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How The Hartford’s Karen Alfonso, Director, Meetings & Events, is doing more with less.
This isn’t your typical Vegas venue. This place has history. It’s got heart. Our building has held criminal trials that helped shape our country, and now it’s become one of the most talked about museums in the world.

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Meeting Planners Are Savvy

Meeting planners sure are a savvy lot. After years and years of perfecting the “doing more with less” challenge, planning pros have emerged as “savvy consumers who work harder than ever,” says Karen Alfonso, director of meetings and events for The Hartford. Karen, who is featured on our cover this month, is a seasoned pro who shares her secrets of success on page 14 in “Savings Without Sacrifice — Creative Strategies to Keep Meeting & Incentive Travel Programs On Track Even When Budgets Are Grounded.”

Karen contends, “The days of frivolous meeting spend ended a few years ago. It’s all about the budgets lately. Many budgets have been cut 10 to 20 percent this year, while, at the same time, costs have increased. Our priorities include doing more with less, being smarter with our meeting spend and finding creative ways to save.”

One way to save is by staying fairly close to home and using venues that offer fabulous amenities and activities. Karen’s company is mainly meeting in the U.S. and rotating between the East and West coasts. “Last year we were in Newport Coast, California, and this year we were in Sea Island, Georgia. Next year we will be in Park City, Utah,” she relates. “This year, we hosted a resort-style triathlon featuring hiking, biking and kayaking in one activity, and this was our most popular activity. Our attendees are more active than ever, though golf, of course, is always a priority.”

Like Karen, Rhonda Moritz, marketing events planner for Syracuse, New York-based Cadaret, Grant & Co. Inc., is also largely staying in the U.S. with her incentives. She recently hosted a program in Austin, Texas, “because it’s such an upcoming great place to showcase different things,” she says. Due to changing demographics and other factors, Rhonda says their priority is to give attendees an “experience they won’t have anywhere else or that they won’t have on their own, and Austin was great for that, because a lot of people recognize it for its eclectic personality.”

For planners considering domestic destinations, please turn to page 19 for a special section on Miami, to page 36 for a CVB Update and to page 42 for what’s new in the Southwest.

The newly constructed Westin will offer 302 luxurious guest rooms, more than 15,000 sf of meeting and prefunction space, an outdoor pool, WestinWorkout studio, business center and all the brand’s signature amenities in a scenic location overlooking The Woodlands Waterway in Waterway Square. The Westin, The Woodlands will feature a 150-seat restaurant, lobby bar and second-level pool deck and bar, with direct access to The Fountains at Waterway Square.

The hotel will be within walking distance to numerous corporate offices, the shops and restaurants in The Waterway Square District, The Woodlands Mall and Market Street, as well as The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion.

All guest rooms and suites at The Westin, The Woodlands will feature the Westin Heavenly Bed — featuring lush sheets, down cushioning and a patented pillowtop mattress. Guests will revive with the brand’s Heavenly Shower, Heavenly Robe and White Tea Aloe bath amenities, in-room and high-speed Internet access. The hotel also will offer the SuperFood sRX menu offering nutrient-rich and delicious options. www.westin.com

Pictured at the groundbreaking (l to r) are Peter Doyle, executive vice president of strategic development for The Howard Hughes Corporation; Tim Welbes, co-president of The Woodlands Development Company; Mitch Gurberg, director of building development for The Woodlands Development Company; David Aspin, senior director, development at Starwood Hotels and Resorts; Alex Sutton, co-president of The Woodlands Development Company; Greg Parsons, general manager and vice president of hospitality for The Woodlands Resort; and Paul Layne, executive vice president of master planned communities for The Howard Hughes Corporation.

Starwood Hotels to Expand Portfolio in the Greater Houston Region

Loews Royal Pacific Resort Set to Expand its Meeting Space to 140,000 sf

ORLANDO, FL — Universal Orlando Resort will soon embark on the largest meeting space expansion in its history. By fall 2015, Loews Royal Pacific Resort — the largest meeting hotel at Universal Orlando — will expand its meeting and event space from 85,000 sf to more than 140,000 sf.

Inspired by the beauty of the South Pacific, the expanded areas will seamlessly connect to the existing meeting space. The new space will feature a nearly 36,000-sf ballroom, divisible by 12, along with four additional breakout rooms and prefunction space. Once completed, the expansion will offer meeting planners a total of 141,330 sf of meeting space on one level. Group reservations are currently being accepted.

Upon completion of the expansion, Universal Orlando will feature more than 306,000 sf of customizable meetings and event space destination-wide. Universal Orlando recently opened Universal’s Cabana Bay Beach Resort, expanded Universal CityWalk and opened The Wizarding World of Harry Potter – Diagon Alley, along with complimentary Universal Express Unlimited ride access, allowing guests to skip the regular lines all day on most rides and attractions in both Universal Orlando theme parks. www.uomeetingsandevents.com

The AAA Four Diamond Award-winning hotel has six restaurants and lounges, a lagoon-style swimming pool, private cabanas, complimentary Wi-Fi, and an exclusive package of theme park benefits including Early Park Admission to The Wizarding World of Harry Potter – Hogsmeade, and The Wizarding World of Harry Potter – Diagon Alley, along with complimentary Universal Express Unlimited ride access, allowing guests to skip the regular lines all day on most rides and attractions in both Universal Orlando theme parks. www.uomeetingsandevents.com

THE BAHAMIAN RIVIERA AWAITS. Introducing a glamorous new playground with the world’s most celebrated hotels, including the dazzling debut of the Baha Mar Casino & Hotel. Get ready for the rendezvous of the century in Nassau, The Bahamas. For an exclusive preview, visit BahiaMar.com.

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Anaheim, Baltimore and San Antonio Join Forces in a New Three-City Sales Partnership

BALTIMORE, MD — The Anaheim/Orange County Visitor & Convention Bureau, Visit Baltimore and the San Antonio Convention & Visitors Bureau has announced the formation of Synchronicities, a three-city partnership designed to assist meeting professionals in maximizing return on investment.

Anaheim, Baltimore and San Antonio conducted in-depth research with meeting professionals via focus groups and surveys to shape Synchronicities into a partnership that delivers what meeting professionals and attendees want most, an unbeatable combination of value and resources. The partnership assists professionals in achieving their specific business objectives by offering customizable options based on the needs of individual meetings. This personalization is the foundation of Synchronicities, along with a seamless knowledge transfer between the three cities, and a united services and marketing platform.

Working together through Synchronicities provides enhanced opportunities for the destinations to invest in industry education. Partnering with esteemed organizations such as IAEE, PCMA and Association Forum of Chicagoland allows the destinations to better anticipate industry trends and share these findings. www.synchronicities.us

CWT and GBTA Release 2015 Global Travel Price Outlook

AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS — Carlson Wagonlit Travel (CWT) released a new joint 2015 Global Travel Price Outlook report with the GBTA Foundation, the education and research arm of the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA). The report gives an early indication of what businesses can expect in 2015, helping them plan ahead during the upcoming budgeting period.

The report highlights that demand from emerging markets such as China, India and Brazil and improved economic growth in advanced economies, combined with limited advancements in travel supply, will result in an upward pressure on rates, particularly in high-demand travel markets.

The study shows that travel managers are prepared for this, however, with those surveyed by GBTA expecting airfares to increase most among all categories due to consolidation in major markets.

The study reveals that travel managers expect price increases next year across the board on travel categories including airfares, hotel room rates and rental car rates,” said Joseph Bates, GBTA Foundation vice president of research. “Risks to the forecast including the escalating Ukrainian crisis; declining European inflation; burgeoning debt in China and oil price shocks could potentially have a negative influence on travel demand and pricing, however, so travel managers are advised to consider contingencies for these risks in their planning.”

The 2015 Global Travel Price Outlook report with the GBTA Foundation, the education and research arm of the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) has announced the formation of Synchronicities, a three-city partnership designed to assist meeting professionals in maximizing return on investment.}

Cape Cod’s Wequassett Resort and Golf Club Renovates Meeting Spaces

HARWICH, MA — Cape Cod’s waterfront Wequassett Resort and Golf Club renovated nearly 20,000 sf of meeting and event spaces, which include 10,000 sf of additional meeting space. Meeting spaces include the Cape Villa meeting rooms, which can hold groups of 10 attendees to 30 participants, and the Pavilion Ballroom — suitable for corporate retreats, business meetings, conferences or private dinners for up to 320 guests. Equidistant from Boston, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island, Wequassett features whitewashed buildings nestled among 27 acres of gardens overlooking Pleasant Bay. The property boasts 120 newly refreshed guest rooms including a Signature Collection of rooms.

The meeting spaces feature the latest in technology, including complimentary high-speed Internet access, multimedia capabilities, blackout drapes, real-time crowdsourcing capabilities, revived interiors, numerous lighting settings and state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment. www.wequassett.com
Teambuilding

Luring in Leadership Development

Leadership and team development activities are being infused into corporate meetings and events in lieu of guest speakers as a way to spread a dynamic message and generate attendee engagement. Although they create an opportunity to give attendees a breather from endless speakers, their impact can be much more than a break. In fact, many event organizers are specifically seeking activities that challenge participants’ abilities to take calculated risks, identify team roles, and allocate resources efficiently and effectively. By selecting the right activity for your team and following some best practices, you can plan a successful event that caters to your organization’s culture and message.

The Big Picture

Although teambuilding and leadership activities have been included in events for decades, such interactive activities are gaining in popularity as additions to meetings, conferences and events. Groups are looking for new ways to build leadership qualities and allow people to discover their potential through a team environment. These types of activities offer a change of pace to the usual sit-and-listen conference and event environment, and the exponential type of learning pushes comfort levels and leaves a lasting impression.

Teambuilding exercises, while fun, also can be quite valuable if they are well conceptualized and strategically organized. So how do you know if an interactive activity like teambuilding will be beneficial? In addition to considering the actual cost of a given activity, it is important to think beyond the traditional objectives and team dynamics. 

Selecting the Right Activity

The desired outcome should be the primary focus when selecting an activity. With the goal clearly identified, it should be treated like every other aspect of that meeting/event in terms of preparation, budget and coordination to ensure a positive experience.

If you are stumped about how to pick the right activity, talk to an expert in the field of leadership and teambuilding. Companies that offer teambuilding, leadership development and interactive activities can guide you to the best option based on several factors:

- Desired outcome and learning
- Time frame and space you have for the event
- Attendee demographics including group size and culture

You also should consider having professional facilitators manage and host the activity as they have the expertise and can work with you to integrate your goals, messaging and culture.

Another major consideration when selecting the right activity is the location. Some activities require a lot of space or an area that allows for “getting dirty.” For example, Playing Picasso is an activity that starts out by dividing a painting into smaller sections and giving each team a photo of a section to replicate on a blank canvas using paint, brushes and sketching tools. Once the teams have finished, the individual canvases are pieced together to create a reproduction of the full painting. The activity demonstrates that even when working separately, the whole contributes to the bigger picture. Further, by incorporating a specific theme, location or image as your graphic, the activity can be personalized. Securing an appropriate location for your activity will ensure that your activity is executed the way it was intended.

Dream Big

When goal-setting for your corporate teambuilding activity, it is important to think beyond the traditional objectives of networking, sharing and leadership development. Many have stretched their objectives to also benefit the community. For example, one popular activity involves teams competing to create the best built wheelchair. Small groups work together to answer a series of questions to earn “bucks” to purchase wheelchair parts. Once all required pieces have been earned and wheelchairs have been assembled, they have to run through the obstacle course to become eligible for inspection. After teams create a custom license plate, final judging takes place in which teams are rated on quality and creativity.

In addition to the obvious benefits of teamwork, this activity offers the opportunity to give back to the community by donating the finished wheelchairs.

Communication Is King

As in all aspects of planning an event, communication with your interactive activity planner is crucial. In addition to clearly outlining the objectives, it is key to communicate shifts in terms of group dynamics, personalities and size — all of which can drastically change the effectiveness of an activity. However, with proper communication, teambuilding and leadership development can be an effective component of your next event.
Small Meetings

By Christine Shimasaki

How CVBs Can Help Planners Deliver Big Results for Small Meetings

Small meetings play a vital role in the success of any destination, and understanding the value they hold will greatly increase a meeting planner’s negotiating clout. With a shorter booking window, small meetings may be harder to book, thus reducing opportunities for prime space and preferred dates. But if planners know how to navigate the waters there are deals to be had and partners to help.

A great partner to help with a small meeting is the Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB). Oftentimes, CVBs are thought of for meetings that require convention center space or multiple hotels, but the same great services and expertise are applied to assisting planners with small, single hotel meetings as well. (See related story on page 36.)

Three Big Tips

What small meetings have in common is their size; but they can be very different in their type of meeting and/or space and room requirements. Don’t get frustrated trying to get space over sold-out dates or trying to find a low rate. They can be very different in their type of meeting and/or space and room requirements. Guest rooms. If a meeting requires more space relative to hotel room nights, planners must consider the hotel’s all-day food and beverage (F&B) to negotiate better rates. How?

1. It Can Be All About the Timing

Determine the type of hotel that fits with your meeting’s objective.

Small meetings have options when deciding which hotel can accommodate their requirements. Planners must decide whether to go with a large hotel, where there are an abundance of amenities, staff and resources, or perhaps choose a smaller boutique hotel, where the meeting may be the only group in the hotel, offering an intimate meeting atmosphere.

Other meeting locations to consider:
- Try looking into museums, commercial buildings or other nontraditional venues.
- Small boutique hotels can hold meetings in their lounge, library, rooftop or pool deck, offering attendees a unique meeting experience.
- Large hotels offer flexibility in space configurations and amenities.

Determine the ideal booking window for your meeting.

Typically, small meetings book in the year for the year. For example, a meeting held in October 2014, would book in the year 2015, whereas larger meetings and conventions book years in advance. Because larger meetings book farther in advance, planners of smaller meetings may experience certain challenges in finding dates and rates, but during a very short-term window, if space is available, they have the opportunity to take advantage of need dates and discounts.

Other factors to consider:
- Try looking at the historical occupancy of the destination and talk with your CVB sales professional to learn about the destination’s unique demand factors.
- Take advantage of meeting cancellations. Hotels will look to fill the lost revenue, putting the planner in a much stronger negotiating position.

3. It Can Be All About the Savings

Get creative with your RFP to increase free and/or reduced meeting space options.

Know the value of your small meeting. Be sure to come armed with data on how much the group spends in total, not just on space, rooms, and food and beverage. When negotiating with hotels, planners should understand the value of their meeting to be in a much stronger position.

Other options:
- Talk to your CVB sales professional to determine if there are any promotions or need periods in the destination.
- Look beyond first-tier destinations. There are a lot of amazing regions to consider that have all the ingredients necessary for a positive, memorable experience for attendees.
- Utilize the meeting’s F&B to negotiate better room rates and reduced meeting room rental.
- By utilizing food and beverage onsite, the meeting has an increased opportunity to negotiate better rates.

Options include:
- Secure the hotel’s all-day food and beverage package. Catering all breakfasts, breaks, lunches and dinners within the hotel will give planners more power to negotiate and the ability to avoid meeting room rental.
- If planners do not have a lot of F&B built into the program, encourage attendees to have their meals at onsite versus offsite restaurants.

CVB sales professional provides guidance, insider knowledge and destination demand information to planners. To find an expert in the destination(s) you are considering, your first stop should be www.empowermint.com. Empowermint.com enables planners to research destination profiles, complete with information on conference hotels, convention facilities, CVB services, a destination map and contact information of destination experts, all for free. To reach out to CVB experts at top meeting destinations, visit empowerMINT.com.

Christine Shimasaki CDME, CMP® is the managing director of empowerMINT.com and the Event Impact Calculator for Destination Marketing Association International. She previously served as executive vice president and chief strategy officer for the San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau, as well as a distinguished career in sales with Marriott.

If planners know how to navigate the waters there are deals to be had and partners to help.
Creative Strategies to Keep Meeting & Incentive Travel Programs On Track Even When Budgets Are Grounded

Across both the meeting industry and, more broadly, the business travel industry, the economy’s return from the recession is having an unwelcome consequence: skyrocketing flight and hotel costs that are overcoming travel budgets.

After shortening meetings, changing up activities and reevaluating who travels and how often, this year planners are finding new ways to stretch their dollars while continuing to create meetings that delight attendees.

“The days of frivolous meeting spend ended a few years ago,” says Karen Alfonso, director of meetings and events for Hartford, Connecticut-based The Hartford. “It’s all about the budgets lately. Many budgets have been cut 10 to 20 percent this year, while, at the same time, costs have increased. Our priorities include doing more with less, being smarter and more creative ways to save.”

The Hunt for Hot Incentives

In finance and insurance firms, it’s hard to do “the same old” for incentives. Often a key differentiating factor between companies, high-quality incentives are a key motivational tool for employees who directly drive the company bottom line. While many planners are finding themselves restricted to locations in the U.S. or greater North America, changing the focus of the trip from pure relaxation to active rejuvenation has opened up new possibilities for destinations that will both surprise the veterans who have already visited every Florida beach with you and motivate younger employees looking for the next thrill rush.

“Currently, we are only hosting domestic incentives,” explains Alfonso. “We tend to rotate East and West. Last year we were in Newport Coast, California, and this year we were in Sea Island, Georgia. Next year we will be in Park City, Utah. We’re making sure that there are plenty of outdoor activities in our venues, because we are seeing that attendees are very active and enjoy much more sports-related recreation. This year, we hosted a resort-style triathlon featuring hiking, biking and kayaking in one activity, and this was our most popular activity. Our attendees are more active than ever, though golf, of course, is always a priority.”

Rhonda Moritz, marketing events planner for Syracuse, New York-based Cadaret, Grant & Co. Inc., is also largely staying in the U.S. with her incentives, but finding that up-and-coming domestic destinations offer a superior price-quality ratio that’s both budget- and attendee-friendly, while offering the active recreation opportunities that increasingly appeal to attendees. “We just went to Austin, Texas, because it’s such an upcoming great place to showcase different things,” she says. “We wanted to try to venture a little west of the Mississippi, but not overboard, so we decided to try Texas. We’ve investigated everything from Houston to San Antonio to Dallas to Austin, and when the Hyatt Regency at Lost Pines Austin opened a few years ago, we jumped on that, because it was a brand new property and a great name. “The resort is 20 to 25 minutes out of town. It’s not a downtown resort, but the airport is right in the middle. It’s right along the Colorado River, which was a great experience in terms of someplace different, more rugged, but brand new with a great brand name. It had all of those advantages right from the start. We did normal things like horseback riding and trap shooting, but we also do high impact for folks that love extreme adventure. We did some rock-climbing, river-rafting and kayaking, and for medium impact, a lot of programming in downtown Austin. We also had some tours for low impact folks, because when they get to a destination they want to explore, but some just want to sit by the beach or the pool, and that’s fine. They won it. It’s their incentive.”

“A lot of companies including ours are noticing changing demographics,” Moritz continues. “But even attendees who are older and have been on 30 incentives haven’t experienced that type of resort because they’re used to Florida and East Coast properties. We want to give them the experience they wouldn’t have anywhere else or that they won’t have on their own, and Austin was great for that, because a lot of people recognize it for its eclecticism.”

If you have the freedom to go a little farther afield but not a lot of space in your budget, investing time to investigate the feasibility of developing destinations can still give you an edge on providing an experience attendees wouldn’t have thought to do on their own.

“Our incentives really range, from about 20 people to 2,000, so the destination depends a bit on the size of the group,” explains an insurance company meeting planner who prefers to remain anonymous. “For our smaller groups, we’ve recently done Panama, and we have a summer one coming up in Calgary, Canada. Usually someone higher from inside the company has been there or heard about it and thought it was an enticing destination. The initial recommendation comes from someone higher in the company, and then I need to check it out. For larger events, we’re looking at destinations that are within three hours or fewer, and then we’ll do two or three days there. However, the destination will change on a year-to-year basis.”

“Now is the time to start thinking about what your meeting planner needs or how you can change your current plans,” adds Alfonso. “It’s not too late to change how you might do your travel or what incentives you might have available. It’s not too late to change the destination you are planning.”

Savings Without Sacrifice

By Gabi Logan

Creative strategies to keep meeting & incentive travel programs on track even when budgets are grounded.

The boardroom at Montage Deer Valley, a luxury resort in Park City, Utah, an ideal area for outdoor recreation group, explains an insurance company meeting planner who prefers to remain anonymous. ‘For our smaller groups, we’ve recently done Panama, and we have a summer one coming up in Calgary, Canada. Usually someone higher from inside the company has been there or heard about it and thought it was an enticing destination. The initial recommendation comes from someone higher in the company, and then I need to check it out. For larger events, we’re looking at destinations that are within three hours or fewer, and then we’ll do two or three days there. However, the destination will change on a year-to-year basis.”

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Karen Alfonso of The Hartford says that domestic incentives that rotate from coast to coast are popular with her group, which enjoyed views like this one of Newport harbor last year.

The one that are outside the U.S., I predominantly use a recommendation from a DMC and then do my own research from there. “With Panama, we chose it because of the tie with the Panama Canal, but the destination itself is a little undeveloped,” says the planner. “They don’t have everything that Jamaica or Mexico could offer in terms of availability and selection, but they’re really accommodating and there are a lot of interesting activities available like going through the jungle or taking a boat cruise through the canal. Attendees might not think about it on their own. Perception is a hump that you have to get over. When you do the legwork on your own, you see that while it’s not a hot spot as a destination, you can actually stay outside the city at the beach at an all-inclusive. All-inclusive is important for us, because it helps control the budget.”

As one of the leaders in the all-inclusive segment, Sandals Resorts’ Luxury Meetings & Incentives Collection offers groups a comprehensive, all-inclusive program called Luxury Included. The collection is comprised of 15 resort locations in Jamaica, St. Lucia, The Bahamas, Antigua, Granada, Barbados and Turks & Caicos. Sandals’ Discovery Dining program allows attendees to choose from up to 15 gourmet restaurants at each property, and wines from Napa and premium brands of liquor are also included. Another budget-friendly advantage of meeting at Sandals Resorts is that most activities are also included, such as unlimited golf (excluding Sandals Emerald Bay), waterskiing, wakeboarding and scuba diving. In fact, Sandals claims to offer “more quality inclusions than any other resort on the planet.” Sandals even offers a convenient “Event Cost Estimate” calculator on its website that enables planners to get a ballpark estimate for hosting their event at any of the Sandals properties as they begin the planning process.

The Airline First Approach

As flights take over a larger chunk of budgets, particularly in the case of incentives, planners are beginning to look at their destinations with a more proactive approach to airlift. “Flight prices are going back up, it seems like we have to get over that mindset that everything is in the $200 range,” says the planner. “In our case, we’re not a hub of any sort, so you’re going to have to connect somewhere which makes things pricier. While this is a challenge personally, I can imagine that if you’re coming out of Newark or Chicago or Minneapolis, you’re spoiled for choice right now.

“It’s beginning to change how we choose our incentive destinations,” the planner explains. “The last thing you want is to have a 10-hour flight, whether it’s for fun or business. We usually have one or two people from each state, and though we obviously don’t operate in every state, it still gives us 20 states to work with. It’s pushing us toward less remote destinations. We’ll choose a standard hub rather than go to a smaller city that doesn’t have the exact flight times we need. With the airlines (merging), this is a big issue. It seems like there’s less and less flight availability. You can only leave and return a few times a day.”

“You have to consider travel,” Moritz agrees. “You have smaller cities that have stopovers, and the flights are not as cooperative...
as they would be from Newark or Philadelphia, where in most cases you can do direct flights because those cities and Atlanta are the connector cities for major airlines. For our incentive, we only have them Thursday to Sunday, and we want to maximize their time, so we don’t want to go too far where it’s an eight-hour travel day there and home.

“That’s why you have to do research early,” she explains. “I’m looking New York. I can’t get the flights yet, but I can look at the schedules for April 2015 and see there are only three flights per day and they leave at 5:45 a.m. and get there at 3 o’clock in the afternoon and go through Chattanooga, Tennessee. When we put together a presentation for company executives, we can say, ‘We like the property. It’s got a great deal, but...’

“The Kettle Inn’s rooftop deck can accommodate 240 attendees and provides views of Austin— a value destination that offers improved airlift and great music. Attendees and provides views of Austin—a value destination that offers improved airlift and great music. Attendees...”

“Many budgets have been cut. ...Our priorities include doing more with less, being smarter with our meeting spend and finding creative ways to save.”

Karen Alfonso, Director of Meetings and Events The Hartford, Hartford, CT

“I started with the firm, these airlines weren’t there or weren’t going where we need to go. You were at the mercy of Continental, Delta in terms of schedule, number of flights and layovers, the things we look carefully at.”

Small Meetings Stay Close to Home

While planners naturally have to find attractive destinations for incen- tives, smaller meetings are less about the destination’s attractions and more about its convenience for attendees. Increasingly, rather than choose a central place to gather employees from around the country, planners are keeping meetings close to headquarters or regional offices as much as possible and organizing more meetings in more locations to keep travel time and cost to a minimum.

“Meetings of fewer than 100 attend- ees are being especially scrutinized,” says Alfonso. “The first priority is to try to host the meeting in one of our offices rather than hold it offsite. Last year, we already condensed meetings and packing more in during the duration of the event, and we are not really seeing any other changes in the format compared to last year, though we are also finding efficiencies by bundling meetings together in order to leverage our spend by sharing AV, production and guest-speaker costs, and combining meals. Needless to say, meeting planners are working harder than ever to find cost efficiencies.”

“We do a lot of things locally,” the anonymous planner agrees. “The really small ones we try to keep in the area and because it’s close to where a lot of corporate people would come to work, and the people coming in are manager level or below. So it’s easier to drive in. But we have noticed we are adding more meetings, which is a good thing.”

Moritz in the process of a test year to evaluate a new way of completely restructuring the locations of her small meetings. “For our small meetings, people do travel. We used to have them in two places: Buffalo, because we’re one of the closest cities and Atlanta are the con- venient or home, Blue Harbor Resort and Spa, is conveniently located two hours north of Chicago in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, that offers improved airlift and great music.

“Continued from page 18 she says. “We’d invite financial advis- ors from the surrounding area codes. For Syracuse, we’d do New York ex- cluding Long Island and Westchester, and also offer meeting details to north- ern New Jersey. It’s a test year,” Moritz explains. “We’re trying to figure out how to make those programs as productive as pos- sible for advisors. We didn’t hit every- one with two big programs, so what we’ve done instead is we’ve turned those cities and Atlanta into two meetings, one in Long Island to draw New York City and Long Island, and one in Philadelphia which would add central and south- ern New Jersey.”

“We want to give them the experience they won’t have anywhere else or that they won’t have on their own, and Austin was great for that.”

Rhonda Moritz, Marketing Events Planner Cadaret, Grant & Co., Inc., Mt. Arlington, NJ

“Eleven years ago when we were already condensing meetings and packing more in during the duration of the event, so we decided to split it and get a better return on investment.”

“Another great spot for a small meet- ings is Cape Cod’s 120-room Wequassett Resort and Golf Club, which com- pleted a new waterfront renovation of 10,000 additional sf of flexible space. Meeting spaces range from intimate to large including the Cape Villa meet- ings and four-bedroom villas. Blue Harbor Resort and Spa, is conveniently located two hours north of Chicago in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, on the shoreline of Lake Michigan. The resort has 182 guest suites that range in size from 500 sf to more than 1,900 sf, as well as 64 two-bedroom suites. The property also boasts more than 16,800 sf of meeting and convention space, a 54,000-sf indoor entertainment area, retail shops, and convention style restaurant and cafe. More to the point, however, is the property’s easy access to nearby attractions which can be accessed via the hotel shuttle. The shuttle is available to transport guests to the airport, the cape cod jet center, and numerous local businesses. Meetings and events are held in the property’s conference center, which is equipped with state-of-the-art technology and offers flexible meeting space. The property also offers a variety of dining options, including an on-site restaurant and two additional dining venues. Additionally, the property offers a full-service spa, fitness center, pool, and numerous recreational activities. The property’s central location and close proximity to major highways make it the perfect destination for meetings and events. The property is also a member of the Preferred Hotel Group, which offers members exclusive rates and discounts.”

True for smaller meetings, Cape Cod’s Wequassett Resort and Golf Club boats newly renovated spaces, including this exquisite indoor/outdoor tent.

Continued on page 35

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It's So Miami

Over the last decade, Miami — a time-honored, century-old tropical hideaway for tourists and celebrities — has evolved into one of the most successful and spectacular meeting and convention destinations in the world. The “Miami” brand is built on a multifaceted foundation, from its rich architectural history to its ever-expanding multicultural influences from food to fashion and music. Today, the city’s sprawling metropolitan area — which includes distinctive enclaves such as the downtown arts district, Brickell financial district, Coconut Grove, Coral Gables and Miami Beach — combines ultra-modern urban chic with a laidback, old-school resort charm. Despite the striking modernity of the city’s hotel product, meeting venues and other infrastructure, it’s still the fabulous beaches and subtropical climate, framed by an energetic Latin vibe, that warm planners to meetings Miami-style.

Much of its success, in terms of resurgent awareness and curiosity, grew out of the South Beach phenomenon that erupted in the late 1990s and drew the likes of the late, legendary fashion designer Gianni Versace, and in his wake models from all over the world, which led to a thriving fashion, movie and TV scene that picked up where “Miami Vice” had left off in terms of style and energy.

Next came the rapid evolution of the Brickell financial district, which is now the international banking capital of Latin America, and the downtown arts and entertainment district that is now home to some of the most acclaimed performing arts facilities in the world. The Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, designed by global superstar architect Cesar Pelli, hosts a world-class season of theatre, symphony concerts and performances by Miami City Ballet, headed by iconic former dancer Edward Villella.

The New World Center, designed by legendary architect Frank Gehry and home base of the world-renowned New World Symphony headed by maestro Michael Tilson Thomas, is located in Miami Beach. The complex features SoundScape Park, where visitors can watch performances or films projected onto a 7,000 sq. ft. wall.

Another Miami landmark — one with a much longer history — is Bicentennial Park, located on a prime 30-acre parcel of city-owned
Biscayne Bay waterfront, near American Airlines Arena. It includes the 2,600-foot Biscayne Baywalk. Now, however, the location is in the process of completing a major new attraction, Museum Park. Its cultural cornerstones are the new Pérez Art Museum Miami, which made its debut last year, and the Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science, a $275 million, 250,000 sq. ft. facility that will open next year. Other venues and attractions popular with groups include Miami Seaquarium, Zoo Miami, Jungle Island and NASCARS Homestead-Miami Motor Speedway.

MEETING INFRASTRUCTURE

While Miami boasts cultural sizzle aplenty, its the city’s vast and diverse meeting infrastructure that gets the attention of planners. The Greater Miami area now has nearly 50,000 hotel rooms, from unique and charming boutique hotels famous all over the world to major brand meeting-and-convention properties. In recent years, billions of dollars have been invested to make Miami competitive with any other destination in the country when it comes to top-quality accommodations and modern amenities.

One thing that further contributes to Miami’s appeal is that virtually all of its hotels offer outdoor function spaces that showcase spectacular views of Biscayne Bay, from downtown or the Atlantic Ocean from Miami Beach. Miami’s subtropical climate means warm weather that allows for comfortable outdoor events throughout the year.

The ability to exploit local color includes rooftop pool decks, lushly landscaped tropical patios and gardens, expansive lawns overlooking world-renowned golf courses, and palm-lined courtyards and terraces with breathtaking views.

Meanwhile, Miami offers world-class convention and conference facilities. For decades, the Miami Beach Convention Center has been one of the most popular facilities in the world. Located at the heart of the Art Deco Historic District, the complex is within easy walking distance of all of South Beach’s best known restaurants, bars and nightclubs. Opened in 1957, the center quickly earned iconic status when it served as the site where Cassius Clay (later known as Muhammad Ali) defeated Sonny Liston for his first world heavyweight championship in 1964.

The facility’s highest-profile user is the prestigious Art Basel, a critically acclaimed art fair that comes every year. To keep pace with its competition across the country, the Convention Center will begin a $500 million renovation and expansion project after next year’s Art Basel. And the art fair recently announced that it would stay in Miami for another five years, even through the renovation.

Another facility highly popular for smaller conventions and conferences is the Miami Convention & Conference Center, located between downtown and the edge of the Brickell financial district. It’s a foundational element of the James L. Knight International Center/Hyatt Regency complex and features a 444-seat auditorium, a 117-seat tiered acoustically balanced lecture hall and 20 meeting rooms.

For serious business conferences and educational or training seminars, another good option is the Biltmore, a National Historic Landmark property built in 1926. The AAA Four Diamond hotel features 273 guest rooms and 70,537 sq. ft. of indoor/outdoor meeting and function space located within the hotel and the adjacent Conference Center of the Americas at the Biltmore. The hotel has 14,000 sq. ft. of indoor space and 24,000 sq. ft. of outdoor space, and the Conference Center of the Americas has 14,797 sq. ft. of indoor space and 17,740 sq. ft. of outdoor event space. Individual facilities include three ballrooms surrounded by expansive terraces, breakout rooms, two state-of-the-art amphitheaters, and executive boardrooms.

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NEIGHBORHOODS

Although to the uninitiated Miami might appear to be a homogenous metropolis, it is in fact a patchwork of distinct neighborhoods, each of which can claim its own charm and appropriateness for a particular group.

Over the last decade, downtown Miami — the part of the city located along the famous Biscayne Boulevard corridor — has been
re-engineered into one of the country’s top arts and entertainment districts as a result of the development of the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, which served as a powerful catalyst for an explosion of art galleries, and an eclectic collection of excellent local restaurants and shops.

At the heart of the neighborhood is the Miami Design District, a neighborhood conceived and developed by local entrepreneur Craig Robins, a pioneer of the early South Beach scene two decades earlier. The easily walkable Design District is dedicated specifically to innovative fashion, design, architecture and dining experiences.

Located south of downtown Miami is Coconut Grove, established as a famous brand decades before developers started resurrecting the Miami Beach neighborhood that would become known worldwide as South Beach.

Another one-of-a-kind venue in Coconut Grove is the Cruz Building, a glamorous three-story venue highlighted by coral stone outside terraces. Its stunning interiors are brimming with extraordinary features and amenities that include soaring ceilings, monumental stained glass windows, European antiques and sculptures, massive hand-carved mahogany bars, a dramatic brass and marble staircase, wrought ironwork and sculptures, and more — all lit by interior gas flame lanterns and museum-quality antique chandeliers.

Southwest of downtown Miami is Coral Gables, the area’s oldest and most iconic community, famous for its lavish Mediterranean Revival architecture and home to the University of Miami. Developed during the 1920s during the Florida land boom that led to the creation of the entire metropolitan area, Coral Gables was one of the country’s first planned communities and is still highly regarded for its strict zoning regulations. It is also home to the landmark Vizcaya Museum & Gardens on Biscayne Bay — South Beach is home to one of the world’s most acclaimed collections of architectural gems in its Art Deco District, a number of them designed by famed architect Morris Lapidus.

GETTING THERE

No destination has invested more money in recent years on state-of-the-art transportation infrastructure than Miami. Miami International Airport, which delivers formidable airlift from the area’s other neighborhoods, Coral Gables offers a range of restaurants and shops. One of its most distinctive and popular offsite meeting venues is Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, which features the only indoor rainforest in the U.S. Another coveted venue in Coral Gables is the Venetian Pool: a spring-fed lagoon carved out of coral rock, this historic landmark and swimming pool features cave-like grottos, stone bridges and waterfalls.

Despite the longstanding appeal of places such as Coconut Grove or Coral Gables, there’s no doubt that in recent years Miami has been best known for the South Beach district of Miami Beach. Just 21 blocks long and a few blocks wide — from the Atlantic Ocean to Biscayne Bay — South Beach is one of the hippest places on earth. So, while South Beach is popular with small groups with a taste for adventure, it’s more popular for incentive programs.

GETTING THERE

No destination has invested more money in recent years on state-of-the-art transportation infrastructure than Miami. Miami International Airport, which delivers formidable airlift from across the U.S. and around the world, offers new and renovated terminals and a recently installed high-speed train that whiskers arriving passengers from plane to baggage claim and then on to a new Intermodal Center that connects attendees with private and public transportation, car rentals, limousine services and taxis in one convenient location.

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In recent years, insurance and financial meeting planning has been rocked by several key changes. ‘Meetings have evolved and are now shorter in duration, used a condensed meeting agenda and usually contain a CSR event for a community giving-back aspect,’ says Alfonso. ‘Meals are healthier and attendees are much more active than in previous years.’

Unfortunately for planners, the evolution continues, largely due to constraints imposed by the rebounding travel industry. But the creativity and resourcefulness planners have cultivated is serving them well to face the current challenges and prepare for the next. ‘Meeting planners are savvy consumers and are working harder than ever,’ she says.
Planners Discover How CVBs Can Enhance the Event Experience

By Derek Reveron

N o matter how experienced a planner may be, or how many cities they may have visited, there’s always something new and important they can discover from destination professionals. The value of insider information such as calendar conflicts is priceless say planners. And forging partnerships on the value of DMOs (Destination Marketing Organizations) is a smart way to do business. Some planners don’t know about the area of town to consider, she guided me through the process. She and the Columbus CVB were great.

Second Tier Doesn’t Mean Second Best

While this meeting was held at the Hilton Columbus, the planner has previously met at convention centers and touts the advantages of those in second-tier destinations. “It’s silly to rule out what some people consider second-tier cities,” he says. “Places like Columbus and Indianapolis have convention centers (the Greater Columbus Convention Center and Indiana Convention Center) that can win big events.”

Planners are asking, “What kind of local partnerships do I need through DMOs to be more productive if I can’t grow my own staff?”

Last year, DMAI formed a industry-wide advisory board of meeting professionals who meet and examine ways to improve DMO services, encourage more planners to use the organizations and overcome industry misperceptions.

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DMO. At the same time, DMOs have to challenge themselves. What is it that they don’t do on a consistent basis?

Price and Perks

A CVB destination expert can guide planners on space and price so they have enough information to make the right decision for their group. “Space is one thing, but pricing is becoming more and more important,” says a financial industry meeting planner who wishes to remain anonymous. The four-day meeting for 50 financial managers was held in Columbus, Ohio, last year. "You are going to keep your eye on someplace that is economically to your advantage. If someplace is significantly less to rent, that’s something you clearly have to consider. While you don’t want to go to a place that’s tired and dumpy, in this day and age you must look at price and the perks you get as far as food and beverage, Wi-Fi and ancillary things that can add up,” notes the planner.

A staff member at Experience Columbus encouraged the planner to consider the city. “She has been a long-time friend,” he says. “She made sure we stayed on her radar. I had never been in Columbus before, and she made sure we were looking at the right hotels and gave me direction on what properties would be convenient for attendees. I did my own due diligence as far as venues and room rates, but when it came down to what area of town to consider, she guided me through the process. She and the Columbus CVB were great.”

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The San Diego Convention Center (SDCC) president & CEO, Carol Wallace, noted that the project is expected to start by the end of 2014. The project will increase the center’s meeting and exhibit space by 42 percent from 625,000 sf to 888,300 sf. Function space in Moscone North would double to 33,600 sf and nearly triple in Moscone South to 267,700 sf. In addition, the project will connect the underground area between Moscone North and Moscone South, creating one large exhibition hall.

Seattle’s Washington State Convention Center has acquired a two-acre site for a proposed expansion that would add 310,000 sf of exhibit space, $135,000 sf of meeting rooms and up to 60,000 sf of ballroom space. The center’s officials have said that, over the past five years, it has turned down more than 300 conventions due to lack of space. Construction is scheduled to start in 2016 and be completed in 2019.

The Anaheim Convention Center’s expansion plan calls for adding 200,000 sf of flexible, multipurpose space to the existing 815,000 sf of exhibit space. The project replaces current parking spaces, adds new loading docks, a vehicle entrance and a pedestrian bridge connecting to the center. The project is slated to begin late summer of 2014 and is expected to be completed by fall of 2016. Currently, the center offers 130,000 sf of meeting space and the 100,000-sf Grand Plaza outdoor function space.

Construction and Expansion Updates

West

A California state appeals court derailed the hotel-tax funding plan for the expansion of the San Diego Convention Center, according to a news report in Trade Show Executive. San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer reaffirmed his support of the project, and the San Diego Convention Center Corp. said it was not giving up on its expansion plan and would be in contact with show organizers and meeting planners to answer questions about the long-term status of the project. “We are disappointed, but our last expansion faced similar legal hurdles, and we were ultimately successful in our effort,” said Carol Wallace, SDCC president & CEO. The $500 million expansion of the Moscone Center in San Francisco is expected to start by the end of 2014. The project will increase the center’s meeting and exhibit space by 42 percent from 625,000 sf to 888,300 sf. Function space in Moscone North would double to 33,600 sf and nearly triple in Moscone South to 267,700 sf. In addition, the project will connect the underground area between Moscone North and Moscone South, creating one large exhibition hall.

A rendering of the Moscone Center expansion.

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A rendering of the Anaheim Convention Center expansion.

A rendering of the Anaheim Convention Center expansion.

A rendering of the Arena District in downtown Columbus, Ohio.

Attendees appreciate lively entertainment districts such as the Arena District in downtown Columbus, Ohio.
activities and hotels. If you are looking for a two- or three-day experience that focuses on training and education, not an incentive, it really doesn’t matter. It’s a weekend-whether you are in a dynamic downtown.”

Take Statehouse Convention Center (SCC), for example. The Little Rock, Arkansas, facility is competing for large national meetings. Last fall, Cynthia Tomei, CMP, FAHM, meeting planner for Chicago-based Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, hosted a meeting in Little Rock of 325 information management managers, employees and executives from Blue Cross Blue Shield companies nationwide. The event’s sessions were held in the SCC, which offers 220,000 sf of meeting and exhibit space, and attendees stayed at the Little Rock Marriott, which is adjacent to the SCC.

The meeting ran smoothly. “We had some functions in the Marriott and some in the convention center, but it was seamless because the Marriott catered both places,” says Tomei. “We also used the hotel’s AV provider, so the center was almost like an extension of the hotel. It was convenient. You took an escalator from the Marriott lobby down to the center. The service was fabulous. The facility was so clean and well maintained.”

When you’re at the SCC, because no hotels were large enough to self-contain the meeting “I don’t necessarily look at centers because they’ve expanded,” she says. “You prefer a hotel that is large enough to host everything under one roof. We turn to centers when we have to, and that’s for a multitude of reasons. It’s comfortable to walk down to a meeting from your hotel space versus having to cross the street or go through a walkway. Hotels tend to be more flexible and negotiable. If the convention center is a union center it increases the rental price.”

New Sales Partnerships Can Maximize ROI

Synchronicities, a new three-city sales partnership has been forged among the Anaheim/Orange County Visitor & Convention Bureau, Visit Baltimore and the San Antonio Convention & Visitors Bureau. According to a statement, the partnership was designed to assist meeting professionals in maximizing return on investment.”

After significant in-depth research with meeting professionals by way of focus groups and surveys, the three cities developed Synchronicities, which they say offers meeting professionals and attendees “an unbeatable combination of value and resources.”

And, of course, the new tri-city arrangement offers planners the opportunity to choose from one of the three cities.

As a matter of fact, Synchronicities announced an organization has already selected Anaheim, Baltimore and San Antonio to host their annual conference in 2015, 2017 and 2018, respectively. To Build or Not to Build

Destinations without convention centers want to build them. Destinations with convention centers want to expand them. In both cases, destinations want to create more meeting facilities, amenities and contiguous exhibit space to compete for more and larger group business and be in a position to hold concurrent events.

That’s why more cities and regions are commissioning studies to determine whether the cost of building or expanding a convention center is worth the financial return. The studies invariably predict a beneficial economic impact. For example, a study by Duluth, Georgia-based Strategic Advisory Group projects that building a convention center in Albany, New York, would yield $25 million in annual spending. Also, a $200 million expansion of the Wisconsin Center in Milwaukee on $189,000 sf to 250,000 sf would bring $114 million additional per year to the region, according to a study by HVS Convention, Sports & Entertainment Facilities Consulting in Chicago. The economic impact of expanding the Washington State Convention Center in Seattle is projected to rise from $34.5 million a year from $272 million a year, according to Visit Seattle.

Another study reports that convention centers are a destination’s most significant revenue producer for hotels. Convention center expansion increases hotel revenue per available room (RevPAR) 1.6 percent per year during the first five years after construction, according to a study of 15 large cities by Jones Lang LaSalle, a Chicago-based real estate services and investment management firm. Cities without convention center expansions had a 0.4 percent decline in RevPAR over the five years.

New Book Raises Questions

But a new book questions the accuracy of studies that predict the financial impact of new and expanded convention centers, especially those using public funding. Convention Center Follies: Politics, Power, and Public Investment in American Cities (May 2014, University of Pennsylvania Press) by Heywood T. Sanders, a professor of public administration at the University of Texas at San Antonio, is based on an examination of predictions in 50 cities. Sanders, a formidable urban development expert, asserts that an abundance of convention centers results in increased competition and discounted rates, causing lower financial returns than expected.

Shimasaki says there are several reasons why some new or expanded convention facilities don’t meet financial expectations. “It’s critical to understand that building a facility is just part of the equation,” she says. “There are lots of other reasons why a facility and destination are selected. A lot of times, due to local issues, the facility isn’t put in the best place; or the expanded space isn’t contiguous, or there isn’t a headquarters hotel or hotel package that is connected; or they aren’t marketed correctly. You can spot facilities where it’s a challenge to attract events, and you can see other cases where they have fixed the problems and are doing well now.”

CVBs Make a Difference

Tomei, like many planners, depends on the local CVB for guidance and assistance. “I’d never been to Little Rock before and wasn’t familiar with anything in the city,” she says. “I had conversations with the (Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau) about what was needed before we convened. The CVB was amazing about getting me information about venues, maps and restaurants that were within walking distance for my folks. They would email a lot of the information. I did a site inspection and pre-planning meeting, and they drove me around. Some of the changes were quite substantial.”

In addition, a new $150 million renovation of the Marriott at the Convention Center added 25,400 sf of pre-function space. Convention center expansions had a 0.4 percent decline in RevPAR over the five years. A rendering of the proposed development of the New Orleans Convention Center Corridor.

South

The New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center plans to spend $150 million to $175 million to improve the facility’s exterior and support private development of a hotel, condos, retail space and park on a nearby 47-acre riverfront site. The convention center also boasts the new 60,300 sf Great Hall, which includes a 3,420-sf rooftop terrace, a 5,700-sf executive club lounge, a 980 sf indoor balcony and a 4,660 sf junior ballroom. In addition, the center added 25,400 sf of pre-function space.

The state Convention Center in Orlando is undergoing a five-year, $187 million improvement. The project will include the hotel, ballrooms, lounges and ceilings in the West Concourse. Plans call for replacing Hall WD with a 50,000 sf ballroom, four boardrooms and an outdoor mezzanine. The entire convention center will get wireless infrastructure upgrades, lighting and utility improvements, and new furniture. In addition, a new pedestrian bridge will connect the West Concourse with the Hyatt Regency Hotel. The West Concourse expansion will be completed by 2015. The entire project will be finished by 2017.

Music City Center, Nashville’s downtown convention center, celebrated its first anniversary earlier this year. The facility offers 1.2 million sf of space, including 60,000 sf of meeting space, 57,400 sf of ballroom, more than 350,000 sf of exhibition space and 90,000 sf of meeting space. The center’s headquarters hotel, the 800-room Omni Nashville Hotel, provides 80,000 sf of meeting space.

Midwest

The 41st Republican Party National Convention will be held in Cleveland, Ohio, at the Quicken Loans Arena in the summer 2016. The Greater Columbus Convention Center in Columbus, Ohio, plans to
Cities and good infrastructure for all of the MICE segment. I invite the meeting planners to go and visit Mexico and live it to believe it. We will welcome them when they want to go and visit on a FAM trip or come to our road shows so they can know Mexico and do business in Mexico.

Mexico’s new government is working hard to address areas of concern to make tourism in the country world-class. Cruz is working with many, many things in the cities, in the venues and in the resorts. I know it is one of the things that meeting planners care about. We also care very much about it. I think it is one of the most important things we’re working on.

Adam Lawhorne, CITE, CIS, is CEO of Chicago-based Meeting Incentive Experts, which operates offices in Los Cabos, Cancun and Puerto Vallarta. Lawhorne notes the significant investments being made in new resorts and infrastructure in Mexico as evidence of the progress the country is making. “The people that are investing in the country are not just Mexicans, but also Europeans, Canadians and Americans. I don’t think they would invest that kind of money if they thought they were going to have a problem with violence and safety concerns. With this new president that has come in and the infrastructure and things that are changing and really getting better in Mexico, people are seeing a difference when they come down for a site inspection.”

In summary, planners shouldn’t hesitate to reach out to the destination experts at the CVB, the DMO or the tourism bureau for assistance. Having a trusted partner at the CVB will make the process for effective, enjoyable and memorable meetings and events.

Northeast

The Boston Convention and Exhibition Center (BCEC) plans a $1 billion expansion that will double the size of the facility. The project will add up to 400,000 sf of exhibit space, 125,000 sf of meeting space and a 75,000-sf ballroom. Plans also call for a new headquarters hotel featuring at least 1,000 rooms and 70,000 to 100,000 sf of meeting and function space. The expansion will allow the BCEC to host overlapping, multiple and large-scale events.

The Minneapolis Convention Center, the largest convention center in the Upper Midwest, will undergo a $14.5 million renovation over the next two years. The project includes design improvements to encourage networking among attendees. The renovation also will include a new mezzanine in the main lobby that will have seats, a lounge and bar. In addition, the facility will include new stairs in the main lobby and visitors center.

Finish a $125 million makeover within two years. The project will add roughly 36,000 sf to the center’s northern exhibit hall, bringing total exhibit space to 375,000 sf. Expansion also will include a redesign of the center’s north end and a renovation of the facility’s interior, including new paint and carpet.

The Music City Center, Nashville, Tennessee.

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that were available to our members. They helped us choose venues for different events that would support our theme, which was Music City. We wanted to tell the story of Nashville to our people.”

With the assistance of the CVB, the group held functions at the city’s most famous venues. “We rented out the Country Music Hall of Fame for a tour, a cocktail reception and dinner in the rotunda,” says the planner. “We went to the Wildhorse Saloon, a night club. We rented out the top floor and line-danced to a country music band. We also toured the Grand Ole Opry, Ryman Auditorium and RCA Studio B, a famous recording studio.”

CVBs make a difference south of the border as well. For instance, Cecilia Cruz, executive director for the meetings industry for the Mexico Tourism Board in Washington, DC, encourages planners to see what’s new in Mexico for themselves, citing Mexico Tourism’s “Live It to Believe It” campaign. “This campaign is really about inviting everyone to Mexico,” Cruz says. “If you don’t go, you can’t imagine how beautiful and how amazing it is — and not just our beaches and sun. We also have good venues and good cities and good infrastructure for all of the MICE segment. I invite the meeting planners to go and visit Mexico and live it to believe it. We will welcome them when they want to go and visit on a FAM trip or come to our road shows so they can know Mexico and do business in Mexico.”

Mexico’s new government is working hard to address areas of concern to make tourism in the country world-class. “We are increasing security and doing many, many things in the cities, in the venues and in the resorts. I know it is one of the things that meeting planners care about. We also care very much about it. I think it is one of the most important things we’re working on.”

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Also, it is expected to push Boston into the ranks of the nation’s top five convention destinations.

— DR

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Fiesta Americana Grand Los Cabos Golf & Spa Resort is a good example of why the Mexico Tourism Board invites planners to visit Mexico to see “how beautiful and amazing” it is.
Southwest Update
What’s New in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah

By Karen Brost

Sometimes, a healthy dose of Southwest sunshine can go a long way toward setting the stage for a successful event. When officials at PayneWest Insurance, headquartered in Missoula, Montana, searched for a destination for their 2014 Network Builder sales event, they found the ideal fit in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Scottsdale/Phoenix, Arizona

“The majority of our attendees are located in the Northwest, so the primary reason for selecting Scottsdale was the weather,” explains Courtney Imhoff, travel and event coordinator for the company. “In April, most of our attendees are looking to get away from cold weather. Scottsdale offers the sunshine they are very much needing at that time of year. We are also looking for unlimited options for both onsite and offsite activities. Scottsdale and the resort offer that as well.”

The property chosen for Payne-West’s sales event, which attracted 390 attendees, was the 326-room Scottsdale Resort & Conference Center, which offers nearly 80,000 sf of indoor and outdoor event space. Imhoff says there were several reasons for choosing the resort, but the biggest reason was its distinctiveness. “From the front circle with its stunning fountain to Sangria’s lounge, the resort is full of surprises. The minute you pull up to the resort, it feels as if it’s hugging you... clean, quiet and comfortable, and the staff is utterly amazing.” She adds, “Did you know they have one handyman whose sole responsibility is touching up paint? This, to me, says they take great pride in their product!”

Imhoff also appreciated the flexibility of the staff. “I am a ‘think outside the box’ event planner. The staff is knowledgeable with regard to what’s been done before, but also allows you to take full creative control and is willing to go along for the ride. They are forward thinkers that aren’t afraid to try something new.

“Lastly, it was the size,” she adds. “We look for properties that can accommodate the size of our group but where we don’t get lost. With 326 rooms, The Scottsdale Resort allows us to take over the majority of the property, which, in turn, means we don’t have competition for rooms, meeting facilities, service, etc.

“Our entire program is based on networking,” she continues, “so we are continually looking for creative ways for our attendees to spend time with others in the same line of business (personal insurance, benefits or commercial) and form lasting relationships.” One of the activities Imhoff organized for her event was a pop-up restaurant event. “Pop-up restaurants are becoming very popular among caterers or chefs who have thought about opening a restaurant but aren’t comfortable going all in,” she says.

PayneWest Insurance used the Scottsdale Resort & Conference Center (pictured above left) for their sales event where attendees participated in a build-a-bike program for charity and a soapbox derby.

The Westin Kierland Resort & Spa in Scottsdale features 27 holes of golf, 732 guest rooms and more than 50,000 sf of meeting space.

Credit: The Westin Kierland Resort & Spa
Instead, they create a pop-up restaurant for one evening where they can showcase their skill with little risk and receive feedback to assist them in making a decision on whether they are ready to open a restaurant.” Imhoff explains how her program worked. “We divided attendees into three ‘restaurants’ based on the line of insurance they sell, provided a private chef who offered customized menus, adjacent championship golf courses, the Palm and Pinge Courses), a build-a-bike program for charity and a soap-box derby. Imhoff worked with a local company, Event Inventors, to plan the latter two. ‘We changed the build-a-bike by requesting to have the children receive their bikes at our awards banquet, allowing all event attendees to share in the experience and see the impact we had made when the children were receiving their new bikes. This was a heartwarming moment and one that our conference attendees won’t soon forget.’ ‘For the soap box derby, we wanted to make the event more competitive and an event that our more thrill-seeking attendees could enjoy,’ she continues, “so we created pit stop challenges that consisted of everything from trivia to attendees having to eat something like fried mealworms — it was just the added touch the activity needed.” The Scottsdale Resort and Conference Center, which just recently joined Destination Hotels & Resorts’ growing portfolio, will undertake a series of renovations beginning in 2015, including the development of a lobby bar and restaurant, re-viving the resort’s existing restaurant outlet and refreshing the resort’s pools and amenities. Kevin Dern of St. Louis-based Kevin Dern Travel has also met with success in Arizona for his insurance clients. ‘Phoenix/Scottsdale is an excellent option for incentive and corporate groups because you can get a resort-like experience and warm weather without having to go too far south or west,’ he explains. ‘Scottsdale has great golf, restaurants and outdoor activities, plus the fantastic Talsen West (Frank Lloyd Wright’s school and studio). Scottsdale offers great shopping on Camelback Road and close to downtown galleries on Fifth Avenue. Phoenix has the Desert Botanical Garden and Heard Museum (Native American art and history).’

**New & Renovated in Scottsdale**

Scottsdale is one of those evolving destinations that always has something new to offer each time a group gathers there. In June, a new venue called Topgolf Riverwalk opened near the 497-room Talking Stick Resort on the Salt River Pima-Marcopoca Indian Community (SRP-MIC). The 65,000-sf facility, which offers private event space as well as partial and full buyouts, allows guests to test their golf skills by hitting microchipped balls toward various targets on a 215-yard field. The venue also features a rooftop terrace with fire pits, plenty of sports bar-style food and beverages and 250 HDTVs so no one has to miss a big game. This summer also will mark the groundbreaking for the OdySea Aquarium which will be the largest aquarium in the Southwest when it opens in the fall of 2015. Also located on SRP-MIC land, it’s part of the $170 million OdySea in the Desert complex that already includes Butterfly Wonderland and OdySea Mirror Maze. Future plans also call for the addition of an IMAX theater, a Ripley’s Believe it or Not Museum and a ‘Taste of the World’ culinery experience.

In late September, the former Radisson Fort McDowell Resort located east of Scottsdale will be re-launched as the We-Ko-Pa Resort Conference Center. The 246-room property, which is located near the award-winning We-Ko-Pa Golf Club, will operate as an independent golf resort.

**New & Renovated in Phoenix**

Excitement is building as downtown Phoenix prepares to become the ‘epicenter’ for activities related to Super Bowl XLIX, which will take place on February 1, 2015 at the University of Phoenix Stadium in the Phoenix suburb of Glendale. The Phoenix Convention Center will be home to the interactive theme park called the NFL Experience as well as the NFL Media Center, which will serve as the headquarters for the 5,000 members of the media expected to attend. The nearby Cityscape shopping and entertainment district will undergo a $35 million resort-wide rejuvenation. Each of our 487 rooms along with the 60,000 square feet of conference space have been completely and beautifully upgraded with the newest signature touches from Westin for a new level of luxury in Tucson. Rated #1 for business travels in Tucson, plus awarded the highest MPSLE score in its class by Inspect-a-Planner.

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PayneWest Insurance
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complex will be the site of NFL House, which will serve as hospitality central for Super Bowl VIPs.

The Arizona Biltmore, A Waldorf Astoria Resort, is undergoing a multi-million dollar renovation of its Paradise, Garden, Valley, Cottage and Terrace Court accommodations. One of the most notable changes will be the new embossed metallic wall coverings that mimic the historic Frank Lloyd Wright design of the "Biltmore Blocks" used to construct the iconic resort.

Travelers who find themselves facing a layover in Phoenix can put that time to good use. They can grab a free brochure which will serve as hospitality central. And when it comes to delivering iconic Southwestern views, it’s hard to beat the setting of Enchantment Resort in Sedona, 110 miles north of Phoenix. Nestled at the base of a box canyon, Enchantment is surrounded by stunning red rock formations.

Tucson, Arizona

When one of an event’s goals is to wow attendees with the saguaro-studded beauty of the Sonoran Desert, one option is the 398-room Loews Ventana Canyon resort in Tucson. The resort also features 37,000 sf of flexible meet-ing space, two Tom Fazio-designed PGA golf courses and the 7,000-sf Lakeside Spa.

Loews was the site of the 2014 Safety Works Plus Expo presented by CopperPoint Mutual Insurance Company in May. The event drew approximately 200 attendees and 15 exhibitors. “The number of attend-ees was about the same as usual for our southern Arizona event, but the number of exhibitors was down a bit,” explains Bruce Trehwey, communi-cations manager for CopperPoint. “I believe it is because the venue is not really centrally located within the city. However, the venue was very nice and had great views.”

He described the factors that made Loews Ventana Canyon a good choice for the event. “We were able to keep every-thing contained in a small area,” he notes. “The classroom sessions and exhibitors were close together, so ex-hibitors were pleased. All classrooms were down one hallway next to the larger general session (ballroom) area. The year prior, we had to use two rooms, which was in-inconvenient. Our space at the Ventana was all on one floor, and it was large enough to accom- modate all our needs. He explained another ad-vantage of holding the event at Loews. “The staff was very ac-commodating and always close by, by the way, didn’t have to go look-ing for anyone when we need-ed something.”

The AAA Four Diamond Lodge at Ventana Canyon in Tucson re-cently announced a multimillion-dollar renovation. The first phase, set for completion in January of 2015, will update all one-bedroom suites while the second and third phases will de-but revamped dining areas, a pool and Jacuzzi spa, and an expanded Golf House and Golf Academy. The all-suite property has completed a renovation to the common areas, including the lobby, fitness center, patios and a portion of the grounds.

Last year, The Westin La Paloma Resort & Spa in Tucson recently completed a resort-wide renovation, which added several new outdoor event spaces and entertaining areas, and a variety of new social areas. The resort, designated as a “Historic Hotel of America,” features 331 casita-style guest rooms and boasts more than 100,000 sf of flexible indoor and outdoor meeting areas and event facilities that can accommod-ate groups of up to 1,000 people. The recent renovation added several new rooms, which include 25 suites. The resort’s 60,000 sf of conference space was redone as were its fitness center, tennis courts, and the greens and bunkers of its 27 holes of Nicklaus Signature golf. In addition, the resort’s lobby, five pools and its 177-foot “Slide/Winder” waterslide also received updates.

The Metropolitan Tucson Conven- tion & Visitors Bureau is continuing its “Tucson on Us” promotion where-by qualifying groups can receive a credit for new meetings booked in 2014-15 and activating in 2014-15. For example, a meeting with 101 to 200 peak room nights could be eligi-ble for a $2,500 credit, and multiyear meetings (for two or three consecu-tive years) can receive the credit for each year. More details are available at www.tucsonotours.com.
transportation for a group dine-around. Complete details are available at www.itsatrip.org/recipeincentive.

Santa Fe, New Mexico
After more than two years of renovations, two historic Santa Fe buildings, Marian Hall, dating back to 1910 and St. Vincent Hospital, which opened in 1953, have been transformed into the Drury Plaza Hotel. The 182-room property debuted in July as the first large, new hotel to open in downtown Santa Fe in 18 years. It will offer a 3,800-sf ballroom and a year-round heated rooftop bar and pool offering view of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Salt Lake City, Utah
The Grand America Hotel, Salt Lake City’s only AAA Five Diamond property, recently announced that it is partnering with The Road Home, a social service agency that operates the state’s largest homeless shelter. The hotel will create hygiene kits and other mountain sports, and in the summer, meeting or incentive participants can choose from fly fishing, hiking, horseback riding and other outdoor adventures. The Park City Convention & Visitors Bureau reports that planners have a choice of more than 50 top-tier lodging and conference facilities and that the area can accommodate groups of up to 700 with its 125,000 sf of meeting space.

The Utah Legislature recently passed a bill that moved the construction of a new convention hotel in downtown Salt Lake City one step closer to becoming a reality. According to Salt Lake County Mayor Ben McAdams, “With a headquarters hotel, Utah will soon be the Rocky Mountain destination for more large conventions, tens of thousands of new visitors and millions of dollars in new revenue. This privately built hotel will also bring us the overdue meeting space that convention planners need and that will help keep the Salt Palace Convention Center bustling more weeks of the year.” Construction plans and a hotel brand have not yet been announced.

Park City, Utah
Located just 35 minutes from Salt Lake City International Airport, Park City is an upscale, alpine resort area offering a wide choice of activities in every season. In the winter months, the area is famous for its skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling and other mountain sports, and in the summer, meeting or incentive participants can choose from fly fishing, hiking, horseback riding and other outdoor adventures. The Park City Convention & Visitors Bureau reports that planners have a choice of more than 50 top-tier lodging and conference facilities and that the area can accommodate groups of up to 700 with its 125,000 sf of meeting space.

One example of the luxury lodging available in Park City is the Grand Summit Hotel located in the Canyons Resort area. The 350-room hotel offers a variety of accommodations, including hotel rooms, studios, suites and luxury penthouses. Canyons Resort also offers unique venues for private events. The Red Pine Lodge, located at an elevation of 8,000 feet, is accessed via a scenic gondola ride and can accommodate up to 350 guests indoors or a private event for up to 100 outdoors. For smaller events with 40–80 guests, Lookout Cabin provides a secluded, mountaintop setting that delivers 360-degree views of the Wasatch Mountains.

Planners who are looking for a refreshing change of scenery (and weather) for their next event may very well want to follow in the footsteps of their colleagues — those who have met with success by heading southwest to Arizona, New Mexico or Utah.
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Terranea, by Destination Hotels & Resorts, Rancho Palos Verdes, California, has named Sandra Montesano as director, national accounts for the Midwest and Maria Trabucco as director of national accounts for the Northeast. Montesano was director Midwest and incentive sales for La Quinta Resort & Club. Trabucco was director of national accounts, Northeast, for the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel in Orlando.

Kevin James Rosa was named director of sales and marketing for Loews Don Cesar Hotel in St. Pete Beach, Florida. He was director of sales and marketing at Turnberry Isle Miami.

Shelborne Wyndham Grand South Beach, Miami, Florida, has named Michael Choiniere as director of sales and marketing. He formerly served as vice president of sales and marketing for The Abaco Beach Resort at Boat Harbour in The Bahamas.

Meg Fasy, CMP, was named vice president of sales for Bellagio, Las Vegas, Nevada. She was the vice president of industry relations at PSAV.

La Cantera Hill Country Resort, by Destination Hotels & Resorts, in San Antonio, Texas, has named Danielle Johnson as director of group sales. She was a group sales manager for Vail Cascade Resort & Spa, by Destination Hotels & Resorts, in Vail, Colorado. Kerri Matthews was named sales manager. She most recently served as director of Southwest sales at Gaylord Texan Resort & Convention Center in Grapevine, Texas. Tiffany Ferguson also was named sales manager. She formerly served as national sales manager at Miramonte Resort and Spa in Indian Wells, California.

Kevin Schieferdecker was promoted to director of sales and marketing at the Hilton Anatole in Dallas, Texas. He joined Hilton Worldwide in 2009 as director of sales at the Hilton Anatole.

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