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Welcome 2016

In this first issue of the new year — our 34th year of publishing Corporate & Incentive Travel magazine — we examine the latest meeting industry trends relating to the airline industry, budgets, incentive travel, and the ever-popular food and beverage category.

In our cover story, “The State of the Airline Industry” on page 22, you will find enlightening information as well as a timely sidebar outlining the specific group programs offered by five U.S. airlines. As you know, our industry has a good friend in the U.S. Travel Association. Lead by president and CEO Roger Dow, U.S. Travel in June presented its plan to Congress to repair the country’s air-travel infrastructure and promote a healthy passenger aviation system. U.S. Travel wants to move the nation toward a set of national policies that is pro-competition, pro-growth and pro-traveler, and as Dow stated, gives “this country the air transportation system that it needs and deserves.”

Budgeting is always a planner’s nemesis, especially in a seller’s market, and on page 12, we present a feature on number-crunching for savvy meeting planners that also includes excellent pointers on negotiating food and beverage programs. As Julie Lindsey, director of global events for San Francisco-based Gap Inc., shares: “One thing I have started doing is making the one-hour cocktail reception before dinner on-consumption and then at the dinner go into a package.”

In the “What’s Cookin’ for 2016” feature on page 26, we are reminded that the very nature of trends means that they are guaranteed to change over time, and as Emily Boykin, CMP, meeting planner for Onyx Meetings and Events in Overland Park, Kansas, notes, “Thanks to sources like Pinterest, clients are really pushing the boundaries on food and making chefs break away from their standard menus and embrace the opportunity to show off ... You want each guest to have an authentic, memorable hospitality experience, and food and beverage is a great way to make that happen.”

What trend will we be talking about next? Boykin is wondering, too: “We survived the recent cupcake trend, are wading through the farm-to-table trend and are really ready to see what clients come up with next.”

Harvey Grotsky
Publisher
George Aguel to Receive Lifetime Achievement Award in Hospitality Marketing

MCLEAN, VA — The Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI) will recognize George Aguel, president and CEO of Visit Orlando, with its 2015 Albert E. Koehl Award for Lifetime Achievement in Hospitality Marketing. Aguel will be honored at the HSMAI Adrian Awards Dinner Reception and Gala on February 16 at the New York Marriott Marquis.

The award, named in honor of Albert E. Koehl — a pioneer in hotel advertising, recognizes individuals who have contributed to the betterment of the industry in a significant and lasting way. “George is a key player in the hospitality and travel community and is making innovative strides while representing the most visited destination in the country,” said Robert A. Gilbert, CHME, CHBA, president and CEO of HSMAI. “We couldn’t be more excited to present George with this year’s Albert E. Koehl Award.”

Gaylord Rockies Resort and Convention Center Project Moves Forward

BETHESDA, MD — Marriott International Inc., together with the owner and development partnership led by RIDA Development Corp. and Ares Management LP, announced December 21 the closing of a $500 million construction loan from Wells Fargo Bank as lead agent for construction of the 1,500-room Gaylord Rockies Resort and Convention Center in Aurora, Colorado. The hotel is scheduled to be completed in late 2018. Marriott will manage the hotel and convention center under a long-term contract. The economic impact of the project is estimated at more than $7 billion of economic activity for the state of Colorado, with more than 80 percent of guests expected to be net new visitors to the state.

Michael Kofsky will serve as the director of sales and marketing for the Aurora, Colorado, hotel and will lead a team with the goal of prebooking more than 1.25 million room nights prior to opening. The hotel is expected to bring more than 2 million visitors to the city of Aurora and the state of Colorado during the first several years after opening.

New Leadership Begins at Philadelphia CVB

PHILADELPHIA, PA — Julie Coker Graham on January 1, 2016, became the new president and CEO of the Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau (PHLCVB). She assumed the role following the retirement of former President and CEO Jack Ferguson on December 31.

“It is a great honor to be assuming the position of PHLCVB President & CEO. On the heels of a visit by Pope Francis in September that drew nearly 1 million national and international visitors, Philadelphia’s star continues to rise across the globe. It is an extremely exciting time to be taking the reins,” Coker Graham said. “As we look ahead to a year that includes the City of Philadelphia hosting the 2016 Democratic National Convention and tens of thousands of delegates and leaders from around the world, I look forward to sharing Philadelphia’s story.”

Las Vegas Breaks Tourism Record

LAS VEGAS, NV — Las Vegas continued its historic visitation growth, setting another new record by surpassing 42 million visitors for the first time. This breaks last year’s record of 41.1 million, which was the first time the destination had ever topped 40 million.

“Las Vegas couldn’t have reached this achievement without the support of our resort partners and the dedicated workers who make the Las Vegas experience what it is,” said Rossi Ralenkotter, president/CEO of the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority (LVCVA). “Whether a first-time visitor or a returning Las Vegas enthusiast, the destination continues to astonish travelers from all over the world with luxury resort experiences, world-class dining and exciting entertainment.”

Boosted by several new non-stop flights, increased convention attendance throughout the year and several other factors, Las Vegas will surpass 42 million visitors by the end of the year. The previous record was set in 2014 with 41.1 million visitors. Official visitation numbers will be announced in early 2016.
2016 Incentive Travel Trends

When executed well, incentive travel programs can reap a multitude of benefits for your business. They improve business results by increasing sales and spurring innovation from your employees or partners. They offer a wonderful opportunity for your business to recognize top achievers within the company and facilitate a culture where employees or partners can thrive. Incentive travel programs also create and strengthen relationships among all parties involved—your company, the participants, and even the host destination or country.

Your incentive travel program should give participants an experience they wouldn’t be able to secure on their own. The program must be engaging and exciting for participants. If it isn’t, you’ll risk a lackluster response that, in the end, won’t achieve your business goals. Creating a successful incentive travel program involves proper planning, strategic communication and a well thought out rewards mix that inspires your participants to take action.

In the last year, several incentive travel trends emerged that will continue to take center stage in 2016. To keep your programs cutting-edge and attractive to all achievers, keep these trends in mind:

PERSONALIZATION

Personalization in events has been popular for many years, and it will continue to be a major theme in 2016. Understanding the unique desires of participants is essential to making a memorable incentive travel experience.

PHOTO-OP OR SOCIAL MEDIA?

Understanding the unique desires of participants is essential to making a memorable incentive travel experience.

"Understanding the unique desires of participants is essential to making a memorable incentive travel experience."

Mobile apps are no longer a “nice-to-have.” They are now expected at events, from incentive programs to larger user conferences. Creating a mobile app for your incentive travel program has a variety of benefits. It keeps participants engaged and creates a custom virtual reality experience for participants. Imagine the excitement around launching virtual games for participants and using your own branded content within.

Social media is an effective means of communication to continuously support, engage and inspire your participants along the way. Effectively incorporating the use of social media during your incentive travel program is also a great way to generate excitement among participants and future participants. When your incentive travel participants are having fun, they will want to share their experiences with everyone. Creating shareable moments, social walls, unique hashtags and photo-sharing opportunities will continue to be at the forefront of successful incentive travel programs.

LONGER BOOKING AND LEAD TIMES

As the demand for meetings and incentive travel continues to increase, supply becomes more challenging. Because of this, longer booking lead times have become a reality. We recently surveyed a number of our key suppliers in the event industry and uncovered some interesting statistics. They suggest booking your large incentive travel program two to three years in advance and medium-sized incentive travel program at least one to two years in advance. These numbers are staggering and put into perspective just how crucial the planning process is to having a successful incentive travel program.

Social media has forever changed the way we communicate with our families, our friends and our customers. It’s the way we share news, events, photos and anything else that inspires us.

That’s why social media elements will remain a critical component of incentive travel programs.

Different generations have varying ways in which they are motivated and want to be appreciated and recognized. As the demand for meetings and incentive travel continues to increase, supply becomes more challenging. Because of this, longer booking lead times have become a reality. We recently surveyed a number of our key suppliers in the event industry and uncovered some interesting statistics. They suggest booking your large incentive travel program two to three years in advance and medium-sized incentive travel program at least one to two years in advance. These numbers are staggering and put into perspective just how crucial the planning process is to having a successful incentive travel program.

Mobile apps are no longer a “nice-to-have.” They are now expected at events, from incentive programs to larger user conferences. Creating a mobile app for your incentive travel program has a variety of benefits. It keeps participants engaged and creates a custom virtual reality experience for participants. Imagine the excitement around launching virtual games for participants and using your own branded content within. Incentive travel programs are an excellent way to motivate those in your business, but they must be carefully thought out and executed well. If your incentive travel program doesn’t leverage the latest trends, you risk your participants losing interest and becoming less inspired to help you achieve your business goals. Keep these suggestions in mind to continue building loyalty for your business.

Bonnie Boisner

is Vice President, Event Management at Aimia Inc., a data-driven marketing, event and loyalty analytics company in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She has more than 30 years of experience ensuring the design, planning and execution of client events that engage, inspire and educate attendees. Bonnie can be reached at bonnie.boisner@aimia.com. For more information, visit http://www.aimia.com/en/capabilities/channels/events-management.html.

FLEXIBILITY

The more diverse the attendees are, the more you need to be diverse in your program agendas. In order to keep participants engaged, you must deliver to the right demographics and offer multiple components to meet the needs of your unique participants. For example, rather than having one activity at any given time, we provide choice in our programs. Not everyone is going to go zip lining or play golf or go to a sushi-making class. We offer flexibility from activities, to gifting and even F&B options.

VIRTUAL REALITY

In 2016, we’ll see more opportunities for virtual reality to take center stage. This technology advancement can help both the meeting planner and the participant. In-person site inspections may become fewer as hoteliers and DMCs are able to use 360-degree video to show details of the meeting space. You also can escalate your event by creating a custom virtual reality experience for participants. Imagine the excitement around launching realistic games for participants and using your own branded content within. Incentive travel programs are an excellent way to motivate those in your business, but they must be carefully thought out and executed well. If your incentive travel program doesn’t leverage the latest trends, you risk your participants losing interest and becoming less inspired to help you achieve your business goals. Keep these suggestions in mind to continue building loyalty for your business.

By Bonnie Boisner

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Trends Come and Go, But What Defines Meetings Will Never Change

By Michael Massari

Meetings Will Never Change

Trends come and go, but what defines the future? Trends are important. Trends help us through the next 365 days. This new awareness often results in a compilation of trends to look out for, setting the scene for the future. Trends are important. Trends help us through the decision-making processes when planning a meeting, whether it's choosing a menu, using new technology or selecting the perfect location. They show us what engages and interests people, allowing us to keep our meetings successful. The new options and ideas that are prevailing at meetings today, have led us to the idea that all of these trends have completely transformed meetings and the attendee experience.

Some would say that meetings are always changing; I believe that if we look a little closer, we might find that meetings haven't really changed at all. The core of a meeting doesn't change; they are all going to have a general session, breakouts and engaging content. This is what defines a meeting — it's the content and the connections that define why we are all here doing what we do in this industry.

A meeting is defined from the value that comes from the face-to-face connections that are being made.

Glancing through our industry's news, everyone is talking about the current trends for 2016. All backed by research and observation, this year's headlines say that hotel demand and room rates are increasing, food and beverage features more interesting and healthier choices, safety is a major concern, and experiential options during meetings are a must have. This is helpful information as these trends provide us with expectations of what attendees are hoping to experience at their next meeting or conference, in addition to any potential hurdles that can surface during the planning stages. Knowing where the industry is headed is important to keep experiences relevant and to create memorable moments. However, these trends don't define what a meeting is and why they are important to an organization. If you take away the enhanced and interactive technology, the upscale food and beverage and the lavish décor, you still have a meeting.

Trend [trend] noun
1. the general course or prevailing tendency; drift 2. style or vogue.

Historically, it's easy to see that trends will come and go but the essence of what a meeting is will remain unchanged. People coming together to meet is the oldest and most natural way to communicate. Something as seemingly unrelated and simple as grabbing a cup of coffee with an old friend demonstrates the positive effects that are generated at meetings. This face-to-face interaction reinforces the relationship between people. It's being able to make that connection with someone that is completely irreplaceable in creating a better understanding and relationship. That connection and understanding cannot be replaced by email or virtual gatherings.

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During the economic downturn that began in 2008, businesses were forced to substantially limit their budgets, and some organizations canceled their meetings completely. Budgets were reduced, and with this, the options for entertainment, food and beverage and other inclusions were limited. However, meetings were still successful. Businesses that continued to hold and attend meetings experienced continued growth and proved to be more profitable through the recession. This led everyone to reevaluate why they held meetings, as they clearly affected their success. When it came down to it, companies realized the value of face-to-face interactions were undeniable. Every dollar spent on business travel converted into $10 in new revenue, and that was only one of many benefits. Spending the time and effort to make a personal connection and communicate effectively through a live interaction sets a high precedent for productive and successful businesses. At the end of the day, holding meetings with engaging content and purposeful conversation is what drove our industry forward.

I encourage you to take a look at what the emerging trends are for 2016 in the meetings industry. It's important to remember that a meeting is defined from the value that comes from the face-to-face connections that are being made; the technology, food, décor and activities act to enhance the meeting, not define it. When it comes down to it, meetings have remained true to their fundamentals. The look and the experiences have changed and progressed on the surface but at the core of it all, the foundation of what a meeting is has and always will stay the same.

Michael Massari
is Senior Vice President, Caesars Entertainment Corporation, Las Vegas, Nevada. He oversees the meetings, conventions and events business for Caesars Entertainment’s portfolio of nearly 40 U.S. properties. He also is an Executive Committee member of the board of the U.S. Travel Association, sits on the MPI Foundation’s Global Board of Trustees and also serves on the College of Southern Nevada Board of Trustees.
Meeting Spend

Savvy Planners Share Ways to Prioritize Needs and Maximize Value While Negotiating Concessions

Among the signs of the overall health of corporate meeting budgets is the response to Meeting Professional International’s Meetings Outlook Winter Edition survey: 11 percent of respondents anticipate budgets to increase by 6 percent or more in the near future, while 42 percent expect an increase between 1 percent and 5 percent.

Of course, cost savings and avoidance strategies must still implement a larger budget in order to maximize value, as well as offset higher lodging rates. A vibrant travel industry continues to drive up demand and RevPAR, which translates to room rate increases. “The market dynamic has changed because there has not been (significant) new supply in the convention hotel sector and the economy is clearly improving, which increases the demand for meetings,” notes Julie Lindsey, director, global events, Gap Inc. in San Francisco.

Lindsey and her planning team book primarily in first-tier cities where the seller’s market is strongest. A robust airlift is typically high priority for their events, which rules out many lower-tier cities with more affordable lodging costs. Fortunately, meeting in second- and third-tier cities is but one possible avenue to cost control. If meeting in a first-tier city is a “must have,” then a planner can consider which “could haves” the meeting owners may be willing to forego.

“Prioritize what the needs are,” advises Kathy L. Miller, president of Schaumburg, Illinois-based Total Event Resources. “We’ll often ask a client, ‘What are your must haves, what are your should haves and what are your could haves?’ That’s the first step to developing creative solutions that deliver value on the spend.

For example, if the specific dates desired are a “could have,” there is the opportunity for date flexibility and perhaps meeting hoteliers’ need times, thereby increasing negotiating leverage. “One of the best things the buyer can do is be flexible with their dates because a lot of the hotels are filling holes 2016, ‘17 and ‘18 are booked with holes,” Miller notes. If a downtown hotel is just a “could have,” a suburban or airport property may offer some rate relief or other kinds of savings. Dale Fisher, CMP, senior project manager with Takeda Pharmaceutical Company in Cambridge, Massachusetts, recently booked a short meeting for a global group at the Hilton London Heathrow Airport for logistical convenience, and “a nice side benefit is that I’m not paying for ground transportation,” she adds. If an offsite special event is merely a “could have,” perhaps it can be held at the hotel, increasing the F&B revenue the planner brings to the table during negotiations.

Bargaining Chips

Leverage is equally important to negotiating concessions, which can be more challenging in the current market, convention hotel sector and the economy is clearly improving, which increases the demand for meetings,” notes Julie Lindsey, director, global events, Gap Inc. in San Francisco.

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Director, Global Events
Gap Inc.
San Francisco, CA

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Schuamburg, IL

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History Lessons
Keeping a record of these kinds of successes and failures is essential. Much is made of tracking a group’s meeting history with hotels, but negotiation history is also important. “I revise my concessions checklist about every nine months based on learning from previous meetings,” says Lindsey. And that list is part of the knowledge-sharing among the five members of her department. “We share the concessions checklist, and we all add to it and discuss it periodically,” she says. “We talk quite a bit to share our successes and our learnings and standards. For example, ‘if the venue won’t say yes to this, here’s the fallback position we would take.’”

It’s really important not to have just one person who is a savvy negotiator. “Especially with the current market conditions, the more savvy negotiators on the front line, the better for the bottom line.”

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audience” when paying for alcoholic drinks: “Paying ‘by consumption’ can be more cost effective compared to ‘by the hour,’” she says. Also, items that are sold per unit, but are not necessarily charged on-consumption, so this must be confirmed. “There are hotels whose food-break options are sold per item, but are not necessarily charged on-consumption, so this, you order 100 and not all 100 are taken there still yours,” Hentges advises. “Provide the extra food or beverage staff, another event that day or take them back to the office.” Overall, keeping records on which pricing structures best fit a group’s behavior will guide decisions on future F&B functions, as will information on the actual number of attendees fed for each event compared to what was guaranteed. “The banquet cap- tain can provide this information and is great to have for the next program, so you do not over-guaran- tee.”

• Custom-designed menus. A tried- and-true approach for savings is to provide the F&B budget to the convention services manager and ask for a menu to be designed that fits that budget. “Nine times out of 10 we won’t pick off of the standard- ized menu,” says Miller. “Instead, we say to the meeting planner to spend, say, $30 (per head) on a lunch or we have this coffee break budget, and ask them to design something accordingly. That’s a great way of being able to save.” What is more, “chefs enjoy having the opportunity to create outside of the standard banquet service and menu.” Cost-saving customization can be requested even for non-meal items. “For jumbo cookies in a higher carbon footprint,” says Lindsey, so by using fewer proteins “you can actu- ally create a more sustainable menu and decrease your costs.”

• Hotel beverage services. “Have a clear understanding of the type(s) of complimentary water service that is offered,” Hentges advises. “We have partnered with a hotel that offered small bottled water as their complimentary water service, so there was no need to pay for bottled water during meals, meetings or breaks. Sometimes hotels offer a few compli- mentary water coolers.” And when it comes to the group’s caffeine needs, half gallons of coffee are not adver- tised, but can be offered if you desire, and are typically at a lower cost than a gallon of coffee,” she adds.

Décor and Offsite Venues
When décor for a special event is called for, and the budget is tight, consider that “sometimes less is more,” as Miller puts it, especially when the venue itself is the star. “We just did an event at Union Station here in Chicago and spent very little on the design, and it looked like a million bucks because you’re in this grand venue.” And while the rental fees for some ornate and/or histori- cal spaces can be significant, the ROI should be borne in mind when the goal is to drive attendance (e.g., a customer-facing event).

Oftentimes, people will know of such a venue and be excited to attend an event there, as opposed to a created space that, while fabulously designed, is unfamiliar to them. In that case, using a crowd-pleasing venue can be more of a “should have” rather than a “could have,” Miller adds that all the ancillary costs associ- ated with a given venue should be laid out, so there are no surprises. That includes details such as whether they have tables and chairs, and the caterers on their preferred list. “So when the client comes to us and says, ‘We have this bud- get for the event, and we’d like to have it at this venue,’ we say, ‘Here’s what you need to know before you fall in love with that venue.’” Miller relates.

Av Features
There are certain features of audio-visual technology that fall into the “must have” category, although a planner may not realize it. For example, backup proj- ectors and computers are an added cost, but not one that should be avoided, Miller maintains. “You need to be prepared. That’s not the area to cut costs. If you’re on the stage delivering a keynote, or awards ceremony (and there is a techni- cal problem with the system), it’s embar- rassing,” she says. “There are less risky ways to save, such as taking care not to use more screens than necessary given the audience size. In addition, discounts on AV can some- times be obtained by pushing the hote- ler — pre-contract signing — to “take the time to negotiate with the third- party vendors, especially the exclusive or ‘preferred’ customers that are supporting the event that you have to use,” Lindsey recommends. “Many times the response will be ‘No, cannot do’ because it’s an outside vendor. Well, that’s not the an- swer. Every time, because you’ve used them, I need to make sure I’m get- ting a good price on it. You can get them to go a little further by engaging that third-party vendor to make the commit- ment in order to get the business.”

Ancillary Fees
Keeping track of hotel pricing trends on all levels is important to protecting the bottom line, and that includes ancil- lary charges. “Resort fees are getting rea- lly high,” Fisher observes. “I’m having a hard time negotiating out of them. Inter- net fees I’m finding are going down a bit.” Together with parking, resort fees and Internet access charges “seem to be the top three hotel/resort ancillary charges,” Hentges comments. “All three are nego- tiable, if you cannot get these 100 per- cent waived, ask for discounts. Review what the resort fee provides, and if you know your attendees do not use all the features, share that information with your hotel salesperson.” Knowing the specific needs of one’s group and meeting is thus critical to de- termining the impact of ancillary fees and the negotiation focus. For example, what Internet fees will the group incur across the property, not just in the guest rooms? “The answer may well be different if it’s an incentive program vs. a training session. Also consider what labor costs will be incurred. ‘Typically the hotel will have their in-house electricians and then, depending on the facility and what you’re designing, carpenters, decorators or teamsters. You just need to know what you’re getting into,’” says Miller. “How you design the event around that knowledge is important.”

Other ancillary charges of note in- clude:

• Re-keying office and storage spac- es. “Lately there have been charges for that service, which you can nego- tiate extra rate,” says Lindsey.

• Displaced minibar items. Many ho- tels in Las Vegas have items in their minibars under a sensor that detects if an item is displaced. “So if you move the item it is considered sold and that item’s cost will be applied to the room bill,” Hentges explains. During a recent Scottsdale site visit, I came across this same concept in one of their hotels. This additional expense is important to share with your attendees.”

Early Cancellation Fees. “Resort fees suggest reviewing this contract clause as it sometimes happens that an attendee may need to depart earlier than expected. ‘You should not have to pay for early an checkout fee in ad- dition to already paying for the guest room,’ she maintains.

• Additional gratuity. “There seems to be a growing trend where the gratuity is already included and shown on the receipt, but then there is another line item called ‘addi- tional gratuity’ for the guest to fill in.” Hentges points out.

• Housekeeping charges. Hentges suggests that “if these charges are mandatory, negotiate that nightly turndown service is included.”

Flexible Negotiation
To make smaller deals sometimes can sometimes result in a standout where the hotel representative won’t budge on a particu- lar item. In that case, it’s important to bear in mind that there can be different costs for different functions, so “more than one item, because if you’ve used one of them, I need to make sure I’m get- ting a good price on it. You can get them to go a little further by engaging that third-party vendor to make the commit- ment in order to get the business.”
Activity Venues Add an Extra Measure of Fun and Flair to Events

By Mark Rowh

A Welcome Change of Pace Spurs Greater Creativity and Imagination

When people complain about meetings, most often an organization’s internal meetings draw the most criticism. But while conferences and offsite meetings often provide a welcome change of pace, that may not always be enough. To provide a memorable experience for those attending, a measure of fun is worth considering as long as extra activities provide solid support to the meeting’s overall objectives.

“Corporate meetings are generally held to discuss incredibly important and thought-provoking topics,” says Breana Nadal, a senior events manager for Marriott Corporation in Irvine, California. She notes that in a typical meeting day, attendees can spend up to eight hours in an atmosphere that demands imagination and creativity.

“There is no better way to cultivate that type of thought pattern than to add a unique and fun portion to such an event,” she says. “Letting attendees take time to relax and let their thoughts come together organically not only benefits the overall goal but also gets them excited to be part of the collective process.”

Nadal recently held a successful event at ChocXO Bean to Bar Chocolate in Irvine, California, for members of Marriott’s General Manager’s Advisory Council. The total of 65 guests not only engaged in discussions about future company initiatives, but also enjoyed the facility’s special activities.

“ChocXO provides both an educational and interactive experience that anyone from any background, age or gender would enjoy,” she says. “They provide you with the ability to live out your childhood fantasy of running free in a chocolate factory. What could be better than that?”

She notes that in choosing the venue, a primary factor was identifying a location with an experiential component, and ChocXO met that goal while providing a one-of-a-kind experience.

“When you drive into what you can describe as a corporate park and find yourself in a chocolate factory, you immediately know that you are in for a rare experience,” Nadal says. “Having the opportunity to aston-”ish your guests from beginning to end is like hitting the event-planning jackpot.”

ChocXO has several locations, and its Irvine, California, factory is available for meetings that are supplement-“ed by special events. Options include an hour-long complete factory tour show-casing the chocolate-making process as well as tastes of the product. The tour includes an educational wall and a scale model of a cacao tree, along with an overview of how chocolate is fermented, dried and processed. Participants get to sample raw cacao pulp, cocoa nibs, cocoa liquor and finished chocolate bars.

For an even more hands-on approach, groups of 15-20 participants go into the kitchen and make their own chocolate bark. They pour liquid chocolate over a sheet pan and then add special toppings. Once the bark chills and crystallizes in a refrigeratori-ter, participants break it up and bag it to take it home.

Many planners are now exploring venues that include some type of activities to supplement meetings and in many cases, become part of the ses-sions themselves. Not only can this make an overall event more appealing, but it may also provide a welcome break from the core business at hand while also promoting teamwork.

“It’s important for teambuilding to have social activities interspersed through an intensive working confer-”ence,” says Denise Sonni-Birlin, whose job as senior executive coordinator, research and drug discovery for Bio-Marin Pharmaceutical in Novato, California, includes meeting planning. She recently coordinated a conference at Asilomar State Beach and Conference Grounds for nearly 400 employ-ees. She says the venue is one favored by pharmaceutical companies. “It’s a great value with a beautiful location and wonderful staff.”

At Asilomar, located in Pacific Grove, California, corporate groups experience a retreat-like setting on 107 acres of coastal land. With 312 guest rooms and 30,000 sq ft of meeting space, the park has accommodations for groups up to 650 people.

Activities include walking tours, beach volleyball, bird watching, hiking, surfing and standup paddleboarding. Team events range from beach Olympics and survivor games to bike tours along the coast.

Along with the park’s offerings, she says that nearby activities also can enhance the experience for attendees. Sonni-Birlin especially recommends reserving the entire Monterey Bay Aquarium for an evening appetizer, dessert and wine reception.

“It’s located about a 10-minute drive from Asilomar,” she says. “It is an awesom”e experience that everyone loved.”

Other parks also offer activity-focused options. At Starved Rock State Park in Oglesby, Illinois, meet”ing participants enjoy a variety of ac-
tivities including guided hikes and scavenger hunts that incorporate the park’s history into the competition. If requested in advance, hiking guides share thoughts and experiences on teambuilding, character development and survival. Other options include an art program where participants complete paintings in a team environment and then have a finished product for their home or office. Or in a nod to the park’s location less than a mile in from the base of the Teton mountain range. The historic Starved Rock Lodge & Conference Center has 69 guest rooms supplemented by 21 cabin rooms located on the property.

Meeting facilities include a 2,200-sf room with a capacity of 200 attendees in theater-style and 120 participants in classroom format, along with four small to mid-sized rooms accommodating from 14 to 60 guests, and a separate cabin for groups of 12 to 25 people.

Some wineries also offer a surprising array of activities. The Mountain Winery in Saratoga, California, a 600-plus acre Santa Cruz Mountain wine estate located above the Silicon Valley, features more than just wine tasting for corporate events. Along with meeting facilities, the winery offers a number of unusual activities and teambuilding programs for groups.

A custom-built grape stomping platform is used for a two-hour event for up to 20 guests, where participants compete in crushing two barrels of grapes. The activity includes a scavenger hunt, grape toss, and wine bottling and racking as well as a three-course plated dinner. A gourmet cooking series includes an “hour of o’erues” war as well as a chef-for-a-day option. In the “war,” meeting attendees select ingredients from a pantry set up by an executive chef and then compete with colleagues to create the best appetizer for their group to enjoy.

Meeting facilities include a grand hall offering natural light and views of marshmallows and the waterfall. The Mountain Winery in Saratoga, California, offers a wide variety of unique activities and programs including grape stomping, wine tasting, a gourmet cooking series, historic tours and many other activities.

Other activities include an obstacle course, bottle ring toss and wine pictorial. An educational series led by a local sommelier includes the option to have a private class connected to a professional meeting. Still other activities range from cigar rolling and dueling pianos to rock climbing, bungee jumping and casino night.

Meeting facilities include a grand hall with a dining capacity of 220 guests and several smaller rooms, as well as an outdoor plaza accommodating up to 2,000 people and another area handling 250 to 500 guests depending on the nature of the function. A 2,500-seat amphitheater also is available.

Other venues are perfect for the glamour of a popular sport or entertainment attraction. That’s the case with Dallara Indy-Car Factory. Located less than a mile from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, it offers expansive meeting space as well as racing-related activities. While the primary purpose of the 200,000-sf facility is assembling and testing future Indy-style cars, it also serves as an exciting venue for corporate events. Visitors can explore interactive and hands-on exhibits centered on racing engineering and technology. They can take a walk through a tunnel filled with current race-car blueprints and design concept drawings, or check out a movie about the company. Meeting attendees also enjoy guided tours of the factory, try out racing simulators and ride in actual two-seater cars. Teams also compete in a pit-stop challenge or mobile karting competition.

The facility has 35,000 sf of meeting space including an interactive hall with a capacity of up to 1,200 people, a garage accommodating up to 1,100 and a conference room seating 100. Dallara offers a true “Indy experience” based on the history of the Indianapolis 500, reports John P. Manos, executive director of JPM Performance Group, an event and performance incentive company based in Cincinnati. He has coordinated a number of events at the site, most recently a combined new product launch and sales meeting at Dallara in October. Most of the 250 attendees were in field sales, but there also were executive management and marketing support personnel in attendance.

“The venue offered many interactive elements, including the opportunity for the attendees to experience a ride in an Indy race car,” he says. “A pit stop ‘quick tire change’ competition was especially popular.”

“The competitive element was very well received by the sales personnel,” he says. Manos praises the flexibility of Dallara staff as well the distinctive identity of the location, which in this instance also supported the theme of the meeting.

“The ability to brand/logo an Indy car to support the new product launch was a great addition to the meeting experience,” Manos says. Still other venues represent efforts to expand offerings in the face of growing competition. For example, many bowling centers have re-invented themselves by adding a variety of features, including opening their facilities for meetings. Along with bowling and a 3,000-sf arcade, Surfside Bowling and Family Entertainment Center in Surfside Beach, South Carolina offers private meeting rooms, teambuilding programs and banquet facilities.

Similarly, Mermaid Entertainment & Event Center in Mound View, Minnesota, provides space for corporate meetings, trade shows and other business events. The 100,000-sf facility has one ballroom with approximately 6,000 sf of space and another with 4,600 sf, as well as a 1,000-sf breakout room and a 4,400-sf garden tent. Meeting attendees can take advantage of 32 bowling lanes for competitive teambuilding events or simply enjoy bowling a few games.

With some options, a change of pace from the standard urban location is the main attraction. At Spring Creek Ranch, in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, conference participants experience the feel of a traditional Western ranch combined with modern amenities and a variety of entertaining activities. The facility has 125 guest rooms and 3,200 sf of event space offering natural light and views of the Teton mountain range.

Breana Nadal, who hosted a group at Choc'kO Bean to Bar Chocolatier in Irvine, California, said the experience was like living out your childhood fantasy of running free in a chocolate factory.

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Activities include white-water rafting where teams compete against one another, group tours of Yellowstone National Park led by the ranch’s resident naturalist, and team scavenger hunts or “amazing races,” which offer group challenges set up within a 1,000-acre wildlife refuge property.

Other possibilities range from scenic river trips and team rides to the top of a mountain, to wildlife safaris in Grand Teton National Park, or in winter, snow coach rides or dog sledding.

Offering a similar approach is California’s Ranch at Laguna Beach, which has 60 guest rooms and a meeting capacity of 300 indoors and 800 outdoors. The 7,000 sf of indoor meeting space will be complemented by a new ballroom in 2016. Along with a golf course, the property features electric karts in climate-controlled surroundings with the option to use private space for meetings or rent the entire facility. The same goes for Autobahn Indoor Speeding in Jacksonville, Florida. Located in an 80,000 sf facility, the speedway includes a conference room and party room, and can accommodate group sizes from eight to several hundred. Activities include racing heats with a final race leading to an awards ceremony.

“Meetings aren’t always fun.” says Ellison Bourbon, an events planner at Globality, an IT firm in Menlo Park, California. “Adding some entertaining activities can make the experience more enjoyable for everyone.”

In her current role and with previous employers, she has coordinated meetings highlighted by activities ranging from archery to grape-crushing contests.

She says that along with other benefits, the value of providing opportunities to step outside routine business relationships should not be discounted. “It’s nice when everyone is on the same playing field,” she says. “An intern can beat the CEO at some type of enjoyable competition. And people do like to compete.”

The end result can be a good morale booster, Bourbon says, even if some extra coordination is needed. “It just takes a little initiative by the event planner,” she says. “Do something outside the box.”
The State of the Airline Industry

2015 Brought Changes — Some Good for Passengers, Some Not — and 2016 Appears to Offer More of the Same

By Christine Loomis

North American airlines have legitimate bragging rights to two elements of air travel these days: They are among the safest airlines in the world and they can claim the highest overall 4 percent net-profit margin. In 2015, the industry’s overall $29.3 billion net profit in its state-of-the-airline-industry speech at the 2015 annual meeting of the International Air Transport Association (IATA) in Miami, director general and CEO Tony Tyler emphasized that profits only translate to an overall 4 percent net-profit margin.

“Week's things in perspective,” he said. “Apple, a single company, earned $13.6 billion in the second quarter of this year. That's just under half the expected $18.12 billion net profit in his state-of-the-air association (IATA) in Miami, director general and CEO Tony Tyler emphasized that profits only translate to an overall 4 percent net-profit margin.

“Let's keep things in perspective,” he said. “Apple, a single company, earned $13.6 billion in the second quarter of this year. That's just under half the expected $18.12 billion net profit in his state-of-the-air transportation Infrastructure (DOT) and members of Congress for years,” says Charlie Leocha, chairman of Travelers United, a passenger advocacy group.

Consumer Advocacy

Leocha says there is such work to be done on behalf of airline passengers, who have very little to celebrate while airlines have much. “Airlines are flying more passengers on fewer planes than ever before, which means travelers are packed into these aluminum tubes like sardines. The airlines are making more money than ever in history. Jet fuel prices have plummeted and airlines have remained steady — obviously not a great outcome for passengers. Airlines are making comparison shopping as difficult as possible and fighting DOT at every point whenever the department and consumers call for more transparency.”

But, Leocha notes, there is good news as well. “The consumer presence is stronger than ever in Congress and at DOT,” he says. “Finally, consumer groups such as Travelers United have gained credibility in the battle for customer service. Change comes slowly, but the recent adoption of the full-fare advertising rule and 24-hour change rule has made a big difference.”

Such changes don’t come easy, according to Leocha, who says the airlines contest every sentence of the written rules — and more. “The airlines sued DOT in the Washington, DC, District Court of Appeals, claiming that the new rules went beyond DOT’s mandate to protect consumers,” Leocha says. “But the final court ruling was a full vindication of DOT and Travelers United’s positions.”

Fee Transparency and Tax Reform

Travelers United hopes to soon have a new rule in place for transparency of seat-reservation fees and baggage fees. “The 24-hour rule and the full-fare advertising rule were part of Passenger Protection 3 rulemaking,” Leocha says. “Passenger Protection 3 rulemaking has already been drafted and comments are closed. We are expecting a final rule by spring, which will mandate that more ancillary fees must be disclosed by airlines through all points of sale during the sales process. That will mean that travel agents will be able to tell passengers exactly how much seat reservations will cost and the specifics of baggage and other fees.”

“Washington, DC, is the epicenter of plans to create a better air-travel system across the board, a charge led by the U.S. Travel Association and its president and CEO, Roger Dow. In June, U.S. Travel presented its ApolloCongress, a plan aimed at fixing the nation’s struggling air-travel infrastructure and promoting a healthy, well-functioning passenger air-travel system. An outcome like that would be a win for consumers.”

Contact for new meetings business: 800-328-2216

Airport Programs for Planners

Here’s how the benefits of booking meeting or incentive air travel through U.S. airlines stack up.

AMERICAN AIRLINES

Required number: 10 or more.
Benefits: Using “Zone Fares.” American will guarantee fares from various geographical departure points to a single destination. Fares are good for midweek meetings as no Saturday night stay is required. Zone Fares are good for travel originating in the United States to North America, Europe, Caribbean, Latin America and Asia.

Future plans: American will provide “future-date pricing,” allowing planners to forecast travel expenses for incentive groups.

Add-ons: American has preferred partnerships with Avis and Budget to reduce rates on car rentals for group members.

Contact: Online RFPs or call 800-221-2255.

DELTA MEETING NETWORK

Required number: More than 10.
Benefits: Online booking tools and “robust scheduling options” with access to more than 300 destinations for groups traveling from two or more cities. A dedicated team of meeting specialists to register a meeting and manage planners requests “from beginning to end,” all with “cost-saving options.” Meeting organizers are offered exclusive discounts on fares in most classes of service.

Add-ons: Access to more than 40 Delta Sky Club locations worldwide and SkyMiles rewards toward award travel.

Contact for new meetings business: 800-328-2216

JETBLUE INCENTIVES GROUP AND MEETING PROGRAM

Required number: 10 or more.
Benefits: Dedicated agents are available Monday through Friday. “We’re the only airline that offers free, unlimited name changes.” Ability for planners...
to book blocked space from one location to another or individual space from multiple origins to a single destination. “Great rates”: JetBlue will release up to 10 percent of seats up to 60 days prior to departure with no penalty. Low deposit of $50 per person to confirm seats, and JetBlue allows for additional options to 10 percent at no charge — though you pay the difference in fare. Final payment is due just 30 days prior to departure.

Contact: Online or call 888-JETBLUE (538-2583), Option 4.

Southwest Airlines

Required number: 10 or more for the Group Travel Program: 150 required to apply for a Meetings Agreement Request or $100,000 annual air spend on Southwest for working with a dedicated corporate sales team.

Benefits: According to Southwest spokesperson Thais Hasin, Southwest is in the process of reviving up its offers to business and meeting travelers. “SWABIZ, Southwest’s booking tool for corporations, offers companies of all sizes robust reporting and tracking at no extra cost. Recently, Southwest Airlines launched a meetings program that provides discounts and loyalty to convention and meeting travelers through the SWABIZ program. We are optimizing

Southwest Meetings Plus and Star Alliance Meetings Plus for international conventions and meetings, providing Star Alliance airlines’ schedules and discounts at a single point of contact as well as other benefits.

Add-ons: The United Meetings team helps planer commun- ities to attend via customized flight and hotel packages. United will provide a flyer template including the meeting name, date, city and discounts, along with the special Meeting Reference Number and 2 Code. Planners can include these flyers in mail- ings to attendees and attendees can take advantage of the savings. The United Meetings team can provide additional tools to promote United as the meeting’s official carrier, including copywriting suggestions, airline photos and United logos.

Contact: www.united.com

Virgin America Groups & Meetings

Required number: 10 or more.

Benefits: Flying from the same city to the same destination may be eligible for a fare discount. Likewise, groups flying from multiple cities to the same meeting or convention might be eligible for a fare discount — but the airline has to look at the details first (how many people from where and to where). Planners must send the name of each guest 30 days prior. A deposit of $100 per person is due 7 days after booking with full payment 45 days prior to flying or immediately if less than 45 days out. The discounts are typically good for booking online, individually or via phone.

Add-ons: Virgin planes are uniformly conducive to business and comfort for business travel. U.S. and ASO planes and JetBlue, United and Delta all have premium power outlets and USB jacks in every row, video-touch screen at every seatback with on-demand menus and countless entertainment options; interior Mood lighting with 12 shades that adjust to exterior lighting; consistent-in-flight amenities and products on every flight in every market; main-cabin seats with six inches of extra legroom as well as complimentary entertainment and selec- tive food and drinks; and first-class seats with all of the above plus seatback TVs, more space in addition to six inches of legroom as well as full food and beverage service and compli- mentary on-demand entertainment. Passengers also have a seat-to-seat chat and delivery feature that allows them to send a message along with a cocktail, snack or meal to a fellow on-board guest. A dedicated sup- port team based at headquarters handles calls exclusively for corporate customers.

Contact: groups@virginamerica.com or call 866-339-0169. For corporate programs: corporate.sales@virginamerica.com. — CL
The playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, “There is no sincerer love than the love of food.” And if he were to go to a meeting today, he’d very likely see that planners, chefs and other food and beverage professionals are helping make sure that meeting attendees can take their love of food to a whole new level.

“Td say the biggest trend we are seeing in food and beverage is the need to have healthier options and more attention to gluten-free items,” explains Melodya Hilliard, MBA, CMP, who is director, events for Skilsoft, an online learning company with U.S. headquarters in Nashua, New Hampshire. “Having restrictions really forces event professionals to think more creatively while planning meals and breaks. “Our attendees are becoming more educated about the amazing gourmet options that are available on a regular basis,” she adds, “therefore, we have to be open to make our chicken something different and present the potatoes in a way that isn’t just mashed. Yet, while being creative, we also have our budgets that provide further restrictions to these options. It’s no longer the simple buffet with basic items; it’s the fancy, yet reasonable options that have people walking away feeling like they ate a good and healthy meal that didn’t clog their arteries.”

Special Orders Don’t Upset Us One ongoing trend is that hotels and conference centers are doing a much better job of accommodating attendees who have special requests such as entrees suitable for vegetarian, vegan or gluten-free diets or if they have allergies to certain food items such as nuts or shellfish.

Chef Mike Jackson, director of food and beverage for the Deloitte University Hotel and Conference Center in Westlake, Texas, which is managed by Benchmark Hospitality International, “reminisced” about the days when meeting attendees were typically vegetarian or had basic preparation in the kitchen, and there were some simple things that we do at Deloitte University. Instead of using roux as a thickener, we’ll use cornstarch or arrowroot or vegetable purées. A lot of things that might not have been accessible to guests in the past because of the gluten, suddenly are available, and, if anything, we’re making the dishes a little bit lighter and healthier.

He adds that the more advance notice the food and beverage team receives about guests with special dietary requests, the more prepared the team can be, and that 72 hours’ notice is a good guideline. That being said, even if there is no one requests, for example, a vegetarian meal in advance, his team still will be prepared to meet last-minute requests.

Since there could potentially be a wide variety of special menu requests within a single group, it takes some skill and planning to identify those guests. Jackson describes the system he uses. “We give our guests that register with special dietary needs a special card that has a purple dot on it, and whenever they sit down, they put it by their place setting. It’s not very obvious to any of their dining companions, but that alerts us, and especially our wait staff, that that guest has a special dietary need, and so the waiter is going to discreetly ask them what we can do to make sure they have a good dining experience. We want them to have a seamless dining experience like everyone else. We don’t want anybody else at the table to be enjoying dinner while they’re waiting for us to scramble and prepare a plate for them.”

A Treat for the Senses Tom Garcia, vice president of food and beverage for Benchmark Hospitality International, explains that when planning breaks for meeting attendees, his company likes to involve more than just the sense of taste. “It’s the music, the ambiance, the smell, the lighting. As we put our breaks out there, we’re trying to enact all of the senses.” He shares an example. “We have an apple break where you have that cider smell as you walk in, and the colors that we use focus on reds, and the music is jazz. We have dried apples, a fresh baked apple tart and other items like that.”

“Whether it’s a gathering for upwards of 200 or a smaller, intimate one with 15 or so, guests still like to have that interaction with the people that are actually serving them.”

Tom Garcia, Vice President, Food & Beverage Benchmark Hospitality International, The Woodlands, TX

Creative Cocktails Garcia notes that there is now more of an emphasis in using fresh products in the creation of cocktails, including the use of custom-made bitters and mixers. “People now tend to be a little bit more adventurous with their dining, and they’re doing that with their beverages, as well. They’re not necessarily stuck in that rut that ‘I’m a chardonnay person.’” We try to create craft cocktails that are a little bit more seasonal in nature that go along with the more traditional beverages that we would serve in a private banquet event.”

Garcia says that Benchmark is bringing techniques used in freestanding restaurants to the banquet room, such as hiring the right staff. “We’re especially looking at bartenders that are emotion-
Watch for everything from beer-battered cod to gourmet or build-your-own varieties of...
The resort staff stood out as well. "Carrie Zimmer-man was my executive meeting manager, and she was incredible! She was prompt, knowledgeable and willing to do whatever we needed to make sure the event was a success and the guests were well taken care of, including making sure that gifts and amenities were delivered appropriately."

Loftus liked that the spacious meeting room was light-filled and overlooked the pool, and that the feel of the resort changed from day to evening. "During the day, the lobby portrayed a beautiful Palm Beach chic style, and at night purple up-lights created a sophisticated change in ambiance. The resort's strong attention to detail was impeccable."

The group also stayed on-property for the majority of meals with great success. "Eau Palm put together the best menu and catered to the various requests of the group," Loftus says. "Each location provided a refreshing new environment. When weather affected one dinner, they quickly moved it to an indoor location that was just as beautiful as the original outside venue. The room rental was waived as long as we met our food and beverage minimum. This played a large part in selecting the Eau because many of the other properties we considered were more expensive for meals and meetings."

In the final analysis, Loftus says, "The Eau Palm made planning seamless." She appreciated that the resort made hospitality rooms available to guests for the afternoon after checkout, and she liked the many outside venues available for evening functions — some with cozy fire pits — as well as the city nightlife nearby.

On the last evening, the group went off-property for dinner. "I researched several locations and finally settled on Café Europe in Palm Beach," Loftus says, adding that the restaurant created a custom menu that was printed with the Vistage and Luxury Trips logos. "The food was spectacular," she says, "and the private dining room was well appointed — exactly what the members were looking for."

**More Palm Beach County News**

Downtown West Palm soon will be transformed by the addition of the 12-story, 400-room Hilton West Palm Beach, an upscale incentive meetings and groups composed of C-suite executives. Elizabeth Loftus, business development manager for Luxury Trips, Winter Park, FL, Vistage and Luxury Trips.

Elizabeth Loftus, business development manager for Luxury Trips, Winter Park, FL, Vistage and Luxury Trips.

The Florida Experience

From Luxury Resorts to Old Florida Outposts

High-end to high-touch: Overlooking the Atlantic at Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa on the island at Palm Beach; and communing with manatees in the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, accessible through snorkel tours at Plantation on Crystal River.

Florida meets the needs of corporate and incentive planners with an appealing mix of sophisticated cities, coastal towns, white-sand beaches, marquee entertainment, theme parks, international culture, and expansive natural areas of lush vegetation and wildlife. Who, after all, doesn’t want to see alligators, dolphins, and manatees by day and enjoy stellar restaurants and entertainment venues by night? Here are diverse areas to consider, plus statewide news on hotels and cities.

Palm Beach County

A haven for the well-beeled for more than a century, Palm Beach County on the Atlantic Coast is an excellent choice for upscale incentive meetings and groups composed of C-suite executives. Elizabeth Loftus, business development manager for Luxury Trips, a team of private travel designers, brought just such a group — 27 participants in Vistage Florida’s annual retreat — to Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa in October.

"Vistage Florida is an invitation-only group. All of the members are CEOs and business owners who have very busy schedules and limited time," Loftus says. "They wanted to get out of Central Florida but only had three days. I needed a destination that was close enough to accommodate the
time constraints but unique enough to give them a relaxing, memorable vacation."

"Palm Beach is a beautiful location. It is known for its award-winning hotels with pristine beaches and coastline, which was what we wanted for the retreat. It’s only a three-hour drive from Central Florida, the ideal travel time for these busy executives."

The group has previously stayed at The Breakers, one of the county’s classic resorts, but this year, Eau Palm attracted Loftus’ attention. "I contacted several hotels in the area, but the Eau Palm stood out for many different reasons, especially given its recognition in Travel & Leisure and Conde Nast Traveler magazines," she says. "The guests were looking for a luxury resort stay that would appeal to the adults as well as the children they were bringing along. It offered a secluded resort atmosphere but was close enough for the guests to experience other parts of West Palm if they desired."

Because this was a retreat with a focus on annual planning, the group spent most of their time on-property. In addition to meetings, they also enjoyed "the all-immersive vacation aspect of Eau Palm." Loftus notes that a meeting highlight was motivational speaker Gene Griesman, who shared insights on leadership.

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Elizabeth Loftus

Business Development Manager

Luxury Trips, Winter Park, FL
Rendering of the Hilton West Palm Beach, which opens this month.

scheduled to open January 27, 2016, the hotel, which is connected to the 350,000-sf Palm Beach County Convention Center by an enclosed walkway, will offer two ballrooms and eight conference rooms, as well as additional event space. It also will feature Manor, a 225-seat restaurant that will showcase the talents of renowned local chef Matthew Byrne of the acclaimed eatery Kitchen. The hotel will feature a lobby bar called Gala, a fitness center and a landscaped pool area with cabanas. The Hilton West Palm Beach is the final piece in the CityPlace master plan, which brought West Palm into a new age, offering a mix of more than 80 national stores, specialty shops, restaurants and entertainment venues. The Kra-

vis Center for the Performing Arts is across the street, and the Norton Museum of Art.

In other news, Mandarin Oriental announced in Novem-

ber that Palm Beach County will get additional accommodations when the brand’s luxury hotel and residences open in January 2016. The first meeting was so successful that we have continued to contract with this hotel over the years and have always achieved the same result — perfection.”

Martin says the hotel easily meets the group’s needs as a primary venue. “This facility has plenty of meeting space relative to its size. It is more than capable of holding our general session with three concurrent breakout sessions — all within the same floor so that the meeting planning staff doesn’t have to run all over the property to manage the sessions.”

It’s the hotel staff, however, that stands out for Martin. “This property has extremely low staff turnover compared to other hotels. It’s great for us because we know exactly what to expect from them, and I’m always amazed at the little details the staff remembers about the event from year to year. That certainly makes my job easier, and they are all a pleasure to work with. There are never any surprises. You won’t find a better crew anywhere else in the area.”

The location is also a plus. All that Disney offers is close by but not so close that it’s distracting. “The great thing about this property,” Martin says, “is that it is just enough removed from the major theme parks that attendees can focus on the work at hand, but close enough for them to enjoy those ven-

At Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa, we’ll never interfere with your business agenda, but we can assure you that a meeting at Eau Palm Beach will be anything but boring. We are in the business of pleasure, adept at creating engaging events that motivate and inspire. Whether it’s organizing a fishing tournament, arranging a group spa day at the Forbes Five-Star Eau Spa, or coordinating dinner arrangements, you’ll be amazed how productive everyone can be when they can relax and just be themselves.

Miami

Miami, which announced a record-breaking increase in visitors from September 2014–August 2015, recently re-

vealed details on Miami Beach Convention Center renova-

tions, scheduled for completion in 2018. The center is be-

ing reimagined as a LEED-certified facility with more than 500,000 sf of exhibit space, a 60,000-sf ballroom and 81 new breakout rooms. The $615 million investment already has resulted in notable future bookings. The renovation includes an adjacent 800-room art deco-inspired hotel. The Miami area also will add an additional 2,300 hotel rooms in the next year, including the new East Miami Hotel, scheduled to open in winter 2016. Future projects also include All Aboard Florida, a $2.5 billion privately run passenger train connecting Miami and Orlando, scheduled to receive passengers in 2017.

Less than an hour’s drive south from Miami Internation-

al Airport is Ocean Reef Club on 2,500 acres in Key Largo, the northernmost of the Florida Keys. Ocean Reef Club will unveil its long-awaited Carysfort Hall in February. The new space will be available to select groups for meetings, corporate retreats and conferences, plus teambuilding events, and cooking classes and demonstrations for up to 150 in the cook-

ing school. The light-filled ball features a 5,607-sf ballroom, meeting rooms, breakout spaces and more, accommodating groups of 20 to 500.

Orlando

Set in Central Florida, Orlando’s 450-plus hotels and re-

sorts, multiple theme parks and convention center with more than 2.1 million of it among the world’s top meeting desti-

nations, and it’s hard to imagine anywhere with a better handle on how to create that elusive “wow” factor.

At Walt Disney World, big changes are underway in the Dis-

eys Springs area, formerly Downtown Disney. While chemistry and branding have changed, the majority of the area’s hotels remain constant, including Wyndham Lake Buena Vista Re-

sort, where Shawn Martin, corporate operations manager, brought 200 attendees for Boston-based HMV Weight Man-

agement Services Corp.’s annual initial training meeting. “We have been coming to this hotel for approximately 15 years,” he says. “When we first contracted with the property, it was due to the size of the meeting space, affordability of the sleeping rooms compared to other area hotels and proximity to restaur-

ants within walking distance.

After our initial meeting, it was clear that the staff was willing to go above and beyond what we require for our events. The first meeting was so successful that we have continued to contract with this hotel over the years and have always achieved the same result — perfection.”

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World, how can it not be fun and successful when you are on vacation time when work is done,” he says. “Orlando, in particular, has something for everyone. Whether you want to work hard during the day and play hard at night, Orlando has it all.”

Martin notes that Orlando works well because of ease of travel and access to multiple resort properties. “It’s also a great place to have fun and take a break,” he says. “These are some of the most popular Disney properties in the world. The staff is friendly, the food is amazing, and the overall experience is something else you need or want. I could not ask for better.”

The success of any meeting often comes down to the people you work with, and Poole has high praise for Christine Burns, Director of Sales Support, at the Holiday Inn staff. “Call Christine,” she says. “She’s a planner’s dream. This staff makes your life wonderful and your meeting memorable. I feel like they are family and enjoy every time I have the opportunity to speak, work and engage with them!”

More Orlando News

The first-ever NBC Sports Grill & Brew opened at Universal Orlando Resort’s CityWalk in October with great fanfare and a slew of NBC sports commentators in attendance. The restaurant features private dining spaces, nearly 100 HD screens so guests can be immersed in the sports experience no matter where they sit, an expansive menu of the best game-day food and more than 100 beer selections including craft and regional brews and the restaurant’s own proprietary 862 Orlando, a draft you can find only here.

The GE group booked functions at Planet Hollywood and at Raglan Road, both in the Disney Springs area. Poole says Raglan was nice but the service slowed although they had made a reservation. Planet Hollywood was a favorite — in spite of an initial mistake by the venue. “We had placed a deposit, and when the bill was presented we overlooked that the deposit was not taken off. I received a call from the manager who apologized that they had overcharged us and refunded the deposit immediately. Honesty goes a long way, plus the service was fantastic for a large group.”

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Universal Orlando Resort and Loews Hotels & Resorts is building the Loews Sapphire Falls Resort. It will be the fifth onsite hotel at Universal Orlando Resort, featuring 1,000 rooms and suites with a casual Caribbean theme, built around a lagoon and towering waterfall. The resort is expected to open in the summer.

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The Swan and Dolphin property offers a huge variety of meeting options with more than 329,000 sf of combined meeting space. Some 84 meeting rooms include executive boardrooms and a number of ballroom configurations. One totals 55,000 sf divisible into 16 meeting rooms, and another 34,000 sf is divisible into 11 meeting rooms. Convention and exhibit space tops 110,000 sf, and 99,000 sf of outdoor space includes a number of terraces and courtyards. The hotel also offers some truly nontraditional event spaces. Dinners, receptions and other group events can be held in areas including banquet kitchens, back hallways and even a giant freezer. With the latter, up to 60 guests may enjoy unusual offerings such as a martini bar served on carved ice, or a raw bar and caviar also served on ice — all while outfitted in parkas provided by the hotel.

Daytona Beach

On Florida’s north-central Atlantic Coast, The Shores Resort and Spa in Daytona Beach Shores completed a property-wide renovation in 2014 encompassing the 212 guest rooms and 20,000 sf of indoor and outdoor function space. Event facilities include a 6,800 sf grand ballroom that can be subdivided into five smaller meeting facilities ranging from 830 sf to 3,700 sf. Guests using this ground-level facility find themselves walking through the Daytona Beach Stock Car Racing Hall of Fame featuring plaques of famous faces in racing. Also available are boardrooms and smaller meeting rooms plus more than 8,000 sf of roof-top “cloud level” meeting facilities with floor-to-ceiling glass for outstanding views.

Daytona’s multifaceted Ocean Center convention center features 32 meeting rooms, an executive boardroom and VIP suite and 32,000 sf of total meeting space. A large ballroom offers divisible space, and the facility also includes a 84,000 sf exhibit hall and 42,000 sf arena that seats 9,300. Located 400 feet from the ocean, the center is flanked by a selection of shops and restaurants.

It just got easier to get to Daytona Beach. In January, JetBlue will begin daily nonstop service from New York’s JFK International Airport. Also new to Daytona is the Cici and Hyatt Brown Museum of Art, opening in February with the most extensive collection of Florida art in the world.

Jacksonville Area

Downtown Jacksonville’s premier meeting hotel is the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront — the self-proclaimed largest

“Orlando, in my opinion, is a perfect meeting destination. The weather is warm, people are friendly and there are a ton of venues to hold an event.”

Shawn Martin, Corporate Operations Manager
HMR Weight Management Services Corp., Boston, MA

Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront offers “Recharge Your Meetings,” a new menu of healthful meeting breaks, including yoga, stretch/planking breaks and Zumba instruction on the outdoor terraces on the riverfront.

Have you met Jacksonville?

It’s the city that makes a meeting feel like an outing; where your attendees can get a clear view of your presentation while overlooking the ocean or the river. And a place that’s known for its fresh seafood, warm smiles, and endless supply of outdoor adventure. So what’s missing? Your group.

Go to visitjacksonville.com/meetings to explore Jacksonville’s meeting options!
The hotel recently began offering “Recharge Your Meetings,” 13,000 sf of prefunction space as well as an 11,000-sf event area, which overlooks Choctawhatchee Bay, the marina and sweeping views of the Gulf of Mexico. Also onsite is The Blackwood Tennis Academy and Kay Casperson Spa. South Seas Island Resort offers numerous dining outlets as well as a sustainable seafood program for catering services utilizing fresh vegetables, fruits and herbs sourced from the executive onsite garden. Within walking distance of the resort is a shopping village and “downtown” Captiva, home of the famously quirky and delightful Bubble Room, a restaurant with a playful mix of décor in five dining rooms on three floors. In addition to group meetings, the hotel is recognized as one of the best beach resorts for wedding ceremonies and events and provides additional flexibility for group activities and breakouts.

The three-story Sanibel Welcome Center opened in December 2014 at Sanibel Beach & Golf Resort. Of interest to planners is Overlook at Sanibel, an L-shaped balcony at the top of the center offering private event space, a gazebo area and sweeping views of the Sister Island Captiva are renowned for their shelling beaches (1.5 miles of them) where 250 different types of seashells are waiting to be found. For attendees who could use a little more laidback and lot less stress, here are a few great options.

South Seas Island Resort occupies 330 acres on the northern tip of Captiva Island, boasting an exclusive 2.5 miles of white sand beaches. Offering a variety of spacious accommodations, including 471 guest rooms, dominiums and waterfront private homes, the resort functionally and efficiently handles large group functions, innovative meeting setups, in-house production and executive retreats. More than 45,000 sf of meeting space includes multiple meeting and breakout rooms, many of which feature Gulf or harbor views; and outdoor settings from beach to bay offer event space for receptions and networking.

The lure of water sports is everywhere at the resort, which has a full-service yacht harbor and marina where planners can charter Captiva Cruises for private group outings. Home to the Colgate Offshore Sailing School, South Seas also offers competitive regatta corporate teambuilding programs. For attendees on their free time, there are rental boats, paddleboards, waverunners, kayaks, fishing charters, dolphins and wildlife adventures and excursions, parasailing, the watersports list goes on. For golfers in the group, even the nine-hole, par 27 executive course, the resort recently invested more than $16 million in refreshed amenities and offers unique outdoor event space with water views.

The new, 7,500-sf addition included expansion to prefunction space, restroom facilities and permanent registration areas. The additional space provides meeting planners with more than 23,000 sf of ballrooms and event space on a single level, with approximately 10,000 sf of additional prefunction area to support the three ballrooms. With nearly 40,000 sf of indoor meeting space and 20,000 sf of outdoor event space, the resort can now accommodate larger conferences and events and provide additional flexibility for group activities and breakouts.

The Ultimate Breakout Room

For decades discerning meeting planners have relied on this island sanctuary to exceed their client’s expectations and deliver memorable events. Ridden by harried, abundant wildlife and world-class amenities, South Seas Island Resort promotes to deliver an unparalleled experience for both planner and attendee. Planners will enjoy setting up events with unique teams building a success and $4,300,000 of Deluxe furnished private accommodations, including beachfront, ocean view and downtown suites. Attendees will enjoy diverse accommodations ranging from rustic/vintage guestrooms to beachfront suites. Choose South Seas Island Resort for your next event and discover why it is recognized as one of the best beach resorts for meetings and weddings.

Call today to learn about special promotions and great rates for Winter and Spring meetings.

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- WATERSPORT ACTIVITIES: CONUNDRUM, PRINCE DESPAIR, 39 PICS, WATER SNORKEL, BILLY BEACHFRONT GOLF COURSE, SANIBEL ISLAND, SWORD FISH, GULF, ENCHANTED BEACH HOUSE, CONUNDRUM, 49 PICS, DIRT BIKES AND MOUNTAIN BIKES, VONZA ADVENTURES, 39 PICS, DINING OPTIONS, BEACH CLUB OFFICE, SANBILD ON NATURE TRIP, SANIBEL MARINA, PADDLEBOARDING, KAYAKING, TABOO...
largest meeting venue on Sanibel Island, boasts 12,000 sf of flexible space that accommodates up to 300 guests.

Crystal River

Just as laidback and authentically old Florida is the community of Crystal River, 75 miles north of Tampa on the Gulf Coast. Crystal River is the winter home of endangered Florida manatees, the ubiquitous, slow-moving residents of the area’s namesake river. Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge is the only refuge created specifically to protect these gentle giants and offers visitors a chance to observe them from above and below the water.

Tammy Alverson, controller for Atex Distributing/Accu-Air Inc., arranged the company’s quarterly employee outing in November for 35 participants. The event is usually a dinner; however, this year the company wanted to make it special by arranging a weekend retreat set at Plantation on Crystal River.

“I searched venues from the east coast of Florida to the south and each search kept coming back to the Plantation,” Alverson says. “We were looking for a location that would be central for everyone while providing activities that all could enjoy. Since our group is so diverse, the options of golf, fishing, boating, spa appointments, swimming, etc., were very important. I had also received pricing from two other resorts and the Plantation was the most affordable. We chose Plantation on Crystal River for all the activities available plus the affordability and the great reviews we found on the Internet.”

Because this event focused on rest and relaxation, the weekend included lots of activities. “Our event planner, Carrie Hartman, was extraordinary in helping us plan our events, down to the competition games we played on Saturday,” Alverson says. “She was always responsive and eager to offer suggestions. Spa Blu’s manager, Tracy, and staff were amazing to accommodate everyone’s appointments. All of the resort staff from the restaurant to the adventure center to tour captains were friendly and helpful.”

Among the group activities were a sunset river cruise followed by trolley transportation to a local restaurant Friday evening. Alverson says the trolley ride was fun but would have been better in daylight and better for a slightly smaller group as there were not enough seats for everyone. On Saturday evening, the group dined at the resort. “Dinner was excellent, well presented and the room was spacious enough for our group to comfortably socialize and enjoy the delicious food.”

In retrospect, Alverson says she probably should not have booked a group breakfast buffet. “The resort has a very nice weekend breakfast buffet so we should have just let folks take advantage of that. This is no fault of the resort; just my poor planning.”

All in all, the weekend was a success and Alverson recommends it to others. “Our rooms were all close together, nothing was too far of a walk, moving about the grounds was very easy,” she says. “The group also took part in all of the activities available except golf, making the resort an excellent choice.

Florida’s natural serenity, however, was the true standout. Looking back, Alverson says that the most memorable element of all was “the beauty and quietness of the river”.

Imagine your next meeting in a place where unforgettable surroundings inspire creativity. Newly designed guest rooms and state-of-the-art facilities provide the perfect backdrop for meetings from 15 to 15,000. With over two decades of service expertise backed by award-winning accommodations and dining, this is the world you’ll experience at the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort.

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Between these two cities are enough options to bring groups triple-digit speeds and then has Maverick Aviation copters swoop in to take them for a trip to the Grand Canyon for a WOW incentive.

Destination: Nevada
Where Exotic Adventures Rev Up the WOW Factor

Nevada is more than Las Vegas. Even Las Vegas is more than Las Vegas — at least more than the perception of Las Vegas held by much of the public and seeded by the city itself with its racy ad campaigns. Ironically, few cities in the world are more serious about meetings and conventions than Las Vegas or able to match Las Vegas in terms of the quality, depth and value of its meeting experience.

Still, it’s not the only game in town. Nevada also has the Reno-Tahoe combo, with the soaring Sierra Nevada as backdrop to Reno’s skyline, and Lake Tahoe, which straddles the California-Nevada border and plummets to depths of 1,644 feet below its piercing blue surface, as a conference add-on. Between these two cities are enough options to bring groups back to the Silver State for years to come.

By Christine Loomis

Las Vegas
Billy Ford, Senior Vice President Kemira Chemicals Inc., Atlanta, GA

200-plus conservative engineers functioning as technical sales representatives, everyone loves the energy and excitement of Vegas. That energy permeates the team, and we leave Vegas energized and ready not only to work but also to win. While a motivated and energized sales force is priceless, it is also helpful that I can clearly document the cost advantage and ease of access Vegas provides, making our selection of Vegas the clear, right choice.

“Before anyone could challenge the selection of Vegas, I solicited quotes from multiple cities. We priced airline flights from around the country to each of those destinations. Vegas has consistently been the lowest total cost option, making it impossible for anyone to challenge the selection of Vegas as our destination.”

Kemira has hosted its meeting at M Resort for multiple years, which Ford says has made the planning process easy. “We initially selected The M because of the focus on service and quality, which matches our company culture. We have continued to choose The M because we have developed a true partnership based on trust. Our management teams have come to know each other, and it really has been as simple as saying ‘Hey, we want to do the same thing again this year,’ which has made the planning simple. We’ve never had to utilize an external event management team to make the meeting a smooth, flow—

Reno-Tahoe

When Amy Alley, director of events for Dynamic Communities Inc. in Tampa, Florida, considers what makes Reno an easy sell, it’s the whole package — hotels, CVB, pricing and community. Dynamic Communities’ User Group Summit took place there in October, drawing 4,000 attendees.

The group was based at Atlantis Casino Resort Spa and Peppermill Resort Spa Casino, both near the Reno-Sparks Convention Center. “Reno is a good fit for us because of the pricing, relationships we built with the CVB and hotel partners, functionality of the space to fit our program and the culture of the area,” Alley says. “It’s not too big, not too small a feel and a grass-roots community much like our organization. Our program was primarily held at the convention center and Atlantis and Peppermill. Several of our sponsors held receptions and events outside of the hotels. One sponsor held an event at the Edge at Peppermill, and it was a huge win.”

With such a large group, Alley was proactive about flights. “The main challenge facing attendees was flight accessibility,” she says. “We listed the top airlines flying into Reno on our websites and communicated with the CVB to inform the airport of our large group. Some attendees had to stay an extra night or leave a day early, but most people were accommodated in their travels.”

When it comes to what made the biggest difference in successfully planning this event, Alley points to the people. “Our sales teams at the CVB and hotels went above and beyond to showcase what the city has to offer. Their customer service and their genuine care for our team and our program led us to do business in Reno. We were really impressed with the facilities at both hotels, as well as their willingness to make our program a success.”

“At Atlantis, John Carter was our primary contact and was always on hand, from the beginning of the sales process to onsite at event execution. John is a true professional. At Peppermill, Nat Carasali and Pat Flynn were there to welcome me from the first site visit. Not every owner of a luxury resort takes the time to show planners the meeting space and guest rooms! Nat has a humble manner but a great sense of pride that beams through.”

Also a standout was Alison Farr, who changed jobs during the planning process but didn’t miss a beat. “Alison Farr is largely the reason we chose Reno for our Summit,” Alley says. “At the time, she was with the CVB and then moved to the sales team at Peppermill and continued the same pleasant, personable level of service to our group, going out of her way to make sure we had everything we needed. John Leinen with the CVB continued our great relationship there, assisting us greatly along the way.”

With such a large group, logistics were critical. “We provided our attendees’ shuttle service from the Peppermill to the convention center, and I believe that’s a must if leveraging both venues for a program,” Alley says. “We used Atlantis for the program’s breakout sessions and ran 17 breakouts consecutively there. The walk across the skybridge was relatively easy and accessible to the convention center, but to ease the flow, we planned the agenda around the least number of times attendees would have to move around.”

Alley says the Peppermill team did an excellent job with catering and that the venue sells itself. “The ambiance and décor of our reception locations provided just the right atmosphere,” she adds.

Some attendees also took advantage of Reno’s proximity to Lake Tahoe through a group rate Alley was able to offer at the Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort. “I personally enjoyed Tahoe during our site visits and believe that is a great asset for Reno to offer,” she says. “I’d encourage groups to plan more outings there if possible for their programs.”

With 4,000 attendees, Alley says it was a large group for Reno — with a lot of expectations. Yet the meeting was a great success, based on positive reviews. “Overall, I believe the relationships and customer service carried us through a great planning process,” she says. “We had some challenges with Internet bandwidth at the convention center as our group requires a lot of service. We started planning early, but I wish we would have had better contingency planning for onsite.”

Alley doesn’t hesitate to recommend Reno. “Reach out to John Leinen at the Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority (aka Johnny Reno — just ask him), Allison Farr at Peppermill and John Carter at Atlantis. You’ll be well taken care of. Everyone works as a team, a huge benefit to planners.”

“Uh, and one more thing: At the Reno-Sparks Convention Center, don’t miss out on the grilled donut stations for your reception — a big hit!”

Reno — with a lot of expectations. Yet the meeting was a huge win.”

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ing success because we haven’t had to reinvent the wheel each year. We make tweaks, but we do so seamlessly with the help of the team at The M. We have also developed a great working relationship with the LVCVA who help us select and connect with service providers like transportation, entertainment and offsite teambuilding venues. With the help of The M and the LVCVA, we show up and the meeting just works.”

Ford says everything about M Resort stands out, from the service on arrival to the housekeeping and food. But two venues are favorites. “We particularly love the Hostile Grape wine cellar for our opening session. If you haven’t seen it you should. It’s ‘technology-meets-wine’ in a high-class environment. We also love the central bar area where we network after dinner. Our team doesn’t get spread out like it might at a mega casino, allowing us to maximize networking potential.”

Also excellent, Ford says, is the ease of access between guest rooms and meeting space. “The main elevators take our people directly from their rooms to the convention level. From there, the primary ballroom and breakout rooms are only steps away. We’ve never ‘lost’ anyone!”

The hotel is the setting for one of the most important evenings of the event, the Pinnacle Award Ceremony, held on the second night. “The white table linens, outstanding surf-and-turf dinner, stage lighting and attention to service all set the right climate for this coat-and-tie dinner,” Ford says. “It’s the pinnacle of our year when we get to recognize our top performers in front of their peers in such a powerful setting.”

The group also has time to get out in the city. “We generally have a free night for the meeting participants to enjoy Vegas. It’s great to see people teaming up with colleagues they don’t work with on a daily basis for dinner and a show or dinner and sightseeing on The Strip,” Ford notes. “One of the most exciting activities is a combined supercar and helicopter program we developed with Exotics Racing and Maverick Aviation. We take our Pinnacle Award winners to Exotics Racing where they drive supercars on a track at triple-digit speeds. When the Maverick Aviation copters swoop in to pick them up for a trip to the Grand Canyon, it becomes tangibly clear that the effort invested to become a Pinnacle Award winner is recognized and appreciated.”

In the end, Las Vegas perfectly meets the needs of this group of engineers, proving that the reality of the city often differs from the perception. “Don’t be afraid to select Vegas,” Ford says. “The cost advantages are clear and easy to quantify. Be confident in your culture, the maturity of your team and your ability to manage both. Being in Vegas doesn’t mean you will wake up with a tattoo on your face. It does, however, mean you will leave energized and with the drive to do what it takes to be successful so you can come back!”

Variety of Choices Attracts Groups

Karen Hurlbut, owner of Muskego, Wisconsin-based Hurlbut Travel, plans multiple meetings in Las Vegas for Cramer and Associates, a consulting company providing sales, marketing and leadership programs for broker/dealers. In 2015, Hurlbut organized five Las Vegas meetings for the company, all held at various MGM properties including Aria, Mirage and Mandalay Bay. “My client chooses Las Vegas for multiple meetings due to

New Year’s Eve 2015 at the High Roller at the Linq by Caesars Entertainment.

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Hurlbut Travel, Muskego, WI

“My client chooses Las Vegas for multiple meetings due to the ease of access, price and the culture of the area. He enjoys the variety of dining options as well.”

The ease of access, price and the culture of the area,” Hurlbut says. “He enjoys the variety of dining options as well. The only real challenges with Las Vegas is trying to find rooms during conventions and the length of flights for my travelers from the East Coast.”

In terms of hotel choices, Cramer & Associates wants top-notch venues. “We love to host our events at hotels where attendees will find a wow factor,” Hurlbut says. “We work closely with the sales and catering staff at each hotel, and they can either make or break your experience. The rooms have to be great, the food has to be excellent and the service has to be exceptional.

“The Mirage is the most compact, so the ease for the attendees is great. Aria and Mandalay Bay have wonderful convention space but are a great distance from the sleeping rooms, which can cause challenges for people with mobility issues.”

One issue for Hurlbut is MGM’s pricing for the different hotels. “The thing that surprised me most was the fluctuation of costs from one MGM resort to another,” she says. “Mandalay Bay was much more expensive in food and beverage costs compared to the Aria. Being that they are both MGM resorts and of the same caliber, I found that frustrating.”

Like Ford, Hurlbut says Las Vegas has a lot going for it. “It’s a fun location for all of the attendees. After the meetings, it’s a great venue for networking around the pools and for the casinos and multitude of activities that make Las Vegas famous.”

That’s important for this group because attendees are typically on their own in the evenings after meetings and group dinners.

Because of the city’s popularity, Hurlbut says it’s important to begin the planning process early. “The most important part of the planning process is to start as early as possible and find availability at multiple hotels of the same quality, which gives you the most negotiating power,” she says. “If there are 10 hotels that want your business, it’s easier to get the best deal.”

New and Noteworthy in Las Vegas

As the 50th Golden Anniversary of Caesars Palace approaches, the evolution continues with the reimagining of the iconic hotel’s original tower, the Roman Tower, to be completely reborn as the new Julius Tower. Expected to welcome its first guests January 1, 2016, the new 587-room tower will feature new design-savvy, modern rooms and suites.

The guest room amenities will include 55-inch TVs equipped with Sonifi system, luxurious Beauty Rest Brevet Island Mattresses, a specially curated mini bar and English-themed Gilchrist & Soames in-room toiletries and amenities.

Encore Resort and Encore Tower Suites at Wynn Las Vegas

The outdoor plaza along the frontage of New York-New York includes Stupidiotic, Swatch and I Love NYNY shops, and restaurants such as Shake Shack and Tom’s Urban. A stage at one end of the Brooklyn Bridge showcases live bands and other entertainment.
Las Vegas began a refresh in summer 2015, including updated furnishings, floor coverings, technology, aesthetics and custom bed linens. Also of note is that the Wynn Fairway Villas and Encore three-bedroom duplexes are now available for guests to rent. The 5,929 sf Encore duplex features a billiard room and private massage and exercise room with floor-to-ceiling views of the city. The dining area seats 16. The Fairway Villas overlook Wynn Golf Course and include a private massage room, workspace with complimentary high-speed Internet access, a breakfast room and seating for eight.

The Buffet at Wynn Las Vegas has unveiled the restaurant’s new concept, which elevates the traditional buffet to that of a more sophisticated dining experience. New at Delano Las Vegas in 2015 was the Delano Beach Club, a South Beach-inspired experience with 16 private cabanas and the availability of buying out the entire beach club in the evening for up to 350 attendees. In July, Delano also welcomed guests to its newly renovated guest rooms, the final phase of a resort-wide refresh.

Rivea and Skyfall Lounge, by Michelin-decorated chef Alain Ducasse, are now open and located on the 64th floor of Delano Las Vegas. Rivea: Influenced by the delectable food markets of Provence and Italy, the menu focuses on simple, fresh Mediterranean flavors made with the best West Coast-sourced seasonal ingredients. The restaurant’s 50-seat private dining room Rivea+ boasts 180-degree views of The Strip through floor-to-ceiling windows.

Skyfall Lounge: Located adjacent to Rivea, Skyfall Lounge offers an evolving nightlife experience that builds in tempo as the evening progresses.

The Monte Carlo and New York-New York Hotel & Casino revitalization will lead visitors to The Park and the new world-class 20,000-seat Las Vegas Arena, both of which are slated to open in April 2016. The Park will create an immersive outdoor destination spanning more than eight acres, re-envisioning the traditional pedestrian experience in Las Vegas. Tom’s Urban, a modern and casual dining concept, is now open and serving breakfast, lunch, dinner and late night at New York-New York. Located on the casino floor and adjacent to the resort’s replica Brooklyn Bridge, the venue features a contemporary dining experience offering innovative, yet familiar dishes coupled with a creative bar program.

The AAA Five Diamond Aria Resort & Casino announced a major expansion of its LEED Gold-certified convention center as well as enhancements to the existing convention center and event space at Crystals, and two new restaurants. The $154 million project will deliver an additional 200,000 sf of technologically advanced, flexible meeting space across four stories, highlighted by indoor/open-air spaces and a glass-enclosed venue with views of The Park and new Las Vegas Arena. With anticipated completion in February 2018, Aria will feature more than 500,000 sf of meeting space.

The first level will feature an open ballroom with ample prefunction spaces, and access to an exclusive loading dock for events that require sizable displays. Versatile indoor-outdoor breakout rooms will highlight the second level, while the third level will offer a large ballroom as well as naturally lit prefunction spaces connecting to Aria’s existing convention center. The facility’s top floor is set to become one of Las Vegas’ most unique meeting venues as it complements a vast ballroom with a striking outdoor patio that can accommodate receptions for up to 2,000 guests. The top-floor patio will feature views overlooking The Park and Las Vegas Arena.

New media walls, high-tech furnishings, charging stations and a new registration area are among the elements added to the current convention center. Adjacent to Aria, The Shoppes at Crystals now offer 13,000 sf of multilevel, flexible space accommodating up to 800. The event space overlooks Aria’s colorful dancing waters of Lumia and the Focus Water Wall. New Italian restaurant Carbone opened in October while indoor-outdoor Herringbone, featuring its take on California coastal cuisine, opened in late December.

Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino opened the Convention Center’s 350,000 sf expansion. The $70 million expansion includes new exhibit space, a 20,000 sf foyer and underground parking. The final phase of the expansion will transition existing space into a 70,000 sf carpeted Oceanside Ballroom this month. The Mandalay Bay Convention Center boasts more than 2 million total sf and more than 900,000 sf of contiguous exhibit space, which elevates its ranking in North America to No. 5 in both total square feet and exhibit space.

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On The Move

The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, Colorado, has appointed Jeffrey Overgaard as sales manager for group sales at the resort’s Wilderness Experience Properties. He previously was group sales manager at Cheyenne Mountain Resort in Colorado Springs.

AMResorts has promoted Colette Baruth to senior vice president of marketing, sales, revenue management and distribution. She was vice president of sales, marketing, revenue management and distribution.

Hyatt Regency Dallas has appointed Bryan King as director of sales and marketing. He most recently served as the director of sales and marketing for the Hyatt Regency St. Louis at the Arch.

The Westin Fort Lauderdale, Florida, has named Deanna Sylvestri as director of group sales. She was a senior sales manager at Gallyrson Fort Lauderdale - A DoubleTree Guest Suites.

David Wahba was appointed as director of sales for the Waldorf Astoria Orlando and Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek properties in Orlando, Florida. He most recently served as senior director for the Wyndham Hotel Group.

Benchmark Hospitality International has named Perry Goodbar as director of sales and marketing for the Villas of Grand Cypress in Orlando, Florida. He was vice president of sales, services and business development for the Colonial Williamsburg Company.

Michelle Lardizabal was appointed as vice president of sales for Club Med. She was vice president of sales for City Wonders, a European guided tour company.

The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, has named Isa Lee as account director responsible for the Southeast market. She previously was senior sales manager at the Hilton Orlando.

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