speaker is so outstanding."

Sheldon Senek, president of the New Jersey-based Eagles Talent Speakers Bureau, concurs.

"A great speaker brings credibility to a conference and they can elevate the meeting," Senek says. "At the heart of it, attendees have to be able to walk away with value and that comes in different ways. It can be actual education, it can be inspiration or entertainment. When they're in the midst of an all-day workshop, sometimes they just need a keynote who can lighten things up."

The most important quality of a great speaker is that he or she is a great storyteller, says Don Epstein, founder and CEO of GTN, a United Talent Agency company.

"If speakers can convey their point of view, which is from the heart, and has tangible takeaways for the audience, they will form a connection with the people sitting in front of



Motivational keynote speaker Ben Nemtin inspires an audience in Orlando with his keynote "5 Steps to Making the Impossible Possible."

Photo by TJ Lievonen

them," Epstein says.

A speaker should also be a professional communicator, says Mary Lue Peck, CEO of the National Speakers Association (NSA). They will bring prepared, customized content relevant to the audience and communicated in a way that resonates.

She continues: "Professional speaking is more complex than simply giving a PowerPoint presentation or delivering a canned speech. The biggest benefit of hiring a professional is that they can communicate the subject matter in a way that engages the audience and helps them really hear and understand the message and also leaves them

conferences, but you'll also alleviate some of the burden born by aspects of your event that may be beyond your control, such as technical challenges or catering problems.

### FINDING THE PERFECT SPEAKER

The search for speakers should begin with identifying the meeting's themes. Understand the primary goals of your overall conference — is it motivational, educational, sales-focused or celebratory? Ideally, this process starts more than a year ahead of the conference — some top speakers can be booked up to a year in advance — but it should at least get underway before conference announcements begin.

Then, identify whether speakers are expected to perform the heavy lifting — for instance, to get a message over the finish line — or if speakers are there to provide inspiration, color or pure entertainment. Don't overlook internal resources. Pinpoint any stars at the company who might serve as a speaker or at least as a moderator for a panel or a Q&A session.

Or maybe you are aiming for a "name" who will help drive event registration and add a bit of dazzle, perhaps sparking social media hits that help build your brand? A celebrity speaker will cost more than typi-

"When a meeting planner is looking for a speaker and doesn't know who they really want, it's very important to start with a large list."



**RICHARD SCHELP**

CEO and Owner, Executive Speakers Bureau  
President, International Association of Speakers Bureaus (IASB)

inspired to take action when they get back to their office or after the meeting."

Plus, find the right speaker and you'll not only ensure buzz that inherently stokes interest in subsequent

cal motivational speakers — generally well into five or even six figures — but if they successfully engage with the audience they can launch a conversation that gets future attendees to pencil in the date for your next conference.

"When a meeting planner is looking for a speaker and doesn't know who they really want, it's very important to start with a large list," Schelp says. "I'm not talking about 75 names, but about 10 or 12. The biggest challenge most meeting planners face is narrowing the list."

### EVALUATE THE SPEAKER

Evaluate how that speaker performs. If you can't find your way to an event to see the speaker in action, watch videos of them live on stage. Many speakers can be found on YouTube, while speakers bureaus will have a larger supply of videos for the talent they represent. Many speakers often have a professional reel.

As you watch your prospects, consider carefully how well they will communicate with your audience. This is particularly important if you are tapping a speaker for expertise that may not be directly tied to your industry.

"Ensure that the speaker has content that is relevant to your audience," Peck advises. "Most professional speakers have videos, blogs, podcasts or books that meeting organizers can review. A true professional speaker will also want to speak with the meeting organizer to again understand their goals and get a feel for what they're looking for."

She continues: "Educating and inspiring others is the very definition of professional speaking, and true professional speakers are excited for opportunities to speak with the meeting organizers — they want to delve deep; they want to make the organization and the person who hired them look good."

In addition to doing your research, Peck suggests asking for references.

Schelp recommends at least one major call between the speaker and the important players with the company. "And then there needs to be some follow-up calls where the speaker speaks with executives and they can help set the stage for him," Schelp adds. "At the beginning, they need to under-

stand where his experience lies. There are speakers who are clearly energetic and others are more content focused."

### WORKING WITHIN YOUR BUDGET

While most professional speakers are represented by an agent or speakers bureau, some are not. It doesn't hurt to reach out to speakers independently — especially if there are synergies that work to the benefit of both the conference and speaker. Yours might be an audience to which they particularly want to speak or they might have a connection to the event location.



Photo courtesy Daikin Applied Latin America

Perhaps they have a book or project to promote. If they are represented, the negotiations will still involve the agent or speakers bureau, but you may be able to establish a relationship up front that will work to your benefit.

Peck recommends reaching out to speakers directly.

"Ask what their standard rates are," she says. "Professional speakers who are not represented by a bureau will work with you directly or they have staff members who can work with you. If their standard fee is outside of your budget, talk with them about your budget and your goals. They may be able to work with you, offer alternative ideas, or they may know someone in your price range. It's a tight-knit community and a speaker's No. 1 goal is to help the organization."

Senek adds, "If there's not a budget

for a big name, find the commonalities. Find speakers who align with your message and see what might be incentives. The more transparent and collaborative you and the speaker can be, the quicker you can get to an answer. Even if you get a no, it allows you to move on."

If your budget is limited, Senek also suggests diving into the searchable Ted Talks database, where hundreds of speakers are available for inspiration. "There are really interesting people there. They might not be the right fit for a lot of corporate groups, but they might work for your niche industry. Budget or no budget, just make sure

the process and the expectations are really clear on both sides," Senek adds. "Don't over-promise something that can't be done. A speaker should always be easy to deal with. If they're not, that should send up a flag for you."

### GET TO KNOW THE SPEAKER

Ultimately, working directly with a speakers bureau from the start may be the best path for many conference organizers. A speakers bureau does not charge a fee for their services, but they receive a commission from speakers and they provide additional benefits, even when they don't personally represent the speaker with whom you are contracting. A well-established bureau will be on top of the diverse landscape of options available, regularly reviewing speaker videos and tracking con-



ference feedback.

"A bureau should not only be thinking about the meeting for this year," Senek explains. "The more we work with you the bigger the picture gets. We'll know what happened last year, what's changing in your industry and we can start to think long-term. The majority of our clients are interested in following a trajectory."

He adds: "It's also knowing who hits it out of the park. Finding great speakers is easy in the higher budget range, throwing out names everyone is familiar with. But sometimes you need to find that needle in a haystack."

And in the event things really go south, your speakers bureau should be more than a shoulder to cry on. If a speaker becomes sick or if major flight delays prevent one from arriving as scheduled, you'll need a fallback position.

"It's very rare, but these things happen," Senek says. "That's where our team goes to work and finds out who is comparable that can step in and knock it out the park."

The budget can also present challenges, Schelp cautions.

"It can get really hairy. And unless the amount of money you spend adds up to the value of what you think you're getting, you're going to be disappointed. I get nervous when meeting planners make a huge jump in spending. Instead, rather than shooting for people who are above your budget, get creative and find that value-added guy who is content-focused or the analytical guy or someone who's going to get up there and tell great stories."

The setting of a conference can also be a factor. While some locations may be a drawback for the speaker you have your heart set on, Senek gave an example of one Chicago-based speaker who normally charges a speaking fee of \$50,000 for his services, but for an event in Chicago, he'll discount the fee by as much as \$10,000.

## GETTING HELP FROM THE CVB

In other instances, the setting may provide inspiration for a speaker. Some CVBs have stepped up to help



identify and recruit local talent.

"Nowadays, the services offered by a CVB are much more than just assistance with room blocks," suggests Rory Archibald, business development manager – associations and sectors for VisitScotland Business Events. "We have utilized many Scotland-based innovators to speak at our national ambassador network events."

He continues: "CVBs have well-developed ambassador programs with local experts in various key sectors. These local experts have an established relationship with the CVB and are willing to work with conference organizers to host programs in their cities. They are passionate at what they do and are eager to tell people about their work, their institutions, and their industries."

Experts on renewable energy, precision medicine, equality, fintech and marine science are just a few of the sectors Archibald identifies that VisitScotland Business Events can provide.

New Orleans & Company is another CVB that assists planners with local speakers.

"If it fits into their programming and education goals, we often work with GNO Inc., our local economic development organization," says Tara Letort, CMP, senior director of Group Public Relations for New Orleans & Company. "We sometimes help match subject-matter experts with incoming conventions based on need. Sometimes, it's motivational speakers that they'd like to find in the destination,

InnovateFilm, an event organized by VisitScotland Business Events, featured speakers Lindsay McGee, John Archer and Mark Stothert.

so there are no travel costs involved."

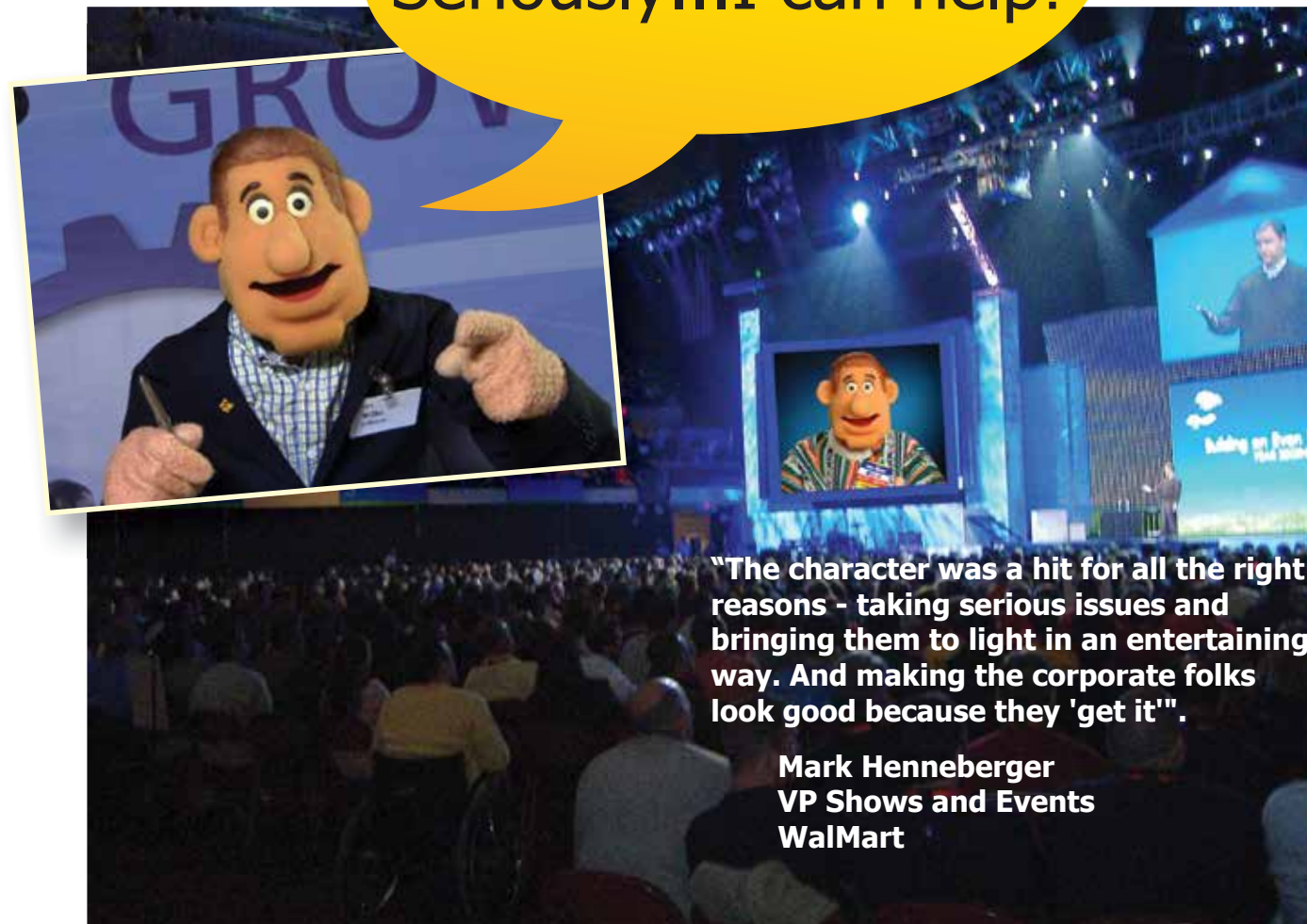
Examples of New Orleans-based motivational speakers include Robert Fogarty (Dear World) and Candy Chang (Before I Die), while political commentators James Carville and Mary Matalin are the locally-based husband-and-wife team who usually find themselves at opposite ends of the political spectrum. They can be hilarious together.

Still, a quality speakers bureau can be an excellent resource, especially guiding planners whose day-to-day responsibilities go well beyond identifying a keynote speaker for the annual conference. When you find a speakers bureau you like, the longer you work with them the more they'll get a feel for your audience and their likes and dislikes, refining your program and building on past successes.

Meanwhile, Epstein suggests the path is not dissimilar to the other aspects of building a successful conference.

"Make sure you have the money in your budget which you're offering," he explains. "Make sure your venue is secured. Make sure you have the authority to move forward with that speaker internally. Once you've ensured all of these elements, you're ready to begin partnership with a speaker and be on the path to a great event." C&IT

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Planners can attract attendees to their events by highlighting that meetings can impact their personal and professional goals.



Photo by Dena Miller / EPNAC

# Make it Happen

## Tips for Helping Attendees Justify Coming to Your Meeting

BY KEITH LORIA

**C**ompanies are invited to different conferences and incentive travel opportunities all the time, and must choose which events make sense to attend and which to skip. Even if a potential attendee wants to go to the meeting, often he or she must convince their boss as to why the meeting is important and how it will help going forward.

Corporate and incentive meetings are all about building relationships, networking, having a say at the table and learning. Attendees benefit with valuable takeaways that can impact both their personal (with incentive travel, for instance) and career goals.

“Being viewed as part of the team, building lasting relationships and trust with others, are the true intangible benefits that can’t be underestimated,” says Debbie A. McClure, direc-

tor of communications for Strategic Incentive Solutions, a Canadian corporate and incentive travel company based in Ontario. “While modern technologies are great, sometimes it’s extremely beneficial for even a once-a-year, face-to-face meeting to accomplish or set goals and objectives, iron out problem areas and discuss future projects or product launches.”

Judy Payne, CMP, director of meetings and travel at Grapevine, Texas-based GameStop, says in today’s busy world, everyone values their time, so a conference must have great value in order to attend.

“The secret ingredients to get attendees to attend are location, education and networking,” she says. “You need a great location — one that most planners would consider sourcing; it needs to be on-point, serious training, as planners want to share best practices with their peers;

and attendees want to be able to meet with partners they work with so they can do business during breaks.”

She adds that while time and money are the biggest issues, if a meeting hits at least two of the “secret ingredients,” it will be a valuable experience for attendees. The conference then changes from “Something I may want to attend” to “Wow, I can get so much done at this event.”

Melinda Burdette, CMP, CMM, director of events for Dallas-based Meetings Professional International (MPI), helps shape the association’s signature World Education Congress and several other events throughout the year. She has developed a “Convince Your Boss” letter that describes the return on investment associated with attending MPI’s signature events.

“We strive to bring emerging trends and technologies to our conference in order to make it compelling and attractive for our attendees,” she says. “Our letter template focuses on the ROI and professional development in addition to networking opportunities.”

Lauren Grech, CEO and co-founder of New York-based LLG Events, says it’s important to find common ground between the attendees and the speakers.

“Attendees tend to gravitate towards events where they can take something away from the meeting or find something relatable or applicable to them. In short, this means that people attend sessions that provide value,” she says. “Therefore, when creating a meeting agenda, be sure to mix the right attendees with the right speakers so that people find themselves engaged and interested throughout the entire event. This ensures that they will attend and want to come to the next one.”

Laura Craven, LEED AP, vice president of marketing and communications and marketing at Imperial Dade, has been planning corporate events for 25 years and her company hosts a B2B trade show every year in varying locations. The guiding light of everything her company does is, “How will this be of value to our attendees?”

“We create events that provide opportunities for the

“We make attending as easy as possible. No fees, free parking and in some cases shuttle service from transportation hubs.”



**LAURA CRAVEN, LEED AP**  
Vice President  
Marketing and Communications  
Imperial Dade

participating in round table discussions at the event and fitting in with the overall company culture of collaboration and team work,” she says.

Moreover, trade shows offer the same overall benefits, but are more work-focused. These events, she says, are about making connections with potential new suppliers and sourcing new product and information to share with management. That’s why people want to come.

**Lauren Grech, CEO and co-founder of LLG Events, says a luncheon creates networking opportunities.**



attendees to discover ways to save money, increase their customers’ satisfaction, comply with legislation and have some fun while they’re at it,” she says.

Craven has found that personalized invitations that include a conversation work best for “convincing people.”

“Our sales reps will invite people to the show and discuss what will be available that will address that customer’s needs,” she says.

For example, “I know sustainability is important to you, please come to our Expo where you can see all of the latest green products and attend a seminar addressing the trends and municipal requirements.” Or, “I know cost-savings is a big deal, so come to the Expo and check out the floor cleaning machinery that will save your crew 20% of the time needed to clean your building.”

She adds, “We also do email campaigns which are more effective for repeat attendees so they know what to expect. They look forward to coming back and seeing what is new. We make attending as easy as possible. No fees, free parking and in some cases shuttle service from transportation hubs. We also offer complimentary F&B during the event.”

McClure understands that corporate and incentive travel are typically viewed as high-value perks of the company or particular position.

“Some of the most compelling reasons to attend are the opportunity to network with co-workers, clients/suppliers and higher-ups, being viewed as a team player by management, par-



## DEALING WITH EXCUSES

The one excuse that is heard throughout the industry is “I don’t have time.”

“Ultimately, there are no good excuses, and that is a fundamental component to the way we run our business,” Grech says. “Everyone is inundated with responsibilities these days, so you just have to prove that your event will be worth their time.”

Craven addresses the “I’m too busy” excuse much in the same way.

“We address that by pointing out some of the things we will have available that will help them save time and money and/or solve a problem,” she says. “Many of our restaurant customers are having their margins squeezed by rising labor costs, higher rents and legislation that requires them to make changes. We design our seminars around current issues.”

McClure says that if there is a cost to the employee to attend an event, i.e. gas or travel costs, this could be a reason someone might try to decline.

“That’s when it’s important to remind attendees of the personal and career benefits. Sometimes people just don’t think about why conferences and trade shows are necessary; they see them as just more work, losing sight of the intangibles associated with these types of events,” she says.



Judy Payne, of GameStop, left, says attendees are attracted by event location, education and networking.

Other reasons might include family conflicts, such as arranging child or pet care, or spousal/family member illness.

“Honestly, if there is a valid reason an employee cannot attend a corporate or incentive travel event, HR or the supervisor needs to listen and respect the individual’s reason,” McClure says. “This tells the employee that the company, and management, care about their personal issues and are willing to work with them, encouraging attendance at the next event. It’s also imperative that the company let attendees know well in advance of an upcoming event, so adequate arrangements can be made on the home front, if possible.”

“Being viewed as part of the team, building lasting relationships and trust with others, are the true intangible benefits that can’t be underestimated.”



**DEBBIE A. MCCLURE**  
Director of Communications  
Strategic Incentive Solutions

## APPEALING TO ABOVE

Sometimes, potential attendees need to convince the higher-ups why a convention or meeting is important, and it’s vital that they know all the benefits when they pitch the idea.

“If you’re able to attend a conference and consolidate business — meet with partners, site a location and get some training in — the pitch is easy,” Payne says. “In this one trip, you can get so much done.”

Grech advises that attendees should be discussing how it will add direct value to the company they are pitching — whether in social, brand or financial currency.

“An attendee should address how this will impact the senior management and the company in terms of education and networking,” she says. “Meetings should always provide networking and education opportunities. The most crucial component of networking is the follow up. I always follow up with an email, notecard or phone call.”

The spiel to a higher up is easy, Craven says, and gives an example of what they should be saying: “By attending this event I will be able to see the latest products available that will help us save money, find ways to enhance our brand and stand out among our competition, improve our health inspection scores, and/or meet LEED certification requirements.”

## MORE THAN ROI

It’s no secret that the ROI of a meeting plays a big role in a company’s decision to send someone to a meeting or not.

“It absolutely impacts a decision, as well as other factors such as time of year, location, etc.” Burdette says. “MPI offers registration scholarships through our MPI Foundation which has awarded over 200 scholarships annually.”

ROI and money issues are always a concern, which is why it makes sense to hire professionals to create corporate or incentive events that not only “wow” attendees, but are packaged within set budgets.

“Incentive travel and marketing firms work hand-in-hand with HR and/or management personnel who’ve been put in place to make events a success,” McClure says. “These professional meeting planners have the connections with destinations, venues and team-building, experiential sup-

pliers to make events not just successful, but outstanding.”

By working within established budgets, they have the experience and connections to know where to suggest an event can or should be held, and sometimes even leverage their relationships with venues to keep costs in line with budgets. At the very least, they provide insights into what can be done effectively for what costs. This takes tremendous pressure off company personnel who may not have the time, connections or experience to accomplish the task.

“When attendees look forward to an event, they become and stay motivated, which means they’re less likely to find reasons not to attend,” McClure says. “They arrive excited and ready to get the most out of the experience. When attendees feel bonded to co-workers, management, clients, or suppliers, great things happen for the company. The ROI is seen both before an event in increased motivation and productivity and after the event with relationships and team work.”

If someone uses money as a reason for not attending, Grech tells them to look at this event as investment in their marketing and promotion — no risk, no reward.

“By attending this event, meeting the right people and making the right connections, you may make a fruitful partnership that pays off the cost of attending and then some,” she says. “The best way to create these opportunities for yourself is to come prepared with background on your company, your upcoming goals and what projects you might be able to collaborate on.”

While Payne agrees ROI matters, she notes when she goes to a PCMA Convening Leaders conference, her team will meet with three to five different city partners to discuss upcoming events, meet three to five of the company’s current vendors to talk about fine-tuning the program, review new technology, get new ideas for attendee engagement and get its CEUs.

“This is extremely valuable and a great use of our time and money,” she says. “Surveys are free and an invaluable source of information. Poll them for input on the locations, topics, etc.; find the solution that fits the greater audience; and then get to work.”

When someone uses ROI as a reason for not attending,



Laura Craven, second from right, has found that personalized invitations work best for attracting people to events.

## Ideas for Justification

**1. Provide an experience they might never get elsewhere:** This is where destination selection is a major component of the decision-making process for meeting planners. And it goes beyond the destination itself. For example, if attendees in the financial industry learn that they will have a private dinner on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, then obviously that potential experience is a highly motivational factor.

**2. Create a personalized learning experience:** Today’s destination meeting programs are increasingly focused on providing hyper-learning and engagement opportunities among colleagues versus simply doing speaking presentations. For example, attendees can schedule “brain dates” throughout the meeting that provide direct, one-on-one learning, information sharing and corporate culture building.

**3. Localized events:** Instead of the traditional after-hours gala, hold offsite events at venues that provide attendees with a true neighborhood vibe that helps them live like a real New Yorker, even if it is just for a few days. **C&IT**

Craven explains that the day out of the office will be well worth the time based on the experience and what they can learn and see during the event.

“Because our event is free, that is easier than for events with a cost,” she says. “For those types of events, providing a pre-written letter with the benefits of attending would be one way to help attendees approach their boss with a case for attending.”

## MAKING THE MOST OF OPPORTUNITIES

Craven champions experiential marketing as one of the most effective ways to build and enhance relationships

“I have seen it year after year. Attendees meet our leadership team and get to know the people behind the brand,” she says. “They start to buy more from our company and are not as willing to let competitors in their doors. Potential customers that are deciding between suppliers will choose our company based on the positive experience they have at our event.”

Grech advises people to attend every meeting pertaining to their profession that they can.

“People are very used to interfacing with others through a device in today’s technological world, so adding a face to your profile or email can only improve your relationship with clients, vendors, press, etc.,” she says. “Also, you never know where your next client will come from.”

For example, she went to a networking event last year that led to her partnerships with the Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora and Tourism Board of Abu Dhabi.

“I followed up, never gave up on the lead, and made sure I was ahead of the game,” she says. “I made sure to have patience, persistence, and capitalize on a little luck.” **C&IT**





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# Vendor Value

## Third-Party and Corporate Relationship Building is Crucial for Successful Planning

BY DEREK REVERON

**E**stablishing and maintaining good relationships with suppliers and vendors is crucial because they implement so many visible and behind-the-scenes details that can make or break meetings.

In addition, sour relationships with suppliers can damage a planner's professional "brand" within the industry.

It's no wonder that every planner wants trusted suppliers and vendors who buy into the vision for a meeting, performs seamlessly as part of a team, and meets deadlines while providing top-notch service.

Creating successful short-term, one-off

relationships with vendors can be challenging enough. However, building thriving long-term planner-supplier relationships can be even more problematic.

Potential conflicts include work and contract disagreements, lack of communication, personality conflicts and poor performance. Navigating such pitfalls is a key to successful planner-supplier relationships.

The benefits of maintaining good relationships with vendors include valuable help they can provide to resolve emergencies. That's especially true regarding hotels, which can become a planner's advocate in time of need if the relationship is solid.

One such instance occurred during a meeting planned by Jennifer Collins, CMP, president and CEO of Silver Spring, Maryland-based JDC Events.

"We had an instance where we needed more equipment than was contracted due to changing needs and desires onsite," Collins says. "We were traveling with our supplier, who brought with them what was planned in advance. Because we had good relations with them, and they were just as invested as we were in our client's success, they rented additional equipment at no cost to us."

### STRONG VENDOR CONNECTIONS

Collins says the long-term connection with the vendor saved the day.

"Had we not developed a strong relationship with them, including using them on more than one occasion and being fair in our working relations, this may not have turned out the same way," Collins says. "We believe that our vendors are partners and critical to the success of our events."

Ashley Case, director of client services, Meetings + Incentives, for La Jolla, California-based Cadence Travel, provides the following example involving a hotel renovation delay.

"Because of the delay, the hotel did not have enough rooms completed to host our group," Case says. "We were notified that the group would need to be relocated just eight days prior to arrival. With some creative negotiation, the hotel relocated the rooms and events to a nearby sister property of a higher caliber."

The hotel also covered several costs. "They paid to rebrand all signage, hosted client rental cars and spa treatments, comped the group's welcome event bar and provided room credits with apology letters to guests," Case says. "The hotel also added entertainment and lawn games to a reception and covered all additional transportation costs to the new location."

Case says her relationship with the hotel helped sidestep disaster. "We were certainly thankful for our long-term partnership with this brand and their sales team for their willingness to work with our needs head-on and find the flexibility we required to make this near-catastrophe a success."

Mary Sue Leathers, president, Meetings and Incentives for Savage, Minnesota-based ALTOUR, cites another incidence involving a group of 350 that booked a sales meeting at a five-star property owned by a company that she worked with for decades.

"We were able to cancel and re-book without penalty two times over an 18-month period," Leathers says. "Then

"In a true partnership, a well-done program review will leave everyone feeling respected and excited about working together in the future."

when the group had to cancel 60 days out, we were able to reduce the penalty from what was stated in the contract due to the relationship with the hotel."

Some relationships with suppliers are so valuable that a planner will bail out vendors who have made mistakes.

Collins recently experienced a situation in which a vendor partner didn't provide an accurate estimate for its services far enough in advance.

"This meant that we didn't fully budget for their work," Collins says. "However, because we had some cushion in our budget, and they were a good partner, we were able to make adjustments that didn't provide full funding, but enough to make up some of the deficit. This approach is definitely an exception done on a case-by-case basis. In other instances, this may be a loss for the vendor."

Creating and maintaining productive long-term connections with suppliers requires effort from planners on several fronts, including transparency about the upfront costs. Planners agree that providing thorough and realistic budget figures can set the tone for teamwork.

According to Collins, "Transparency is vital in establishing a good working relationship with vendor partners. It can also streamline the decision-making process by understanding priorities, highlighting areas of negotiation and knowing how to give and take. This creates a sense of fairness and trust, which is the lifeblood of any partnership."

Case agrees. "Being upfront about budget requirements allows both

parties to be consultants and make the best recommendations," Case says. "It also shows trust and partnership, as it saves everyone time. Vendors aren't spending time proposing items out of the client's realm and the planner isn't grabbing pieces from a lengthy proposal and desperately trying to negotiate down later."

### DEVELOPING A TRUE PARTNERSHIP

Case thinks developing a true partnership should be a planner's goal. "If the goal of both parties is 'How can we provide the most 'wow' with this number?' then you're not only going to have a fabulous event, but a great partnership going forward."

Danielle Miles, manager of conferences and meetings for Minneapolis, Minnesota-based metroConnections, an event services and conference company, also thinks long-term relationships and valuable input from third-party suppliers can result from budget transparency.

"From a third-party perspective, budget transparency and accuracy are critical in establishing good, long-term



**ASHLEY CASE**  
Director of Client Services,  
Meetings + Incentives,  
Cadence Travel



relationships,” Miles says. “Through careful consideration of each line item, a third-party has an opportunity to use historical information to make highly impactful recommendations. Building trust will go a long way when the penalties shake out at the end of an event.”

Repeatedly asking, “Can you do better?” can lead to mutual frustration, prevent an agreement and forestall a potentially beneficial long-term relationship. Instead, offer a bottom-line number and say something like, “If the price comes down to the number, then we may have an agreement.”

Clarity in negotiating helps establish good communication, another key factor in creating productive long-term relationships.

## GOOD COMMUNICATION COUNTS

Failure to establish open and frequent communication, especially about the details of services and deadlines, can result in big problems later. That’s why it’s best to communicate with vendors before, during and after meetings to make them part of the team and ensure they share its goals and vision.

Collins thinks planners should provide vendor partners with a full briefing of the event prior before it starts.

“This process would help the vendor fully digest the scope of what’s required and allow mobilization of resources,” Collins says. “During the event process, the vendor should be included in regular meetings and discussions on site visits and other interactions so that they are fully invested in the success of the program.”

Linda Nelson, CMP, president and CEO of Asheville, North Carolina-based To Plan Ahead, has a strategy for establishing good communications.

“I like to meet with them individually so I can better outline the bigger picture and what the various steps will be,” Nelson says. “There has to be a two-way dialogue to enable trust and commitment from each party.

Once I have everyone on board, I set up a series of conference calls as a way of ensuring everyone remains on the same page and stays invested in the conference.”

According to Case, planners should communicate with vendors clearly,

“There has to be a two-way dialogue to enable trust and commitment from each party.”

**LINDA NELSON, CMP**  
President and CEO  
To Plan Ahead



with detail and often.

“Start with the goals of the event, budget, timeline and an ideal agenda, but allow room for vendors to make recommended adjustments to enhance the program and meet goals,” Case says. “Hold a pre-conference meeting where the goals and the vision of the event are reviewed again, along with the usual run of show to ensure the details don’t overshadow the big picture.”

Leathers adds that it’s crucial that planners communicate early on that the goal of the vendor should be to exceed the planner’s expectations. Planners offer the following advice to improve communication with vendors before, during and after meetings.

- Share meeting goals and expectations for service, work quality and improvement.
- During planning, periodically check in with suppliers on their progress.
- Introduce the stakeholder or client to vendors because it will make them more feel more invested in the meeting’s result.
- Communicate by phone in addition to email to maintain a personal connection. That’s especially true for bad news. According to Case, “If there is a shift or change, tell them by phone. Difficult news by email

doesn’t translate well and certainly doesn’t demonstrate strong partnerships. You can always send a recap email to have it in writing.”

- Conduct post-meeting reviews of vendor performance. Discuss execution, budget, what succeeded, what didn’t and what can be improved. Also review how the relationship can be strengthened. Let vendors know that continued improvement is expected.

Case thinks a review is especially important if there is the possibility of a long-term relationship.

“A post-conference meeting with key vendors is important, not only to celebrate the successes but to identify the areas of

improvement and how communication could be improved in the future,” says Case. “In a true partnership, a well-done program review will leave everyone feeling respected and excited about working together in the future.”

## AVOID CONTRACT CONFLICTS

Even the best of supplier-planner communication can’t prevent disagreements and conflicts, which are often related to hotel contracts.

Conflicts with hotels often result from different perspectives.

“A planner may be reading something in the contract one way that may benefit the client,” Case says. “A hotel will be looking at it from a different angle or from a revenue management perspective. I always find that it’s best to prioritize the client’s needs and be upfront with the vendor.”

Case takes a balanced and direct approach to conflicts.

“If it’s a major hot button, then express that and look for something you can trade back that your client may not even use,” Case says. “Also, look at other elements your client may be bringing to the vendor post-contract, as the vendor may not be aware of additional opportunities with add-on items or future business.”

Her bottom-line philosophy: “I look

at these situations as if the vendor’s business is my business and propose what is reasonable for both sides.”

Nelson cites an example of a contract conflict with a hotel.

“I had a hotel contact that clearly stipulated ‘No meeting space may be reassigned by the hotel without prior written approval from the client,’” Nelson says. “Two months from the meeting, the hotel contacted me to say they had double-booked the room we were scheduled for our general session with a large evening dinner which needed several hours set-up time.”

After some back-and-forth, Nelson settled the matter. “In an effort to maintain and build on the relationship we had developed with the hotel, we agreed to move our meeting to a different room even though we knew it was not as ideal as the room we had secured,” Nelson says. “Additionally, we received several concessions from the hotel.”

Miles says nailing down contract specifics before signing can help prevent serious conflicts.

“Be sure to spell out items in the contracting phase on how conflicts will be resolved,” Miles says. “Include clauses like a dispute/prevention clause and/or a clause outlining liquidated damages should the contract be breached by either party. Managing expectations on the front end of the contract is much easier to do than after a problem arises.”

Perhaps the ultimate challenge for planners is building and maintaining good relationships with vendors while demanding good pricing and service.

Collins acknowledges the dilemma. “We sometimes are faced with clients who want to squeeze vendors dry in trying to get as much as they can for nothing,” Collins says. “We are careful about these situations since we work with these vendors over the long term. We work hard to educate our clients on the overall value of vendors as well as industry standards and operations.”

Nelson offers the following advice: “The best strategies for me are all about being fair but firm and also being well informed. Before I start negotiations, I find out what their ideal piece of business looks like, rooms to



Time Into Pixels

**Danielle Miles, manager of meetings and conferences for Minneapolis, MN-based metroConnections, says nailing down contract specifics before signing can help create good relationships.**

meeting space ratio, meeting pattern, time of year, size of group and so on. Then I can better determine how my piece of business will be received by them.” Nelson also seeks to determine whether the hotel’s bottom line is based purely on profit or something else.

Planners agree that a balanced approach works best, and offer the following advice:

- Drive a hard bargain but don’t squeeze too hard. Even if high-pressure tactics result in record low prices, it doesn’t make the vendor feel good about the job, hurts the chances for a long-term relationship, and damages the planner’s “brand” among vendors.
- Compare vendor proposals and show them to all parties to encourage competition. Don’t accept an off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all proposal.
- Recommend top-performing vendors to other planners and let vendors know it. This builds good will which may be useful in the future.
- Thorough vetting is one of the best ways to increase the chances of having a good relationship with vendors.
- Ask suppliers for references and pose the following questions:
  - Does the vendor provide planners with timely feedback on the progress of projects and potential problems?
  - Are there examples of the supplier anticipating the needs of planners or responding well to an emergency?
  - How does the vendor handle unexpected problems?

- Is the person straightforward about prices and services?
- Is there a reputation for submitting accurate proposals without low-balling or inflating prices?
- Is the vendor transparent about prices and rates?

Planners say building good relationships with suppliers is about “give and take” without compromising meeting goals and standards and making them feel like part of the team.

Wendy Burk, founder and CEO of Cadence Travel, says the bottom line for a planner is doing business honestly and with respect for all parties. “We view our suppliers as partners, instead of a means to an end. When you refer to someone as your partner, you make a very clear statement about working towards a common goal. Transparency is just one key component of a successful relationship that also includes things like listening well, being open to new ideas, feedback and, of course, genuine caring for the other party.”

As Miles puts it, “Look to your suppliers as strategic partners. When you find good suppliers treat them well and they will do the same in return. By maintaining a good relationship, they become loyal and are more apt to negotiate price based on the good history of the relationship.”

C&IT



# THE GULF COAST STATES

Delivering Diversity, Charm  
& Meeting Excellence

Florida, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama offer turquoise waters, white-sand beaches and activities sure to satisfy any taste.

BY CHRISTINE LOOMIS

Our southernmost states are around the northern beaches of the Gulf of Mexico. From Texas in the west to Florida on the Gulf's east side, these states offer sun, sand, waves, cities, islands, picturesque towns and a collection of resorts that provide a balmy, idyllic setting for business and pleasure. Best of all, perhaps, many of them are drive-to destinations — no air or flight logistics required.

## FLORIDA GULF COAST

The Sunshine State's Gulf coast cities and towns are a bit more casual than many of their Atlantic coast counterparts. They provide an excellent setting for groups wanting to conduct business with a splash of blue-green water, a swath of fine sand and plenty of dazzling sunshine to go around. One city to consider: Tampa.

"Tampa is a great meeting destination for our group due to a variety of factors," says Kathleen Butcosk, vice president, corporate meetings and travel for Lumbermens Merchandising Corp. (LMC), which held its annual meeting last year at Tampa Marriott Water Street with 1,700 attendees. It was the fourth time LMC hosted a meeting there.

"The most important factor is a great convention center surrounded by many hotels within walking distance. The center and the Marriott sit right on the water, which gives the destination a very resort like feel. Tampa is an easy city to access with great airlift, and the airport is only 20 minutes from downtown. It is an affordable city with great restaurants and nightlife including historic Ybor City."

Beyond the Tampa Convention Center and hotel, LMC hosted an event for 770 at Topgolf. "Topgolf provided an ideal venue with activity options, great food and an exceptional staff."

The group used space at the hotel and the convention center. "LMC used the Tampa Convention Center for its



trade show,” Butcosk notes. “The center is the perfect size for our exhibits (200,000 sf) and has enough meeting space to host our educational sessions and other meetings. It’s a wonderful facility with an experienced, professional staff. The building has a breathtaking location right on the water and its many windows provide natural lighting.”

Butcosk says the Tampa Marriott Water Street works well at every level. “It has great meeting space, a beautiful lobby and a wonderful outdoor terrace overlooking the water. The hotel’s rooms were recently renovated with soft colors, hardwood floors and beautiful new bathrooms. It has a terrific staff and takes very good care of the LMC group when we are in-house. It is truly one of LMC’s favorite hotels.”

In addition, she says, “The Marriott has a lovely outdoor pool and sundeck and is located right on Tampa Riverwalk.”

The hotel’s conference space accommodated LMC’s six small meetings, Butcosk says, “as well as a breakfast for 800 and another for 300. The food was excellent and the staff is very capable of handling large groups.”

Butcosk’s main advice for planners considering Tampa is, “Definitely work with Visit Tampa Bay, the city’s CVB. The staff is experienced and extremely knowledgeable about Tampa and everything it has to offer. They were a tremendous help to us during the planning process and helped make our job so much easier. They are a great group of professionals and a delight to work with.”

The recent \$40 million renovation of the Tampa Marriott Water Street is not the only hotel news in the city. The Sheraton Tampa Riverwalk Hotel underwent a hotel-wide re-do of rooms, the pool area and lobby. In the Westshore District, there is a 175 room AC by Marriott, and in the Rocky Point area, Godfrey Hotel

**Galveston has plenty to offer groups, from rich history and bird watching to a diverse collection of hotels and resorts.**



& Cabanas Tampa opened last year with 276 rooms and views of the bay as well as a waterfront deck and pier. The former InterContinental hotel is now the 325-room Westshore Grand, and the former Westin Harbour Island is now the completely reimaged Westin Tampa Waterside, thanks to a \$20 million renovation. The Hilton Tampa Downtown created a cool new outdoor banquet space and redesigned the rooftop pool and outdoor bar.

Farther down the Gulf Coast, Sarasota announced that its meeting and group hotel inventory has increased by 1,200 guest rooms and additional meeting space. The 240 room Westin Sarasota, has 26,000 sf of meet-

groups. Embassy suites by Hilton Sarasota and Even Hotel, a wellness-fitness brand, also launched recently with 128 guest rooms and 2,566 sf of flexible meeting space.

Planners would be hard pressed to find a major meeting city or town along the Gulf that isn’t evolving. The Gulf Coast offers meeting planners distinctive new options, history, culture, beaches, creative chefs, casinos, panoramic waterfront views and a legendary level of hospitality.

## LOUISIANA - NEW ORLEANS

It’s well known that New Orleans knows how to throw a party. But it knows how to throw a business meeting and conference, too. What it brings to the table in addition, perhaps more so than any other U.S. city, is a lively, engaging culture all its own. Last year New Orleans celebrated its 300th anniversary.

“New Orleans is an expert in hosting events from corporate board meetings to Super Bowl games and everything in between,” says Stephen Perry, president and CEO of the city’s CVB, New Orleans & Company. “The authentic culture, unique meeting venues and experienced hospitality industry make New Orleans an ideal destination for

meetings and events of all sizes. New Orleans has topped every major publication’s list of must-visit destinations last year. From the historic French Quarter to the up-and-coming Bywater, the picturesque Garden District and the bustling Warehouse District, the city is filled with excitement and innovation.”

Tammy Syock, account executive with locally based MC&A Destination Management Company, agrees. “Our city offers a plethora of highlights that make it a ‘must meet’ destination. Quality restaurants, unique event venues, outstanding entertainment options and unmatched hospitality — the pros are endless,” she says. “As airlift options continue to improve, it’s hard to find a reason to not select New Orleans when considering where to host a group.”

New Orleans, she adds, “has incredible history, colorful people, unique architecture, superb food, incomparable music and a kaleidoscope of traditions. Opportunities are endless when sourcing unique and memorable touchpoints for attendees.”

Perhaps the city’s most well-known “touchpoint” is its Mardi Gras tradition, into which groups can tap.

“Whether it’s a custom mini-float parade, second line or an evening at Mardi Gras World, it’s an experience that embraces so many of our cultural nuances and always provides lasting impressions with attendees,” she says.

But that’s not the only one-of-kind option. There’s also the Mercedes-Benz Superdome. “Recently when tasked with finding a venue that offered enough space to accommodate seating for a 1,600-person awards dinner as well as a custom stage with extensive lighting, video components and the ability to host a pyrotechnics finale,” Syock says, “We sourced the Superdome as our solution. Based on size and wow factor, it met all the criteria the client was looking for and then some.”

Team-building opportunities? Check. Syock points to volunteerism with ArcGNO.

“The Arc promotes and protects the human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabili-

ties,” she says. “While New Orleans and surrounding areas celebrate the carnival season each year for two weeks, Arc of Greater New Orleans is in Mardi Gras mode year-round. Arc receives donations of beads and throws from area residents, which are then sorted, packaged and sold to float riders in 30-pound crawfish sacks. The Mardi Gras Recycling Center makes for a fun and festive volunteer outing, especially for large groups. Mardi Gras

music is always part of the setting as volunteers sort the beads.”

New Orleans is also notable for its definitive cuisine, and groups can get hands on with that, too. “Guests get a firsthand demonstration on what makes New Orleans cooking so unique and delicious,” Syock says. “During these courses, guests learn the basics of Louisiana cooking, focusing on traditional fare such as gumbo, jambalaya and pralines. The experience is

“As airlift options continue to improve, it’s hard to find a reason to not select New Orleans when considering where to host a group.”

**TAMMY SYOCK**  
Account Executive,  
MC&A Destination  
Management Company



ing space and a new rooftop bar. Art Ovation Hotel, Autograph Collection, which opened last year in the heart of downtown with 162 guest rooms and a 6,000-sf ballroom, is ideal for smaller

Meet where business and pleasure go together naturally.

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FLORIDA'S PARADISE COAST

MeetInParadise.com





New Orleans is renowned for its unique culture and distinctive cuisine.

full of trivia, history, delectable food and fun for all. The event also provides attendees with the knowledge and skills to recreate a bit of New Orleans when back home.”

Syock also points out that the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center accommodates groups of different sizes. “The convention center offers a variety of space options, making it ideal to produce custom themed events and experiences. The team at the convention center works with planners to make events flawless from set-up through event execution and tear-down.”

The city has a nonstop festive vibe and, Syock says, “Our culture is infectious. Boasting 300 years of diverse heritage provides attendees the opportunity to experience uncommon and authentic cultural thrills in every moment spent in New Orleans.”

That includes during business meetings and conventions. Of note to planners, the Hard Rock Hotel New Orleans will open later this year, and two restaurants of note are now open: Manolito, a Cuban bar and café in the French Quarter launched by two of the city’s top lead bartenders, and Bywater American Bistro, the newest eatery from Chef Nina Compton, located in the Bywater district. Also, the long-

awaited new terminal at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport is slated to open later this year.

## TEXAS GULF COAST

It doesn’t get any more “Gulf Coast” than Galveston, a barrier island 55 miles southeast of Houston. Approximately 200 square miles in size, Galveston has plenty to offer groups, from rich history and bird watching to a diverse collection of meeting facilities.

Mary Alice Kahanek, CMP, senior manager, events and trade shows, for Goodman Manufacturing, brought the company’s national sales meeting last year to The San Luis Resort, Spa & Conference Center with 575 in attendance.

The resort has completed a significant renovation, notably around and near the pool, which includes a new custom-built firepit area where groups can gather.

“The hotel and convention center were a perfect size for this group. The San Luis Resort is the largest on the island, which is what we needed. The cost was less than our last meeting. The convention center had a great exhibit floor size, so we could grow if we sold more sponsorships.”

The setting was also part of the draw. “The location on the beach is beautiful. The convention center is set up so you get plenty of natural light on breaks and while moving around the meeting. Attendees don’t feel like they

are closed off from the world stuck in a meeting room. The group used only the meeting space provided by the resort and convention center.”

Kahanek calls the sales staff and the group’s CSM amazing. “They were on top of everything we needed and on call the entire time. The ease and flexibility of the banquet leaders and staff was refreshing,” she says.

While there were no real road blocks to the event’s success, Kahanek notes that the lighting at the Galveston Island Convention Center was an issue for her because the can lights in the ballroom don’t dim. Because of that, she suggests planners meet directly with the lighting person to assess specific needs.

In fact, she advises, “Have a few planning meetings and speak to each person responsible for each specific task. Our CSM was very accommodating and wanted to say yes to everything. But it’s best to double check directly with the people that know 100 percent what options you have. We used an outside A/V company that also made some assumptions. That’s our best takeaway.”

The group bought out the property, which Kahanek says was definitely a positive. “They were at our beck and call the entire time. We were their priority and it showed.”

Moody Gardens, another group-friendly Galveston resort, completed a \$37 million renovation to its Aquarium Pyramid. New extended-stay luxury suites opened at The Tremont House last year following a \$1.2 million renovation. The Tremont’s sister property, Hotel Galvez & Spa renovated its pool area.

## MISSISSIPPI - BILOXI

Biloxi sits 90 miles northeast of New Orleans. The city of 45,000 offers casinos and golf in addition to miles of beaches. Two new hotels are opened last year and a new aquarium will open later this year or early next year. Among its attractions are Betsy Ann Riverboat Cruises and the \$15 million, 30,000-sf Ocean Adventures Park & Center.

A project manager with an inter-

national beauty retailer brought a Loss Prevention Agent Conference to Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Biloxi two years in a row, first time with 124 attendees and 153 at last year’s event.

“Biloxi is centrally located, which is great since we have people flying from all over the country. The cost to hold the conference in Biloxi was significantly lower than other cities across the country. It’s also extremely safe and only 20 minutes from the airport,” she adds.

Cost was also a factor in choosing the hotel. “The quality of lodging, and more importantly conference food costs, are why we originally chose Hard Rock Biloxi. Most conferences make the bulk of their money on F&B and Hard Rock catering prices were unbelievable. The catering is adjusted to accommodate any needs and dietary restrictions.”

The staff was also impressive. “Lisa Bird, sales manager, was a phenomenal partner,” says the project manager. “She goes out of her way to assist on every aspect of the conference, not just the portions that are happening at the hotel. The banquet manager, was also amazing. He was deft in adapting to our last-minute needs and nuances with our group. The chef catered the menus to our specific needs and created a special dinner that took in local specialties but also flowed with the outdoor setting. He even created a specialty cocktail to go along with the theme of our conference.”

As for meeting space, she calls it a “wow.” “The Hard Rock conference space is the concert venue stage, complete with stage, giant screen, side monitors and concert-level audio. You feel like a rock star when presenting. The A/V staff is top-notch and makes the presentations larger than life.”

The hotel has two towers. “I put management in the newer tower and everyone else in the other tower,” she says. “This elevated the room experi-



The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Biloxi offers an impressive staff, world-class entertainment and beautiful Gulf Coast views.

groups fly into New Orleans, then provided transportation to Biloxi. This shaves a few hours off total travel time for many attendees and avoids layovers.”

In addition to considerations related to casinos, she has one more piece of advice for planners considering the Hard Rock. “Avoid Fridays for any extended meeting times as the concert venue takes over on weekends. The crowds start arriving in droves and it’s very hectic.”

In addition to the new hotels coming on line in Biloxi, MGM Resorts International last year completed a \$10 million suite renovation at Beau Rivage, its AAA Four Diamond beachfront resort. The redesign of 95 suites was the final piece in a multiyear renovation.

## ALABAMA - MOBILE

Mobile is Alabama’s Gulf Coast city. It’s accessible from three major airports and two interstates. It has more than 1,000 hotel rooms within walking distance of the Arthur R. Outlaw Mobile Convention Center, and its Southern charm, Mardi Gras history, deep-sea fishing and nature and outdoor activities make it a good bet for groups and planners.

One popular event sure to attract attendees is the ArtWalk, which offers the latest in local art, music, food and culture on second Fridays from 6 p.m. to 9 downtown.

Downtown also offers more than 50 restaurants featuring everything from Southern-style barbecue, seafood straight from the Gulf to local delicatessens.

It’s also home to the USS Alabama Battleship Memorial Park, where groups can book private events for up to 100 or more than 500. **C&IT**



## ON THE MOVE //



ESPARZA

BENCHMARK, a global hospitality company, appointed **Donna Esparza** director of sales and marketing for Lake Arrowhead Resort and Spa, a Benchmark Resorts & Hotels property in Lake Arrowhead, California. Geoff Young, Benchmark's managing director for the resort, made the announcement. "I am extremely pleased to welcome Donna to our resort and to Benchmark."

BENCHMARK, a global hospitality company, named **Linda Maurer** global account manager-southwest, a newly created position designed to develop and grow Benchmark's group sales success in the regional southwest. Previous to joining La Cantera Resort & Spa and Benchmark, Maurer was director of national accounts northeast for Terranea Resort of Rancho Palos Verdes, California.

The Brown Palace Hotel & Spa, a legend among downtown Denver hotels since 1892, welcomed **Justin Budyak** as complex director of sales and marketing of the iconic landmark and the adjacent Holiday Inn Express Denver Downtown, part of The Brown Palace hotel complex. Budyak will be responsible for generating maximum revenue through developing and executing marketing strategies.

Union Station Hotel Nashville, a Nashville, Tennessee, property managed by Sage Hospitality, appointed **Trevor Bondarchuk** director of sales. Previously, Bondarchuk had been director of group sales and events for Sage Hospitality.

The St. Jane Hotel, Chicago, named **Pete Zudyk** vice president of sales and marketing. Previously, Zudyk spent two years as director of sales and marketing at Chicago's Ace Hotel.

The London West Hollywood at Beverly Hills in West Hollywood, California, appointed **Greg Velasquez** as director of sales and marketing. Previously, Velasquez was chief marketing officer at Hotel Figueroa, Los Angeles, and held the role of director of sales and marketing at Four Seasons Los Angeles at Beverly Hills in Beverly Hills, California.

As the first luxury hotel in San Antonio, The St. Anthony Hotel announced sales team appointments with the promotion of **Lena Gutierrez** to sales account manager and welcomed **Ana Francesca Garcia** to the team as a sales account executive.

The Woodlands Resort appointed **Nicole Kubitza** as director of sales and marketing. Kubitza will lead a team of 17 in establishing and executing creative strategies to drive revenue from corporate and social clientele.

Visit Seattle announced the promotion of **Troy Anderson** to director of sales. Anderson will take on several new responsibilities, chief among them to provide day-to-day leadership of the Seattle-based contingent of Visit Seattle's strong convention sales team, which also includes several regionally-based sellers.

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MAURER



BONDARCHUK



VELASQUEZ



GARCIA



ANDERSON



BUDYAK



ZUDYK



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