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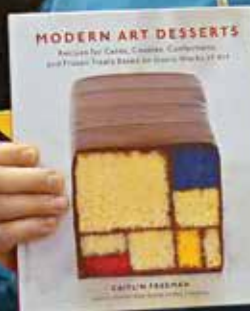
## Show and Tell

### Planners Reveal Exhibitor Retention Tactics

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The Museum Store Association's Executive Director/CEO Jama Rice, MBA, CAE, presents a Buyer's Choice Award to exhibitor George Morris of Random House.

RANDOM HOUSE, INC.



## Hotel Industry Update

Check Out New Programs, More Value for Meeting Planners

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# Sandals

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 By Dave Weil and Pat Dwyer

**On the Cover:** Each year, attendees of the annual Museum Store Association Expo vote for their favorite products in six product categories in the MSA Buyer's Choice Awards, which are designed to give special recognition to the exhibiting companies that have developed the most unique and innovative products. Pictured is a Buyer's Choice Award-winner at MSA's 2013 Expo in Los Angeles.

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## The Virtuous Cycle

Wikipedia defines the economic term “virtuous cycle” as a complex chain of events that reinforces itself through a feedback loop which, unlike a “vicious cycle,” produces favorable results.

In the association world, creating a virtuous cycle is the key to exhibitor retention. Tommy Mayne, vice president of meetings for the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers sums it up quite simply in our cover story: “If we keep exhibitors and increase the numbers, we will make the (profit) margin we need to make. And if you get enough exhibitors, then attendees don’t have to pay as much (registration fees). And if attendees don’t have to pay as much, they show up more. Exhibitors like that.”

The trick of course is to *keep* the exhibitors, and that demands a year-round effort of nurturing vendor relationships in a climate of fierce competition and cyclical economic challenges.

One notable success story is told by the Museum Store Association’s Executive Director/CEO Jama Rice, MBA, CAE, who graces our cover. Nearly 40 of her approximately 250 exhibitors have attended MSA’s annual conference for at least 14 out of the last 15 years. Beyond providing the “big data” exhibitors expect in order to prove ROI, Rice has found that it is just as important to build loyalty by personalizing the process with some old-fashioned recognition and face time: “I have a lot of vendor friendships,” says Rice, “because we have taken time to build those relationships over time.” Adds Lawson Hockman, CEM, V.P. of industry relations at IMN Solutions, “You can use email and social media, but nothing beats a personal relationship with exhibitors — making that personal phone call and going to visit them.”

In our story “Show and Tell” on page 14 and in ViewPoint on page 12, you’ll read more about other effective exhibitor retention strategies, as well as how to avoid and handle setbacks.

Planners can keep the positive energy and excitement high for attendees and exhibitors alike with savvy destination choices, such as Nashville (page 30), which *The New York Times* dubbed “the next big hit,” and New Orleans (page 24), one of *National Geographic Traveler’s* “must-see” destinations in the world.

And don’t miss our hotel industry update on page 18, in which planners are the ones on the receiving end of some relationship nurturing from the hospitality industry — creating yet another virtuous cycle!



Harvey Grotsky  
Publisher

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**PUBLISHER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**  
**Harvey Grotsky**  
harvey.grotsky@themeetingmagazines.com

**CREATIVE DIRECTOR**  
**Mitch D. Miller**  
mitch.miller@themeetingmagazines.com

**MANAGING EDITORS**  
**Susan W. Fell**  
susan.fell@themeetingmagazines.com

**Susan S. Gregg**  
sue.gregg@themeetingmagazines.com

**CONTRIBUTING EDITORS**  
**Karen Brost**  
**John Buchanan**  
**Gabi Logan**  
**Christine Loomis**  
**Derek Reveron**  
**Patrick Simms**

**PRESIDENT & CEO**  
**Harvey Grotsky**

**VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS**  
**David A. Middlebrook**  
david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

**ADVERTISING SALES OFFICES**  
2700 N. Military Trail, Suite 120  
Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394  
561-989-0600 Fax: 561-989-9509  
advertising@themeetingmagazines.com

**CT, DC, MA, MD, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT**  
**David Middlebrook**  
561-989-0600, ext. 114 • Fax: 561-989-9509  
david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

**FLORIDA/CARIBBEAN/BAHAMAS**  
**David Middlebrook**  
561-989-0600, ext. 114 • Fax: 561-989-9509  
david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

**AL, AR, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX**  
**Hutson Lambert**  
228-452-9683 • Fax: 866-419-9580  
hlambert@airmail.net

**CO, IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO**  
**ND, NE, OH, SD, VA, WI, WV**  
**Michael D. Stack**  
847-367-7120 • Fax: 847-276-3421  
michaeldstack@aol.com

**AZ, CA, HI, ID, MT, NM, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY**  
**Marshall Rubin**  
818-888-2407 • Fax: 818-888-4907  
mrubin@westworld.com

**ALASKA/CANADA/MEXICO/INTERNATIONAL**  
**David Middlebrook**  
561-989-0600, ext. 114 • Fax: 561-989-9509  
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to say Yes to anything and everything your team needs!



## Orlando Hosts AIBTM for the First Time

**ORLANDO, FL** — Orlando will host the Americas Incentive, Business Travel & Meetings Exhibition (AIBTM) for the first



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time June 10–12 at the Orange County Convention Center. A leading global exhibition for the U.S. meetings and events industry, AIBTM delivers the highest concentration of North

American Hosted Buyers of any MICE exhibition. There are 18,000 pre-scheduled appointments between buyers and exhibitors expected to take place at AIBTM 2014, a 20 percent increase from 2013.

Planners and exhibitors alike will see many changes to the landscape of Orlando with new hotels, restaurants and attractions that have recently opened. Beginning next year, AIBTM will rotate between McCormick Place in Chicago and the Orange County Convention Center. Orlando will host again in 2016.

“Orlando is one of the top meetings and convention destinations in the world,” said George Aguel, president and CEO, Visit Orlando. “We have an incredible diversity of hotel and resort properties, a world-class convention center recognized annually for its services and amenities, and hospitality that is second to none. Our team at Visit Orlando is working with Reed Travel Exhibitions to ensure a successful meeting for attendees this year.”

AIBTM and Visit Orlando have partnered with B.B. King's Blues Club, Cuba Libre Restaurant & Rum Bar, The Pub and Tommy Bahama Restaurant & Bar for the welcome party at Pointe Orlando, one of the city's popular hot spots.

[www.visitorlando.com](http://www.visitorlando.com), [www.occc.net](http://www.occc.net)

## Pittsburgh's Hospitality, Meeting and Event Industry Organizations Plan Their Own Event

**PITTSBURGH, PA** — More than 200 local hospitality and special events professionals in Pittsburgh attended the “Break the Ice” event in February at the Renaissance Hotel. “The spirit of collaboration represented by members of 10 different Pittsburgh meetings and hospitality organizations to plan this event is indicative of why Pittsburgh is so unique,” said Craig Davis, president and CEO of VisitPittsburgh. “These groups work to ensure that the hospitality and events industries in our community are at the cutting edge, and therefore create better experiences for visitors and residents alike.”

The icebreaker is a collaborative effort, bringing together 10 dynamic organizations to talk about their respective products and help further promote Pittsburgh as an impressive destination for meetings, events and visitation. The event showcases the local tourism and meeting industries and aims to advance them through education and networking, which ultimately enhances experiences in Pittsburgh overall.

The following professional organizations were represented: Destination: Greater Pittsburgh, Greater Pittsburgh Hotel Association, International Special Events Society, Meeting Professionals International, PA Restaurant and Lodging Association, Pittsburgh Society of Association Executives, SKAL International Pittsburgh, Society of Government Meeting Planners, Women in Sports & Events and VisitPittsburgh.

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

## 2014 HSMIA's MEET West Conference Set for June 16–17 in San Diego

**NEW YORK, NY** — The 17th annual HSMIA's MEET West event, presented by Questex Hospitality + Travel, will be held June 16–17 at the Hilton San Diego Bayfront in California. HSMIA's MEET (Meetings, Events, Education, & Technology) expos are trade shows designed for hospitality sales and marketing professionals to present their properties, destinations and services to the industry's leading planners and decision-makers.

Marilyn McHugh, Questex Hospitality + Travel vice president, global events, said HSMIA's MEET West expands “beyond a traditional trade show by connecting suppliers with prospective clients through a hosted buyer appointment-based program and dynamic networking and educational programming. This highly anticipated event will offer top-of-the-line training and development opportunities for meeting and event planning professionals. We are collaborating with HSMIA to build upon the proven popularity of this series of conferences.”

Advance registration is complimentary through June 13 for qualified meeting planners and event professionals.

For exhibitor inquiries and sponsorship opportunities, please contact Victoria Farrell, Questex Travel Group regional account representative, at 212-895-8268 or [vfarrell@questex.com](mailto:vfarrell@questex.com). For more information about HSMIA's MEET series of events, visit [www.MEETConference.com](http://www.MEETConference.com).



Brian Kemp (l), Hughie's Event Production Services, and Craig Davis, CEO of VisitPittsburgh at “Break the Ice.”

## CIC Updates Economic Impact of Meetings Study

**ALEXANDRIA, VA** — The Convention Industry Council (CIC) released an update to the 2009 study on the Economic Significance of Meetings to the U.S. Economy. New figures show significant increases in meeting participants and other categories from 2009 to 2012.

During the 2012 calendar year, 1.83 million meetings were held in the U.S., attended by 225 million participants, providing more than \$115 billion in contribution to GDP to fuel the economy. The contribution of meetings to GDP is greater than the air transportation, motion picture, sound recording, perform-

ing arts and spectator sport industries.

“The data proves organizations continue to value and place a priority on face-to-face meetings, even during a recovering economy,” said Karen Kotowski,

CMP, CAE, chief executive officer of the CIC. “Total economic output of meetings was valued at \$770.4 billion dollars in 2012, a staggering figure. Not only does that mean more meetings held — they were attended by more people.”

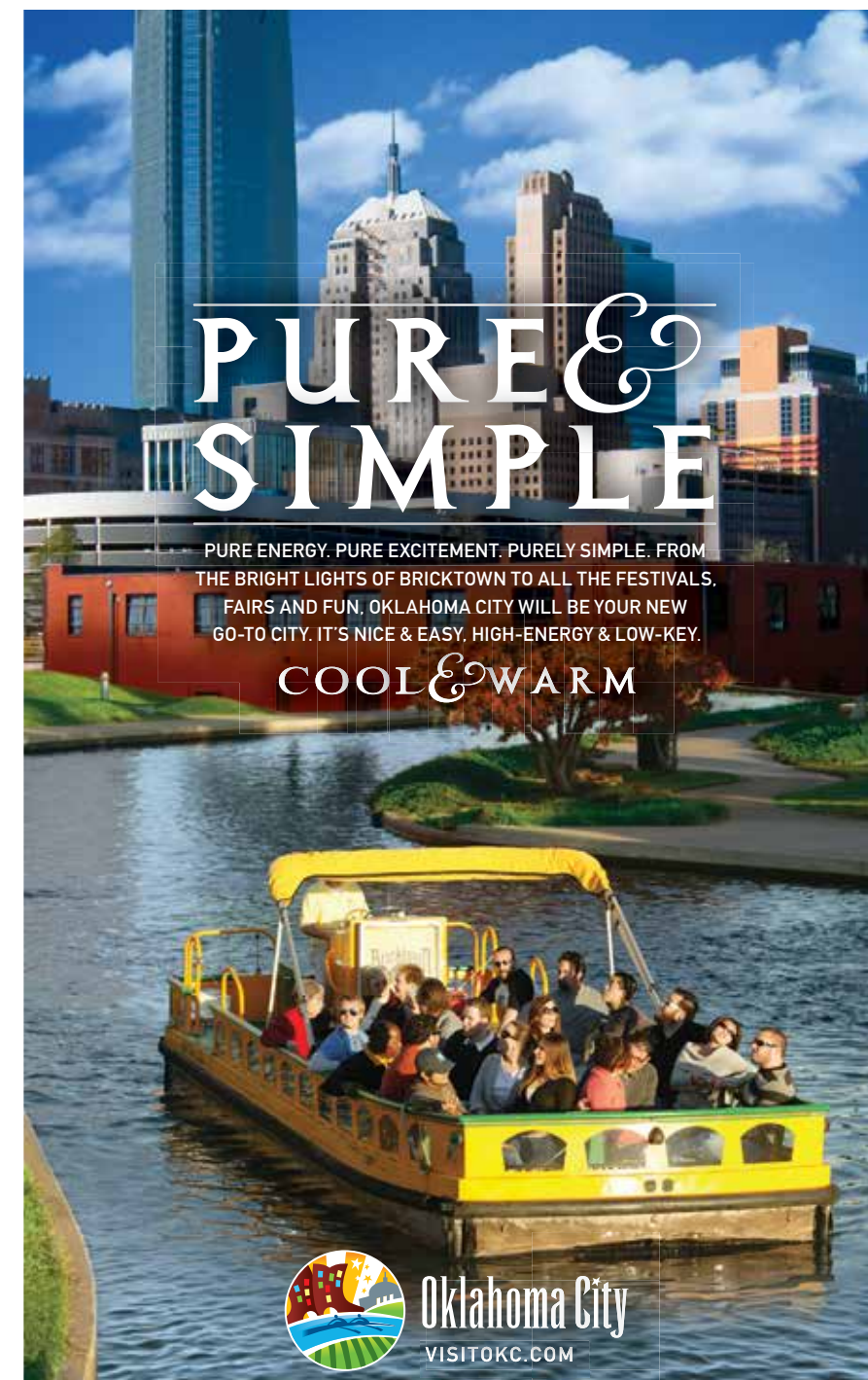
[www.conventionindustry.org](http://www.conventionindustry.org)

## Hyatt Regency Denver at Colorado Convention Center Completes Guest Room Renovation

**DENVER, CO** — The Hyatt Regency Denver at Colorado Convention Center completed the \$23 million redesign of its 1,100 accommodations. The contemporary elements seen throughout the modern hotel are carried in the guest rooms, with clean lines and sparkling, granite-touched baths. Amenities include soft, white linens atop the Hyatt Grand Bed, efficient work stations and an LCD Smart 46-inch television. Also, upgraded Wi-Fi with increased bandwidth adds speed to access.

Hyatt Regency Denver offers 60,600 sf of meeting space including two large ballrooms that can seat up to 3,400 people theater-style. The signature 27th floor Peaks Lounge offers views of the Mile High City and nearby Rocky Mountains. Altitude Restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and dinner daily and features an outdoor patio. Strata Bar and the 24/7 Perks Coffee and More are located conveniently in the lobby. The 6,700-sf health club features a lap pool, outdoor sundeck and whirlpool, and Spa Universaire.

[www.denverregency.hyatt.com](http://www.denverregency.hyatt.com)







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## Hyatt Regency Dallas Enhances Landmark Ballroom



**DALLAS, TX** — Hyatt Regency Dallas recently unveiled the renovation of its 30,000-sf Landmark Ballroom and entry vestibule. The ballroom project included new carpets, light fixtures, banquet furniture, artwork, and upgraded technology and audio-visual tools.

Drawing inspiration from the Texas sunset, which is reflected daily on the hotel façade, the design team created a dramatic, contemporary space. The new design features a series of murals and a vibrant carpet that capture the oranges, reds and light blues of the Texas sky. The carpet's geometric pattern also pays tribute to the iconic geodesic sphere of Reunion Tower, which is adjacent to the space.

Four ceiling light fixtures illuminate the carpet and murals, which are visible no matter how the space is divided. Adaptable for meetings of any size, new operable dividing walls with custom upholstered panels adjust to create two, three or four smaller spaces. New banquet linens and chairs reflect the updated surroundings. In addition, the audio-visual system includes state-of-the-art Wi-Fi running at 100Mbps or more and enhanced video capabilities including an ArKaos Video Mapping System.

The 1,120-room Hyatt Regency Dallas recently completed a \$50 million renovation to guest rooms and hallways.

The hotel features 160,000 sf of public function space including three ballrooms, two exhibit halls, 56 meeting rooms and 42 hospitality suites.

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

## The Best Beach Boardwalk Is in Atlantic City, Says The Travel Channel

**ATLANTIC CITY, NJ** — The Travel Channel's Annual Best Beach Awards of 2014 named Atlantic City's iconic wooden thoroughfare as the "Best Beach Boardwalk" in the world.

The four-mile Atlantic City Boardwalk features an eclectic mix of amenities and activities from bicycle rentals, free volleyball courts and miniature golf to world-class casino hotels, dining, shopping and entertainment. More than 50 convenient and handicapped-accessible walkways and ramps lead to the free, clean beautiful beaches and the new Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville and LandShark Bar & Grill.

On a nightly basis, free 3-D light and sound shows on the façade of historic Boardwalk Hall entertain visitors, and live entertainment is in full swing at several public venues up and down The Boardwalk.

[www.njcrda.com](http://www.njcrda.com), [www.doatlanticcity.com](http://www.doatlanticcity.com)

## Record 14.2 Million Overnight Visitors to Greater Miami and the Beaches in 2013

**MIAMI, FL** — Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau (GMCVB) President and CEO William D. Talbert, III, CDME,



Talbert

announced that travel and tourism's overnight visitors to Greater Miami and the Beaches for calendar year 2013 surpassed another benchmark with a record-breaking 14.2 million

overnight visitors, a 2.2 percent increase over 2012.

"This is the first time the destination has welcomed more than 14 million overnight visitors and marks the fourth consecutive year of record-breaking overnight visitors to the destination," said Talbert. In 2013, Greater Miami and the Beaches welcomed a record 7.13 million international overnight visitors, an increase of 4.4 percent over the previous year and a record 7.09 million domestic overnight visitors, a 0.2 percent increase over the previous year. A record \$22.8 billion in visitor expenditures for 2013 represents an increase of 4.6 percent over 2012.

In 2013, Greater Miami and the Beaches ranked No. 4 in all three categories of revenue per available hotel room (RevPar), hotel room rate, and occupancy among the Top 25 U.S. Hotel Markets. The destination achieved new records in 2013 for RevPar of \$137.60, an increase of 10.1 percent over the previous year. Average daily room rate reached a record (ADR) \$176.66, an increase of 8.1 percent over the previous year, and hotel room occupancy climbed to a record 77.9 percent, a 1.8 percent increase over 2012.

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



Credits: 1. ADMEI; 2. Tampa Convention Center; 3. Chuck Fazio Photography; 4. DMAI; 5. ESPA; 6. CC; 7. Visit Pittsburgh

**1** Award winners at ADMEI's 19th Annual Conference include (back row) Joshua Jones; Staci Loeffler; Bent Hadler, DMCP; Jonni Adams; (front row) Rob Carachilo; Trevor Hanks, DMCP; Rhonda Marko, DMCP, CMP, CMM; Alan Waxler; Liz Keyser, DMCP, CMP; Laurie Sprouse for Beverly Brin, DMCP; and Carol Norfleet, DMCP, CMP. **2** Tampa Convention Center's Eric Blanc (l), CMP, and Rick Hamilton at the Annual Gasparilla Pirate Fest Invasion and FAM. **3** Chuck Fazio and Yulita Osuba at the CSPI 2014 Annual Conference in DC. **4** Capricia Marshall, former U.S. Chief of Protocol; Michael Gehrisch, president & CEO, DMAI; and Martha Sheridan at Destinations Showcase. **5** Paul Ruby, Laura Schwartz, ESPA President Julie Pingston, Devon Sloan and Denise Suttle, at the ESPA 2014 Annual Conference. **6** Hosted by the Convention Industry Council, the Hall of Leaders Recognition Pavilion at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center was unveiled with a ribbon-cutting ceremony. **7** Visit Pittsburgh welcomed meeting planners for the Big Shot Familiarization tour at Billy Joel's concert at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center.



# Exhibitor Retention Strategies

Dave Weil and Pat Dwyer



## Extend Exhibitor ROI Beyond the Trade Show Floor

As an industry professional, you likely already know — because of firsthand experience — that it is easier for associations to keep current members than to recruit new ones. The same can be said for trade show exhibitors. Unfortunately, the economic downturn has forced many companies to reevaluate their involvement in trade shows, from attendance to sponsorships to exhibit booths. This puts immense pressure on event planners to prove tangible return on investment for exhibitors.

However, a formal exhibitor retention plan can do just that. Created with the help of trade show administration, along with your sales and logistics team, a successful retention plan should be a collaborative process that clearly outlines a strategy to identify challenges, build loyalty, create educational opportunities and ultimately improve the overall exhibitor experience to increase ROI.

### BE DATA-DRIVEN

Before creating a retention strategy, you must understand why exhibitors are not renewing. The success of any trade show can be traced back to upfront planning and preparation. Therefore, before doing anything, thoroughly review your previous shows and reevaluate their culture and mission, objectives, and operating policies and procedures. Conduct an analysis to determine trends — is there a particular segment of the industry that is not seeing your show as an important marketing option? Also, have your sales team report any reasons why the companies they are in contact with are not renewing. Is it strictly monetary? Has the company had a shift in their marketing approach or directive from corporate? The responses directly derived from your target audience can help you identify new opportunities to adjust your strategy and address your exhibitors' issues, concerns and challenges.

Furthermore, at the conclusion of every

show, key performance indicators (KPI) should be tracked and measured by the event team. These indicators include changes in square footage, exhibitor segments and overall investment in the show. Flagging any year-to-year changes can assist the team with identifying trends and possible solutions to retain exhibitors. Through this deliberate approach, you can better ensure the success of your trade show.

### REWARD LOYALTY

Once areas of concern are identified, the event staff can implement a variety of tactics to mitigate problem areas and enhance the overall exhibitor and sponsor experience, thus, improving and cementing loyalty to your trade show. Furthermore, establishing loyalty programs for your long-term exhibitors recognizes and further rewards their commitment to the show. By extending your appreciation to those exhibitors who have been with you for a number of years, you might encourage them to support you at a higher level than they might otherwise.



The show floor at EIBTM - The Global Meetings & Incentives Exhibition.

For example, one cost-effective way to have leadership interface with the long-term exhibitors is to have your board and/or committee make personalized visits to assigned exhibitors during the show. It's a simple way to thank the company for participating.

Other exhibitor rewards programs can include discount pricing, special badges, signage to display in their booths, a VIP event and marketing assistance, to name just a few.

### AMP UP EDUCATION

Consider producing several webinars during the months leading up to the show. The webinars would educate exhibi-

look for ways to add value for the exhibitors that go above and beyond what was originally promised and successfully communicate that value. Surprise them with free lead retrieval machines, additional allotment of badges or an appreciation breakfast.

An important aspect of exhibitor and sponsor retention is the ease of doing business with the show producer. Creating an exhibitor resource page or portal is helpful when sharing a variety of details about the show or updating information that has been changed. This can be the one place where you post all of the information that has been sent throughout the year — exhibitor bulletins, FAQs, con-

*A successful retention plan should be a collaborative process that clearly outlines a strategy to identify challenges, build loyalty, create educational opportunities and ultimately improve the overall exhibitor experience to increase ROI.*

tors on how best to implement strategies, perform better as a team, and network with leads and prospects at the show in order to maximize their experience and outcomes. The idea is to provide your exhibitors with tools to ensure their success before, during and after your trade show. Sample topics can be selecting and training sales staff, exhibitor/attendee marketing, attendee engagement strategies, onsite exhibitor customer service and cost-saving ideas to assist with budgeting/financial management. In creating compelling, unique educational offerings for exhibitor staff, you can provide additional value to exhibitors.

### FOCUS ON COMMUNICATIONS

Retention plans also should focus on an open line of communication between exhibitors and event staff. Establishing an Exhibitor Advisory Council, made up of event attendees and exhibitors, allows you to meet directly with companies to discuss their ideas to enhance deliverables in the future (believe us, they'll have ideas!). Always

tact information, taped webinars — anything that an exhibitor would want for their planning process. This is also a great place to remind exhibitors about the unique services you provide and encourage them to take advantage.

The sales process really begins very early on. If you wait until the exhibit space application is sent to your team before you engage with the exhibitor and communicate the value of participating in your trade show, it's too late. The trade show competition is fierce, so make sure your data is accurate and useful, your communications are clear and helpful, and your event team and trade show are viewed as valuable to the exhibitor community. By listening to their needs, showing them how to succeed and telling them what the ROI is for participating in your show, you will realize increased exhibitor retention rates in the future.

*Dave Weil is a vice president and Pat Dwyer is a senior manager in event services at SmithBucklin, an association management and services company. [www.smithbucklin.com](http://www.smithbucklin.com)*



# Show and Tell



Museum Store Association Executive Director/CEO Jama Rice, MBA, CAE, at the 2013 Annual Meeting & Museum Expo in Baltimore. (Inset) Rice with Buyer's Choice Award-winners from Solmate Socks at the 2013 MSA Expo in Los Angeles. The awards, voted on by attendees, give special recognition to exhibiting companies with the most innovative products.

By Derek Reveron

## Planners Reveal Their Exhibitor Retention Tactics

**'S**how and tell" brings to mind kindergarteners standing in front of the class proudly expounding on their most prized possessions. For association meeting and convention planners, a calculated exhibitor "show and tell" strategy is necessary to keep their most prized "possessions" coming back year after year.

Exhibitors, after all, are the financial lifeblood of associations, providing funds for member benefits and activities. But the frag-

ile economy has exhibitors trimming their trade show budgets — and perhaps reallocating larger slices of marketing budgets to online advertising. So the pressure is on for planners to justify participation by proving return on investment; and to nurture exhibitor relationships before, during and after the show. It's a crucial challenge, as it costs less time and money to keep exhibitors than to acquire new ones.

That's why organizations such as the Museum Store Association (MSA), whose members include museum store professionals and their vendors, are redoubling efforts to retain their exhibitors.

While the MSA hasn't significantly increased its number of exhibitors over the last few years, the organization has attracted 250 to 260 exhibitors to each of its annual conferences during that time. "That, to us, is a bit of a success story in this economy because of the economic challenges our members face and the market we are in," says Jama Rice, MBA, CAE, executive director/CEO of the MSA. She is especially proud of the number of long-time exhibitors. Nearly 40 exhibitors have attended the conference for at least 14 out of the last 15 years.

The MSA's success stems from ongoing exhibitor retention efforts. For example, the MSA is in the process of rolling out a new exhibitor services program. Previously, exhibitors contacted various MSA officials and third-party vendors for MSA services such as exhibit sales; advertising in the organization's magazine and on its website and newsletter; and sponsorships and proprietary online product directory. The new program provides one point of contact within the MSA for all services.

### STAND BY ME

Another key to the MSA's retention plan involves maintaining good communication and relationships with exhibitors. "I have a lot of vendor friendships because we have taken time to build those relationships over time," says Rice. "So in years when it's a little tough and you don't have as many members coming as you would like due to economic challenges, exhibitors will still stand by you because they appreciate the relationship you have."

The MSA reaches out to exhibitors at its trade show as well as those of competitors. "At our trade show me and my staff visit each exhibitor and take them a little gift," says Rice. "We discuss how it's going and note any suggestions or ideas. It's an effort to listen. Our exhibitors go to lots of shows over the year. I travel to those shows and so do our board members. We make a point to visit all the vendors at those shows to discuss how it's going."

Exhibition industry experts say that constant communication is paramount because it can identify exhibitors' issues before they consider leaving. "You can use email and social media, but nothing beats a personal relationship with exhibitors — making that personal phone call and going to visit them," says Lawson Hockman, CEM, vice president of industry relations for IMN

*"In years when it's a little tough and you don't have as many members coming as you would like due to economic challenges, exhibitors will still stand by you because they appreciate the relationship you have."*



Jama Rice, MBA, CAE  
Executive Director/CEO  
Museum Store Association  
Denver, CO

Solutions, an Arlington, VA-based conference and trade show management company. "We make sure we know their products, their market trends and competitors to make sure we reflect that when talking to them," says Hockman, who was a panel member in sessions on exhibitor retention at the 2012 International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE) and the 2014 Convening Leaders annual conference and trade show of the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA).

### SELLING RELATIONSHIPS

Hockman advises associations to focus more on cementing relationships with potential exhibitors than selling exhibitor space. "What I see in a lot of cases are too many exhibit salespeople (for associations) that are order-takers just trying to make a sale," he says. "But to keep the show strong, you must have salespeople who are also very good with customer relations. It's about selling relationships. If there is a strong relationship, in a lot of cases, if somebody is on the fence about leaving a show, they may give you good feedback on their concerns and stay."

The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) undertakes several efforts to strengthen exhibitor relationships. "We send them emails, we meet with them face-to-face, we have chapters in every major city in the world that provide technical education programs," says Tommy Mayne, vice president of meetings for the IEEE. "The latest thing we are doing is social media. We market on LinkedIn the most with forums on industry trends, technology and others issues."

The IEEE also encourages exhibitors to promote the organization's trade show to potential attendees, thus creating more possible customers for all exhibitors. "Exhibitors are a marketing piece for us as well," says Mayne. "We supply exhibitors with materials to put the conference in the minds of their customers. So when exhibitors call on engineers throughout the year, they can talk to them about coming to the conference. That works very well."

The outreach strategies contribute to the IEEE's success. The organization has an exhibitor retention rate of 65 to 70 percent at its annual IEEE Power and Energy Society Transmission & Distribution Conference & Exposition, which is held every two





Lawson Hockman, CEM  
Vice President, Industry Relations  
IMN Solutions  
Arlington, VA

***“You can use email and social media but nothing beats a personal relationship with exhibitors — making that personal phone call and going to visit them.”***

years. The group expects about 780 exhibitors this year compared to 704 in 2012 and 560 in 2010, says Mayne.

### ATTENDEE AUDITS

Maintaining good communication with exhibitors also involves providing them with feedback from surveys, or audits, of attendees. Audits can help associations provide what exhibitors value most of all — quality attendees who are potential customers. Attendee quality is the top factor exhibitors consider when deciding whether to exhibit, according to 2011 study by the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR). The second and third most important factors were return on investment (54 percent) and positive past performance (50 percent).

David Dubois, CAE, CMP, FASAE, CTA, president and CEO of IAEE, offers the following advice about audits to associations: “Don’t be afraid to audit your attendees,” he advises. “Let’s say you have two competitive shows. One gets 10,000 people and the other gets 12,000 people. They are equally priced, and both have great sessions and a great reputation. I’d go with the show that audits.”

Dubois adds that, when it comes to audits, the IAEE believes in leading by example. “We have an audit done of our attendees every year within 30 to 45 days of our annual meeting and exhibition,” says Dubois. “When exhibitors decide to exhibit and sponsors decide to sponsor, they want big data. They want to know who the attendees are and how many potential buyers attend.”

The IAEE makes its audit results available in materials provided to exhibitors when marketing exhibit space. Representatives of the IAEE also have the audit results at their fingertips when talking to potential exhibitors. “If a convention center in Asia wants to know how many of the buyers we have do business in

Asia, we need to be able to say it’s 25 or 30 percent, which is actually what it is,” says Dubois.

The IAEE’s audits cover several areas, including the following: How many exhibitors are executives? What is the lead time for making purchases? Is exhibit cost most important or are there other factors? How is the show traffic?

Last year’s audit also assessed what exhibitors thought of a change in the annual meeting and exhibition format. “The conference changed from a one-day, six-hour show to a two-day show of three hours each day,” says Dubois. “We asked how that format went. Did you have enough traffic on the second day? Did you like the floor plan? Are there any recommendations on how we can improve traffic on the show floor?”

When possible, the questions in an audit should be geared to the exhibitors’ industry. It’s also best to change things up. “About every year, we have the audit refreshed with different questions,” says Dubois. “The best way to do it is to let an exhibitor advisory committee identify survey questions for the audit that will best serve their needs.”

Hockman suggests making the audit as thorough as possible without making it too long. He says, “I always want to know future buying needs and dates of possible purchases. Is there a preferred exhibitor? Are they receptive to buying from other exhibitors? How much will they spend over a certain period of time? And, will it be spent domestically or in the global market?”

### BRINGING EXHIBITORS ONBOARD

An exhibitor advisory committee (EAC) is another valuable tool for retaining exhibitors. Every association can define its EAC’s size, structure and role depending on the organization’s needs. For example, about a year ago, the MSA added an exhibitor to its board to allow members to get direct feedback on issues, suggestions and concerns, says Rice. “The representative has become somebody other exhibitors talk to because he speaks their language. He has provided a great deal of input to the board, and we share the information with all exhibitors.”

**Experts offer the following advice on organizing an EAC:**

- Include large and small exhibitors that offer a variety of services and products.

(Above) Keeping exhibitors happy and the trade show floor full requires a year-round retention strategy.  
Credit: Tradeshow Logic



- Limit the group to 10–12 members. Large committees can become unwieldy.
- Don’t select only friends of association executives or only long-time vendors.
- Focus on issues that will improve the show for both exhibitors and attendees.
- Act on good recommendations so exhibitors won’t become discouraged.
- Share the EAC’s suggestions and resulting actions with exhibitors.

### HANDLING SETBACKS

Inevitably, despite the best retention efforts, every association must deal with exhibitors who decide to withdraw from a conference or trade show. How should planners and associations respond to exhibitors who want to pull out?

Dubois suggests that planners use a low-key approach with exhibitors: “We appreciate your support. We will continue to send you research from our audit. If it’s okay with you, can I talk to you after next year’s show to see if you would be interested in coming back?”

In addition, Dubois adds, “Sometimes such a soft touch works because their sales may drop after they leave. And sometimes they get business from the show but didn’t track it back into their database accurately, so they decide not to return.”

Dubois also suggests leaving the door open for dissatisfied advertisers and sponsors who eventually could return as exhibitors. “An advertiser spent \$3,000 to be in our online directory a few years ago,” says Dubois. “He wanted his money back after a year because he got one lead. I asked the salesperson to give him half of his money back and try to keep him as a member. I said tell him respectfully that perhaps that wasn’t the right place to spend his marketing dollars. We wanted to satisfy him because, instead of advertising online, he might buy a booth one year. You never know.”

Hockman advises the following approach with exhibitors who



Tommy Mayne  
Vice President of Meetings  
Institute of Electrical and  
Electronics Engineers  
Lacombe, LA

***“We supply exhibitors with materials to put the conference in the minds of their customers. So when exhibitors call on engineers throughout the year, they can talk to them about coming to the conference. That works very well.”***

***“Don’t be afraid to audit your attendees. ...When exhibitors decide to exhibit and sponsors decide to sponsor, they want big data. They want to know who the attendees are and how many potential buyers attend.”***



David Dubois, CMP, CAE, FASAE, CTA  
President and CEO  
IAEE  
Dallas, TX

consider leaving: “Sit down with them and find out why they feel that way. Build a plan to keep them. Look at who is attending the show to make sure it’s getting the people they need to see. In some cases, the right people are at the show but not coming to the exhibitor’s display for some reason. Help them build a program to make sure these people stop by their display.”

As part of the conversation, Hockman advises, planners should mention the benefits of exhibiting other than leads and sales, such as promotional value over the long run. “But sometimes the problem is a weak brand. Help them rebuild their brand through sponsorships, education programs and webinars,” says Hockman.

Catherine Perkins, who is a coordinator of event services for four associations and senior coordinator, events services, Smith Bucklin, offers this advice: “I would work with the exhibitors to find out their goals and how we can help them get there. For a technology association, we had one of our biggest exhibitors and sponsors want to pull out after coming for about four years. The sales team worked with them, and they ended up coming after all.”

The exhibitor decided to come after scaling back its presence. “They downsized their sponsorship package but maintained their 10-by-20 booth,” says Perkins. “Our goal is to eventually get them back to that sponsorship level. In the coming year, we will have a sit-down meeting with them to discuss their plans.”

The PCMA session that included Hockman advised that associations ask themselves the following key questions:

- Do you have an exhibitor retention plan?
- What was your exhibitor retention rate from your last major annual trade show?
- Is your exhibition strategy aligned with the times?

Keeping exhibitors happy ensures a cycle of success. As Mayne puts it, “If we keep exhibitors and increase the number, we will make the (profit) margin we need to make. And if you get enough exhibitors then attendees don’t have to pay as much (registration fees). And if attendees don’t have to pay as much, they show up more. Exhibitors like that.”

Also see “How to Extend Exhibitor ROI Beyond the Trade Show Floor” on page 12.



# Robust, Good Heath of the Hotel Industry

## Leads to New Programs and More Value for Meeting Planners

By John Buchanan

**A**s the association meeting market returns to robust health, hotel partners play a more important role than ever in the success of conventions, conferences and other events.

And as the hotel industry returns to good health, there has been a wave of new property development, renovations, and the creation of new services and benefits for meeting planners and attendees.

*Association Conventions & Facilities* surveyed a who's who list of major meeting industry hoteliers to see who's doing what — and why planners should do business with them.

### CAESARS ENTERTAINMENT

Caesars Entertainment is one of two titans in the convention and gaming industry, operating a portfolio of major Las Vegas meeting and convention hotels that includes the landmark Caesars Palace, as well as the Flamingo, Rio All-Suite Hotel and Planet Hollywood.

Other major brands include Harrah's and Bally's.

Despite the tremendous brand awareness the company enjoys in Las Vegas, many planners may not be aware that Caesars operates a total of 40

properties across the U.S. Caesars also operates high-profile properties in Lake Tahoe, the Gulf Coast and across the Midwest.

Now that Las Vegas has fully recovered its might as one of the country's most dominant association convention destinations, Caesars has commenced an aggressive development slate.

It's no accident that Caesars Entertainment enjoys its giant reputation in the meeting and convention industry, says Michael Massari, vice president of meeting sales and operations - Las Vegas.

"We have wonderful meeting and event venues from one end of the country to the other," he says. "But our real goal has always been to make the meeting planner successful with things that are more intangible. Our organizational structure has everyone who touches a meeting at any of our properties under a single leadership umbrella. It also puts salespeople in the communities where our customers are, so they can get to know them and provide a more personal level of attention and service."

One innovation that has proven wildly popular with meeting planners is the company's one-stop-shop philosophy, which makes it easy for planners



Massari

to seamlessly mix and match properties and venues within a destination, with one contact, one contract and one F&B minimum. "Planners can also take advantage of alternative venues like restaurants, lounges and nightclubs and have a portion of their spend apply to their catered F&B minimum," Massari says. "We also recognize and reward planners in two ways: our Total Rewards program allows planners to earn reward credits for their meetings and events, and then use those credits for future meetings or individual rewards. In addition, when they book a meeting with us, they're automatically upgraded to Diamond Status, which provides a host of VIP benefits and services when they visit any of our properties."

As for the needs and interests of planners, Massari says, personalized service and attention to individual events is another things that sets Caesars apart.

"In our business there really is no one-size-fits-all," he says. "Fortunately, we have the benefit of getting to sit down with each and every customer and ask them what they're trying to achieve, what their needs are, and then crafting a custom solution that is just for them. The things I mentioned that we've put in place over the years — our organizational structure, one-stop-shop philosophy, alternative venues program, Meeting Diamond and Total Rewards programs — these are all things we created to make us more flexible and easier to work with, and to let the planner choose what they wanted and needed from us. The good thing is, this approach is timeless, and doesn't need to change with the economic climate or adapt to trends. It is always, simply, about giving the customer what they want."

For more information and a list of properties, visit [www.cetmeetings.com](http://www.cetmeetings.com).



Luteran

### HILTON WORLDWIDE

Hilton Worldwide is arguably one of the most respected individual hotel brands within the meeting industry.

The company operates a whopping 3,500 U.S. hotels across 10 brands.

Its most important meeting-related brands are Conrad Hotels & Resorts, Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts, Hilton Hotels & Resorts and DoubleTree by Hilton, according to Larry Luteran, senior vice president,

group sales and industry relations.

Hilton's mission in the meeting industry is clear-cut, Luteran says. "Our mission for meetings is to be the first choice for meetings globally and to ensure the highest level of service excellence," he says. "When our clients come to us for a convention, conference or meeting, we sincerely listen to the requests and

wishes that will make their event extra special. And then — the most important part — we deliver. We strive to meet the expectations of each customer we work with.

"We also provide a number of tools for meeting and event planners such as Connect+, an online portal that gives instant access to event management tools and everyday solutions, to Meetings Simplified, a service that offers our services and facilities for groups of 25 attendees or less," Luteran says.

On the planner side, Luteran says, tight budgets continue to be a challenge. "Planners are being asked to produce great results with smaller budgets. Therefore, planners have to be more creative, and our hotels have to be better equipped to help produce the resources they need."

Hilton Worldwide, he says, "is focused on enhancing our products and tools to create great experiences for our group customers. We continually examine every aspect of the customer experience to evaluate areas for enhancement, from our sales processes, pricing, online tools, contracts, Hilton HHonors program and sales structure. Hilton Worldwide has always been a leader in the meetings business, and we strive to continually improve and evolve."

For more information and a list of properties, visit [www.hilton.com](http://www.hilton.com).



Marr

### STARWOOD HOTELS & RESORTS

Over the last decade, Starwood Hotels & Resorts has worked relentlessly to become one of the world's premier operators of meeting and convention hotels, notes David Marr, senior vice president, brand marketing.

As a company that serves meeting planners, "Starwood is laser-focused on strengthening the existing relationships with our customers and developing new accounts to be the partner of choice," Marr says. "We are confident

that our diverse brands and ever-growing global portfolio will drive our strategy to continue to outperform the market and grow share. We strive to be the easiest company to do business with by deploying our teams the way customers buy and instilling a culture of being reliable, flexible, responsive, proactive and focused on creative solutions. We capitalize on setting the trends with our innovative eye to draw greater loyalty from our customers and guests. We are dedicated to personalizing our sales and service approach tailored to the unique behaviors of our customers — not only to stand out from the competition, but to ensure relevant value to our customers and their overall experience with Starwood. Our ongoing strategy is built with this personalization effort front-and-center, including our group offers."

In terms of keeping their finger on the pulse of meeting plan-



ner goals and demands, Marr says, “Groups are still hyper-focused on their bottom line and value, requiring an even greater need to convey the importance of the actual meeting and its value to attendees. The environment today is...people staying for fewer nights and in some cases attendees who’ve chosen to stay at lower priced accommodations — reiterating the importance of driving relevant value and broad loyalty. Besides our efforts at being the easiest company to do business with for ease and efficiencies perspective for our customers, there continues to be a need for collective collaboration. Starwood, in particular on the meeting side, develops programming to help our customers construct creative ideas. Our consultative mindset and tools complement the process to ensure a unique and personalized experience with Starwood.”

Starwood operates 577 U.S. properties under the Sheraton, Le Meridien, W Hotels, St. Regis and Luxury Collection brands.

For more information and a list of properties, visit [www.starwoodhotels.com](http://www.starwoodhotels.com).



Leong-Lyons

#### HYATT HOTELS

Hyatt Hotels is another of the most time-tested and respected hotel brands in the meeting industry.

Hyatt Hotels Corporation currently operates 386 hotels in the U.S., according to Rodahl Leong-Lyons, vice president, sales operations, the Americas.

Hyatt’s primary meeting industry goal, Leong-Lyons says, “is to make a difference in the lives of those we touch every day. That means

providing meeting experiences that are meaningful and memorable. Meaningful and memorable mean different things to different people. It is our job to understand their definition and deliver. That is easier said than done. But our people have a passion for caring and a talent for delivering. These are the people I trust to take care of my clients, and they often make me look good in the process. I trust them immensely.”

Key trends Leong-Lyons is seeing from planners include a new focus on F&B. “Local and healthy is the new normal,” Leong-Lyons says. “A variety of choices and gluten-free options are vital to satisfying the expectations of meeting attendees.”

Meeting décor, Leong-Lyons says, “has shifted to natural and non-traditional settings like outdoor spaces, farms, universities and museums, all of which bring a different flair and a renewed meeting environment and energy.”

Technology also is a hot topic so far this year. “The Internet is like air,” Leong-Lyons says. “It has to be everywhere in all

areas of the venue for different devices. People now insist on staying connected — no matter where they are.”

Meanwhile, meeting budgets remain largely flat, Leong-Lyons says. “As a result, both planners and suppliers will have to be creative in delivering a memorable experience.”

Recycling and corporate social responsibility platforms also are now expected by many planners, according to Leong-Lyons. “Associations are working with suppliers to reduce their carbon footprint. Being green is not a clear-cut differentiator anymore. Meetings where attendees participate in community outreach events, to give back as part of an event, are gaining more and more popularity.”

For more information and a list of properties, visit [www.hyatt.com](http://www.hyatt.com).



Himelstein

#### LOEWS HOTELS & RESORTS

Loews Hotels & Resorts is a small operator with a big footprint in the meetings industry as a result of its upscale and uniquely appointed properties.

The company operates 17 hotels in the U.S. and one in Montreal, Canada, under the Loews brand.

It operates hotels in some of the country’s most popular association meeting destinations such as Washington, DC, New York, New

Orleans, Nashville and Orlando.

“Last year was a year of growth and expansion for Loews Hotels & Resorts, and 2014 will continue on the same path,” says Bruce J. Himelstein, CMO. “The company has committed nearly \$1 billion to the industry between new builds, new acquisitions and renovations of existing properties.”

The brand also was the first hotel company to allow guests to book rooms via Twitter with their Social Reservations launch in November 2013 and recently announced that all properties will now offer complimentary Wi-Fi throughout all guest rooms and public areas.

“These changes and expansions allow us to continue to be a leader in providing first-class meetings and events services in all of our destinations,” Himelstein says. “At every Loews Hotel, our signature mix of innovation and expertise creates a standard of quality that is hard to match. We combine flawless execution with the local flavor that is our calling card. Whether your group is 10, 100 or over 1,000 strong, Loews Hotels provides the room you need with all the courtesy and professionalism you’ve come to expect from any of our 18 North American destinations.

“From a variety of spaces to award-winning, personalized service, Loews lets you enjoy your event knowing everything is

running smoothly,” Himelstein says. “We know it’s about peace of mind for our meeting planning clients. They’ve put everything into their event’s success, and with Loews, you’ll know we’ve done the same.”

Over the next several years, Loews Hotels & Resorts will continue its efforts to grow its portfolio of hotels, targeting gateway cities and resort destinations, Himelstein says.

Meanwhile, Himelstein sees planners focusing on quick response times and true value.

“In regard to quick response, this starts at the beginning with the RFP process through the actual execution of the meeting,” he says. “At Loews Hotels, we have staffed and deployed teams to respond to RFPs within four hours of receipt. Additionally, Loews Hotels has a program across all of our hotels called Loews LINC, which provides planners with a go-to resource for all their needs during a conference or event. Every meeting room big or small has a phone line, which runs directly to the LINC.”

Himelstein defines true value in today’s market as “providing more for less.”

Planners today are even more budget-conscious than ever, he says. “However, they are still looking for hotels to deliver high-quality, unique meetings within that budget. Loews Hotels has

introduced several offers and ways to help planners achieve this. One example is our Customized Meetings Packages, where the culinary and conference management teams literally sit down with planners and create a meeting experience tailored to their needs and budgets.”

For more information and a list of properties, visit [www.loewshotels.com](http://www.loewshotels.com).



Dominguez

#### MGM RESORTS INTERNATIONAL

Like Caesars Entertainment, MGM Resorts International is a Las Vegas-based hotel company best known for its world-famous Las Vegas landmarks, such as Bellagio, MGM Grand, The Mirage and Mandalay Bay.

Other Las Vegas properties include Aria Resort & Casino and Vdara Hotel & Spa at its vast CityCenter complex, The Signature at MGM Grand, THEHotel at Mandalay Bay, Monte Carlo, New York-New York,

Luxor, Excalibur and Circus-Circus.

But MGM Resorts also operates meeting and convention



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properties Beau Rivage and Gold Strike on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi and MGM Grand Detroit.

Despite its flurry of development, MGM Resorts International remains strongly focused on serving meeting planner customers, says Michael Dominguez, senior vice president of sales.

“MGM Resorts International remains group-focused with an emphasis on a seamless meetings experience when serviced at an MGM Resorts destination,” he says. “We want to be the go-to company of choice in Las Vegas for groups because of our expertise, diverse and quality offerings, and our commitment to making the process easy. We also are fair, consistent and, most importantly, transparent with our partners.”

MGM Resorts has launched a Meetings Rewards Program that allows planners to benefit from group room revenue spent during their meeting. **“MGM Resorts is a thought leader in the meetings industry and is committed to the professional growth of this industry, so many of the rewards can be redeemed towards certification programs, educational programs and even membership to industry organizations,”** Dominguez says.

Across the desk, where planners sit, Dominguez sees event-related technology as a critical issue. “The planner today is being challenged with the explosion in technology, usage and the curation of content,” Dominguez says. “MGM Resorts is partnering with the appropriate companies in the industry that focus on business solutions to these challenges.”

For more information and a list of properties, visit [www.mgmresorts.com](http://www.mgmresorts.com).



Faust

## OMNI HOTELS & RESORTS

Omni Hotels & Resorts is a small operator with a big reputation for innovation and service within the meeting industry. The company operates luxury properties that are optimized in terms of facilities and amenities for state-of-the-art meetings and conferences.

The company operates 59 U.S. properties under just one brand — Omni Hotels & Resorts, according to Tom Faust, vice president, sales.

Omni also takes a very precise approach to the association meetings market.

“Omni Hotels & Resorts understands everything that goes into a successful meeting,” Faust says. “The brand’s distinctive properties offer versatile meeting space, exquisite banquet cuisine and impeccable service. Additionally, Omni has a dedicated sales team that listens to planners’ needs and understands their programs.”

Omni “can meet any need with its large portfolio of meeting venue options — be it a city-center hotel, an activity-rich resort or

a spacious convention property,” Faust says. “The properties’ stylish ballrooms, breakout rooms and boardrooms are the perfect settings for hosting executive presentations, national conferences or major meetings. Each property features state-of-the-art technology and full-service business centers (some are open 24 hours) — many of which feature a notary public, printing and secretarial services.”

Omni offers exclusive deals and discounts for meeting planners and money-saving value dates at select properties. Omni Select Rewards is a program that rewards meeting planners or their organization in a number of different ways. **“Planners simply need to book a qualified meeting and then choose from a variety of rewards, such as gift cards, master account credits, professional development or a charitable donation,”** Faust says. **“The choice is theirs.”**

Faust also keeps his finger on the pulse of what meeting planners are asking for or are concerned about.

“High-speed Internet access available throughout the hotel and state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment is a must-have to ensure meetings go off without a hitch,” he says. “To that end, Omni has partnered with AVT Event Technologies (AVT), who has outfitted meeting rooms with the most advanced, creative meeting technology available including custom event products, high-speed Internet Access (HSIA), Wi-Fi, rigging and power distribution. AVT also provides meeting planners with a single onsite technology partner that takes their meetings and events from ordinary to extraordinary. Omni also offers complimentary Wi-Fi in public spaces.

“Furthermore,” Faust continues, “Omni has created a customized meeting planner mobile application, optimized for the iPad. The mobile app was created for meeting planners to use while conducting meetings at our luxury properties. While built for iPads, the tool also can be used across various mobile devices. Not only does it eliminate the need for reams of paper, it helps planners expedite a number of activities from menu and floor-plan reviews to session changes and environmental requests. The mobile app, which works via an iPad supplied to the planner when they arrive at the hotel or they can use their own device, is pre-loaded with the details for the specific meeting, including BEOs, group resumé, agendas and interactive floor plans. Meeting planners can simply tap a few buttons to make a request of the Omni team.”

In addition, Omni offers an annual “Be Collaborative” program, which is a professional development series offered to meeting planners across the nation. The theme of the program differs by year, but the overall objective remains the same: provide insight on how clients and suppliers can understand and appreciate each other’s perspectives and offer insight on partnering to collaboratively overcome obstacles to their mutual satisfaction. The half-day program, conducted road-show style at various Omni hotels across the country, centers on professional and personal development, followed by a networking cocktail hour. Each session features a

notable expert speaker and professional development content presented by an industry expert.

For more information and a list of properties, visit [www.omnihotels.com](http://www.omnihotels.com).



Pierce

## WYNDHAM HOTEL GROUP

Based on its size alone, Wyndham Hotel Group qualifies as a major hotel operator in the meeting industry.

The company currently operates about 5,720 U.S. hotels under the umbrella brand Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, with three tiered brands that include Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, Wyndham Grand and Wyndham Garden, according to Keith Pierce, executive vice president, brand operations. Select Ramada and Dream locations also cater to meetings and events.

Wyndham promotes itself as a global vendor to meeting planners, catering to both domestic and international association conferences and meetings.

Wyndham promotes itself as a global vendor to meeting planners, catering to both domestic and international association conferences and meetings.

“With over 140 hotels globally as of September 30, 2013, the upper-upscale Wyndham Hotels and Resorts brand is committed to providing high-quality accommodations, excellent service and functional venues for meeting planners and guests in top meetings destinations around the world,” Pierce says. “Our properties have the space and resources planners need to put on effective events, whether they require full conference centers, a ballroom for 250, or intimate meeting rooms for small gatherings. Properties offer the latest in ergonomic design, state-of-the-art audio-visual services, business services, catering and customizable menus, high-speed Internet and dedicated onsite staff to help meetings and events run smoothly and efficiently.”

Pierce adds that at Wyndham, “we understand that planners are looking for valuable offerings, amenities and experiences. To help them gain perks when booking with us, our Wyndham Event Rewards program lets planners earn points for every event booked and held at a Wyndham Hotels and Resorts location. For every dollar spent, planners earn 10 Wyndham Event Reward points — up to 1

**million points per program or event. Points can be redeemed for a variety of options including free nights at top Wyndham destinations around the world, airline tickets, gift cards and more.**

Once a planner books an event at a participating Wyndham location, Pick Your Perk by Wyndham Event Rewards gives them even more rewards, as they can choose their reward of savings, reward cards, points and more. More information is available at [www.wyndham.com/about-us/rewards](http://www.wyndham.com/about-us/rewards).

As for the things planners are most interested in these days, Pierce cites that planners are primarily looking for value. “While the economy has improved, there is still a vested interest in controlling costs without sacrificing quality or effective events for their attendees,” he says.

“Additionally, they’re on the hunt for the next big idea and innovation, something that will draw in their attendees and inspire their groups to engage and connect. From unique team-building events to customizable menus, state-of-the-art facilities and Wyndham Event Rewards, our Wyndham properties give planners the memorable experiences, flexibility and value they’re looking for.”

For more information and a list of properties, visit [www.wyn.com](http://www.wyn.com).

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# The Big Easy

By Christine Loomis

## Better Than Ever, New Orleans Is a Model for Creative Reinvention

New Orleans is a brilliant testament to persevering through challenging times. It's a model for embracing change, creative planning and for calling on its top thinkers and doers to help it emerge better and stronger than ever.

Associations have faced their own challenges in recent years, including an economic downturn impacting everything from meeting sites to membership numbers, which makes The Big Easy a perfect setting for association conferences. NOLA's indomitable spirit and success in reinventing itself easily provide inspiration for meetings, members and leadership.

"Our city is thriving," says Stephen Perry, president and CEO

of the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau. "In 2014, we will host major events such as the NBA All-Star Game and WrestleMania XXX."

That's on the heels of 2013, an incredible year starting with Super Gras, when Super Bowl XLVII was held during Mardi Gras, and finishing with a fall 2013 convention calendar up 60 percent from the previous year.

"Major initiatives over the next five years, leading up to the city's tricentennial in 2018," Perry says, "include a new world-class airport, a new riverfront development, incredible enhancements at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, a wonderful Convention Center Boulevard and so much more."

The CVB is one of the city's best assets, voted by its customers among the top five convention and visitor bureaus in the country. That's no surprise to many planners.

"The New Orleans CVB was a wealth of information and communicated every step of the way," says Jessica Castillo, CMP, senior manager of meeting services for the North American Spine Society (NASS), which held its 28th annual meeting in NOLA in October with 6,794 in attendance. "The marketing tools they offer as a complimentary service to planners are a great resource; those tools help ensure that their services are above and beyond those in many other convention cities."

And the praise was not just for pre-conference assistance. "My experience has been that CVBs spend a great deal of time with you before you sign on the dotted line, after which they are available when needed but not so proactive," says Kristen Penczek, interim executive director of the International Dyslexia Association, whose annual IDA Reading, Literacy & Learning Conference in November attracted 2,000 attendees. "We spent as much time working with the New Orleans CVB after contract, leading up to and after our conference. Our every need was met or exceeded, from a quick response to creation of a microsite to offers to assist in various ways. Seriously, we were spoiled."

Tina Gaerlan, CMP, conference and events manager for IMA, the Institute of Management Accountants, which had its annual conference and exposition for nearly 1,000 attendees in June, appreciated the CVB's efforts to save her group money. "The CVB took us around the neighborhoods and showed us great places

for dining. They provided us with magazines and guides of New Orleans, which included discounts...and they solicited discounts on our behalf from local restaurants, bars, museums and tours to offer our attendees and their guests."

When the National Council of La Raza brought its conference and National Latino Family Expo to New Orleans in July, attended by 4,500 and 20,000, respectively, it needed connections. "The CVB did an amazing job helping us connect with the community and leaders throughout New Orleans," says Jessica Mayorga, director of marketing, integrated marketing and events for the organization, "which was so important considering our interest in not only attracting a national audience to our conference but also attracting a local audience to our expo."

Of course, the city itself, declared by *National Geographic Traveler* as one of the 21 must-see destinations in the world for 2014, is a huge draw for attendees. "We have found that when it comes to our attendees, there is a higher draw when the site is cost-effective to travel to and has destination appeal," Penczek

says. "New Orleans offered both of these to us. Beyond this, our attendees love to learn, are very interested in history, and New Orleans has so much rich history to offer."

Mayorga also points to New Orleans' diversity as a draw. "The city provided all the key ingredients for a successful experience: warm and welcoming people, a great destination for conference-goers and their families, and a robust and well-preserved culture deeply rooted and influenced by the contributions of some of the first American Latinos, which is so fitting to the work and identity of our organization."



(Above) The North American Spine Society held its president's reception at Generations Hall, where the NASS Band "Axial Pain" entertained. (Below) The opening reception at Mardi Gras World featured a living dessert table.

And, of course, there's the celebrated nightlife. "It's not a city that shuts down at 5 p.m. as some convention cities do," Castillo notes.

### SERVICE TO THE MAX

New Orleans' centerpiece facility is the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, with 3.1 million total square feet. Last year, a new grand entry was constructed and the 60,300-sf, column-free Great Hall opened to acclaim. This year, the center debuted a high-density wireless network throughout public spaces and meeting and function areas that supports 20,000 attendees' concurrently connected devices.

But a convention center is only as good as its staff. "I can't say enough about (convention center) event manager Wen Lu, his team and their level of service," Castillo says. "Wen is one of the best event managers I have ever worked with. There were often times when he was steps ahead of me, anticipating a question or an issue that could potentially arise and was working to solve it before



Credit: New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center

The New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center opened the new 60,300-sf, column-free Great Hall last year.



Credit: Michael Buxbaum, International Center for Documentary Arts





Jessica Mayorga (above, right), director of marketing, integrated marketing and events for the National Council of La Raza, promoted her New Orleans conference on local television. (Right) Janet Murguia, president and CEO of NCLR, with first lady Michelle Obama, who spoke at the conference.



Credits: NCLR

it even happened. He and his team are an integral reason that our meeting ran so successfully.”

Mayorga’s convention included high-profile guests. “The convention center was quick to respond to any needs we had,” she says, “and worked with our team to handle intricate coordination of logistics, especially around the security and related needs of our VIP guests. First lady Michelle Obama spoke at our conference, which meant a lot of preparation and coordination for which the convention center staff was a strong partner.”

Penczek praised the staff for communication while noting that sometimes when you think communication is clear, it isn’t. “The crew at the convention center was constantly checking in, making sure everything was set, and was very responsive when we had questions or needed assistance. But we had miscommunication on the food vendors. We understood they would be open; they

**“The city provided all the key ingredients for a successful experience: warm and welcoming people, a great destination for conference-goers and their families, and a robust and well-preserved culture.”**



Jessica Mayorga  
Director of Marketing, Integrated Marketing and Events  
National Council of La Raza  
Washington, DC

were not. It was rectified by day three, but day one was very rough in the complaint department.”

## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

With more than 37,000 hotel rooms in the metro area, New Orleans has choices. Hotels conveniently located in the Central Business District and French Quarter include Hotel Monteleone, Hyatt Regency New Orleans, Hyatt Place New Orleans/Convention Center and New Orleans Marriott, among others.

National Council of La Raza primarily booked the New Orleans Marriott, which has 1,329 guest rooms and 80,000 sf of meeting space. “The Marriott has a great location in the French Quarter and was therefore attractive to our attendees,” Mayorga says. “It had the size and spaces we needed not only in terms of sleeping rooms but also venues for the receptions and the gala dinner we held at the hotel.”

During planning, Mayorga stayed at the Marriott several times over the course of one year. “I started getting to know the housekeeping, registration, restaurant and bell staff by name, and I was so impressed with what a wonderful collection of friendly professionals are employed at this hotel. The staff seems to love their work, and it showed in their attention to detail and willingness to do whatever was needed to resolve challenges and ensure that our experience was nothing but pleasant.”

Penczek, Gaerlan and Castillo booked the Hilton New Orleans Riverside in the Central Business District, a 1,622-room hotel with 130,000 sf of meeting space.

IMA staged all core events at the Hilton. “It’s a great location,” Gaerlan says. “It is walking distance to the French Quarter, and there was a trolley just outside of the hotel. It is also close to Harrah’s Casino, so attendees had a lot of options for activities nearby.”

She gives the hotel kudos for customer service and food. “What worked well was serving local foods such as gumbo, mufulettas and king cakes,” she says. “You hear about New Orleans’ great food, and the catering team did not disappoint us. Also, they were flexible in working with us. We requested custom cupcakes and desserts with our logo, and we wanted them to be served on models with table skirts. They took care of everything.”

The North American Spine Society has a long history with Hilton. “The brand recognition,” says Castillo, “along with the fact that we were able to contract a large number of rooms for our block, valuable concessions offered and proximity to the convention center were all factors in choosing this hotel as our headquarter.”

Historically, the group has had positive experiences with Hilton, but this time Castillo faced a situation planners dread: Her convention services manager left the hotel just weeks before the meeting, and the 11th-hour transition negatively impacted attendees and exhibitors.

“The issues that arose were due to lack of communication,” Castillo says. “As a society, we are very specific in all of our details that we give to meeting facilities to ensure that everyone is on the same page. The more information our key contacts have, the better they can service our meeting. A lot of that information wasn’t passed along, and our meeting suffered because of it.”

The take-away for Castillo is that next time she won’t take anyone’s word that critical information has been relayed. “If this happens again in my career, and I assume it will, I will facilitate a conference call with the DOS who booked our group, as well as the new CSM, prior to getting onsite. During the call, I will give background information on our attendees, outline our expectations and hit upon key items regarding our meeting. I will review and reiterate all the information that the original CSM and I went over.”

## EATING OUT AND ENTERTAINING

One of the city’s newest entertainment venues is the historic Saenger Theatre, which reopened in October and already counts Jerry Seinfeld and Bonnie Rait among its headliners. And the Big Easy’s restaurant scene continues to explode, though old favorites still deliver a memorable experience, too.

Several well-known eateries worked well for IMA’s VIP functions. “We brought people to Arnaud’s and Commander’s Palace,” Gaerlan says. “Both groups raved about these restaurants, and I

can’t say enough about Kaitlin Crabtree, Arnaud’s private dining coordinator. Our teams also enjoyed Manning’s and Grand Isle in the nearby Warehouse District, which are great for groups. We booked the second floor of Acme Oyster House, where we enjoyed the seafood and watched passersby from the balcony, and ventured to Coquette in the Garden District, where the food was amazing.”

Castillo booked a combination of restaurants and private-event space. “We used Commander’s Palace for our board of directors dinner, Calcasieu for our past-presidents dinner, Mardi Gras World for our opening reception and Generations Hall for our president’s reception,” she says.

Calcasieu is a Warehouse District event space for up to 275 guests, operated by James Beard Award-winning chef Donald Link, the name behind Cochon. Mardi Gras World is part tour, part event space, and part float-building studio, giving attendees a behind-the-scenes peek at a beloved New Orleans tradition. Generations Hall, a converted 19th-century sugar refinery, features artwork depicting the history of New Orleans jazz and an aesthetic that captures a bygone era, but complete with today’s technology.

“Mardi Gras World stood out and put on a great event,” Castillo says. “It’s a piece of New Orleans history that our attendees and exhibitors really enjoyed. Generations Hall worked well for our president’s reception because we have a NASS band (Axial Pain) that played during the event. It was a great venue to showcase the band, and the event team was wonderful to work with.”

## NEW ORLEANS HOTEL NEWS

In August, the Hyatt Regency New Orleans completed a \$2 million renovation to its Bywater Pool Deck & Bar. Complementing the saltwater pool are flat-screen TVs and a menu featuring fresh and grilled selections. Guests also now have 15 minutes of complimentary use of the lobby’s four new Mac computers and two printers.

**Hotel Monteleone** was named one of 2013’s Best Hotels in the USA by *U.S. News & World Report*. Winners are calculated based on industry awards, reputation, ratings and opinions of travel experts and guests.

In January, **Loews New Orleans Hotel** celebrated 10 years and, along with all Loews hotels, launched a new initiative offering complimentary wireless in all guest rooms and public spaces.



Jessica Castillo, CMP  
Senior Manager of Meeting Services  
North American Spine Society  
Burr Ridge, IL

**“The New Orleans CVB was a wealth of information and communicated every step of the way.”**



Attendees enjoy an authentic New Orleans musical experience at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.





Credit: Visit Baton Rouge

The Old Governor's Mansion in Baton Rouge is available for special events.

At **The Roosevelt New Orleans, A Waldorf Astoria Hotel**, what's old is new again. The property's 1930s-era Fountain Lounge reopened last fall in a modern iteration melding its glam past with contemporary appeal. Once described as "casual and carefree as a night in Paris," the Fountain Lounge of today features inventive cocktails, wines, small plates, a full raw bar and live entertainment.

**Sheraton New Orleans Hotel** completed an extensive revitalization in May 2013, especially apparent in the inviting, open lobby. Works of late Louisiana artist George Rodrigue, famous for his Blue Dog paintings, provide a vivid backdrop. Most meeting spaces were also refreshed, with the remainder to be completed in 2014. The 24/7-access fitness center was expanded as part of the brand's partnership with Core Performance.

A \$15 million renovation was completed at **Omni Royal New Orleans** in April. Guest rooms and public spaces feature a new color palette (ice blue, gold, chocolate brown and rust), custom furniture and enhanced lighting, and 24 wrought-iron balconies were added. Meeting rooms were refreshed with new furniture, carpeting and window treatments.

## Baton Rouge

Louisiana's capital is an appealing amalgamation of colorful history and a sizzling food scene. Eighty miles from New Orleans, its location at the junction of I-12 and I-10 makes it highly accessible.

"Baton Rouge is an ideal city for smaller associations that bring in about 2,000 attendees and that need an affordable city, and everything is within walking distance, all located on the banks of the Mississippi River," says Paul Arrigo, CDME, president and CEO of Visit Baton Rouge. In 2013, the city hosted 150 state, regional and national associations; in 2014 it will host more than 200.

French and Creole heritage is infused in Baton Rouge culture, food, music and language, giving planners multiple ways to weave an authentic sense of place into meetings. Agendas should include time for attendees to sample beignets, step-step-pause to a thrumming Zydeco beat, and dig into rich and tasty gumbo.

Among the best places to experience regional history are Louisiana's Old State Capitol and the Old Governor's Mansion. The first is a Gothic edifice and National Historic Landmark. The 160-year-old "castle-on-the-river" provides a glimpse into the razzle-dazzle life of Huey P. Long, Louisiana's revered and reviled

governor who was assassinated in 1935. The Old Governor's Mansion, built by Long in 1930, is now a museum with evocative architectural details and featuring furnishings and artifacts from nine governors. Both venues are available for special events.

The greater Baton Rouge area has more than 900 restaurants. Highlights include the Food Truck Wround Up, a Wednesday event featuring food trucks and music in various locations, and Al's Chicago Dogs, served up by a local blues musician. For a retro vibe, there's Huey's Bar, a nod to the infamous governor. Among its old-school beverage specialties is the Ramos gin fizz, Huey's cocktail of choice.

## Shreveport & Bossier City

Sometimes called "Louisiana's other side," these two cities on opposite banks of the Red River near the Texas border are as much Lone Star state as Louisiana. It's apparent in the music, cuisine and deeply rooted culture unlike that in the rest of the state.

When it comes to the biggest cultural and entertainment influence here, however, the casinos shine brightest — literally, with miles of neon lighting the skyline. Six Vegas-style casinos provide a hip, cosmopolitan vibe; think Vegas with Southern overtones. It's a recipe that offers groups a singular mix of laidback charm and pulsing nightlife.

There's one long weekend each spring when Shreveport goes all Louisiana. Mudbug Madness celebrates crawfish and the ever-popular crawfish boil, along with Louisiana music and art. It's one of the state's largest Cajun festivals, and a fine time to schedule a



Credit: Shreveport-Bossier Convention & Tourist Bureau

The Shreveport Convention Center features 350,000 sf of meeting space.

meeting here to be part of the tasty revelry. The festival gives planners budget-friendly options for no-host meals and entertainment.

From New Orleans to Shreveport & Bossier City, Louisiana welcomes associations with its engaging culture, food and music, its diversity and its ability to meet diverse needs, whether the need is for affordable venues or an all-out citywide with parades, celebrity chefs, top entertainers and spectacular ballrooms. AC&F



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# Nashville

By John Buchanan

## Love at First Sight

Nashville, defined for decades as the country music capital of the world, has undergone a full-fledged and remarkable renaissance over the last several years.

Today, it is the world capital of all kinds of music — and a first-rate meeting and convention destination. Association meeting planners from coast to coast are falling in love all over again with the new Nashville.

“As a local, I have watched Nashville grow significantly over the last several years,” says Angela Layton, CMP, CMM, a proud Nashville resident and former corporate meeting planner who is now senior meeting planner for the locally based National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA), which will use the city for more than a dozen executive meetings this year.

“We are now fortunate enough to have a new convention center and a new convention center hotel,” Layton says. “And when you take that into account, along with Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center and other hotels, then you have a variety of venues that can really house a meeting of any size.”

### MUSIC CITY CENTER REDEFINES THE LANDSCAPE

Nashville’s status as a red-hot meeting and convention destination has been generated by the opening of the new \$623 million Music City Center complex, which includes a 1.2 million-sf convention center and, as of its debut September 30, the \$250 million, 800-room Omni Nashville convention center hotel, which is connected to the newly expanded Country Music Hall of Fame.

Developed in the heart of a robust downtown, which boasts a nationally acclaimed dining and entertainment scene, the state-of-the-art Music City Center includes a 350,000-sf exhibit hall and 60 individual meeting rooms that total 90,000 sf. Ballrooms include the 57,500-sf Grand Ballroom and 18,000-sf Davidson Ballroom. In addition, the complex, which features a green roof with a 200-kilowatt solar panel, is designed for environmental sustainability and is expected to achieve LEED Silver certification.

The critically celebrated new convention center has been the key catalyst in the dramatic growth of Nashville as a genuine A-list association meeting destination, Layton says.

Joseph Hite, CMP, director of event development at the Arlington, VA-based American Trucking Associations, a federation of trucking associations, was so impressed with Nashville and its planned Music City Center that even before it was completed, he booked the destination for five consecutive ATA annual meetings, for approximately 3,200 attendees each, from last year through 2017.

“Music City Center is something planners need to see firsthand,” says Hite, who hosted his annual meeting last year at Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center. “I think they’ve done an amazing job with the design of that building. It’s really a special venue. It stands out. It doesn’t even look like a convention center. It looks like a place you really would want to spend your day, because it’s beautiful.”

In addition, the facility is conveniently located within easy walking distance of Nashville’s hottest local restaurants and world-famous country music honky-tonks.

Hite, as well as his executive management and attendees, developed an affection for Nashville in 2008, when Hite hosted ATA’s annual fall meeting and national technician skills competition there for 1,000 attendees.

ATA soon committed to come back for five consecutive four-day annual meetings held early each year.

For this year’s meeting, held at Music City Center, Hite’s hotels are the Omni Nashville, as well as the Renaissance Downtown, Hilton, Hyatt Place and Hampton Inn — all within easy walking distance of the convention center.

Booking Nashville for five consecutive years was an easy decision, Hite says. “The whole plan that the CVB laid out, with a new, state-of-the-art convention center and the new Omni hotel and the other hotel plans — along with the ease of getting around the city — it was just a good choice for us,” he says.

And, he says, based on his experience, he expects other meeting planners to follow his example. “I think that for a lot of meeting planners, it’s a surprise to see the variety of things to do in Nashville, and also with the dining and entertainment scene,” he says. “I think people are often surprised to learn that Nashville is not just about country music.”

### AIRLIFT AND HOTEL INVENTORY

In addition to its impressive new meeting infrastructure, Nashville also offers excellent airlift — another pleasant surprise for planners.

“The airlift was fantastic,” says Sheila King, CMP, director of meetings and education at the Indianapolis, IN-based Vacation Rental Managers Association (VRMA), which used Nashville for the first time last October for its four-day annual meeting for 908 attendees. “Airlift is a factor that we always look at when selecting a destination. We also look at more than just what airlines fly in and out and from where. We also look at how easy it is for our attendees to get in and out of the airport. And the fact that there were so many airlines flying in and out and that they offered so many flights a day was a huge factor in our decision to use Nashville.”

In fact, Nashville’s broad and efficient airlift surprised her, King says. “We were not expecting that, so I was really surprised by how accessible it was from anywhere in the country.”

**“We are now fortunate enough to have a new convention center and a new convention center hotel. And when you take that into account, along with Gaylord Opryland and other hotels, then you have a variety of venues that can really house a meeting of any size.”**



Angela Layton, CMP, CMM  
Senior Meeting Planner  
National Association of State  
Boards of Accountancy  
Nashville, TN

So were VRMA’s members, apparently. They set a new record for attendance at the meeting.

“All of our meetings have been growing,” King says. “But location definitely played a role in the success of the Nashville meeting.”

King used Gaylord Opryland as her hotel because its size and vast facilities and resources meant she could host the entire event under one roof.

“When we walked in for our site visit, I was totally impressed,” she says. “Since the flood a couple of years ago, they didn’t just rebuild the hotel exactly as it was. They made changes that made it even better for meetings. It’s just a fantastic facility.”

One aspect of Gaylord Opryland King particularly liked was the fact that it could function “like a hotel within a hotel,” she says. “Although it’s very large, they were able to put our sleeping rooms and our meeting space in the same area of the hotel, which made it really feel like we were in our own area. And that was another key factor for us.”

She also gives Gaylord Opryland an A+ for its food and beverage service. “The food was phenomenal, and the service was great,” King says. “They just did a fantastic job for us. It’s just an outstanding meeting property.”

Although Gaylord Opryland, the new Omni Nashville Hotel and the Renaissance Nashville Hotel often dominate the conversation when it comes to major meetings, Nashville also offers options for smaller meetings, too.

Among them is the wildly popular, 247-room Hutton Hotel, opened in 2009 and now a AAA Four Diamond and Forbes Four Star property. Last July, *Travel & Leisure* bestowed one of its coveted “World’s Best” awards on the hotel as one of the top large city properties in the continental U.S.

### DINING AND ENTERTAINMENT SCENE

Although the new Music City Center and Omni Nashville Hotel, along with Gaylord Opryland and smaller properties such as the Hutton, have been the major factors in the emergence of Nashville as a popular association meetings destination, the con-



A state-of-the-art boardroom at the Omni Nashville Hotel.





Sheila King, CMP  
Director of Meetings and Education  
Vacation Rental Managers  
Association  
Indianapolis, IN

**“And they just loved the local food and the downtown scene in Nashville. They especially loved the country music honky-tonks along Broadway. They loved the fact they could wander along from bar to bar and just hear great music and have a fantastic time.”**

current development of a fabulous and eclectic local dining and entertainment scene also is a big plus.

“We have a lot of new restaurants,” says Rhonda Marko, CMP, CMM, DMCP, president and CEO of Destination Nashville, an award-winning destination management company. “And we have one of the hottest restaurants in the country right now — The Catbird Seat, which opened a little over two years ago.” The Catbird Seat is an intimate, exclusive fine-dining restaurant by renowned chef Erik Anderson.

Marko’s other favorites from the current list of hot dining spots include Kayne Prime, a local steak house, and Husk Nashville, housed in a building that dates back to 1895 and a sister outpost to the internationally renowned Husk Restaurant in Charleston, SC, from chef Sean Brock, a James Beard Award-winner and a pioneer in the farm-to-table movement. “The food and the presentation at Husk are magnificent,” Marko says. “And 90 percent of what they serve is produced locally.”

Another dining option highly recommended by Marko is Etch,

located in the Encore condominium in the hot SoBro neighborhood located South of Broadway and offering prized global cuisine from chef Deb Paquette.

Layton agrees that The Catbird Seat is arguably the best choice in town at the moment for groups, but she also has high praise for The Southern Steak and Oyster.

Even though ATA hosts serious meetings that keep attendees very busy during the day, Hite says, the dining and entertainment scene in Nashville provides an important benefit for attendees and exhibitors.

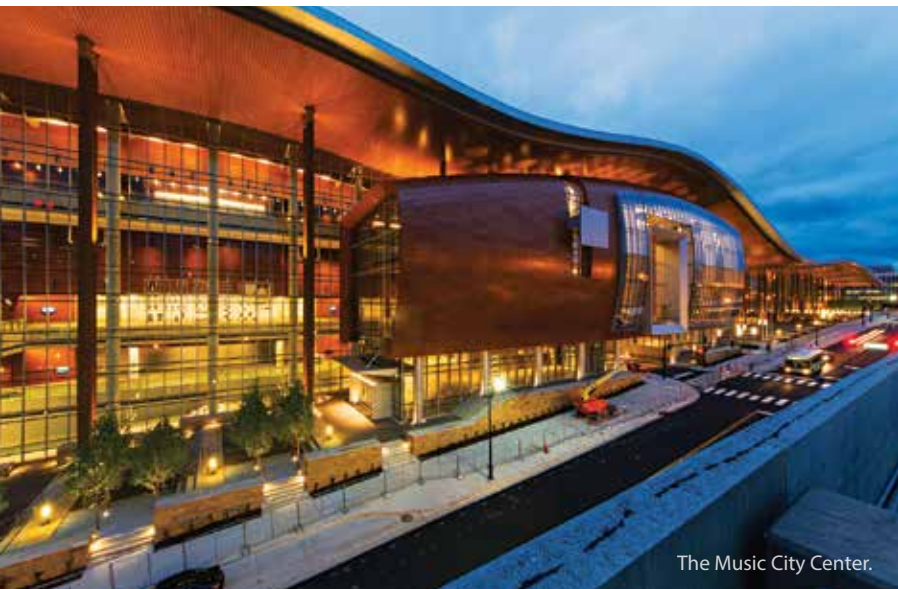
“The dining and entertainment scene in Nashville plays a role in the success of the destination, not just for our meetings, but in all meetings held in Nashville, I think,” Hite says. “Even though our attendees are busy during the day, they do want to go out for dinner or to have a drink, especially if it’s with customers. And Nashville has always been a very positive place to get that kind of socializing and business done because it’s really easy to get around the city. And there is also a lot of range in terms of price, whether that’s fine dining or casual dining. It’s just a really good and convenient city for entertaining.”

King’s attendees “absolutely loved the dining and entertainment scene,” she says. “When they go to a city, they want to really experience that city. They don’t want to go to chain restaurants, and they also don’t want to be stuck in a hotel. They want to be able to get out and see what the city has to offer. And they just loved the local food and the downtown scene in Nashville. They especially loved the country music honky-tonks along Broadway. They loved the fact they could wander along from bar to bar and just hear great music and have a fantastic time.”

## OFFSITE VENUES

Given its reputation as “Music City USA,” Nashville also offers a wide range of spectacular offsite venues.

King hosted an evening at Tequila Cowboy in downtown Nashville that featured an open bar, buffet dinner and live music. “I liked the value that we got for taking over a beautiful venue with a buyout,” she says. “I also liked that it had many different individual areas. For example, in one area there was a live band. In another, there was karaoke. In another, there was a DJ. So attendees could go to a particular area based on the kind of experience they wanted to have. They also had a mechanical bull and darts, so there were just a lot of things to do, depending on what you were interested in. But the whole thing was under one roof. And the food was fantastic. They offered a lot of variety. For example, they offered Southern food like barbecue, but we also have attendees that are more health-conscious, so they offered healthier food for them.”



The Music City Center.

Credit: The Music City Center

One of Marko’s time-tested, go-to offsite venues is Wildhorse Saloon, a three-story historic warehouse that now serves as a landmark 66,000-sf dining, live music and dance destination. Its restaurant and catering operation is famous for its Southern barbecue, steaks and fried pickles.

“It can hold up to 1,500 people,” Marko says. “But you can do a buyout and also use adjacent Riverfront Park to stage an evening for 5,000 attendees. And some of the best bands in town started at Wildhorse Saloon as house bands, so they have established relationships with all of those bands.”

Layton notes that there are also some less well-known, world-class venues that she has used very successfully over the years.

Among them is the Schermerhorn Symphony Center, home of the Nashville Symphony. “It’s a beautiful venue,” Layton says. “It’s an amazing venue for dinners or receptions or private concerts.”

She also likes the historic War Memorial Auditorium, operated by the state of Tennessee and located across the street from the state capitol building. “I love the architecture on the outside,” Layton says. “But inside, it offers a beautiful canvas for a variety of options for meetings and events.”

Layton also recommends the General Jackson Showboat, which cruises the Cumberland River. “They do a nice cruise and also offer dinner shows,” she says. “With a buyout, you can bring your own entertainment onboard. It’s just a really special thing to do in Nashville anytime of the year. The view of downtown Nashville is amazing from the river.”

## NASHVILLE CVB

Yet another advantage of doing a meeting in Nashville is its convention and visitors bureau — the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp. (NCVC) headed up by long-time president Butch Spyridon.

“For all of our meetings, we work with the local CVB,” King says. “And the Nashville CVB was phenomenal. The customer service that you get in Nashville as a planner is, in general, just exceptional. It’s top-notch. Like Destination Nashville, the DMC we used, they just make everything easy for you as a planner. And they also make it an enjoyable experience for attendees.”

Hite also gives high marks to the NCVC and credits its performance as one of the key reasons ATA committed to five consecutive annual meetings in town.

“I think the Nashville CVB really sets the standard for the kind of service a CVB should provide,” Hite says. “Butch Spyridon and his team are not only responsive, but they also have great ideas. They are really willing to help, in some areas where other CVBs are not necessarily willing to help.” For example, Hite says, the NCVC helped research and book entertainment — a service usually provided by a DMC for a price.

## A BRIGHT FUTURE

Although the last few years have brought a dramatic rise in Nashville’s stature as a meeting destination, all indications are that the future is even brighter.

“There is a lot of great development going on that will continue to shape the future of the city,” Layton says.

Although the new Omni Nashville convention center hotel is the city’s star attraction, four new major downtown properties are now in development. Marriott plans to build a 400-room property. Hyatt Regency is developing a 450-room property. And Westin will build a 400-room property. Meanwhile, InterContinental is planning a 281-room hotel on the city’s west side. No completion dates have been announced yet.

**“I think the Nashville CVB really sets the standard for the kind of service a CVB should provide. Butch Spyridon and his team are not only responsive, but they also have great ideas. They are really willing to help, in some areas where other CVBs are not necessarily willing to help.”**



Joseph Hite, CMP  
Director of Event Development  
American Trucking Associations  
Arlington, VA

Recently renovated hotels include the 700-room Renaissance Nashville Hotel, with 100,000 sf of meeting space, which completed a \$20 million renovation in February.

The 474-room Sheraton Nashville Downtown Hotel, with 25,000 sf of function space, will complete a \$3.25 million renovation in April.

The 330-room Hilton Nashville Hotel, with 18,542 sf of meeting space, will complete a \$25 million renovation in June.

The 340-room Loews Vanderbilt Hotel, with 24,000 sf of meeting space, will complete a \$17 million renovation by the end of this year.

All of that adds up to a city that means more than its moniker “Music City USA.”

“I think Nashville is comparable, in terms of value and service, to other, much better known destinations,” King says. “It’s just a fantastic destination, and we want to go back at some point. And our attendees want to go back. And they don’t say that very often about a destination.”

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**Stew Krane** was named sales manager for the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, responsible for the Washington, DC, area and the Southeastern U.S. He formerly served as volunteer manager at the Greater New Orleans Sports Foundation.



KRANE

The Long Beach (CA) Convention & Visitors Bureau has named **Jarrod Finley** as vice president of sales. He most recently served as an area sales leader for nine Marriott hotels in the Los Angeles South Bay Area.

**Darren Green** was named senior vice president of sales at the Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board (LA Tourism). He formerly served as director of sales for the Starwood Hotels and Resorts New York metro market team.

Taj Boston has named **Brian D. Macaluso** as director of sales and marketing. He previously served as task force director, sales and marketing, for Starwood Hotels & Resorts.



FINLEY

The Anaheim Marriott, Anaheim, CA, has named **Erica Westmyer** as director of group sales. She formerly served as citywide sales executive for Marriott International's Los Angeles/Anaheim market sales team.



WESTMYER

The Omni Homestead Resort, Hot Springs, VA, has appointed **Wayne Kearney** as director of resort sales. He most recently served as director of group sales at the Pinehurst Resort, Pinehurst, NC.

**Joyce M. Martinez** was appointed vice president of business development and sales for Meet Puerto Rico. She most recently served as director of research and business development for the organization.



GREEN

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