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AAA 4-DIAMOND CASINO AND GATEWAY TO CITYCENTER.  UNPRETENTIOUSLY LUXURIOUS™
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Optimism Reigns

Every two months Meeting Professionals International (MPI) publishes its Business Barometer, which tracks actual business conditions and business outlooks year-to-year by surveying a select group of senior-level meeting professionals culled from its 22,000-member global community.

The February survey reports the highest increase in optimism since April 2009, and predictions for the future continue to improve at a faster rate than at any time since 2008. For example, 68 percent of respondents indicated a year-on-year improvement in favorable conditions, up from 66 percent in December 2010 and 62 percent in October 2010. And only 15 percent of event professionals indicate unfavorable conditions compared to a year ago, down from 16 percent in December 2010 and 17 percent in October 2010.

Which all goes to point out that this is the time to toot our horns and maintain one voice about “the power and value of the ME&I industry” as Maritz Travel’s Chris Gaia so aptly argues in his guest column on page 10. Gaia presents compelling science-based research that “shows that businesses needing to capture an audiences’ attention, inspire a positive emotional climate, and build human networks and relationships within their business can best be achieved in a face-to-face setting.”

Planners everywhere know that meetings at sea afford some of the best opportunities to stage face-to-face events and incentives. Planners featured in “High Seas Meetings & Incentives” (page 12) know they get “more bang for their buck” by holding meetings on cruise ships that combine a relaxing experience with the convenience of a one-stop-shop for one set price. Launched last year, Celebrity Cruises’ Eclipse (shown on our cover this issue) is the newest ship in their Solstice class. It features special amenities such as Celebrity iLounge, an Internet café offering easy access to the Internet; and fresh green grass on the top deck’s Lawn Club. One planner appreciated the size of the ship’s lounge, which was large enough to fit all the participants for the company’s awards ceremony.

Visit premiere mountain resorts in “Altitude Adjustment” (page 32); and stop by in Orlando (page 36) for an update on the destination planners and attendees rate No. 1.
Optimistic Outlook for Orlando Meetings

ORLANDO, FL — Visit Orlando executives released an optimistic forecast for the city’s meetings and conventions industry based on positive trending for year-end 2010 and expected business travel increases in 2011. Business travel to Orlando is forecasted to increase 2.3 percent in 2011 to 3.34 million and 4.8 percent in 2012 to 3.62 million. "Up ticks across several key indicators demonstrate real strength and growth for Orlando’s meetings and conventions community. Orlando is attracting an increasing variety of meetings, more international attendees, particularly from Latin America, and renewed meeting planner interest driven by Orlando’s high value and affordability,” said Gary Sain, president and CEO of Visit Orlando. "Orlando was a bullish destination during the economic downturn, adding new hotels at all price points and new amenities for the meetings industry, and the meetings industry is responding to Orlando’s unique energy, excitement and diversification.” During the recession, Orlando invested more than $4 billion in new infrastructure projects, from meeting hotels to the new Amway Center to the Medical City complex. www.visitorlando.com/cvb

Silverado Resort and Spa, Napa, CA.

The Legendary Napa Valley Package offers planners 10 percent off the master bill, and a complimentary 30-minute private wine and cheese reception. As part of Dolce Hotels and Resorts, Silverado offers the Complete Meetings Package, starting at $259/person, that includes guest room, continental breakfast and buffet lunch, continuous refreshment breaks, meeting room and AV, Wi-Fi, and more. Meetings must have minimum of 10 rooms and must be consumed by June 30, 2011. 800.532.0600, www.silveradoreresort.com

Wynn Las Vegas Remodeling from Top to Bottom

LAS VEGAS, NV — As is his custom, Wynn Resorts CEO Steve Wynn calls for a complete remodel of his resorts before guests notice any wear and tear. According to the Las Vegas Sun, Wynn Las Vegas 2,700 hotel rooms and suites are undergoing a complete makeover, which is scheduled to be completed by summer. To date, renovations are complete in Wynn Las Vegas’ Resort Tower and are more than 50 percent complete in the hotel’s AAA Five Diamond-rated Tower Suites. Wynn Design and Development Executive Vice President Roger Thomas, who has worked for Wynn for 30 years, custom-designed the rooms. www.wynnlasvegas.com

MEETING VALUES

- South Beach Marriott, Miami Beach, FL. Planners who book a 2011 meeting with more than 75 cumulative room nights and F&B by June 1 receive the following: 35 percent attrition allowance; 2 percent rebate to master; triple Marriott reward points; 5 percent discount on 2011 F&B menus; and 10 percent discount on AV pricing. Meetings booked between June 1 and September 30, 2011 also receive comp internet in guest rooms; and additional 5 percent off F&B and AV. 305.536.7700

- The Sea Pines Resort, Hilton Head Island, SC. Planners who book a 2011 or 2012 meeting with room revenue of $15,000 by May 31, 2011 receive: $1,000 credit to master account; one-hour cocktail reception; 1/25 comp room; two comp foursomes for golf; comp meeting space and welcome amenities; 15 percent off catering; 20 percent off AV; comp wireless internet; comp tennis; comp valet parking; double resort reward points; and more. 800.732.7463, www.seapines.com

- Portofino Hotel and Yacht Club, Redondo Beach, CA. Meetings booked now through April 30, 2011 receive complimentary welcome reception; complimentary meeting room rental; two upgrades to Ocean Premier rooms with amenities; 1/25 comp room; overnight stay with breakfast for two; wireless internet for all attendees; and dinner for two in BALENLos Angeles. Meetings must be actualized by December 31, 2011. 310.798.6875, www.hotelsportofino.com

Moody’s Says The Las Vegas Strip Recovery to Continue

NEW YORK, NY — Moody’s Investors Service has good news for The Las Vegas Strip. As reported in the Las Vegas Sun, Moody’s market update predicts that the gambling industry recovery will continue this year and accelerate in 2012, despite some slowing from higher costs driven by climbing oil prices. Other factors that may affect the pace of recovery include the influx of more than 4,000 new hotel rooms, aggressive pricing and promotion strategies by new owners, and the struggles of highly leveraged operators. “The real upturn in profits will not begin until 2012,” Moody’s reported.

Nationwide MeetingsDirects 5 Percent Back to Groups

LAS VEGAS, NV — Andrew Pepper, the president and CEO of Las Vegas-based Nationwide Meetings, recently announced that the company will redirect 5 percent commission from its preferred venues to groups booking through the company. “Not a single dollar of commissions will go to Nationwide from its preferred venues,” said Pepper. “Our interest is in a tough economy for so many of our hotel and meeting planner partners is to provide less obstacles and more revenue for both as we all move forward in business together.” Nationwide Meetings’ preferred venues include convention hotels, resorts and boutique properties, including venues such as The Broadmoor, The American Club, The Coeur d’Alene Resort, Kiawah Island Golf Resort, The Lodge at Torrey Pines and Disney Resorts. For more information, email info@nationwidemeetings.com.

Hard Rock Hotel at Universal Orlando Celebrates 10th Anniversary

ORLANDO, FL — (Left to right) Carlton Hudson, general manager, Hard Rock Hotel at Universal Orlando; Jonathan Tisch, chairman & CEO, Loews Hotels; Tom Williams, chairman & CEO Universal Parks & Resorts; Mark McGrath of Sugar Ray; and Hamish Dodds, president & CEO, Hard Rock International, at the 10th anniversary of the Hard Rock Hotel at Universal Orlando. The highlight of the birthday bash was a special performance by Sugar Ray at Velvet Sessions, Hard Rock Hotel’s special rock ‘n’ roll cocktail party and lobby concert held the last Thursday of every month.

Events Calendar

APRIL 13-14, 2011 HOSPITALITY SALES AND MARKETING ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONAL AFFORDABLE MEETINGS MID-AMERICA Navy Pier Chicago, IL Contact: 312.421.3270 www.affordablemeetings.com

APRIL 27- MAY 1, 2011 INCENTIVE RESEARCH FOUNDATION INCENTIVE INVITATIONAL Aria Resort & Casino Las Vegas, NV Contact: 702.373.5601 www.thei.org

MAY 24-26, 2011 IMEX — THE WORLDWIDE EXHIBITION FOR INCENTIVE TRAVEL, MEETINGS AND EVENTS Meese Frankfurt Germany Contact: (011) 44.1273.227311 www.imex-frankfurt.com

JUNE 2, 2011 DMAI DESTINATIONS SHOWCASE CHICAGO Donald E. Stephens Convention Center Rosemont, IL Contact: 202.265.7888 www.destinationsshowcase.com

JULY 23-26, 2011 MEETING PROFESSIONALS INTERNATIONAL WORLD EDUCATION CONGRESS Orange County Convention Center Orlando, FL Contact: 972.702.3053 www.mpiews.org

OCTOBER 11-13, 2011 IMEX AMERICA Sands Expo at the Venetian/Palazzo Hotel Las Vegas, NV Contact: +44 1273.27311 www.imexamerica.com

QR Codes: The Next Best Thing

How Quick Response Codes Can Create Quick Responses to Your Next Meeting

Many major national marketers are beginning to test quick response (QR) codes in their marketing programs. In fact, a 2010 study by Burson-Marsteller showed that 22 percent of Fortune 50 companies in the U.S. are actively using QR codes in their marketing efforts. And QR codes are likely to become more commonplace in marketing during 2011 and beyond. We’re already seeing major retail chains such as BestBuy and Sears making use of QR codes in their advertising, which will serve to educate the American public and help them become more familiar with the technology. With the technology finding its way into the hands of consumers throughout the world, QR codes are something every meeting planner should be watching. In fact, the technology could just be the best thing that ever happened to your meeting.

What is a QR Code?

QR codes are two-dimensional, black and white codes that are readable by dedicated QR barcode readers and camera phones. The code consists of black modules arranged in a square pattern on a white background. The information encoded can be text, URL or other data. The QR code was created in Japan, by Toyota subsidiary Denso-Wave in 1994 and is one of the most popular types of two-dimensional barcodes. Other types of two-dimensional codes include JagTags, MS Tags and Stickybits. Many mobile phones in the U.S. are now starting to be equipped with pre-installed QR code reader software. For consumers who do not have the software installed on their mobile phone, there are a number of free readers such as ScanLife or i-nigma, which consumers can download for free.

Like many of today’s mobile technologies, when used properly, QR can improve how you market your meeting, attendee networking at your event and even save you money.

How to Use a QR Code

So how can you use these codes to better market your next meeting? Here are four examples to get you started.

• Marketing your speakers. The single best usage of QR codes is leveraging their ability to turn print into video. So for your next meeting, edit together a high-light reel of your speakers so prospective attendees can get a glimpse of the high quality content they’ll receive. This is especially useful when you’re trying to save a bit of money by booking lesser-known speakers who despite their lack of name recognition are nonetheless powerful and informative speakers. Go ahead, scan code No. 1 (right) and see what you get.

• Mobile-friendly registration. Research shows that we Americans love our mobile phones. In fact, they’re often within 5 feet of us at all times. Take advantage of that the next time you run an ad promoting your meeting. Include a QR code tied to a mobile friendly event registration site such as the one you’ll see if you scan code No. 2. Don’t rely on your attendee to remember a phone number, or a website or an e-mail address, tear out the ad or anything else. If your ad has convinced them, book them right then and there.

• Help attendees network. Major meetings and conventions are as much about networking as learning. But let’s face it, typing or scanning in all those business cards to our contacts file and then synchronizing with our smart phone is, well kind of a pain. Why not make it easy on your consumer to a regular website that isn’t mobile friendly? Don’t rely on your collateral or a sign, and that code takes the attendee to remember a phone number, or a website or an e-mail address, tear out the ad or anything else. If your ad has convinced them, book them right then and there. To scan the codes with your smartphone, download a free reader at www.i-nigma.com.

QR Business Card (code No. 3).

Whenever you attend a conference or meeting, you’re likely to be handed a name badge. If you’re like me, when I attended the Social Medium Tourism Symposium (affectionately known as the SoMeT) this fall, organizer David Serino of Gammet Interactive made my life a lot easier. Why not do the same for your attendees? Regardless of how you use QR codes, the key item to remember is context. These codes are scanned by mobile phones, so make sure whatever website or content you point the code towards is mobile friendly. That is probably the single biggest mistake marketers are making right now. They include a QR code in an ad, on a piece of collateral or a sign, and that code takes the consumer to a regular website that isn’t readable on a mobile phone.

These are just a few examples to get your mind turning. I promise you, there are lots of additional ways you can use QR codes in the planning and execution of your next meeting or convention. But you won’t know if you don’t try…so it’s high time to get started.

The single best usage of QR codes is leveraging their ability to turn print into video.

Corporate & Incentive Travel

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Join the discussion on our Facebook pages or follow us on Twitter @TomMartin or subscribe to his blog, http://www.HelpMyBrand.com to learn more.

Tom Martin is the founder of Converse Digital, a digital marketing firm that helps companies understand how to leverage digital tools such as QR codes to create more effective marketing. You can follow him on Twitter #TomMartin or subscribe to his blog, http://www.HelpMyBrand.com to learn more.
For the travel industry, 2010 proved to be a year of renewal, energy and growth. We’ve faced some challenging and dark days the past couple years; yet in 2010, the economy began to recover, business started to come back, and the meetings, events and incentive travel (ME&I) industry made great strides in helping policymakers, business leaders and consumers understand and embrace the value created by ME&I programs. Now that 2011 is in full swing, it’s critical that those of us within the travel industry — meeting professionals, hoteliers, airline employees — maintain one voice to speak on behalf of the economic and motivational value travel brings to business and this country.

There are federal programs that have an impact on the entire travel industry, including meetings, events and incentive travel. The reality of global business travel to and within the U.S., for example, has become increasingly cumbersome due to unpleasant experiences with security screenings, U.S. visa issuance, and crowded and delayed flights.

Improving Passenger Screenings

To address these security screenings, the U.S. Travel Association convened a Blue Ribbon Panel for Aviation Security comprised of industry and security experts and former government officials to make recommendations on how to improve air travel security in a way that maintains security and minimizes the burden on travelers. On March 16, 2011, the U.S. Travel Association released a final report that includes a broad set of recommendations to improve passenger security screening. One of the key recommendations in the report calls on the federal government to create a “trusted traveler” program that would allow passengers passing a background check to utilize a checkpoint lane with less intensive screening. Under the U.S. Travel Association proposal, the trusted traveler program would be administered by the federal government, include a risk-based approach and provide for variations in the TSA screening process.

Power of Travel Coalition

Also during the first part of the year, the U.S. Travel Association’s Meetings, Incentives & Tradeshow (MIT) Council has concentrated its efforts on collaboration with exhibition industry organizations to explore opportunities to cooperate on matters of mutual interest to the industry. The U.S. Travel Association continues to encourage enrollment into the Power of Travel Coalition, the grass roots effort of individuals whose jobs depend on the travel industry and whose purpose is to champion, protect and improve travel and tourism, including the meetings industry. In addition, it has begun proactive outreach to the White House to amend the General Services Administration’s policy discouraging government travel in the name of protecting the environment.

But we can’t stop there. For our efforts to succeed, all meetings associations within the industry must engage with one another to educate and inform business leaders and consumers on the value of ME&I programs. We must develop advocates among a larger group of business leaders as to the value of ME&I programs create through energizing and engaging employees, channel partners and customers. We must focus on educating and earning the support of policymakers for meetings, incentives and trade shows through ongoing communications and data that documents the economic impact to each state and congressional district. We must develop recommendations on how to improve passenger security screening. One of the key recommendations in the report calls on the federal government to create a “trusted traveler” program that would allow passengers passing a background check to utilize a checkpoint lane with less intensive screening. Under the U.S. Travel Association proposal, the trusted traveler program would be administered by the federal government, include a risk-based approach and provide for variations in the TSA screening process.

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We must focus on educating and earning the support of policymakers.

Economic Impact

Additionally, the U.S. Travel Association and Convention Industry Council recently released a study highlighting the travel industry’s economic impact on the U.S. economy. The study “The Economic Significance of Meetings to the U.S. Economy” found that our industry contributes $106 billion in GDP and can be a significant contributor to growth and reducing unemployment. These types of research studies are just two examples of the work that the industry must undertake and promote in order to create and maintain one voice. In so doing, we as meeting professionals can better demonstrate the value meetings, events and incentive travel programs have on achieving effective results for businesses, their people and our country.

CIT

Chris Gaia, vice president of marketing, Maritz Travel, manages product development, events strategy, industry relations and the overall reputation of Maritz Travel. www.maritz.com
“Some groups say, ‘We’ve done Atlantis, we’ve done Las Vegas, and we’ve got a group of a thousand people, what do we do with them?’ I can show them something that will blow everyone’s mind,” Wallack says.

The 5,400 passenger Allure of the Seas spans 16 decks and is divided into seven “neighborhoods” such as Central Park, Boardwalk, the Royal Promenade and the Pool and Sports Zone. One of the Allure’s many entertainment choices is a show called OceanAria, which is performed in the ship’s open-air AquaTheater. “It’s a water acrobatic show with laser lights that’s so out-of-the-box,” Wallack notes. “I can’t even believe what they’ve been able to do at sea.”

No one knows the wow factor like DreamWorks Animation, which has partnered with Royal Caribbean to produce OceanAria and other onboard parades, ice shows and experiences with the film studio’s characters. The Allure also features the first at-sea Broadway production of “Chicago: The Musical.”

Pros and Cons of Chartering

While cruising offers a multitude of ship sizes, amenities and itineraries to choose from, the first decision planners need to make is whether to charter a private cruise or book a portion of a larger ship for their program. There are pros and cons to each side.

“With a charter, you have control, with reason, of where you go and when you leave,” Wallack says. “It’s great if you really have a grip on your numbers, because you can pick the ship with the right capacity for your group. But if you’re just starting out doing incentives, you need to start with group space. It will give you the flexibility to have attrition.” Wallack adds that she has chartered everything from a small, 50-person tour of the Greek Islands to a buyout of a 3,600-passenger ship.

Ashley Muntan, CMP, event marketing manager for the Atlanta, GA, technology company Symantec, went with Wallack to charter a Crystal cruise for an incentive program. “We maxed out the ship with about 1,400 people,” she notes. Crystal is a luxury cruise line that prides itself on offering exceptional service, spacious staterooms and gourmet cuisine.

“Crystal is absolutely amazing. If you take over that entire ship, you can customize it for your event,” she says. “When you go to a hotel, you’re never the only one there. When we were on this charter, it was so cool because everywhere we would go, it would be our people.”

Even though the charter was a great experience, Symantec has chosen to host its next cruise program on a larger ship. “Whenever you do an incentive, there’s no way to know exactly how many people are going to qualify, so we need some scalability in our numbers,” Muntan explains. “On a (chartered) cruise, if you don’t fill some of your cabins, you’re still paying for them, and if you have 800 winners and only 700 cabins, you’re in trouble.”

Wallack notes that because many cruise lines have more ships they are now more willing to do a charter for as little as four to five nights. “Seabourn is a good example of that. They just added two ships, and they’re adding a third. Compagnie du Ponant is a great company that no one knows about. It’s a European company based in France. They’re a nice alternative to the high-end luxury market.”

“The ships are gorgeous and yacht-like and they can go into small ports of call,” she continues. “They’ve just built two ships that hold 263 passengers that they will charter to you for any length. One of the special features is the ability to convert 40 cabins into 20 suites. The whole wall slides open between two cabins to make one 400-sf suite.”

The Big Ship Experience

For its next incentive program, Symantec has booked the 2,850-passenger Celebrity Solstice for a six-night cruise in the Mediterranean. “I find it a shame that people don’t look at Celebrity more,” Wallack notes. “It’s got gorgeous interiors, wonderful food, great service, beautiful cabins. I would go out on a limb and say they’re the prettiest new ships on the water in the large-ship class.”

The Solstice first set sail in 2008. Its two sister ships, the Celebrity Equinox and Celebrity Eclipse, launched in 2009 and 2010, respectively. Symantec chartered a Crystal cruise to the Greek Islands for 1,400 attendees that allowed them to customize the entire experience for the group.

Celebrity Solstice is the ship of choice for Symantec’s upcoming six-night incentive program. The Solstice’s two sister ships, Equinox and Eclipse, launched in 2009 and 2010 respectively.

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The Solstice first set sail in 2008. Its

By Karen Brost
Two more Solstice class ships, the Celebrity Silhouette and Celebrity Reflection, will be introduced in 2011 and 2012. “When I presented the large group experience, one of the benefits was that we can take over the show lounge and do an awards ceremony,” Muntan explains, noting that smaller ships don’t have a venue large enough to hold the entire group at one time. “That was one thing our management was missing (on the charter)...doing some kind of recognition in front of the spouses.”

Muntan acknowledges that when they’re on a larger ship, they’ll lose some of the intimacy they had as a group on the charter. “We know we’re going to lose some of that ‘one team’ feeling, but we had to just try it and see how it works.”

Apparently, it worked quite well for Terry Miller, event manager for Planos, TX-based Wellness International Network Ltd., who planned a combination incentive program/company anniversary celebration on the Celebrity Silhouette. He has been booking cruises for his company’s annual sales incentive program as one of the key reasons. He has used a number of different cruise lines, including SilverSea, Crystal and Royal Caribbean.

“It was one of the best experiences I’ve ever had holding an event on a ship anywhere in the world,” he says. “Normally, when you have an event onboard, you’re basically dealing with the onboard coordinator. That’s pretty much the only person you have access to as far as making sure your event goes off without a hitch. From the moment we stepped onboard Celebrity, we had our onboard meeting set up, and everybody from the hotel director all the way down to the event coordinator was in the room and we went through everything step by step.”

Miller noted that Celebrity’s staff showed up at the start of every event, including a black-tie award presentation held in the ship’s main theater. “They all made sure that my events went off perfectly.”

Since Miller’s guest list can at times include nearly 100 children, he also plans kid-friendly events. “We’ll do scavenger hunts so the kids can get to know each other and get comfortable. For a lot of them, it’s their first time sailing,” he notes.

**Dream Cruise**

One of the most highly anticipated ships to debut in 2011 is the 4,000-passenger Disney Dream. The first new Disney ship to launch in more than 10 years, the art deco-inspired Dream began offering three-, four- and five-night cruises from Port Canaveral, FL, to the Bahamas and Disney’s private island, Castaway Cay, in late January. Its sister ship, the Disney Fantasy, is scheduled to begin service in 2012.

In true Disney style, the Dream features plenty of innovative touches. Inside staterooms are equipped with “virtual portholes” that give passengers a view of the ocean in real time along with glimpses of Disney characters floating by. Another unique attraction is the Skyline bar that displays the sunset over a different city skyline every day. “Enchanted art is another cool concept,” explains David Giardino, spokesperson for Disney Worldwide Sales & Travel Operations. “It’s artwork that comes to life when you walk by it. Your room card triggers it. It might be two pirate ships and all of a sudden they go into battle. As long as you have your room card with you, it knows who you are so you’ll never see the same thing twice.”

The enchanted art is activated by RFID technology embedded in the room keys.

In another cruise-line first, the Disney Dream features a water-coaster ride called AquaDuck. From 12 decks up, the ride propels guests through an acrylic tube that goes out over the side of the ship and then drops down four decks into a lazy river.

Suzanne Evers, manager of meetings and travel for Reliv International Inc. in Chesterfield, MO, booked the Dream sight unseen for her March 2011 incentive program for approximately 100 guests. “We’re very excited about it,” she says. “We were on the Disney Wonder in March of 2010 and had a wonderful time. Our distribu-

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**When you go to a hotel, you’re never the only one there. When we were on this charter, it was so cool because everywhere we would go, it would be our people.”**

Ashely Muntan, CMP Event Marketing Manager
Symantec, Atlanta, GA
We went to a different restaurant with 16 March 2011 • the new Dream, we were even more intrigued and wanted to do that. It’s a little trivia just raved about it and wanted to do, yet you have the Disney service. The innovative cruise ships offer multifunctional public spaces to accommodate groups of any size.

Evers listed some of the advantages of booking a cruise for an incentive program. “No. 1, being all-inclusive makes it easy operationally to run a program on a cruise. And there’s something just really sexy about a cruise that people just love, so it’s very easy to promote.”

Corporate incentives “is an under-developed but potentially important market for the (cruise) industry and, given my background, one I am very excited about exploring.”

Christine Duffy, President and CEO Cruise Lines International Association, Fort Lauderdale, FL

Planners who fear that their incentive winners might be overrun with kids on a Disney cruise can put those fears to rest. Evers explains that her guests never felt they were on a kids’ cruise. “You definitely have adults areas and adult things to do, yet you have the Disney service. They were lying on Disney’s private beach, adults only, with a drink in their hands. They were having a ball.” She also liked the variety of dining options for adults. “We went to a different restaurant with a different menu and a different atmosphere every night.”

Customized Luxury Cruising

Regent Seven Seas Cruises offers charters of any number of nights for all destinations. Planners also can customize itineraries. Small groups and full-ship charters can use conference rooms, lounges, restaurants and theaters for meetings and events.

Bowled Over on the Epic

Corporate and incentive cruise event services company Landry & Kling put together a 42-person sales meeting/ incentive program for the Brunswick Corporation, which is headquartered near Chicago. The Lake Forest, IL-based recreational products company is well-known for its bowling, billiards, fitness and marine products, including Mercury Marine, so a waterborne meeting on-board Norwegian Cruise Line’s new Epic was a natural fit. Surprisingly, it was the company’s first sales-incentive cruise.

Explain Filip Pawelka, a marketing manager for Brunswick, “We decided to hold our annual meeting at sea because we wanted to combine a relaxed meeting atmosphere with convenience. With all the necessary facilities available onboard the cruise ship, we were able to simplify our meeting/event coordination. With the one-stop-shop nature of a cruise ship we were able to conveniently plan all meetings, meals and social activities through one source as compared to land locations where several aspects of such an event need to be planned and booked separately. We wanted to offer our guests an exciting meeting location, as well as a balanced variety of social activities to ease the natural stress of business meetings. “One of the main deciding factors was also the overall cost of such a meeting on a cruise ship,” Pawelka says. “When compared to previous meetings we conducted in several locations around the world, the cost was comparable or even below. Finally, our cruise departed from Miami, which provided a convenient travel location for our international guests and staff.”

Even though the Epic accommodates 2,115 passengers, the ship’s luxury Villa Complex offers exclusivity for smaller groups of up to 150 attendees with a private dining room, spa and pool. The 685-seat Epic Theater features an entertainment favorite of corporate groups, Blue Man Group. Cirque Dreams and Dinner in the Spiegel Tent is another show that can be reserved for groups.

Planning Tips

Flight plan. Wallack explained that some companies are reluctant to book a cruise because their VIPs don’t want to be in a position where they can’t get off the ship and fly back home if they need to. “I can fix that,” she says. “In the Mediterranean, you can easily structure your charter so that every day you are in a port that has a major harbor.” She noted that this also makes it easy to fly a speaker in for a day to “catch up” with any baggage that may have gotten lost.

“The site inspections are actually really easy,” Wallack notes. “Most of the big ships are here (in Florida) in the winter with a few exceptions. In the winter, if you want to do a site inspection, you just fly to Fort Lauderdale or Miami and we go on for the day.”

Timing of the Celebrity Solstice’s positioning between the Caribbean and the Mediterranean prevented Muntan from doing a pre-booking site inspection. “It’s not so like me,” she explains. “The challenge we had was that the Solstice does not go to the Mediterranean until May when it’s too late to do a site inspection.” She found another solution. “We’re going to jump on the Solstice down in the Caribbean and we’re going to sail on it for two days and get off at the first port of call in Puerto Rico. At least we can see the ship in motion.”

Muntan still has questions about how her group will disembark at their ports of call in the Mediterranean. “Are we tendering? Are we going to be docking? I’d like to see all that, but it just didn’t work out this year. I’m really going to be relying on Buy The Sea, the cruise broker, to give me direction.”

Cruise brokers. Muntan has found that there are many benefits of working with a cruise broker. “They’re one central place for all of the data on the cruise industry. They’re there to partner with you and guide you through the process. They really know what you can do and what you can’t do. They also understand the workings of a ship. In a hotel, you have a front office manager, and you have your convention services manager.

You don’t have that on a cruise ship. The departments are organized differently, so you have to know who to go to for all of your different needs. (The broker) educates you and puts you in touch with the right people.”

Choosing a Cruise

According to CLIA, the Caribbean is the No. 1 cruise destination in terms of sales. Other top ranking destinations include Alaska, the Mediterranean (including the Greek Islands and Turkey), Europe, Hawaii, Panama Canal, European rivers and Canada/New England.

“We’re seeing quite a bit of Alaska lately. Alaska is so cyclical. The problem with Alaska is that companies only do Alaska once. They don’t do it twice for the most part,” Wallack notes, adding that cruises to Tahiti, the Baltic and the Greek Islands are also typically once-in-a-lifetime trips.

The Caribbean, she says, is a different story. “The Caribbean gets done over and over. You may do it once, twice, but every year somebody wants to go again.”

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Top 10 Cruise Ships for Meetings
Cruise event services specialists since 1982, Landry & Kling has selected the following top 10 ships for meetings and group events based on a combination of factors, including superior onboard meeting facilities, state-of-the-art audio-visual capabilities, as well as top-notch amenities and entertainment options. Landry & Kling is the parent company of Seasite.com, a Web portal designed specifically for the cruise meetings and incentive market.

1. Royal Caribbean International: Allure of the Seas
2. Norwegian Cruise Line: Norwegian Epic
3. Celebrity Cruises: Celebrity Millennium
4. MSC Cruises: MSC Splendida
5. Carnival Cruise Lines: Carnival Dream
6. Regent Seven Seas: Seven Seas Navigator
7. Royal Caribbean International: Liberty of the Seas
8. Sea Dream Yacht Club: Sea Dream Yacht II
9. Silversea Cruises: Silver Whisper
10. Lindblad Expeditions: National Geographic Endeavor

Royal Caribbean Cruises is considering ordering a new ship that will signal a new class of ship for the brand. Richard Fain, the company’s chairman, suggested that this would “probably be the start of a new series of ships which would incorporate our latest learnings about efficiency and about guest amenities.”

Regent Seven Seas Cruises’ Seven Seas Voyager has been named the “Best Cruise Ship in the Large Ship” category by Conde Nast Traveler readers. On February 1, Christine Duffy, former president and chief executive officer at Maritz Travel, took the helm as president and CEO of CLIA. In her new role, she will apply her extensive travel industry experience to further the promotion and growth of the cruise industry.

“Due to the extraordinary diversity of experiences available, from the ultimate in yacht-sized luxury, world cruises and adventure voyages to the Antarctic, to fun-filled weeks in the Caribbean, Alaska, Mediterranean, Canada/New England and elsewhere, cruising represents an ideal match for corporate incentives,” Duffy says. “The fact that CLIA member ships come in all sizes makes even a full ship charter an appealing option. While there are a handful of companies and agents specializing in this, including the recent CLIA Hall of Fame honoree Landry & Kling, this is an under-developed but potentially important market for the industry and, given my background, one I am very excited about exploring in the years to come.”

Cruise News
Royal Caribbean and Norwegian Cruise Line recently announced that they are discontinuing their cruise service to Mexico from the Port of Los Angeles. Carnival is also suspending its service to Mexico from the Port of San Diego.

Industry experts speculate that reports of escalating drug violence in Mexico have negatively impacted demand for these cruises. Royal Caribbean’s Mariner of the Seas will be rehoused in Galveston, TX. NCL’s Norwegian Star will be relocated to Tampa, FL. Carnival will reposition its Carnival Spirit ship to Australia in 2012.

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Smart Phones Make Planners Smarter

Amazing Apps Revolutionize the Meetings Landscape

Mobile meeting guides and applications (apps) for smart phones and tablet PCs are the hottest and fastest-growing cool tools on the meetings landscape these days. Sales of smart phones, which are out-selling PCs for the first time, are off the charts: Vendors shipped 100.9 million smart phones worldwide for 4Q10, up 87.2 percent, and 302 million were sold for the year up 74.4 percent, according to International Data Corporation. And Verizon’s long-awaited launch of the iPhone 4 resulted in record-breaking sales. Analysts speculate that the record-breaking 100 millionth lion iPads were sold in nine months.

Landscape of all types of apps available and at least several hundred apps designed specifically for meetings and events. The number of meeting app producers and products is growing fast. “There is a whole eco-system of companies producing native apps for individual smart phone types or more generic Web apps for meetings information,” says Spellos. “The question is, which platform developers are the sexy approach to develop them for the iPhone. But that’s not the platform in the greatest use in the business community right now. Development for the Blackberry and Android is also important. You have to make sure you have an app that can be used for several smart phone platforms, otherwise you will diminish the value of it for meetings,” Spellos advises.

Thousands of Apps

Apps exploded onto the scene after iTunes launched its app store in 2008. There are now hundreds of thousands of all types of apps available and at least several hundred apps designed specifically for meetings and events. The number of meeting app producers and products is growing fast. “There is a whole eco-system of companies producing native apps for individual smart phone types or more generic Web apps for meetings information,” says Spellos. “The question is, which platform developers are the sexy approach to develop them for the iPhone. But that’s not the platform in the greatest use in the business community right now. Development for the Blackberry and Android is also important. You have to make sure you have an app that can be used for several smart phone platforms, otherwise you will diminish the value of it for meetings,” Spellos advises.

By Derek Reveryen
The use of mobile meeting guides and other apps will grow along with the use of smartphones. “Smart phones account for more than one-third of the mobile phone market, according to a survey by Nielsen, an audience research and measurement firm. More than 60 million people in the U.S. use smartphone apps, and the number is projected to double within two years. The number of U.S. smartphone users who access mobile content through apps and browsers now exceeds the total number of non-smart phone users, according to comScore, a digital marketing research and consulting firm. The use of smartphones tends to be highest among frequent business travelers such as meeting planners.

Hybrid Meetings, Too

The fast-growing popularity of smart phones makes it possible for planners to use the devices in other innovative ways for corporate meetings. For example, Nancy Settle Murphy, president of Guided Insights, a Boston company that designs and facilitates corporate training meetings and workshops, depends partly on smart phones to implement hybrid corporate meetings that involve face-to-face and online sessions.

Murphy recently ran a hybrid strategic planning meeting for a global corporation based in New England. The meeting involved about 30 managers and executives, mostly from North America. About eight days before the face-to-face meeting, Murphy sent a series of e-mails to participants, asking them to access online conference “flipcharts,” which encouraged them to brainstorm ideas online before the event. “Getting a great app but not having it meet needs of clients doesn’t make sense,” says Spellos.

Research apps online, Spellos advises planners to check out meetingapps.com to become familiar with the range of meeting guides and other apps available. Meetingapps.com applications are listed according to 26 categories, including meeting management, conference, destinations, hotel search, venues, air travel, risk management, and green guides. The number of listings on meetingapps.com continues to increase. For example, the website recently added an audio-visual category that includes several applications that planners can use in corporate meetings. One app enables an iPhone or iPad to control PowerPoint presentations, and use an iPhone to create a pointer for presentations. Another application converts an iPhone or iPad into a scrolling teleprompter. “Portals like meetingapps.com tend not to be biased toward a particular product and show the types of products that are available,” says Spellos.

Visit the websites of companies that produce meeting apps. Spend time to read and understand what the technology offers, and how to apply it and be a better resource for clients. Don’t try to dip into all the technology and be overwhelmed by it. Find out the type of app that can help your organization and start there,” Spellos advises.

Talk to meeting planners who have used meeting apps. That’s what Mullen did. “Ask them about the strengths and weaknesses of using apps,” she says.

Know how to use an app before considering it for attendees. After selecting an app, provide staff onsite who can answer questions from meeting participants.

Don’t expect to find a “killer app” that meets all of your needs. There is no such thing. No matter what anybody says. But there are apps that meet your needs better than others,” says Spellos.

Don’t feel the need to use different apps for different meetings. “Once a planner becomes comfortable with an app and has success with it, changing all the time isn’t a great idea. Providing a degree of continuity isn’t a bad thing for meeting attendees. It’s better to continue with the same app and have it customized more to your needs than make a 360-degree turn to another app,” says Spellos.

Be patient. There are temporary hurdles to attendee use and comfort levels with mobile meeting apps. “For any business or organization that uses apps, especially as more than a single meeting strategy, there could be a learning curve involved, especially with attendees that aren’t tech savvy. But there has to be a level of patience because everyone won’t adopt it immediately,” says Spellos. It’s expected that, within three to five years, mobile meeting guides and other apps will be commonly used. Apps will eventually perform functions that planners don’t now envision. “Planners will help define that. The technology will go as far as the feedback that developers get from planners who use it. If a planner looks at apps provided by five companies and none of them fits meeting needs, then they should tell developers what they want,” says Spellos. Apps providers are willing to meet the needs of planners, partly because a growing number of businesses are competing for a small but fast-growing base of users, adds Spellos.

Tablets Gaining in Popularity

With tablet PCs such as the iPad becoming increasingly more popular, it’s still unclear whether these devices will soon become the primary format for meeting apps. Dozens of companies have introduced or plan to market tablet PCs. The devices are creating more options for planners and attendees because they provide more functionality than smartphones.

Tablet PCs have larger screens for representing meeting documents and videos, and taking notes and engaging in interactive functions. Spellos expects tablet PCs to help increase the adoption rate of apps among planners and attendees. Like smartphones, tablet PCs can be used while sitting, standing or walking.

In other new technology developments, meeting planners can soon expect to see more integration between mobile apps and Web-based software. That means attendees and planners can use mobile apps to access data entered through Web-based software.

But no matter how apps evolve, meeting planners will continue to embrace the technology because it helps attendees and planners make more effective use of their time and budgets while providing more rewarding meeting experiences.
How to Draw Attendees Into the Conversation

At a time when meeting budgets continue to face unprecedented scrutiny, genuine attendee engagement should be an urgent fundamental goal for meeting planners. Why? "The reason can’t precede the why. And the how becomes much more clear once you know the why. But often, planners just go right to the how," says Eric Olson, general manager of Bolder, CO-based meeting technology leader Active Network/Events. "The standard today for attendee engagement is much higher than it was just a couple of years ago. And it has been raised because of the demands of the people who attend meetings. For a long time, meetings were sort of an isolated world that would remove from the everyday social experience that people have. And meeting attendee will not tolerate that anymore. So, the onus is really on planners now to provide the tools that will promote real engagement among their attendees." What percentage of planners are doing it right in early 2011? "A vast minority," says Olson. But on the other hand, he adds, a new and higher standard is beginning to be set by innovators and best practitioners, such as Cisco. "But for most planners, the focus is still on logistics rather than attendee engagement," Olson says. "There has been a lot of discussion about engagement in the digital age. But there has not been a lot of adoption yet."

A core principle of engagement in the era of Facebook, Twitter and other revolution social media platforms is that "planners can no longer talk to attendees," says Lynn Randall, a strategic events consultant at Fenton, MO-based Maritz Travel Co. "You have to learn to talk with them and engage them in the conversation around the meeting. And that process has to begin before you ever step foot onsite for the meeting." For example, Randall says, long before the meeting, a savvy planner will engineer collaborative communication among a keynote speaker, attendees and other key stakeholders, so that the keynote can adapt his or her canned talk to specific issues and concerns raised by a specific audience. "And if they have to pay a fee to be there," she says, "you have to work even harder to make sure you give them the value they want to be there." Nevertheless, says Michael Lyons, DMCP, Newton, PA-based executive vice president of AMR Meetings & Incentives, "Many companies lose sight of the underlying purpose and practical benefit of their meetings. "You have to get back to basics about the purpose of the meeting and why attendees should want to be there," says Lyons, who has planned meetings for 40 years. "It's about exchanging information. Therefore, it's really about the content and the takeaway from the meeting. It's not about technology."

Avoid Confusion

Yet, experts unanimously agree, in the Internet Age the essential message about the meeting is routinely confused due to the technology platform that delivers the message. Planners emblazoned of Facebook and Twitter create a lot of noise that adds up to not much. The initiative lacks a clear, compelling reason why the meeting matters to the company — and should matter to each and every audience.

"For me, attendee engagement is about making it worthwhile for people to be there. You have to be clear on how they can justify their attendance. So, our primary focus is on content that really addresses what's important."

Kerry Price, CMP, Senior Director Amerinet Inc., St. Louis, MO

By John Buchanan

Content Is King

Despite the transformational effect that technology has had on the process of planning a meeting, the undeniable fact is that content is the primary driver of engagement, both for attendees and the organization.

Despite the meetings slump of 2009–10, when many companies saw attendance at voluntary but important meetings plummet, St. Louis, MO-based national health care group purchasing organization Amerinet Inc. enjoyed enthusiastic voluntary attendance at its many meetings, says senior director Kerry Price, CMP Why? "A lot of our programs focus on continuing education for health care professionals, whether it's a supply chain or pharmaceutical or dietary issue," says Price, who plans more than 250 meetings a year with a three-person staff. "And we have attendees up to the C-suite level. For example, we do a forum every year for CEOs from member hospitals. And we find that it's really just a matter of the content. For me, attendee engagement is about making it worthwhile for people to be there. You have to be clear on how they can justify their attendance. So, our primary focus is on content that really addresses what's important."
better meetings that are more relevant and more useful to your attendees.”

Pamela Cavanaugh says technology as a facilitator of attendee engagement will enjoy remarkable rewards, says Bob Etheridge, event director at West Chester, PA-based Social Media Plus, which drew 750 highly engaged attendees to a social media conference in Philadelphia last year. “And LinkedIn was responsible for 80 percent of the engagement that we got through social media,” Etheridge says. “And that’s because my target market was sales and marketing people within 100 miles of Philadelphia. And with their enhanced search capability, LinkedIn gives you the ability to really target who you want to get your message in front of, as opposed to Facebook and Twitter, which just go out there, and you hope you’re reaching your market. With LinkedIn, you can really get granular about who you want to target.”

Price also uses LinkedIn as a key technology platform. She uses it to foster peer-to-peer communication among attendee constituencies such as Amerinet member hospitals or a category of suppliers.

**Defining Best Practices**

Ironically, while the explosion of technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has empowered faster, broader technology has 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How to Find a Happy Medium With Virtual and Physical Events

After an economic nadir in 2009 when companies often staged virtual versions of their events for the traveler and lodging cost-avoidance, many now have settled into a “happy medium” with hybrid events. They combine the quality of a face-to-face experience with the convenience of a virtual one. Unsurprisingly, major providers of virtual events such as San Francisco, CA-based ON24 and Menlo Park, CA-based Unisfair have seen a surge in business over the last couple years.

So even when economic recovery allows face-to-face meetings to return, many companies seek to retain the virtues of virtual that they discovered, including the promise of reaching a broader audience. “There’s really no reason why any event in the future would not have a virtual component,” says Joerg Rathenberg, vice president of marketing for the Mainframe Business Unit of Islandia, NY-based CA Technologies. “That’s how we came up with the idea to have a virtual event for our mainframe customers.”

That month-long event, May Mainframe Madness (MMM), was held for the first time last year, overlapping with CA World, a week-long user conference that has been held for several years in Las Vegas.

From the point of view of the exhibitor, the virtual medium also means increased exposure in the marketplace, thus boosting ROI. And virtual technologies even can reduce their investment on the logistics side. “One of the interesting approaches we’ve seen is the ability for exhibitors to have additional people available virtually in their booth,” says Neal Thompson, director of strategic technologies with Maritz Travel. “So I may not bring 20 experts to the booth, I may only have three or four, but I have another 10 available on camera for attendees to speak with at the booth.”

Hybrid Sales Meetings

Sales meetings also derive logistical advantages by going hybrid, while retaining the more personal connection with reps through a physical presence. San Jose, CA-based Cisco Technologies’ Global Sales Experience (GSEX), for example, went from being face-to-face for 19 years to fully virtual to a hybrid style last August. “Definitely the first year completely virtual there was a lot missing,” says Angie Smith, senior manager of the GSEX. “And part of it is perception: People are used to it a certain way and you take that away from them and there’s no in between.”

Now there is an “in between” with a virtual medium that reaches attendees in nearly 400 cities worldwide, complementing physical events in San Jose (the “hub”) and 162 other cities at Cisco offices (the “spokes”). “We also had four locations around the world that we call ‘super spokes,’ where we had a high concentration of people,” Smith explains. “And we had Cisco TV facilities and locations where we could work on the bandwidth across the network and distribute content from the super spokes as well.”

For Cisco’s second go-round at the hybrid model, it plans to lean more heavily on the virtual medium and “not produce events in so many cities,” Smith says. “We tried to make it super convenient where people were geographically located. But quite frankly, to produce even small events you are still going to make sure everything is working: the conference room, the Ethernet the IP addresses.” And sometimes employees who were not ideally qualified had to help out. “If there’s an office of 600 people we needed a real travel director on the ground,” she says. With fewer speakers, “maybe more will have to travel but we can make that experience more impactful.”

Hybrid sales meetings also afford the flexibility of presenting content to agents after the live event. “We’re seeing many sales kickoffs adding a virtual component, oftentimes as an add-on after the event for anyone who couldn’t participate or joins the company after the kickoff,” notes Denise Persson, CMO, and vice president of marketing with ON24. “Especially with sales organizations, you’re constantly hiring, and after the sales kickoff you’ve developed all of this valuable training content you don’t want to lose. It’s worth so much more than the cost of building a virtual component afterward.” But there are other options, such as delivering the general sessions virtually followed by regional face-to-face events as “breakouts.”

Pro and Cons

Perhaps the classic way to structure a hybrid meeting is to simply transmit the content (e.g., presentations) to the remote audience live. But it’s not necessarily the best approach, argues Rathenberg. “The advantage is it’s exciting. Virtual attendees feel they’re taking part in the event while it’s going on. The disadvantage is that you don’t have control over the content, and accidents may happen, like somebody stepping over the camera and everything goes dark.”

Rathenberg warns of “trying to match the virtual event too closely to the physical event,” for example by transmitting live sessions in parallel and forcing the virtual audience to choose. “The whole benefit of the virtual environment is that you can make the sessions available on demand and you stagger them,” he notes. Along with online discussion among participants and presenters, on-demand content is a way to “extend the life” of the event beyond the face-to-face gathering. Revenue-generating events have the potential to accrue more profit in this way. “You might capture all the content in your live and then extend that event in the following month to a new audience to generate yet another revenue stream from it,” Mark Szelenyi, senior director, webcasting for ON24, points out. “Most of your revenue is coming from sponsors, and you can extend your sponsor packages to include your virtual side as well.”

Equally valuable is the pre-event virtual presence. Participants can begin to discuss the topics that will be presented face-to-face, host companies can use the medium as a marketing tool and presenters can get “warmed up.”

For example, software developer Ariba, a Unisfair client, stages a virtual user conference and product launch as a forerunner to physical events at cities such as New York, Paris and London. “Decentralization is a trend,” says Rathenberg. “Instead of having this one gigantic worldwide event that everybody’s going to fly to, you go where the people are and have a virtual event upfront. The benefit is that you’ve developed all your content and the speakers deliver the same material live that they’re already fine-tuned in front of the camera. So it’s kind of a dry run for the physical event. The interesting thing is that you’re not having a cannibalization effect. You actually attract more people by giving them an incentive to go to the physical event.”

Attendance Robber?

“Cannibalization” occurs when many attendees choose to attend virtually in lieu of face to face, which is usually the ideal way for them to participate (especially for revenue-generating events). Thus, by offering the virtual option, the host company effectively undercuts its own attendance at the physical event. Overall, it’s not happening, Rathenberg observes, showing that attendees still appreciate the value of meeting in person.

But companies are understandably concerned. Menges admitted to being “pretty worried about cannibalization” of CA World by the virtual event May Mainframe Madness. “Getting people physically out to Las Vegas with us for a week is still the best way for them to interact, and we thought that such a robust virtual event might have some people choose that over the physical event,” Menges says. “But we very carefully marketed each event for what it was. We called it May Mainframe Madness, not CA World Live or CA World Interactive. We very purposely gave it its own identity, its own branding, to make it very clear that it was something different and something to augment the CA World experience. We didn’t want it to be a super norm that everybody’s going to fly to, you go where the people are and have a virtual event upfront. The benefit is that you’ve developed all your content and the speakers deliver the same material live that they’re already fine-tuned in front of the camera. So it’s kind of a dry run for the physical event. The interesting thing is that you’re not having a cannibalization effect. You actually attract more people by giving them an incentive to go to the physical event.”

By George Seli
or boring. After all, the virtual event doesn’t have the energy of a live audience to compensate for these drawbacks. Even a high-quality presentation will tend to lose its luster for the remote audience after too long of a time, so Rathenberg recommends offering approximately 20-minute online sessions.

In contrast to cannibalization is the possibility that the virtual event will not be compelling enough, resulting in weak remote audience’s participation, but No. 1 is the quality of the content. “That’s really the main reason people participate,” said Rathenberg, “so make sure you don’t have anything that’s redundant, lengthy by having the speaker available to answer questions virtually. “Throughout our planning process, we kept in mind whether the marketing or content of the virtual event would in any way potentially cannibalize or hurt the physical event.” Steven A. Menges, Vice President, Marketing, CA Technologies, Islandia, NY

Typically conference sessions are about 45 minutes or maybe an hour, but if you just stream that into the website it’s going to be a failure, people are going to get bored, be quipped for that,” began because “when you’re sitting in a big audience, the threshold is high to get up and leave, but when you’re at your computer the threshold is extremely low. You just click one button, and then you’ve got that spreadsheet that you were working on. With this in mind, a planner might design the face-to-face sessions so as to be easily chunked for virtual consumption, for example by dividing presentations into three sections. Afterward, the recorded sessions will be available online and a live component can be added

Engagement Challenges

In contrast to cannibalization is the possibility that the virtual event will not be compelling enough, resulting in weak ROI. There are many ways to encourage a high-quality presentation will tend to lose its luster for the remote audience after too long of a time, so Rathenberg recommends offering approximately 20-minute online sessions. Even if a Twitter stream will be integrated with a live broadcast, consider whether to offer it in every single session. When we did the chat we made a session all about that. We didn’t mix it up with delivering strategy and fiscal year initiatives and motivating them to still want to work for a great company.”

M MMM was facilitated by ON24, which offers a virtual event platform (VEP) with a variety of options for presenters and moderators. “You can log into the system in different roles: Q&A screener, moderator, speaker, giving you different permissions and views of the event,” Szelenyi explains. “And having a moderator to manage the technology so that it appears seamless to the speakers is very important as well. Don’t want them bogged down with managing the technology when they are trying to present.”

The same goal applies to face-to-face sessions that are simultaneously broadcast virtually. Remote participants shouldn’t be left hanging while the onsite group takes a break. A virtual chat, for example, can be arranged at those intervals. It’s critical that participation not become systematized. “Integrate applications that will keep them interacting with the content, such as Twitter, group chat, polls and Q&A sessions to make sure they are to the point and you have your attention,” says Persson.

Streaming Q&As

If a Twitter stream will be integrated with a live broadcast, consider whether to broadcast it in the meeting room, and if so, whether on a main screen behind the presenter or on monitors off to the side. “Once the session is over and the content is finished being presented you come to that Q&A slide, and we’ve seen a lot of sessions presenting on the screen a Twitter feed showing the tweets coming in in real time, and then they can pick questions from it,” Thompson describes. “And having a moderator to manage the technology so that it appears seamless to the speakers is very important as well. Don’t want them bogged down with managing the technology when they are trying to present.” Thus, the comfort level of the presenter with that medium should be taken into account: Is a moderator needed to track the stream and bring questions to the presenter’s attention? Should the input be held over for a Q&A session, or brought up during the presentation?

“Easy to say that I’m giving a live presentation, I’m not going to be directing questions up to him,” Szelenyi says. “On the other hand, if I as a product manager am training sales representatives, I can log into the handle in take into handle from hundreds of virtual participants. Each moderator is logging into each of its two or three weekly keynote presentations. “We decided to allow the audience to essentially type in their questions during the presentation itself or at the conclusion of it, they had the choice,” Menges relates. “The speaker as well as a member of my staff could see the questions come in, sift through them and basically combine duplicates and put them in kind of a priority order to have those ready for the speaker.”

Integrating Social Media

ON24’s VEP also can integrate social media tools such as Twitter, as does Unisfair. “We would be crazy to try to take people away from their Twitter, so we integrate with it, as well as with Skype, which is wildly popular in Europe,” notes Rathenberg. “We also provide our own proprietary chat in parallel, but we try to do everything inside our virtual environment, so when you click on a window it appears in our environment. It’s very easy to loosely integrate by popping up new windows, but really effective in doing so. They have to try to take people away from their Twitter feed, did they chat, did they network? We are starting to see more dashboard-type approaches where all that data is aggregated and summarized in kind of an executive level dashboard.”

One example of this increased sophistication is Unisfair’s Engagement Index (EI), which allows the host company to quantify the degree of a virtual attendee’s engagement with the content. Essentially, the company can define what specific actions it would ideally like the attendees to take during the event, and award points for each. Suppose it wants to target marketing managers from the UK for lead generation. “You can say: I want them to attend the webinar session about my new product, download the data sheet, and to have chatted at least for 10 minutes with the booth rep,” says Rathenberg by way of example. “You then give points for those actions that count toward the person’s EI.” The attendee may then be qualified to be referred to the company’s CRM system only if he or she exceeds a certain EI threshold.

“Throughout our planning process, we kept in mind whether the marketing or content of the virtual event would in any way potentially cannibalize or hurt the physical event.”

“With our most senior executive, we would have 2,500 people let’s say in a chatroom and on average get about 500–600 questions, so that’s a pretty good percentage.”

Engagement is indeed how today’s planners often conceive the objective of their events: to strengthen the psychological ties that attendees, whether employees or customers, have with the host company. Adding a virtual component to face-to-face meetings is another route to engagement, and measuring engagement. The route is becoming less optional going forward. “The hybrid approach is something corporations will have to embrace in order to measure ROI. One of the advantages of the virtual environment is that it allowed us to interact face-to-face,” notes Thompson. “You can somewhat measure engagement based on the interactivity of the user, how long they are in, did they check on what’s happening, did they chat, did they network? We are starting to see more dashboard-type approaches where all that data is aggregated and summarized in kind of an executive level dashboard.”

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Do Your Meetings Need an Altitude Adjustment?

MOUNTAIN RESORTS INSPIRE PEAK PERFORMANCE

Mountain resorts have a rarified air about them. They afford corporate groups not only the opportunity to escape the maddening crowd but the environs to inspire the kind of creative thinking that’s often disrupted by the demands of the high-tech work world. Following are some stellar destinations for planners who aspire to meetings on a higher plane.

The Spirit of the Southwest

The recently renovated Inn of the Mountain Gods Resort & Casino sits on the Mescalero Apache Reservation in southern New Mexico, near the town of Ruidoso. The AAA Four Diamond resort is surrounded by a collage of colors, textures, mesas and the Sacramento Mountains.

There are 273 guest rooms, many facing Lake Mescalero, and 40,000 sf of space for meetings. Outdoor recreational opportunities are unlimited, including golf, horseback riding, boating, fishing, skeet shooting, hiking and biking. Indoor entertainment centers on the 38,000-sf casino, and fine dining can be had in Wendell’s Restaurant. Other onsite amenities include an indoor pool, fitness center, pro shop and gift shop.

What many attendees love most, however, is the Southwestern setting—Mountains that change colors as the day progresses; bald eagles overhead, and wild turkey, deer and elk roaming the reservation, and the nearby Old West town of Ruidoso. And planners love the affordability.

Bruce Tevis, field manager for a major petroleum service company, has been bringing some 125 attendees to a customer appreciation golf tournament and dinner event at Inn of the Mountain Gods for 27 years. “We like it here because there’s so much to do,” he says. “Between the amenities and the natural beauty, there’s never a reason to leave.”

Tevis says the staff at the inn is not only professional, but proactive. “Our attendees love it,” Tevis says. “As soon as one event ends, they’re already asking when the following year’s will be.”

Rocky Mountain High

The Broadmoor is one of America’s grandest hotels, designed in Italian Renaissance style and opened in 1918, situated in one of the great towns of the West, Colorado Springs. Just outside your door is 14,110-foot Pikes Peak. And with 744 rooms and cottages, and 185,000 sf of meeting space, it’s a planner’s dream.

Only 70 miles from Denver International Airport, The Broadmoor has Colorado’s only five-star spa, its only five-star, five-diamond restaurant, and 25 retail shops. Outside? Three championship golf courses, hiking, biking, horseback riding, tennis, paddleboats on the lake, rafting, fishing, two pools (and another one indoors) and rock climbing. And Colorado Springs is surrounded by attractions such as the United States Air Force Academy, Cave of the Winds, Garden of the Gods, Royal Gorge, the U.S. Olympic Training Center and the Cog Railway to the top of Pikes Peak.

“We define ourselves as ‘Where European elegance meets Western hospitality,’” says Allison Scott, spokesperson at The Broadmoor. “And we’ve put close to a billion dollars into it’s a planner’s dream.

Down Home in the Quaker State

The Inn at Pocono Manor was built in 1902 as a “Retreat House” by Quakers from Philadelphia and is on the National Registry of Historic Places. The all-season resort, known as “The Grand Lady of the Mountains,” is perched on the top of Little Pocono Mountain, and surrounded by glorious 1930s-era coun-

Bruce Tevis, Field Manager for a major petroleum service company
The Mohonk Mountain House is an elegant Victorian-era hideaway in New York’s Hudson Valley. This was the company’s first meeting in a mountain resort. But it won’t be the last.

“We accomplished all our goals,” Kolodziejczyk says. “And our attendees thought it was a wonderful, change of pace from the usual meeting venue.”

The Heart of Utah

Located in Park City, UT, 25 miles from Salt Lake City, Montage Deer Valley sits amidst the stunning natural beauty of Deer Valley, considered by many to be the top ski area in America. With 220 guest rooms and 55,000 sf of indoor/outdoor space for meetings and events, this resort offers 75-mile views, all the way to Wyoming. It just opened in December with three fine restaurants, the Spa Montage, every conceivable kind of summer and winter recreation, and an ambience reminiscent of the great mountain lodges.

“Meeting planners seem to like the small-town flavor of Park City,” says Kurt Diekhoff, director of sales, “and the outdoor recreation here. We think this leaves attendees more productive.”

Allegheny Mountain Meetings

Located in White Sulphur Springs, WV, The Greenbrier has been welcoming folks to this part of the Allegheny Mountains since 1778. And, if anything, its Early American elegance has grown over the years. There are 710 guest rooms, more than 100,000 sf for meetings, and outdoor patios and lawns for large gatherings.

There’s hiking, biking, trout fishing, skeet shooting, a falconry academy, an off-road driving school, horseback riding, four golf courses, tennis, a spa, 11 restaurants, 25 shops and a movie theater. And there’s even a new 103,000-sf gaming and entertainment venue, in which — in true Greenbrier style — gentlemen are required to wear jackets after seven.

The special ambience here is perhaps best symbolized by the afternoon custom High Tea.

The Homestead, now 245 years old, is a National Historic Landmark in Hot Springs, VA, founded by George Washington. And it’s still a place where people come to “take the waters” of the naturally heated springs. For meeting planners, though, the lure is 483 guest rooms, 72,000 sf of newly renovated and technologically advanced meeting space, all integrated into the resort’s unique Old World ambience.

Nestled in the Allegheny Mountains, the resort’s environs offer a quiet, colorful alternative to urban meeting places with activities such as falconry, three golf courses, a spa, and hiking, biking, canoeing, kayaking and skiing. “Mountain resorts offer attendees a true private getaway that allows them to focus on the business at hand,” says Mike Aylmer, director of sales at The Homestead. “You won’t find any bulletin boards in our lobby with lists of meetings.”

Northeastern Nuggets

The Mohonk Mountain House is 80 miles north of New York City in the Hudson Valley in New Paltz, NY, overlooking spectacular Lake Mohonk. Built in 1869, the turreted, turn-of-the-century Victorian castle sits on 2,200 acres. There’s 13,000 sf of meeting space, 260 guest rooms and a full-service spa. It’s a snow-white wonderland in winter with an 18,000-sf ice skating pavilion, and a colorful recreational retreat in summer that features a 110-year-old historic Scottish golf course.

Stowe Mountain Resort in Stowe, VT, boasts some of the East Coast’s best skiing on Mount Mansfield, the state’s highest mountain. In December, Stowe Mountain Lodge opened its South Wing, doubling the property’s guest room capacity to 312. The lodge is the centerpiece of Spruce Peak at Stowe, a new $400 million alpine neighborhood. Stowe Mountain Resort offers a combined total of 56,000 sf of meeting space including group options at the newly opened Spruce Peak Performing Arts Center.

From Rocky Mountain jewels to Allegheny landmarks, mountain resorts lend a breath of fresh air — and hopefully some fresh thinking — to even the most staid corporate meeting.
Over the past decade, Orlando has evolved from the world-famous home of Mickey Mouse to a mature center of business and one of the country’s premier meeting and convention destinations — whether a theme park foray is on the agenda or not. The evolution has come from a relentless, concerted effort by Visit Orlando (the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau), city and county officials, hoteliers and other industry suppliers to build a brand that is synonymous with successful meetings.

That campaign hit its high-water mark last year, when a Metropoll market survey found that Orlando ranked as the top overall convention site, placing No. 1 among corporate planners.

“Orlando is an easy destination to get to and an easy destination to work with,” says Lisa Zebrowski, CMP, manager of major events at Boston-based global information management technology provider Iron Mountain. Last March, Zebrowski hosted 35 attendees for a five-day meeting at the Hard Rock Hotel at Universal Orlando Resort. “We have people coming in from all over the world to attend our meetings,” adds Zebrowski, who plans about 90 meetings a year, “so it’s important to us that it’s easy to get into and out of. But because of the time of year when we hold some of our most important meetings, the climate is a big factor, too.”

Other key factors that make Orlando so attractive as a destination include “a ton of hotels and a variety of things to do,” she says. “It’s also one of the relatively few destinations where you can bring a large group and stay in a single hotel, such as The Peabody Orlando.”

Leslie Tait, events manager at call center software provider Aspect Software in Chelmsford, MA, is another enthusiastic repeat user of Orlando as a destination. In January 2010, Tait hosted 850 attendees for a five-day meeting at the 584-room Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes.

“I’m tasked with controlling the cost of programs” says Tait, who plans 15–20 meetings a year. “And what I’ve found is that Orlando is very cost-effective for us, in terms of airlift and flights, including for our international attendees. You just can’t beat Orlando for value. For example, on the typical meeting we do in Orlando, we save $50,000 in airfare for an internal program, compared to what we’d pay for the same meeting in a directly competing destination.”

When selecting destinations, Tait also uses a ranking system for airports, based on data from the Bureau of Transportation and Statistics. By that measure, she says, Orlando International Airport is one of the top two or three in the U.S.

Terry Cosentino, director for special events at New York City-based software manufacturer Information Builders, also

What’s Not To Love?

Planners and Attendees Rate it No. 1

Golf programs are back in favor and what better place to play than Orlando. Here a foursome celebrates at Reunion Resort, home to courses by Palmer, Watson and Nicklaus.

By John Buchanan
holds Orlando dear on his roster of regularly used destinations. For him, however, the holy grail is exceptional service. “When I’m planning a meeting, I always say that ‘no’ should not be part of the vocabulary,” says Cosentino, who has been with Information Builders for 20 years and plans more than 100 meetings each year, including destinations across the U.S. and around the world. “And I’ve found that in Orlando, because the destination deals with a lot of children and their parents, there’s a different mindset as far as making sure that everything goes fine. And that if there are any mishaps, that they’re taken care of, and you never, ever see a problem. And I appreciate that level of service, because what a meeting planner always fears is a problem that needs to be corrected immediately. And I’ve found that any resort in Orlando deals with it so creatively and does such a great job, that ‘no’ or the idea of a ‘problem’ is never an issue.”

**New and Renovated**

A key catalyst for Orlando’s accelerating dominance as a top-draw meeting destination has been the dramatic evolution of its hotel inventory as well as major new projects such as the $1.3 billion “medical city” complex in Lake Nona, one of only two medical city communities in the world; the $383 million Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course. The 390-room Holiday Inn & Suites at Universal Orlando completed a $45 million renovation in January of last year. The property features a popular Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course. The 390-room Holiday Inn & Suites at Universal Orlando completed an extensive renovation last October.

The 1,334-room Rosen Centre Hotel, located adjacent to the convention center and one of four major convention properties owned and operated by legendary local hotelier Harris Rosen, has finished work on a pedestrian bridge that connects the property to the OCCC. Rosen Centre is the third hotel property to connect to the OCCC, along with The Peabody Orlando and the Hilton Orlando.

With the recent addition of the 1,020-room newly renovated and rebranded Rosen Inn at Pointe Orlando to the brand’s collection of convention hotels, Rosen Hotels & Resorts now offers four convention properties totaling 4,500 guest rooms and 605,000 sf of meeting and event space.

In addition to Rosen Inn at Pointe Orlando, the independent brand’s collection of convention hotels includes the two award-winning properties that bookend the OCCC — the 800-room Rosen Plaza with 60,000 sf of meeting space and the 1,334-room Rosen Centre with 106,000 sf of meeting space. In addition, the 1,500-room Rosen Shingle Creek with 445,000 sf of meeting space is within a mile of the OCCC. All four hotels are within 15-15 minutes of Orlando International Airport.

The 1,001-room Doubletree Orlando Resort—International Drive has been rebranded as the DoubleTree by Hilton Orlando at SeaWorld. The newly revitalized resort is in a prime location situated on 28 acres of native palm trees and tropical fountains and only 10 minutes from the Orlando International Airport. The property has 60,000 sf of meeting facilities for indoor or outdoor events, including two grand ballrooms. The 750-room Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress completed a $45 million renovation in January of last year. The property features a popular Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course. The 390-room Holiday Inn & Suites at Universal Orlando completed a $45 million renovation in January of last year. The property features a popular Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course.
“And believe it or not, shopping is a very popular recreational activity for meeting attendees. We have fantastic outlet stores. ... There’s just so much to do in and around Orlando. There really is a recreational activity for every taste.”

Dana Cross, Executive Sales and Event Manager
ME Productions
Orlando, FL

Golf and Recreation
Orlando features nearly 200 golf courses, which include some of the most prestigious in the country, such as the famous links at Arnold Palmer’s Bay Hill Club and Lodge, site of the annual Arnold Palmer Invitational tournament on the PGA Tour.

Orlando golf is such a draw for some attendees that last year, five foursomes got together and came in a couple of days before Cosentino’s meeting commenced to get in a couple of rounds.

Golf also plays a role in a number of the meetings Tait plans. “We actually use golf as more of a perk for our speakers and presenters,” she says. “But for meetings involving executives or clients, golf plays a part in the event. In fact, we usually place our Orlando meetings at resort properties that have a golf course and spa. And I love the range of golf and spa properties that Orlando offers now. Our meetings are very intense from a business perspective, so it’s nice to have a great resort that offers those options for attendees to relax and enjoy themselves.”

Orlando also scores well with Zebrowski’s attendees. “We haven’t actually booked a meeting at a golf resort,” she says. “We just make arrangements to get people to the golf courses.” Although honest debate can ensue about which Orlando golf courses offer the best experience, depending on skill level and preferences, there are many of the best golf clinics or academies that Orlando offers now. The 720-room Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate features the Annika Academy, which offers customized Callaway golf-club fitting. The David Leadbetter Golf Academy at the Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate is one of the most highly regarded facilities of its kind, regularly coaching top PGA players. The Grand Cypress Academy of Golf is another place where attendees can master the game, if only for a day. The Faldo Golf Institute by Marriott is another local golf landmark for aspirants to the perfect swing. The Brad Brewer Golf Academy at Shingle Creek Golf Club offers customized programs for individuals and groups as well as team building and a new player session that teaches fundamentals of the game in just four to six hours.

Non-golfers also can enjoy a wide range of choices in the Orlando area. Kennedy Space Center, about 45 minutes from downtown Orlando, is a consistent draw for attendees, says Dana Cross, executive sales and event manager at Orlando destination management company ME Productions. “And believe it or not, shopping is a very popular recreational activity for meeting attendees,” she says. “We have fantastic outlet stores. We also recommend things like a wine tasting tour of Lake Ridge Winery or airboat rides into the Everglades.”

Another popular group property is hot-air balloon rides. “There’s just so much to do in and around Orlando,” Cross says. “There really is a recreational activity for every taste.”
Theme Parks

Although recreation can take many forms in Orlando, the city’s major theme parks — operated by Disney, Universal and Sea World — are its international calling cards. And each offers a broad range of meeting facilities and services, including spectacular entertainment options. But regardless of whether it’s a buyout for the event, or a casual visit for a small group of attendees after hours, Orlando’s famous theme parks deliver a memorable experience.

“For our meeting last June, the highlight was a chance to go to Universal Studios,” says Cosentino. “We did an offsite event there, where we virtually took over Universal Studios. And we were free for four hours to go wherever we wanted. Every attraction was open. We had food and an open bar. It was a great night.”

Cosentino has been an enthusiastic user of Universal for years. “We’ve also done buyouts of the other Universal theme park, Islands of Adventure,” he says. “We were actually one of the first groups to use it when it had first opened up.” Such excursions always score well in post-meeting surveys. “Attendees absolutely love it,” Cosentino says. “They always say they want to go back.”

For Tait, a group outing to a theme park on the final night of her Orlando meetings is a special treat, because until then attendees have been engaged in intense, all-day business meetings for up to five days.

“I typically will do a buyout at either a restaurant or a venue,” Tait says. “And I’ve done a lot at Universal, especially at CityWalk. I’ve also used Disney venues when we used a Disney hotel. For example, we used Typhoon Lagoon for one meeting. Those facilities are a big plus for planners, a real no-brainer, because it makes things so easy. It’s a turnkey option for groups. And it’s something that attendees really like because it’s just fun.”

Zebrowski also has used Disney venues successfully. “We’ve used Pleasure Island at Downtown Disney, and we’ve also used Epcot,” she says. “We did a fantastic awards ceremony at Epcot that went over really well. Last March, we took the group to Universal and to Disney World. We had a smaller group for that meeting, so we could just mingle with the public and reserve sections of the restaurants for our group.”

Like Cosentino, Zebrowski finds that Orlando theme park experiences always generate high scores in post-meeting research. “They’re popular with all of our attendees,” she says. “But especially with our international attendees.”

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of nearly 2 million from 2009. Fresh, new experiences are what corporate meeting attendees expect when they come to Orlando, and Harry Potter and his friends continue to deliver.

Offsite Venues
As a natural extension of its broad and sophisticated theme-park capabilities, the greater Orlando area also offers a wide range of choices in offsite venues and related activities.

For example, planners can choose from a dozen museums. The more traditional options include Orlando Museum of Art, Cornell Fine Arts Museum or the Museum of Arts and Sciences. But there are also notably interesting or eclectic options, such as Fantasy of Flight, which chronicles the history and evolution of aviation, or The Wells’ Built Museum of African American History & Culture.

One of the area’s top offsite venues for groups is the Kennedy Space Center, says Cross. “It’s an amazing place. It’s a great venue for a reception or banquet. That’s especially true of the Saturn V rocket room — that’s the huge rocket that got men to the moon. You can stage a dinner or other major event there and have an astronaut as keynote speaker. Or you can arrange for the group to have lunch or dinner with astronauts. Not a lot of planners realize that.”

Other options include Blue Martini, a highly popular local nightclub, and Corona Cigar Company and Diamond Crown Cigar Lounge. The Velvet Bar at the Hard Rock Hotel, located onsite at Universal Orlando Resort, is a popular option for smaller groups.

Planners with sports-minded attendees also can select a venue from a diverse list. Universal Orlando Resort features a NASCAR Sports Grille and NBA City. Other exciting options include Daytona 500 Experience, Richard Petty Driving Experience and Orlando Harley-Davidson. Brand-name live entertainment venues include House of Blues and Hard Rock Cafe, located in Universal’s CityWalk complex.

“The options and talent pool in Orlando for doing offsite events are phenomenal,” says Tait. “We look for something turnkey, that doesn’t have a lot of moving parts to it. For example, we’ve done events at the Hard Rock Cafe that were very successful. In Orlando, you have a lot of options. You don’t ever feel like the same old jazz trio is the only game in town.”

Zebrowski also praises the range of venue options in Orlando. She tries to mix things up and keep things fresh from meeting to meeting, year to year. “We work hard so that attendees will never think we’re just doing the same old thing all over again,” she says. “Another advantage of Orlando is that there are just so many things you can do.”

Dining and Entertainment
Just as Orlando has meticulously upgraded its general meeting capabilities over the past decade, so too have its dining and entertainment scenes risen to world-class standards.

For meeting planners, the city now offers a vast range of reliable dining options, from established national brands to lesser-known local landmarks. For example, the relatively little-known Victoria and Albert’s at Disney’s Grand Floridian Resort & Spa is one of the most critically acclaimed restaurants in the U.S. and also highly rated by Zagat. It’s expensive, but it’s also intimate, and it offers a period-themed experience based on classical American cuisine prepared as culinary art.

Excellent big-name steak-house options include Capital Grille, Morton’s of Chicago, The Palm and Ruth’s Chris Steak House, as well as beloved, family-owned local competitor Del Frisco’s Prime Steak & Lobster.

Top seafood options include Landry’s Seafood House,
“Our folks just love Orlando. Some people, especially our international attendees, will add a day or two before or after the meeting so they can really enjoy Orlando. And sometimes they even bring their families and enjoy a little personal vacation.”

Leslie Tait, Events Manager
Aspect Software
Chelmsford, MA

Getting Help
Given the staggering list of available options in Orlando, many planners turn to Visit Orlando, the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau, for everything from recommendations on dining or entertainment to meeting services such as onsite registration staffing. Also, attendees can purchase discounted attraction tickets for SeaWorld Orlando, Universal Orlando Resort and Walt Disney World Resort.

"The CVB is another reason I love Orlando," says Tait. "They have a great CVB. I work with them on site visits, and I also use their registration services at the meeting." Cosentino also gives high marks to the CVB. "They are wonderful," he says. "They reach out to you. They are always accessible. You feel like you have a long-distance cousin helping you out. They offer all kinds of services, and they’re always there for you."

Add it all up, and you understand Orlando’s phenomenal rise of recent years. "The city is evolving into a really robust meeting destination," says Tait. "You have the new hotels and the major renovations such as The Peabody. You have upgraded McCormick & Schmick’s and Todd English’s Blue Zoo. Unique, locally themed seafood restaurants include Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. at Universal’s CityWalk, as well as the Flying Fish Café at Disney’s BoardWalk Resort. Other popular seafood choices include The Crab House and Boston Lobster Feast, each with two Orlando locations, and Coral Reef Restaurant at Epcot.

The most critically acclaimed Italian restaurants in town include Bice Ristorante and Primo by Melissa Kelly, which are complemented by longtime local favorites Christmas Ristorante Italiano and Antonio’s at Sand Lake. Particularly popular with attendees are the small neighborhood eateries located in the Vietnamese district of the city, along East Colonial Drive. It’s the best Vietnamese food this side of Vietnam. And it’s inexpensive. By its very nature, Orlando offers an extraordinary roster of after-dinner entertainment possibilities, whether organized for a group or as an individual activity. Two hot-ticket shows are Blue Man Group at Universal and “La Nouba” from Cirque du Soleil at Walt Disney World Resort.

Groups geared toward the performing arts can enjoy an evening of classical music with the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra, or a night at the opera with Orlando Opera Company. For competition-oriented groups, Casino Party Planners can arrange an onsite or offsite private casino experience.

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The Broadmoor, Colorado Springs, CO, has named Tammy Page, CMP, as director of national sales, Midwest region. She formerly served as The Broadmoor’s director of national sales for the Rocky Mountain Region.

The Sheraton San Diego Hotel & Marina, San Diego, CA, has named Patrick Connors as director of sales and marketing. He was director of sales and marketing at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort and Spa, Phoenix, AZ.

The Chicago Convention & Tourism Bureau has announced the promotion of Mark Tunney to senior vice president of sales and services. Tunney formerly served as managing director of convention sales at the bureau.

Beau Rivage, Biloxi, MS, has promoted Mike Davis to director of hotel sales and marketing. He was assistant director of hotel sales.

Hilton Hawaii has named M. Leo Hart as director of sales for Hilton Hawaiian Village Beach Resort & Spa in Waikiki. A 30-year hospitality veteran, Hart most recently served in sales and marketing for Ritz-Carlton.

Jess Johnson was named director of sales and marketing for the Nashville (TN) Marriott at Vanderbilt University. He was director of national accounts at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center in Nashville.
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