The New Destinations International
DMAI Gets a New Name, New Mission and New Value Proposition to Empower Destinations to Excel
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Experiential Event Design
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The newly flagged Hilton Orlando Buena Vista Palace recently completed a major makeover. PAGE 24

DMCs ITA Group and Terramar created a spectacular closing night event featuring a custom-built “ship” on the beach. PAGE 44

The glittering Las Vegas Strip is forever changing with new and exciting properties and experiences. PAGE 56

Credit: Hilton Orlando Buena Vista Palace
Credit: ITA Group
Credit: Las Vegas News Bureau

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Better Together

There’s good news in this issue for planners and their partnerships with Destination Marketing Organizations, commonly referred to as CVBs, and other key meetings industry partners, including DMCs and hotel brands. Enhancing professionalism is at the top of the list for Don Welsh, president and CEO of Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) — and the impetus for the rebranding of DMAI in both name and substance to Destinations International — DI. The group’s name change becomes official at the association’s 2017 annual convention this month in Montreal. In our cover story on page 20, Welsh explains the new mission and value proposition, which is designed to more effectively support and empower the more than 600 member destination organizations and CVBs in more than 15 countries to excel in each of their own tourism missions. In turn, planners are the beneficiaries of an enhanced ROI for meetings held in such dynamic destinations. Destinations International represents a powerful, forward-thinking, collaborative association (committed to) exchanging bold ideas, connecting innovative people and excelling tourism to its highest potential,” says Welsh, who himself is uniquely suited to lead such an effort, as his more than 30-year career excelling in the industry attests. Before accepting the leadership position at DMAI in January 2016, Welsh held CEO positions at Choose Chicago, the Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Association and the Seattle Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Welsh, who is also a veteran of the hotel industry, appreciates the partnerships hotel brands form with planners to continually upgrade and build new properties — including one by Hosts New Orleans, which also just “hosted” the fifth annual HGA hotel brands form with planners to continually upgrade and build new properties — including one by Hosts New Orleans, which also just “hosted” the fifth annual HGA...
**MGM Grand Breaks Ground on Conference Center Expansion**

LAS VEGAS, NV — MGM Grand and community executives broke ground in June on a $130 million new addition to the MGM Grand Conference Center. The new 250,000 sf space at MGM Grand will connect to the existing Conference Center on all three levels and include a new 5,500 sf outdoor courtyard available for private events, a 48,000 sf ballroom, a 32,000 sf ballroom, three junior ballrooms, and 11 breakout rooms. The resort’s existing meeting spaces include the stand-alone, 92,000 sf Marquee Ballroom and the 18,800-seat Grand Garden Arena.

Upon completion, the MGM Grand Conference Center will total more than 850,000 sf. As part of the expansion, Stay Well Meetings — the industry’s first-ever wellness meetings experience, which launched at the hotel in 2014, also will expand its footprint by 22,000 sf. [www.mgmgrand.com](http://www.mgmgrand.com)

**Waldorf Astoria Announces Iconic Property in Beverly Hills**

BEVERLY HILLS, CA — The Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills opened in June at the intersection of Wilshire and Santa Monica boulevards. Adjacent to The Beverly Hilton, the 12-story hotel is the Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts’ first new build on the West Coast and second California property. Genserl and Pierre-Yves Rochon Inc. are the co-design architects.

A Personal Concierge is assigned to every guest, from pre-arranged visits to local museums, galleries, and restaurants to your own private shopping experience. These appointments are designed to enhance the guest’s experience beyond the four walls of the hotel.

Each of the 170 guest rooms, inspired by the contemporary interpretation of Hollywood glamour and the Streamline Moderne style of the 1930s and ’40s, has floor-to-ceiling windows that open onto oversized private balconies overlooking the Hollywood Hills and nearby Century City.

The rooftop pool deck, available only to hotel guests, features a 2,500 sf roof deck with a rooftop pool, hot tub, and fire pits. The rooftop pool deck is designed for relaxation and socialization with amenities including a bar, outdoor grill, and elevated lounge seating. The rooftop pool also features a 5,500 sf outdoor room with private cabanas, ping pong and foosball tables, and a private theater. Additionally, the rooftop pool deck is adjacent to The Pool Bar & Grill, the hotel’s new poolside restaurant.

The Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills lobby.

**Six Sigma Meetings Offers New Certification**

Six Sigma Meetings has announced a new certification for the meetings industry that is based on the Lean Six Sigma approach to project management. The certification — Lean Six Sigma for Meeting Professionals (LSSMP) — has been approved by the Events Industry Council (EIC) for 48 CE Hours.

The LSSMP Green Belt certification transcends industries and will enhance professionalism because it is hard to earn, requires focused study and the actual completion of change in order to be certified. The course(s) have been designed specifically for meeting professionals who want to impact their operations and enhance their position within their organization and the industry.

“For too many years, meeting professionals have been looked at as ‘party planners.’ The CMP and CMM certifications carry value with our colleagues and within the industry, but not on a wider basis,” stated Rob Wilson, instructor and Lean Six Sigma Black Belt. “By earning this certification, a meeting professional will stand out to both HR and management, due to the wide acceptance of the Lean Six Sigma methodology.”

The inaugural five-day course will be offered in Kansas City, September 17–22, and attendees who complete the project work will receive the LSSMP Green Belt certification. Other courses that will qualify meeting professionals for the LSSMP White and LSSMP Yellow belts will be available for purchase online.

For more information: contact Robert H. Walters, rwalters@sixsigmameetings.net, call 724-596-0290 or visit [www.sixsigmameetings.net](http://www.sixsigmameetings.net).

**Why Incentive Travel Is No. 1**

Silicon Valley has turned workplace incentives into an art form. From foosball tables in conference rooms to kitchen gardens to on-site gyms to company-wide celebrations, Silicon Valley companies in the San Francisco Bay area are amuse workers for hours on end. But when it’s time to get down to business, companies such as Facebook and Adobe know that one of the best ways to inspire a group to perform is by offering a chance to travel.

Incentive travel is a $14 billion industry. The Incentive Federation Inc. says that 38 percent of all American companies with revenues of more than $1 million offer some sort of incentive travel. Between the fall of 2014 and the fall of 2016, the average amount spent on incentive travel by companies increased by 10 percent, with trips to different U.S., Mexican and even Europe being the most popular.

**The Millennial Factor**

Those numbers will only increase as younger employees join the workforce. Members of the youngest generation (estimated 79 million) overwhelmingly want to travel abroad as much as possible (75 percent). At the same time, the Deloitte Human Capital Trends 2016 study says that one in four would be willing to move to a new company right now if they felt it was a better fit. A company that offers millennials a chance to travel for hitting sales goals, garnering the most referrals, enhancing product awareness or achieving another metric is a company at which workers want to stay.

Employers will want those employees to stay, as well. A 1997 study conducted in England showed an 18 percent increase in productivity when employees are offered travel incentives. Those trips can have a positive effect on the abilities of employees, too. According to Psychology Today, travel generally, and international travel specifically, helps people feel less emotionally reactive to day-to-day changes, since it grants some perspective to the traveler. Multicultural experiences, such as exploring a new country, also can spark creativity. Essentially, incentive travel not only can inspire employees to new heights before they take their well-earned vacations, but it also can give them important skills to become even stronger contributors to the team upon their return.

**It’s All About the Experience**

While employees like incentive travel — and in many cases prefer it to cash-equivalent bonuses — The experiences. Whether it’s a ticket to the Super Bowl, a wine tour through the French countryside or even a zip-line adventure through the Costa Rica jungle, an incentive travel package can’t be spent on paying off bills or contributing to a retirement fund. These types of trips force the type A personalities, the workers who often are the most likely to hit those incentive points, to stop and turn their focus elsewhere.

Super Bowl, a wine tour through the French countryside or even a zip-line adventure through the Costa Rica jungle, an incentive travel package can’t be spent on paying off bills or contributing to a retirement fund. These types of trips force the type A personalities, the workers who often are the most likely to hit those incentive points, to stop and turn their focus elsewhere.

The hard-headed and driven sometimes have to be persuaded to take time off; giving them a free chance to do so will ensure that your top contributors are getting the rejuvenation time. Plus, it sure beats lunch-hour foosball tournaments.

— By Michael Upp, Senior Vice President, Mitch Stewart Inc. for the Incentive Travel Council
News & Notes

DMAI to Offer Reimagined Destination Management Program

WASHINGTON, DC — Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) Chairman Gary C. Sherwin, CDM&E and president and CEO of Visit Newport Beach, Inc. and President and CEO Don Welsh announced a partnership with George Washington University to deliver a reimagined, cutting-edge and global Professional in Destination Management (PDM) program for today’s destination management professionals. The new PDM program is designed to prepare entry-to-midlevel professionals with the skills and knowledge critical to successful destination management and marketing.

The comprehensive educational program includes seven core courses — three conducted in a classroom setting and four available online — and is available to individuals interested in the travel and tourism industry. The Fundamentals course will debut the program during DMAI’s annual convention on Tuesday, July 11, 2017. Registration is now open.

“One of DMAI’s key priorities this year has been to reinvent our educational programs so that they are relevant and meaningful to industry professionals regardless of where they are in their careers,” said Sherwin. “To help us fulfill this mission, we are thrilled to partner with George Washington University to help us reimagine and deliver the PDM program. Their longstanding expertise and commitment in the travel industry sector makes them the perfect choice to co-create this course for a new generation of destination organization leaders.”

The core content areas include: the fundamentals of destination organizations; destination development and management; governance and finance; destination organization operations; membership and communications; marketing and research; and sales and group services.

“The new PDM program is the result of the association’s 2017 Business Plan released earlier this year,” said Welsh. “It aligns with the four key pillars of our new brand — Community, Advocacy, Research and Education. We will continue to deliver important and impactful offerings, including research, networking opportunities, professional and organizational development, all with the intent to keep entry-level and even C-level leaders ahead of the industry curve.”

Upon successful completion of the required seven courses students will receive a Professional in Destination Management Certificate from The George Washington University School of Business and DMAI. (See “The New Destinations International” on page 20.)

Universal Orlando Offering New Meeting Enhancements

ORLANDO, FL — Universal Orlando Resort has announced its newest Meetings & Events offering — Meeting Enhancements. Now, when planners host meetings at Universal Orlando onsite hotels they can utilize Meeting Enhancements to create compelling experiences that connect attendees to their organization’s message in impactful ways that engage, inspire and entertain.

Options include character interruptions, customizable performers and unique entertainment elements.

In the Branded Character Moments, powerful characters such as Optimus Prime can open a meeting or introduce a CEO. Picture a meeting interruption by the Minions to excite and engage attendees, reminding them to have some fun.

Custom Character Options offer customizable character moments — such as an adventure guide, sports broadcaster or movie director — to help deliver specific messages and reinforce conference theming.

Inspirational Atmosphere. Add another layer of enthusiasm with atmospheric elements taken right from Universal Orlando’s three theme parks. From stilt walkers to signature Mardi Gras entertainers and other specialty acts, these performers allow planners to meet attendees’ high expectations with a boost of energy.

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MPI’s 2017 World Education Congress

By all measures, this year’s Meeting Professionals World Education Congress (WEC) at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas June 19–22 was a winning event. MPI’s goal at the annual conference was to help meeting professionals stop planning meetings and start designing experiences.

There were more than 2,500 registered attendees of which approximately 55 percent were planners; nearly 70 percent in attendance were MPI members. In addition there were 142 virtual attendees. The MPI Exchange Program, which consists of hosted buyer planners and suppliers and Exchange Room (formerly MarketSquare) participants included 248 planners and 163 suppliers. Attendees took advantage of more than 70 total education sessions, most of which qualified for clock hours. The sessions were focused on eight areas: Event Marketing; Event Operations; Legal Procurement & Compliance; Personal & Career Development; Technology & Big Data; Transforming Yourself from Planner to Producer; Transforming Yourself from Supplier to Partner; and Security & Risk Management, which received special emphasis.

MPI also introduced several new education offerings from the MPI Academy as part of its new Executive Education Series, including the Women in Industry Events

It’s Time to Stop Planning Meetings and Start Designing Experiences

Leadership Program and a designation program for the highly regarded MPI Experiential Event Series. In addition, the association formally announced it is collaborating with the National Center for Spectator Sports Safety and Security (NCS4) at the University of Southern Mississippi to develop educational programming and resources, with the first course — Emergency Preparedness for Meetings and Events — debuting at this year’s WEC.

Learning From the Glitches

Even the glitches turned out to be learning experiences for planners on how to overcome inevitable and unforeseen hiccups during events. When Magic Johnson pulled out at the last minute as keynote, WEC in partnership with MGM Resorts International lined up new entertainment to save the day. In his MPI Blog, Rich Luna, MPI’s director of publishing, relates this reaction from an attendee: “For me, it was really great,” said Unique Carey, a student attendee. “I got to get the insight on what really happens when things don’t go as planned. You have to have a Plan B and a Plan C, but you really have to work with your partners to make sure you’re getting the right fit for your audience to make sure they’re not losing value at the event.”

MPI honored the recipients of this year’s RISE (Recognizing Industry Success and Excellence) Awards at the annual signature event RISE Awards Presentation and Luncheon. The recipients were selected for exceptional achievements in the meeting and event industry.

The MPI Foundation’s Big Deal at the Palace Ballroom at Caesars, the Ren dezvous night networking event at XS Nightclub at Encore and the Not-So-Silent Auction raised $340,000 to benefit scholarship and grant opportunities for MPI members around the world. MPI raised more than $218,000 with the President’s Dinner to support the MPI Foundation in its efforts to provide more education to MPI’s global community.

Other offerings included a redesigned Exchange Floor, plenty of networking events, and high-profile keynote speakers, guests and entertain ment, including world-renowned spiritual leader Dr. Deepak Chopra and performances by Las Vegas entertainers.

Next year’s WEC takes place in Indianapolis. www.mpiweb.org/indy18. C&M
Fifth Annual Hosts Global Forum

More Than 240 Industry Leaders Let the Good Times Roll in New Orleans

Hosts Global (Hosts), a strategic partner for destination management services worldwide, hosted more than 240 clients and hospitality industry professionals for their fifth annual Hosts Global Forum. This invitation-only event occurred at the Sheraton New Orleans in Louisiana from June 26–29, 2017 where attendees participated in on-trend industry discussions, educational sessions, networking events and memorable destination-specific activities.

Global Gathering
“The Hosts Global Forum is our annual opportunity to bring together our 50-plus Destination Management Company (DMC) members, clients and colleagues from around the globe,” says Marty MacKay, DMCP, president of Hosts Global Alliance. “Attendees travel to one of our key destinations for a firsthand experience led by Laura Shuler, CEO of Hastings Hotels have eagerly begun planning for Hosts’ first European conference. Hastings Hotels is planning a series of events in the following categories:

- **DMC of the Year 2016** — 2017 Award Capers DMC.
- **Brand Honors Award** — Hosts Las Vegas and Destination Mexico.
- **H Factor Leadership Award** — Robert Bass, DMCP, with Maple Ridge Events, and Michael Dalton, CIS, with Moloney & Kelly.
- **Critic’s Choice Award** — 2017

Local Color
It wouldn’t be a forum for hospitality leaders without showcasing New Orleans’ unique venues and musical talent. The conference opened with the Hosts & Heritage Festival, a nod to New Orleans’ Jazz Fest, and closed with a progressive parade through Bourbon Street with stops at legendary venues and live performances by Kermit Ruffins & The Barbecue Swingers, and Grammy and Billboard award-winning musician, Irvin Mayfield. The unrivaled local knowledge and planning capabilities of Hosts New Orleans made the experience one all attendees will not soon forget.

At the close, Hosts unveiled the location of their 2018 Hosts Global Forum occurring June 21–24, 2018 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Moloney & Kelly, a Hosts Global Partner, along with their clients, was at the forefront of the conference.

Learnings and Awards
Once underway, industry awareness was at the forefront of the conference. Featured topics included a discussion on innovative thinking presented by Keith Harneyer, partner of SmartStorming, and an informative session on brand experience led by Laura Shuler, CEO of August Jackson Communications Design.

During the conference, Hosts proudly announced the winners of the annual Hosts Honors awards acknowledging DMC members who exceeded expectations in the following categories:

- **Critics’ Choice Award** — Hosts Las Vegas and Destination Mexico.
- **Brand Honors Award** — Roberts Event Group.
- **H Factor Leadership Award** — Robyn Bass, DMCP, with Maple Ridge Events, and Michael Dalton, CIS, with Moloney & Kelly.
- **DMC of the Year 2016** — 2017 Award Capers DMC.

To learn more go to: go.hosts-global.com/2018HostsGlobalForum
How to Ask for a Raise — and Other Top Learnings From IAEE Women’s Leadership Forum

Having recently consulted with a major professional association on the sustainability and long-term growth strategy of its women’s leadership conference, I was motivated to attend a leadership forum for women in our own industry: the International Association of Exhibitions and Events’ (IAEE) Women’s Leadership Forum, which took place at the new MGM National Harbor in early May. Here are some of the key learnings I took away from the forum, many of which can be applied to any aspiring professional or any conference.

1. Ask for a raise.
   If you’re a woman, never go to your boss asking for a raise because a man makes more than you. Having research about pay scales can add to your value to the organization. Take notes when someone compliments you or sends you written props, when you’ve saved the company money, brought in additional revenue over and above expectations, helped your organization make a strategic leap or volunteered for projects or work that are not part of your job description. Oh, and by the way: NEVER say it’s not my pet peeve among the women attending the forum).

2. Advocate for an advocate.
   From a woman’s viewpoint, it’s best to have an advocate who will represent your interests in a room or a discussion that you’re not privy to. This point was made not only during a panel of CEOs about engaging men as advocates (man-bassadors) to pioneer gender equality but also in a presentation by Jay Newton-Small, author of Harvard Business Review: “How to Convince Your Boss to Let You Work from Home.”

3. It’s not always about “show me the money.”
   The panel also made the point that making more money may not be the most important motivator for a woman. If work/life balance is important to you, be prepared to ask for time off, work-at-home options or flexible hours rather than salary increases. A great reference is this recent article from Emotional Intelligence, or EQ, versus IQ). A little refueling never hurt anyone. That says a lot about how important soft skills are to women leaders. But guess what we’ve discovered in dozens of our own engagements with association volunteers when we’re tasked with improving the education at their annual conferences? Think of a mentor or boss you really admired. What attributes made them special? “Listens well, inspiring or visionary” always wins the day over “intelligent.”

4. I versus we?
   If there are large numbers of people from the same organization at your conference, it is important to help them branch out from those they’ve come with: Attendees will only reap benefits and grow if they leave their comfort zone and interact with new people. Formal networking can be intentionally designed. It can happen serendipitously, but ideally it should be both. Those attending the first afternoon at the forum had fun with an organized networking event — a scorecard where you had to fill in boxes such as “Favorite dessert” and find a mate who had the same answer — but the following day lacked planned networking or table discussions.

5. Refuel, refill.
   Clearly many attendees thought of the forum as more personal development than professional development (Emotional Intelligence, or EQ, versus IQ). A little refueling never hurt anyone. That says a lot about how important soft skills are to women leaders. But guess what we’ve discovered in dozens of our own engagements with association volunteers when we’re tasked with improving the education at their annual conferences? Think of a mentor or boss you really admired. What attributes made them special? “Listens well, inspiring or visionary” always wins the day over “intelligent.”

6. Encourage networking.
   If there are large numbers of people from the same organization at your conference, it is important to help them branch out from those they’ve come with: Attendees will only reap benefits and grow if they leave their comfort zone and interact with new people. Formal networking can be intentionally designed. It can happen serendipitously, but ideally it should be both. Those attending the first afternoon at the forum had fun with an organized networking event — a scorecard where you had to fill in boxes such as “Favorite dessert” and find a mate who had the same answer — but the following day lacked planned networking or table discussions.

7. Build to transform.
   The speakers were entertaining, en pointe with messaging, particularly about personal improvement, and highly professional. I believe women’s conferences should aim to be inspirational and transformative. This also can be achieved through the flow of the sessions: Start strong and end with emotion. According to the organizers of TED Talk conferences (as well as the advice we give our clients), “Save the most gripping speakers for the end. This is when your attendees are most open to being moved. It will leave them with a feeling that will stay with them — maybe even motivate them to action.”

Do you think women should use “I” or “we” in a professional setting when talking about their achievements? Are you an advocate for people you manage, and if so, how? The post “How to Ask for a Raise and Other Top Learnings from IAEE Women’s Leadership Forum” appeared first on Velvet Chainsaw (www.velvetchainsaw.com).

“Women will rise to the top because they are consensus-builders.”

By Betsy Bair

Betsy Bair is Vice President, Strategic Narratives, for Velvet Chainsaw Consulting, which provides strategic consulting for associations and companies that are interested in growing or transforming their major face-to-face events through redesign of premium education, networking or the trade show floor. www.velvetchainsaw.com
The Hotel Commission Dilemma — Plan Now to Avert a Potential Disruption

By the GBTA Meetings Committee

Could an elimination of agency commissions in the hotel industry happen, like the elimination of airline commissions did in 1997? With the mounting pressure toward increased profits by hotel owners and the evolving nature of the hotel industry, further impacted by the mergers and acquisitions in recent years, industry leaders are looking for additional revenue sources in all corners of the hotel P&L. A big potential target is the commissions paid on every room night booked through an agency or meetings management company.

Commissions have historically been a channel-marketing fee that hotels offer to intermediaries when they place volume at their hotel, and were seen by the hotels as compensation for the use of the intermediaries’ sales channel. In recent years, hotels began looking at all cost-reduction opportunities, including commissions.

Three different models exist for how commissions are utilized by intermediaries:

• Intermediaries use commission as a revenue stream.
• Intermediaries use commission as part of their revenue stream, and may use a fee-based model for other services.
• Intermediaries return commissions to the customer or customer takes commission directly from the hotel.

The Impact of Commissions

Three major players are impacted by the payment of commissions:

1. Hoteliers and their owners who pay the commissions.
2. Corporations and associations that may or may not receive the commissions back from their intermediaries and use them to offset the costs of their managed meetings program.
3. Intermediaries that receive payment for the use of their sales channels that may, or may not, return those commissions to their clients.

In a GBTA Meetings Committee survey of medium to large companies across industry verticals, 50 percent of companies responded that they rely on commissions to support some part of their meetings management program.

Potential Impact

Intermediaries that rely on commissions as a sole source of revenue would face a significant impact. Some could end up closing shop as they may not be able to show any other value. Intermediaries that use commissions as part of their revenue could have an easier time shifting to the fee-based model as they already utilize that model for other services and customers are accustomed to it.

For the corporations and associations that receive commissions back and use these commissions to fund some or all of their revenue stream, commissions are extremely important. For intermediaries that offer sourcing only, commissions are their main source of revenue. For others, commissions are part of their revenue while fee-based services might make up the rest.

Likelihood of Elimination

While we have no definitive answer, we note that there are differing opinions on the issue.

As one of the hotel chains shared, “Owners are pushing hotels to maximize profits, reduce costs and evaluate all cost-of-sale points, to a greater degree in recent years. Due to increased financial obligations to banks, increased business costs and competing with other owners are challenging hotels to find savings in all areas more than ever.”

If you are an intermediary or company that is funded in whole or part by commissions, Tony Wagner, vice president Americas, for CWT M&E, has reassuring words for you: “Hotels may evaluate the structure of their sales channel compensation model (e.g. commissions) and incentives — all good businesses do — but no, I do not believe commissions will be eliminated in the M&E space. The difference between hotels and airlines is fragmentation. (Unlike airlines), the hotel industry is massively fragmented. What’s key is that hoteliers understand the risk and bottom-line impact if they eliminated this channel compensation and others did not.”

Mark Harris, on behalf of the UK-based Hotel Business Agents Association (HBBA), in the white paper “Money for Nothing,” says, “The industry consensus is that change will be significant. Owners are pushing hotels to seek savings in all areas more than ever.”

We can never be certain if this change could come, but one thing is certain; if it does, it will be very disruptive to the industry. We recommend that you take the time now to make sure you have a plan. GBTA

In a GBTA Meetings Committee survey...50 percent of companies responded that they rely on commissions to support some part of their meetings management program.”
When Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) convenes its annual convention in Montreal this month, there will be one major difference between it and every convention that has preceded it: The acronym DMAI will no longer be the correct designation for the organization. Starting with the 2017 meeting, the group’s official name will change to Destinations International — DI.

Destinations International Chairman Gary C. Sherwin, who also serves as president and CEO of Visit Newport Beach, California, and DMAI President and CEO Don Welsh, made the announcement in March during the 2017 CEO Summit, which took place in Nashville with more than 180 in attendance. The announcement was met with a standing ovation, which came as something of a surprise to DMAI leadership. Since then, the team has received consistent feedback that this was a great name and direction for the association. It was all part of a thoughtful process.

From October through December 2016, a DMAI team worked on the new organization name research and strategy. “Destination” or “Destinations” was the foundation for all of the name considerations, and there were quite a few in the beginning, according to Melissa Cherry, DMAI’s chief marketing officer. The process included brainstorming sessions with the team, legal searches, name testing with key stakeholders and a competitive review of other associations. Once there was a final recommendation, it was shared with the DMAI Board of Directors for approval in November 2016.

In case you’re wondering, a number of rather famous entities have also gone down the name-change route with great success: Datsun became Nissan, BackRub became Google and Apple Computers shortened its name to just Apple without confusing consumers for a nanosecond.

But changing a name is just one aspect of a rebranding process, whether for a corporation or an association. For DMAI, it’s really about better serving its stakeholders by strengthening, clarifying and refocusing its mission and goals, the work it does, and, ultimately, its future.

“We realize we are a trade organization, not a marketing organization. Our members are the marketers. This is exactly why we felt the need to rebrand the organization,” Welsh says. “Our efforts go far beyond a sharp new logo and a new name. Together with our members and partners, Destinations International represents a powerful, forward-thinking, collaborative association (committed to) exchanging bold ideas, connecting innovative people and excelling tourism to its highest potential.”

As part of this collaborative process, DMAI conducted an extensive brand review over many months, which included stakeholder interviews and a deep analysis of key operational facets of the association. It began in July 2016 with the launch of the first of several planning sessions to review past and current initiatives with the goal of building a new framework for the organization.

**Cover Story**

**The New Destinations International**

President and CEO Don Welsh

Tells How DMAI’s New Name, New Mission and New Value Proposition Will Significantly Empower Destination Organizations to Excel

By Christine Loomis

“Destinations International represents a powerful, forward-thinking, collaborative association (committed to) exchanging bold ideas, connecting innovative people and excelling tourism to its highest potential.”

Don Welsh, President and CEO Destinations International

Washington, DC
in 2017 and beyond. During the review process, the team collectively established a new vision, mission and value proposition, which in turn led to a new brand build positive change. Welsh says that the collaborative process itself, as well as the resulting new brand focus developed during that time, is what will be the broader dimension of our organization.”

**Coming Changes**

The association’s long look inward revealed many things, but none more compelling than the understanding that change would necessarily include a greater focus on member needs. “We are fundamentally changing the way in which we lead,” Welsh says, “and that begins with consistent engagement with our members.”

Welsh provides a deeper context for that international shift, explaining that the organization is to empower our members so that their destinations excel,” he says. “Together with the support of the Destination & Travel Foundation (which also is undergoing a name change and will become the Destinations International Foundation in July), we support more than 60 official member destination organizations and Convention and Visitor Bureaus (CVBs) in more than 15 countries. We do that with resources, research, networking opportunities, professional development and certification programs. Since we announced a strategic organizational realignment nearly one year ago to date, we have been and continue to engage our members and partners throughout the year. “Weissenborn and Johnson will work together to expand the research library, which will include association and foundation research reports, destination-related research, an external resource research library, destination industry resources and more. “We will develop our products and improve those as well as new projects to provide stronger engagement internationally with ECM, Europe, Canada, Australia, Mexico and Colombia to provide the products, services and education that they need. We will continue to deliver forward-focused and relevant data,” Welsh says. “We are thrilled to have Andreas Weissenborn on board as director of research and analytics, working alongside Jack Johnson, our chief advocacy officer. During our listening tour with members and partners, we consistently heard the need for research to assist with the creation of strategic plans, the ability to communicate return on investment, advocacy for funding and other means of support, and to be nimble to what members need now, “Welsh says. “A vibrant and engaged member community is the cornerstone of both the association and the foundation,” Welsh says. “The member-centric focus that DMAI/Destinations International has now instituted across all departments is core to the success of the new brand positioning and to the overall messaging for the association. By delivering on the stated value proposition, stakeholders and in turn will feel engaged, valued and empowered.”

To ensure that continued engagement, Welsh says several goals are in place and will be a focus throughout the organization’s International’s four key “pillars,” which is what we are calling,” he says. “We will continue to deliver forward-focused and relevant data,” Welsh says. “We are thrilled to have Andreas Weissenborn on board as director of research and analytics, working alongside Jack Johnson, our chief advocacy officer. During our listening tour with members and partners, we consistently heard the need for research to assist with the creation of strategic plans, the ability to communicate return on investment, advocacy for funding and other means of support, and to be nimble to what members need now,” Welsh says. “A vibrant and engaged member community is the cornerstone of both the association and the foundation,” Welsh says. “The member-centric focus that DMAI/Destinations International has now instituted across all departments is core to the success of the new brand positioning and to the overall messaging for the association. By delivering on the stated value proposition, stakeholders and in turn will feel engaged, valued and empowered.”

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First-tier cities tend to be hotbeds of hotel development, and this is to be expected given their high demand in the leisure, business travel and meetings segments. But these days it is especially challenging for planners to find lodging space in those cities, and it pays to keep an eye on less-traveled pockets of the country where meeting hotel development is surging.

Northeast

One such destination is National Harbor, Maryland, located along the Potomac River just south of Washington, DC. While the destination has a recreational feel with waterfront concerts, the Capital Ferris wheel and Tanger Outlets, there are two major meetings-ready hotels on-site, one of which is new and the other improved.

Last December, the MGM National Harbor began welcoming guests to its $1.4 billion property, complete with a 3,000-seat theater, three celebrity-chef restaurants among 15 dining options, high-end retail establishments and a spa. The 308-room resort is also serious about meetings, offering the 50,000-sf MGM National Harbor Conference Center. Even more recently, the AAA Four Diamond Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center has enhanced its meeting space with a new 16,000-sf RiverView Ballroom situated in front of the resort on the waterfront. The natural light that this ballroom provides will help with overall creativity, productivity, mood and even reduce stress. Kelly Julian Fleming, corporate event planner, “It will definitely be a ballroom that we will want to utilize for our future programs. The natural light that this ballroom provides will help with overall creativity, productivity, mood and even reduce stress. We are very excited about the additional space and outdoor terraces right on the river with gorgeous views.”

Meeting at the Gaylord National allowed all 2,059 Goodyear customers, exhibitors, associates and staff “the opportunity to network under one roof,” says Fleming. “One location for our general sessions, our trade show floor, education sessions, meal function and sleeping rooms — no running to catch a shuttle to the hotel from the convention center.” Among the numerous onsite dining and recreational venues, Fleming highlights The National Past Time Sports bar, which “is a very popular amenity with our attendees. It provides a great menu selection, a variety of TVs to watch sports, sports memorabilia and a friendly environment to meet at and network with one another.”

Another DC property the 413-room Four Seasons Washington, DC, completed a $23 million renovation in January that encompassed all guest rooms, the lobby and loggia. The executive forum amphitheater was converted into the 2,900-sf Kennedy Ballroom, and the courtyard garden was leveled to allow for larger events. Following is a selection of more regions and cities that are home to new and renovated properties, creating exciting opportunities for corporate groups.

Southwest

Another destination outside of the first tier that is burgeoning with hotel development is Austin, Texas. The 1,012-room JW Marriott Austin opened in 2015, adding 120,000 sf of meeting space to the city’s meetings infrastructure. This major new property is located just two blocks from the Austin Convention Center.

Last December, construction began on the $6 million Red River Canopy Walk that will connect the Austin Convention Center to Fairmont Austin. Opening in September, the Fairmont is yet another major addition to Austin’s hotel inventory, offering 1,048 guest rooms and nearly 140,000 sf of total meeting space. Amenities will include a heated swimming pool on the seventh floor rooftop terrace, full-service salon and spa, and state-of-the-art fitness center.

Groups also can take advantage of an upgraded Hilton Austin. The hotel will offer 16,000 sf of meeting space.

South/Central

Nashville is another second-tier city that has welcomed major new hotels. The 453-room Westin Nashville opened last fall with 20,000 sf of meeting space. Highlights include a rooftop pool bar and lounge, L27; and a re-

New and Renewed Properties to Stay Competitive. Here's a Sampling From Across the Country

Brands Continually Roll Out

Hotels & Resorts

Hotels Never Sleep...
fans of Music City can look forward to an even larger property, the 533-room JW Marriott Nashville, scheduled to open next summer. Housing 50,000 sf of flexible meeting space, the property will boast Bourbon Steak, a Michael Mina Restaurant as well as a rooftop bar on the 33rd floor. Groups will have up to 32 breakout rooms at their disposal.

Next spring will see the debut of the 612-room Omni Louisville Hotel. The property will bring 70,000 sf of LEED Silver-certified meeting space to a prime location, just one block from the Kentucky International Convention Center. And in 2020, an 800-room Loews convention hotel is expected to open in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. The new hotel, Loews Kansas City Convention Center Hotel, will be located across from the Kansas City Convention Center Grand Ballroom and offer about 60,000 sf of meeting space.

Northwest/West

The American Northwest is known for its majestic vistas, and a Seattle hotel opening this month will deliver inspiring views of Lake Washington from 23,000 sf of outdoor terraces. Offering a total of 60,000 sf of indoor/outdoor function space, the 347-room Hyatt Regency Lake Washington at Seattle’s Southport is 11 miles from downtown Seattle and nine miles from the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. It’s an ideal location for Bellevue, Washington-based PACCAR’s RPM Expo, which convenes dealers and suppliers for product learning. The event has been booked at the Hyatt for next January and will bring in about 160 dealers in two separate waves.

“I was at a Hyatt focus group a couple years ago, and they mentioned they were putting in this new product on Lake Washington, and I was ecstatic because it was literally half a mile from my office,” says Catherine Schrock, CMP, marketing events manager for PACCAR. Schrock, who has met the GM, adds that she has confidence that the new hotel will be up to par in its operations.

“A rejuvenated property in the Emerald City is Motif Seattle, a Destination Hotel, which recently unveiled a $10 million redesign of its 319 guest rooms. Rooms now include art walls that serve as bold representations of the Seattle cultural scene and artwork by local artists. Groups have the 6,000-sf Seattle Hyatt Regency Lake Washington at Seattle’s Southport, 11 miles from downtown Seattle, opens this month.
Ballroom and the 8,915-sf Emerald Ballroom at their disposal.

DaVita, a Seattle-based kidney care company, held its annual meeting at Motif Seattle last September, bringing in about 175 finance and accounting managers. “We have used Suncadia in the past, which is part of Destination Hotels, and to avoid monotony, we looked into other options in the Seattle area for our 2016 retreat,” explains DaVita’s C-Level Executive Assistant Nikki Brummond. “We were delighted to find that Motif was part of Destination Hotels and allowed them to bid. ... While Motif was not the cheapest, it was the relationship we had with Destination Hotels that made the decision easy for us. It was something new, fresh (down-town Seattle vs. rural Suncadia), and we knew the Destination Hotels standard.” Attendees can look forward to enjoying the redesigned guest rooms, as “We will definitely keep Motif in the rotation,” says Brummond.

Farther south on the West Coast, the Oregon Convention Center is preparing for a headquarters hotel in 2019, the Hyatt Regency Portland. The 600-room hotel is expected to achieve LEED certification, not to mention a 30 percent increase in convention business for Portland. The hotel will have its own 32,000 sf of ballroom and meeting space.

“The boutique end of the spectrum, The Pendry San Diego is a new West Coast property that is also in a prime location: just four miles from San Diego International Airport and three blocks from the San Diego Convention Center. For a boutique property, it’s well stocked in function space (35,000 sf) and has a great diversity of F&B outlets (six restaurants and bars),” says Annie Rector, CMP, and Kristin Hems, CMP, who did several site inspections of the property last summer and fall, cite several features that make the property a standout. “It’s one of the few hotels in the Gaslamp area that is vehicle-accessible in their ballroom spaces,” says Hems. Another feature is “all of the different restaurants and bars it has on property. We can stream whatever you’re watching on your phone to the TV. Those kinds of little touches really made a big difference in their stay.” The hotel’s rooftop pool, which accommodated nearly 200 attendees on the deck for a special event, was another highlight.

In spring 2017, The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Las Vegas recently completed a major renovation that encompassed meeting spaces and Casino Tower guest rooms. The former Buena Vista Palace Resort & Spa was recently reflagged as the Hilton Orlando Buena Vista Palace, connected to the new Disney Springs area by pedestrian skybridge. The 1,011-room hotel completed a major makeover featuring newly designed guest rooms, a new outside terrace and refreshed meeting spaces totaling 92,000 sf. The renovation also includes the Float Lagoon lazy river; new pools and cabanas; and Shades, a new pool-side restaurant. As the hotel is an official Walt Disney World Hotel, groups are offered entertainment and event production services through the Disney Event Group as well as the Disney Institute’s educational programs.

Another property, Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista also is connected by pedestrian skybridge to the Disney Springs dining, shopping entertainment district, recently completed a major hotel development news to share from top to bottom, as it were. Up north, the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront completed a renovation of its 951 guest rooms, corridors, the rooftop fitness center and Regency Club lounge in April. The guest rooms now evoke the St. Johns River with their color palette, and outdoor terraces allow planners to use the actual river as an event backdrop. The project also added six hardwalled meeting rooms, located on the fourth level of the hotel’s Terrace Building. Overall, the Hyatt offers more than 116,000 sf of flexible meeting and exhibit space.

Annie Rector, CMP (left) and Kristin Hems, CMP, of Third Avenue Events recently brought a major automotive group to the 317-room property for a media-facing product launch. Third Avenue Events owners Annie Rector, CMP, and Kristin Hems, CMP, who did several site inspections of the property last summer and fall, cite several features that make the property a standout. “It’s one of the few hotels in the Gaslamp area that is vehicle-accessible in their ballroom spaces,” says Hems. Another feature is “all of the different restaurants and bars it has on property. We were there for two weeks solid; I don’t think I ate at every outlet they had.” In addition, attendees gave “a lot of good feedback with regard to the technology they had in the guest rooms. They have a port on the nightstand where you can plug in all of your chargers. You can stream whatever you’re watching on your phone to the TV. Those kinds of little touches really made a big difference in their stay.” The hotel’s rooftop pool, which accommodated nearly 200 attendees on the deck for a special event, was another highlight.

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The hotel offers more than 78,000 sf of meeting space, a 41,000-sf ballroom, 30,000-sf hall and 16,000-sf outdoor event area and an additional 16 meeting rooms and three meeting planner offices. The new meeting space at Loews Sapphire Falls Resort's prefunction spaces, filled with natural light, contain many open seating areas, perfect for workshops. New ideas or networking between sessions. An air-conditioned bridge connects Loews Sapphire Falls meeting space to Loews Royal Pacific Resort, creating The Loews Meeting Complex at Universal Orlando, offering a combined total of 247,000 sf of meeting space and 2,000 guest rooms.

Down in Miami, the future is looking even more promising for the meetings industry with the MDM Group's $25 million renovation of The Westin Peachtree Plaza completed in 2014. Every interior element of the hotel, including the lobby, meeting space, a 1,073 guest rooms and suites, the hotel's grand lobby and many of its retail, restaurant and lounge spaces now feature a more contemporary Spanish revival-style design. In addition, the hotel's 18-hole championship Shingle Creek Golf Course has been redesigned and complemented by a new open-air bridge that connects the property to Loews Royal Pacific Resort, creating The Loews Meeting Complex at Universal Orlando, offering a combined total of 85,000 sf of meeting space, and the entire 85,000 sf of meeting space, and the revolving Sun Dial Restaurant, Bar and View, were revamped. One of the guiding ideas for the redesign was Westin’s emphasis on wellness.

"Westin has six pillars of wellness: Eat Well, Sleep Well, Work Well, Play Well, Move Well, Feel Well. So everything if possible had to support those pillars," explains Ron Tarson, the property's general manager. "For example, the pre-renovation property had a black terrazzo floor (in the lobby) with kind of bench seating. When we renovated, we understood that in order to work and play well in the lobby, what we would have preferred is a bunch of conversational areas. So the look completely changed; we carpeted a piece of it and added beautiful conversation areas, many of them with televisions and hookups to be able to have impromptu meetings there. So the whole look of the lobby changed because our emphasis changed to be more targeted toward the Westin customer."

The project has led to new group business for the Westin Peachtree Plaza, Tarson reports, but it was also important to "communicate with our best customers while we were undergoing the renovation. One of the things they told us is make sure when you're inviting us back, you're inviting us back at the right time. And what they meant was, don't bring us in early if your meetings space isn't ready for having a group. Make sure that the first experience we have back with you is a good one. We listened very carefully to that and as a result, we didn't invite our group customers back until a good year after we invited our transients back. That took a bit of discipline, but it was absolutely the right thing to do."
Experiential Event Design
Creating a Higher Level of Engagement Through Personalization, Interactivity, Technology and Even the Unexpected

By Maura Keller

In this ever more distracted and distractable world, meeting and event planners find themselves on a continual quest for new and innovative ways to capture attendees’ attention and hold it long enough to drive home the meeting’s message. The most successful of these planners become disciples of experiential event design.

For Erin Fontana, CMP, meeting and event manager at Special D Events, the design of an event is critical to driving attendee engagement and experience. “The discipline and meeting architecture allow planners to build an event based on the desired outcomes, whether that is improved learning, attendance or working, attendee engagement or..., across the board,” Fontana says.

In today’s digitally focused world where everyone is tethered to their smartphones, executing events in which attendees truly engage can be challenging.

As Vicky Fairhurst, executive producer at Bishop-McCann, explains, there are many barriers to attendee engagement. We are all,” Fairhurst says. “Our attention spans are shortening, and many of us feel the pressure to multitask at every moment of the day, leaving little headspace for engaging in a single task.”

“At times, the days of sitting in a conference room with a number of speakers taking turns to use the lectern, today’s participants expect events to reflect their day-to-day lives and the challenges we face,” Fairhurst says.

“You design experiences. Let’s do this!”

“Despite the number of digital and virtual ways to connect, humans will always need face-to-face interaction to develop emotional connections.”

Vicky Fairhurst, Executive Producer
Bishop-McCann, Golden Valley, MN
come with a highly connected lifestyle. Smart event planners mix up the event format with different communication techniques to appeal to all types of learners. Workshops, panel discussions, video content, expos, gamification and interactive keynotes all strive to shake attendees out of their sometimes passive mindset and create a more active and collaborative level of participation, which results in increased learning.

Personalization
Event Personas and Event Design

Maritz Travel divisions, encourages the development of “personas” for each event they design. Karen Watson, senior director of strategic events at Experient, explains that personas are not segments and not based on demographics, but instead help identify groups of people who share the same or similar attitudes, behaviors and motivations. At a recent conference, Watson describes how she engaged attendees by creating an event that was “outside the box” and offered attendees something new.

Engagement Through Speakers

“Different event elements can appeal — and thus engage — different people throughout the event,” Watson says. One of her pet peeves includes speakers who strictly speak at attendees and don’t try to incorporate opportunities for audience participation. This can include asking attendees to discuss a point they just made with the person next to them or building in real-time polling and Q&A.

Build in Flexibility

To further positive engagement outcomes, Maritz Global Events builds schedules that allow people to be more flexible in how they spend their time. Watson says, “It’s harder and harder to keep people’s attention, so you have to work at incorporating different things into presentations. This can even apply to entertainment at evening events. People want to participate, which you can build into more interactive food and beverage stations or food events that are educational.”

Engaging the Senses

Robert Fowler, managing partner and senior vice president of Catalyst Creativ, an experience studio in event marketing, has had the opportunity of working with The Nature Conservancy on their last three annual trustee summits in Washington, DC. The meeting is a multiday event that takes place in a windowless ballroom. Catalyst Creativ uses air-purification systems, live plant material and trees to make the space feel more alive. “Touching on all the senses with every event is so important,” Fowler says. “Some days we even add nature sounds during walk-ins and transitions to make attendees feel like they are outside.”

In the past we never would have had ‘competing’ elements, but now we acknowledge that some people are going to be distracted by a business emergency and be called out of a session. We design seating areas in the public space to allow for these side conversations, but in addition to this, we design elements of the event where everything doesn’t follow the exact schedule,” Watson says. “Some sessions may run 60 minutes, some may run 90 minutes, and some elements are available throughout the conference. This allows people to engage as they choose and personalize their experience.”

Engagement Strategies

Vicky Fairhurst, executive producer at Bishop-McCann, offers this advice to foster attendee engagement:

- Ensure there are clear periods of time for people to connect with their daily work life. If attendees know there are regular breaks to check emails and voicemails, this will make them more comfortable being fully present in their current environment.
- Curate a variety of experiences to appeal to different types of audience members and learning styles.
- Take people out of their comfort zone, as research has shown that having new experiences produces new neural pathways that enhance memory. Keep the venue a surprise, challenge them to try new things, make the environment more physical.
- Put attendees in charge of the content — appeal to them to propose topics, discuss points and keynote speakers to make them feel fully valued and heard. — MK

“The journey map is a shortcut to helping guests identify those elements of the program that might best appeal to them, but it certainly doesn’t limit them for trying out everything.”

Karen Watson, Senior Director of Strategic Events

Experient, Austin, TX

“‘Question Ranking.’ This involves asking participants to rank questions they would like to ask speakers who strictly speak at attendees and don’t try to incorporate opportunities for audience participation. This can include asking attendees to discuss a point they just made with the person next to them or building in real-time polling and Q&A. One programming element that

“The proliferation of media has resulted in highly fragmented brand communication,” Fairhurst says. “Despite the number of digital and virtual ways to connect, humans will always need face-to-face interaction to develop emotional connections.” This is evidenced by the increased proportion of marketing budgets being assigned to relationship, experiential marketing and event design.

Event Personas and Personalization

And different people find different things engaging, which also adds to the challenge. Maritz Global Events, which includes the Experient and

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New Configurations and Formats

Conferences today are packed with so many sessions and events, it is difficult to compete for and win an attendee’s full focus and attention even in the sessions they decide to attend. Fowler has found that keeping events as small as possible is best and using discussion circles where attendees can all see each other instead of sitting behind a table. Of course, the constant need to stay connected via cellphones, tablets and laptops makes it more difficult to hold attendees’ attention. Fowler says. “When attendees do not have a table to ‘hide’ behind, there is more engagement,” Fowler says. “And please, no panels. We have found that panels are the least engaging way to present information. Use formats like fireside chats where someone from your organization interviews a guest, or have speakers give TED-style talks that last less than 15 minutes and get straight to the point of the content.”

Fontana suggests setting the meeting room in crescent rounds instead of classroom style. This fosters a networking environment by being able to see and speak with several people at once rather than one or two people in a standard classroom setup.

Surprise and Delight Moments

Offering “surprise and delight” moments throughout an event also encourages attendees to explore what else might be in store for them. These moments can range from something simple like offering an unexpected catering item to a surprise appearance by a top music artist.

Fontana says incorporating CSR activities into a meeting also can be very beneficial. Activities such as a “build-a-bike” challenge can double as very beneficial. Activities such as a top music artist. Speakers give TED-style talks that last as 15 minutes and get straight to the point of the content. “When a motivational speaker is involved, it may involve having screens that stream the speaker, so no matter where an attendee is in the room, they can see the presentation,” Churchill says. “Planners should always go into each event visualizing its setup, as an attendee. Are interactive signs needed? Hostesses to direct guests? Or even a fun, playful map when they arrive? Planners need to always think of in that community during their time there.”

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Anne Churchill, CMP, owner, AnnaBelle Events and Jubilee Planning Studio, says visuals are vital for engagement and experiential event design — this could be entertainment, a live band, food that’s interactive or a photo booth.

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“How can we engage attendees more directly in the event? How can one become the subject of conversation? As we move into the future of meetings, I see it becoming more and more interactive. There will be less speaker-to-audience delivery and more open think tanks, in which the conversations. This interactive approach will invite attendees to take a more active role.”

“The experiential design embedded in social media facilitates both of these goals. Oscar Godwin Osei, meeting planner at EventMates, says social media tools, from a simple event hashtag to a Snapchat geofilter, enable attendees to easily connect with other attendees and receive easy-to-share information.

“While planning an event, schedule key content elements to be shared throughout the event,” Osei says. “Infographics, quotes, videos, slides, info bits — information keeps guests engaged and coming back for more. Offer behind-the-scenes footage and recap of the day, to drive attendee engagement well after the event is complete.”

Osei also adds elements of fun: “Selfie stations continue to draw high participation rates. Include a hashtag sign holder, and you have the built-in ‘share.’ Show the pictures during the breaks and have attendees vote for the best selfie.”

According to Justin Markle, who functions as director of sales and marketing at the Duke Energy Convention Center for venue management company EventMates, Spectator, event apps allow for direct networking with those attending the same meeting.

“Most events can create an event-specific hashtag,” Markle says. “Promoting this prior to the event allows for additional networking before attendees arrive. This hashtag can be monitored by attendees, and they can see who else is talking about it, giving them an opportunity to connect beforehand.”

Connecting Before, During and After

From social media to face-to-face activities, most elements during an event enhance engagement. But planners to engage attendees before and after the event as well. Watson says, “As part of the gamification process, the follow-up is important. Is it a postcard after the event? Video slideshow of photos from the event? Or perhaps it involves sharing content on the app or a post-event website, both of which provide the opportunity for guests to continue to engage with the event. What’s the ROI? Effective experiential event design ties into impressions and event ROI.

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Partners in Progress

Strengthening Industry Relationships That Are Crucial to Successful Meetings and Events

By Maura Keller

Business partnerships come in all shapes and sizes. Whether you are a corporate meeting planner, marketing agency, CVB, live event agency, DMC, rental company, entertainment agency, technology provider or social media curator, it has become even more important to create cohesive working relationships to provide the end client or attendee with the best possible meeting or event experience.

For Maureen Sojka, event planner at Creative Marketing Alliance, a full-service marketing agency located in Princeton, New Jersey, establishing these professional relationships provides her with a wealth of knowledge and experience.

“For example, when sourcing a location you have never been to, your best option is to reach out to the CVB for the most up-to-date information,” Sojka says. If you come across a new contract clause, you can reach out to your colleagues in the industry and see if they are experiencing the same thing and how they addressed it.”

Colleagues also are a valuable resource when selecting new vendors. However, the vendors themselves also can be helpful.

“I recently contracted with a transportation company who provided a referral for a Trivia Contest emcee who turned out to be the hit of our evening event,” Sojka says.

Building professional relationships is important in most industries, but even more so in the meetings and events industry, which is relationship-based.

Trust Is Crucial

As Lynnette Offen Gerber, CMM, CMP, manager of global accounts at Helms-Briscoe explains, meeting a hotel supplier, for example, could help a meeting planner decide between whether they want to do business with Hotel A versus Hotel B.

“It actually can be crucial,” Gerber says. “People want to do business with people they know and trust.”

Relationships have been crucial in Gerber’s own career: In her previous two positions, she had already known people at the organizations, which not only gained her entrée, but helped her ultimately get hired.

“Additionally, if a crisis comes up in a meeting or convention, working with those you have partnerships with will better help you solve the problem,” she says. “With the relationship already established, you are more likely to share information, and you are inclined to work together. You both are motivated as well!”

Patrick Burkhardt, chief idea person at Luxpitality, a San Diego-based hospitality company that connects new-age businesses with unique hotels for corporate events or team bonding experiences, says that his company continually partners with other entities in the meetings and events field to create mutually beneficial outcomes. Luxpitality partners with some of the top hotels and businesses in the U.S. and Europe, and prides itself on harnessing local partnerships to provide clients completely customized group trip experiences. Burkhardt has more than a decade of experience in the hospitality industry and served as president of Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE) Southern California, the largest chapter in the world.

“We work with hotels, and that’s what we excel in. However we aren’t as savvy when it comes to executing ground-service activities and offsite venues for our groups,” Burkhardt says. “So we partnered with an amazing company called Hosts Global Alliance. They share the same global footprint as us but excel in all these services. We help them with hotels, and they help us with destination management services.”

“We partnered with an amazing company called Hosts Global Alliance. …We help them with hotels, and they help us with destination management services.”

Maureen Sojka
Events Manager, Creative Marketing Alliance, Princeton Junction, NJ

Patrick Burkhardt
Chief Idea Person, Luxpitality, San Diego, CA
‘Coopetition’ and a Changing Industry

Corporate meeting planners and other entities within the meeting-planning sphere share the same goal: to provide memorable meetings and events that provide an impactful outcome for attendees and companies alike.

Take Kathy Miller, for example. Miller is CEO of Total Event Resources, a Chicago meeting and event planning company that produces innovative events for Fortune 1000 companies, major trade associations and not-for-profit organizations. She says that the meetings and events industry has changed drastically, especially when it comes to business relationships.

“Are there days when we are partnering with a caterer and other days when we are competing for the same business?” Miller says. “It’s no longer black and white, it’s very gray, which is why one day they are your partner and the next they are your competitor.”

Shackman Associates in New York City agrees. “Relationships are also important in New York City when traffic can completely alter the timing of an after-hours event or product launch,” Shackman says. “We have worked with the NYPD to speed transportation and meeting logistics when un-related problems could throw off timing. Relationships also help for meetings on a budget.”

For Miller, business relationships enhance her company’s learning curve, as their partners bring new and innovative ideas to Total Event Resources on a continual basis, giving Miller and her team the platform to be uber-creative in the proposal process.

“In Chicago, and I believe in other major cities where meetings and events are plentiful, we are finding that venues are popping up all over and being bought and managed by a variety of supplier partners including scenic design firms, caterers, event agencies and DMCs,” Miller says. “This makes the venue search and management process interesting for the live event agencies like us. Again, one day we are partnering with a scenic design firm to provide all the design elements and the next time we are competing with them.”

Helping Reduce Costs

For Karen Shackman, president of Shackman Associates in New York, relationships, quite frankly, are “everything.” This is especially important when a meeting group wants to book something on short notice.

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Tying it all together on a continual basis, giving Miller and her team successfully is dependent upon continuing communication with key hotel and venue staff.

“Understanding who else might be meetings at a hotel helps us discover potential opportunities for sharing food and beverage,” Shackman says. “When we piggybacked a luncheon at a five-star hotel, we noticed that our group of 750 attendees was similar in size and demographics to another one, so our relationships with the hotel event management team led the same menu to be prepared for 1,500 people, which obviously saved costs with a larger order.”

Establishing Strategic Relationships

Today, much of the meeting and events business is built upon reputation and word of mouth. David Jacobson, who has more than 15 years of professional events experience, is the CEO of TrivWorks, a corporate entertainment and teambuilding company. He understands that to be successful, meeting and event professionals cannot operate within a vacuum. Collaborating with other industry professionals not only extends the planner’s reach, but also provides access to talent, venues and offerings they otherwise wouldn’t be able to deliver.

“Be bold and approach those whom you genuinely feel there is the potential for a mutually beneficial collaboration,” Jacobson says. “The best types of strategic partnerships are those where both sides stand to gain tremendous value over the long-term; when seeking out potential partnerships, where both you and your potential partners’ interests are well-aligned, and a mutual benefit is clearly outlined upfront,” Jacobson says.

Richard Heby, marketing manager at LiquidSpace, a network for on-demand workspace, including event spaces, says corporate meeting planners should know what they expect to offer and what they can expect to receive from the partnership, but they shouldn’t be afraid to reach out if they don’t have a complete multiyear plan. “It’s so easy to connect these days — so go and connect,” Heby says.

Strategic partnerships have been the key to LiquidSpace’s success, because the company works to connect venues with startups and other enterprises looking for space. “We partner with coworking spaces, business centers, hotels, private companies and direct landlords,” Heby explains. “Our network benefits everyone involved by injecting speed, technology and simplicity into the space discovery and rental process. That includes space for meetings, training sessions, event rental, flexible office space and more. And great partnerships often will pay dividends in exclusivity and referrals.”

Networking

When establishing professional relationships, the best types of strategic partnerships are those where both sides stand to gain tremendous value over the long-term; when seeking out potential partnerships, where both you and your potential partners’ interests are well-aligned, and a mutual benefit is clearly outlined upfront,” Jacobson says.

“Be bold. ...The best types of strategic partnerships are those where both sides stand to gain tremendous value over the long-term.”

David Jacobson
Founder and CEO, TrivWorks, New York, NY

Information Sharing

The most useful information that meeting and event planners, vendors and CVBs can share with others in the industry is that which provides early insights into what’s trending, which types of venues attendees respond best to and other related details that inform the very front end of the meeting and event planning process. This includes trends, forecasts, quality assurance results, ROI and other actionable information. This level of detail supports the staging of events, scheduling resources and production, and managing the overall quality of future events.

That said, one of the biggest obstacles to effective collaboration is that people may think sharing information about their events, attendees and general meeting plans with suppliers or other planners means they are giving away a competitive advantage.

But by sharing the information, planners can evaluate such things as meeting or event effectiveness, ROI and attendee retention for future events. One thing is for certain: The ability for industry professionals to use real-time analytics to collaborate and engage with one another is exciting. The good news is that the opportunity has never been greater and the capabilities more robust for driving this type of collaboration.

In fact, looking at data-sharing through the lens of mutually beneficial objectives creates the opportunity to transform the discussion from one of competition to one of collaboration. Understanding the needs, interests and preferences of meeting and event attendees ensures that meeting and event professionals, vendors, CVBs and all stakeholders deliver a great experience for future events.

— MK

Kathy Miller
CEO, Total Event Resources, Schaumburg, IL

There are days when we are partnering with a caterer and other days when we are competing for the same business.”

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If our partnership with a vendor is unique, it gives a selling edge over our competition."

James Bennett
President, Firefly Team Events, Los Angeles, CA.

Leveraging LinkedIn

And it’s important to remember that sometimes long-term partnerships begin with simple gestures, such as connecting via professional websites including LinkedIn, which can be a very powerful tool for connecting with industry players and generating business leads. Having a LinkedIn page facilitates engagement with followers, sharing potential meeting and event opportunities, and being available as a trusted resource.

LinkedIn also allows planners to connect with potential industry partners by sharing industry-related blog content, participating in Q&A sessions or even displaying a call to action in your summary. As an added feature, LinkedIn provides analytics, which enable users to measure just how effective their updates are.

Providing industry-related blog content on LinkedIn also is an excellent strategy for gaining exposure from new audiences, while catering to an existing network and industry partners. But the goal is to provide shareable content — something followers would be genuinely interested in seeing, and would consider sharing to their own followers. The result is exposure that increases exponentially, particularly when content goes viral.

Participating in Q&A sessions related to the industry is a powerful way to build stronger connections and demonstrate industry expertise. The key is to add value to the conversation. The end goal is to establish partnerships with others within the meeting and events industry.

Getting an Edge on the Competition

“If our partnership with a vendor is unique, it gives a selling edge over our competition. Referrals are an obvious bonus of partnerships,” says James Bennett, president of Firefly Team Events in Los Angeles. “A less obvious benefit is that each of your partners may be a privately owned business. As a small business, we have growing pains and struggles. I can reach out to some of my partners and have a heart-to-heart with an owner who’s probably gone through similar situations. It’s extremely valuable to have a network of peers that know your journey.”

Recently one of Firefly Team Events’ planner partners added all of the company’s products to their website. For Bennett and his team, that is like having an additional sales team promoting their clients.

“It allows us a wider reach and gives our partner a larger service offering,” Bennett says. “It’s a beautiful win/win for both of us.”

Bennett has found that industry events are great for a first introduction, but it is vital that meeting planners follow up after those connections are initially made.

“Many of our partnerships with fellow suppliers are forged in the heat of battle while working for the same clients,” Bennett says. “With our hotel partners, we reach out to them quarterly and try to schedule face-to-face time with their teams as well as FAMs.”

Sojka advises other corporate meeting planners to avoid the common mistake of not moving outside of their circle. “The more inclusive, the wider the range of contacts, the broader the base of knowledge,” Sojka says.

And reputation is everything. “Nothing is worth losing your reputation over. Be honest, hardworking and true to your core values,” Bennett says. “For us, we’re trying to keep our clients happy, healthy and engaged.”

"If our partnership with a vendor is unique, it gives a selling edge over our competition."
If there is a reliable formula for the creation of a major meeting or incentive program that succeeds in spectacular fashion, it often includes an effective collaboration between the meeting planner and a destination management company. And, without a doubt, there is a simple, clear equation for a productive and mutually satisfying planner-DMC relationship. It includes what might be dubbed the three C’s: creativity, collaboration and communication.

To illustrate three diverse examples of DMC success stories, Corporate & Incentive Travel spoke with a trio of planners and their DMC partners in order to identify the traits that make such collaborations work.

**Float My Boat (Before It Sinks)**

ITA Group, an independent meeting planning company based in West Des Moines, Iowa, faced one of the industry’s worst possible nightmares after learning, in the midst of planning an April 2016 incentive program that would take 150 qualifiers plus spouses and guests to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, that its local destination management company had suddenly gone out of business—vanished, with many questions lingering in the air.

Enter Cabo San Lucas-based DMC Terramar. David Abers, CMP, ITA’s lead program manager, met Terramar’s Senior Account Manager Cheryl Miller on an emergency site inspection trip. And the duo set about transforming a potential disaster into a rousing success.

Abers and Miller faced several daunting challenges. The JW Marriott Los Cabos Beach Resort & Spa was under construction and would open just six weeks before the high-end group arrived.

In addition, the program’s signature element, a closing-night event that would feature a custom-built galleon on the beach as its spectacular venue, was in jeopardy. Saving it would be complicated and expensive. “We had been planning to build an enormous ‘ship’ on the beach, and the hotel had said they were going to bulldoze the beach to make it level and just perfect for our event,” Abers says. “But then we ran into unexpected zoning problems during the construction of the ship. And at that point, things started to unravel because the former DMC had been going out of business, and we had no idea what had been going on. So we had to go down there and figure out what we needed to do to continue on with the scheduled program. And we had very good meetings with Terramar and Cheryl. Fortunately, she was able to pick up the existing program proposal. But she also made it much better than it originally was, which improved the overall execution of the program.”

Miller’s first action, taken under duress, was to assess the overall program and make sure it could be delivered, as planned and on budget, she says. “We also wanted to make sure that activities were being done the way we would have proposed them, and that the budget was accurate, and so on,” she says. “In other words, we wanted to make sure the program was viable, as proposed.”

A major element of accomplishing that was for Abers and Miller to work together to make the original client-approved budget work in the face of unexpectedly rising costs for the closing-night event. One important key to their ultimate success was that Abers and his ITA team were able to re-crunch their numbers and find savings that could be shifted elsewhere to sustain the event’s bottom line.

Meanwhile, with the custom-built “ship” venue for their closing night suddenly thrown into doubt, Miller stepped in and found a solution to the problem. “She and the owners of Terramar really came to the rescue,” Abers says. They knew the people who owned the property adjacent to the JW Marriott, and they were able to lease that property for us so we could build the ship and execute our big event as envisioned.” However, the acquisition of permits to stage the event presented another obstacle that had to be overcome. And then better sand had to be brought in to make the beach setting more aesthetically pleasing.

The end result: The program came off in spectacular fashion. “The event turned out to be phenomenal,” Abers says. “And at the end of the night, we did a sensational fireworks display over the ship. The client and all of the attendees were thrilled. And no
High Energy, High Impact

When it comes to its annual user conference held each March, Pleasanton, California-based software supplier Ellie Mae has a simple goal. It wants to be able to claim the most sensational event in its industry. In order to achieve that lofty goal, for the last two years the event has been held at the tony Wynn Las Vegas hotel. And Susan Chenoweth, Ellie Mae’s senior vice president of marketing, has worked with Activity Planners, one of the city’s most acclaimed DMCs, and its president, Stephanie Arone, DMCP.

“We rely on Stephanie and her team for many elements of the event,” Chenoweth says. “But one key is that each fall, we come up with a major marketing campaign and theme for the company for the following year. And then that theme is promoted at our conference and carried out throughout the year. And it’s always used in a big way at our conference.”

The theme for this year’s event was “License to Succeed.” And Chenoweth says, what that meant for Ellie Mae’s customers was to “get all of the tools and techniques they need to be successful with our software, successful in their business and successful as individuals.”

Chenoweth relied on Activity Planners to bring the theme to life for the conference. “And that meant carrying it out through a number of elements of the conference,” Chenoweth says, “but most importantly on the main stage for our opening general session.”

The planning for this event starts the year before, and once theotional incentive programs, for other clients, Terramar has offices in Cancun, Mexico and Panama. The keys to the relationship are open, honest communication and mutual trust,” Abers says. “And with regard to the importance of those things, this was a learning experience for me.”

Continued from page 45

one but Cheryl and me knew how much work had gone into pulling it off.”

The most important key to success, Miller says, was an honest and trusting relationship forged under pressure between strangers. “My stress level in taking important issue became delivering an authentic experience, something their attendees would typically not be able to do on their own, and something that was a party,” says 212ºF Account Director Tanya Henneman, who led the planning effort. “It was incredibly exciting,” Arone says. Adds Chenoweth: “Can you imagine what we had to go through to make that happen? But it was well worth all the effort. It was really amazing. People were really shocked.” And that was exactly the reaction to this year’s conference. “Our goal is to really wake people up and get them going,” Chenoweth says. “We want high energy, high impact, right from the start.”

In a budget-conscious era, not many corporate clients aspire to, or are willing to, pay the cost of such creative and sensational meeting attributes, Arone notes. “The level of commitment that Ellie Mae makes to really deliver a spectacular attendee experience is at the high end of the scale,” she says. “It’s very important to them as an organization. But not many companies these days think that way or are willing to make the investment that is required to do something that unique and spectacular.”

The result? This year’s conference drew 3,000 attendees, up from 2,200 in 2016. “And one of the reasons our conference has grown so dramatically over the last several years is that our attendees have such a great experience,” Chenoweth says. “If they’re going to take the time and spend the money to attend, we want to make sure the event is very special to them and that they are as excited and engaged as they can possibly be. So we work very hard to deliver an awesome experience. And really great partners like Activity Planners play a major role in that.”
“The Orpheuscapade was at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, and it was a very sophisticated black-tie ball,” says Hosts New Orleans Director of Operations Carol Padgett. “Our attendees were hosted by the captain of the krewe. That’s an experience that very few people from outside New Orleans ever get to have. Our group got a police escort from the parade to the party. It’s something you remember forever.”

On their last day in the city, attendees experienced a speakeasy-themed gala event — An Evening of Fringe, Feathers and Fedoras — at the Napoleon House, one of the most iconic destinations in the city. The gala featured handsome gangsters and beautiful flappers who greeted guests with feather boas and fedoras on arrival, an absinthe tasting station, a six-course menu with premium beverages and wines, and a late night burlesque performance.

“Despite such a challenge, based on an up-close and personal performance, we’ll deliver the rave reviews from our newly renovated Casino Tower guest rooms to innovative dining choices, shuttle service and one-of-a-kind atmosphere. Our audience is the star of the show in this magnificent space, surrounded by over 110,000 square feet of dynamic work and meeting spaces, including our innovative dining choices, shuttle service and one-of-a-kind atmosphere.”

Whether it’s standing room only or an up-close and personal performance, we’ll deliver the rave reviews from our newly renovated Casino Tower guest rooms to innovative dining choices, shuttle service and one-of-a-kind atmosphere.
Atlantis Paradise Island recently introduced the new Junkanoo Bahamian Fest & Feast teambuilding program.

The arc of islands that curve from the Bahamas in the Atlantic Ocean down through the Caribbean Sea to South America offers planners superb beaches, rich culture, history, plenty of activities and resorts able to meet diverse needs.

In February, he booked two liquor-industry sales incentive destinations. Jay Smith, president of Sports Travel and Tours, likes Aruba. Located below the hurricane belt, Aruba has nearly year-round idyllic weather.

“Aruba offers great people, wonderful weather and a place you probably won’t go to just once.”

Jay Smith, President
Sports Travel and Tours
Hatfield, MA

In addition to functions on site, the group played golf at Tierra del Sol and had a dinner or two at local restaurants. While Aruba temperatures average 82 degrees year-round, winter weather in U.S. cities can cause flight problems. “Possible alternatives are something to have in place before the moment of impact,” Smith cautions. Fortunately, when delays occurred this winter, the hotel helped, adding nights to the end of the trip for attendees who missed the start.

Winter is Aruba’s prime season. “You need to be patient with hotel staff to achieve the end results of your programs,” Smith says. “They get very busy; you need to stay on top of details that you as the meeting planner must make sure are covered.”

Smith suggests a minimum of four nights for a program so attendees really enjoy the experience. Beyond that, “Aruba offers great people, wonderful weather and a place you probably won’t go to just once.”

Aruba
Located below the hurricane belt, Aruba has nearly year-round idyllic weather.

Jay Smith, president of Sports Travel and Tours, likes Aruba. In February, he booked two liquor-industry sales incentive groups on the island, both at the Hilton Aruba Caribbean Resort & Casino, which completed a $25 million renovation to guest rooms, public areas, pools, the beach and restaurants in December.

“You couldn’t design a dinner function any closer to the sea than this one at the Hilton Aruba Caribbean Resort & Casino.”

Ph. Credit: Atlantis Paradise Island Bahamas

The Best of the Bahamas & Caribbean
Enticing, Exotic and Always an Attendee Favorite

By Christine Loomis

The resort is next to the in-progress Baha Mar development, which Nicholas says shouldn’t deter planners. “Although the infrastructure of Baha Mar isn’t complete, the Melia is easily accessible and a wonderful all-inclusive option with proximity to great golf and offshore water activities. The grounds are lovely and the buildings are beautifully appointed. Once all the Baha Mar facilities are up and running, it will be a fabulous resort complex.”

Nicholas says the Melia offers a great value for the money, “and raises the bar in this area for all-inclusives. If you’re a Melia resort frequent traveler, you’ll be well acquainted with the restaurant offerings and consistently good Royal Service.”

For those considering the Bahamas, Nicholas adds, “The Nick Smith, president of Sports Travel and Tours, likes Aruba. In February, he booked two liquor-industry sales incentive destinations. Jay Smith, president of Sports Travel and Tours, likes Aruba. Located below the hurricane belt, Aruba has nearly year-round idyllic weather.

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The Bahamas
Seven hundred islands across 100,000 square miles offer enormous diversity. Most well known are Grand Bahama and Nassau and Paradise Island, but there are many possibilities.

Bimini is the closest Bahamas island to the U.S. mainland — just 50 miles east of Miami. Ernest Hemingway and Martin Luther King Jr. both found profound inspiration here.

Barbara Becker, V.P. administration with Fields Auto Group, in Glencoe, Illinois, brought 58 attendees to the Hilton at Resorts World Bimini last May. “Although it’s not the easiest place to get to, it’s worth the wait. The rooms are beautiful, the staff is wonderful, the restaurant offerings and consistently good Royal Service.”

For those considering the Bahamas, Nicholas adds, “The
Junkanoo dance lesson.
Dinner featuring Bahamian cuisine.
A Junkanoo history session with Principal of Bahamian

July 16, 2017 as The Coral at Atlantis with all new guest rooms,
Three new restaurants also opened, including 77° West, spe
Art and Entertainment Center, casino and Marina Village.

The Coral at Atlantis is an app giving attendees access to mobile check-in,

itinerary management, a direct link to guest services and more.

Delegates also commented on the technology and service fit what the client was looking for to achieve his
goals of rewarding his top customers.

“Dual cultures enhance the experience. "You have two cultures and countries that come together as one," Robertson says. "The tax-free shopping on the Dutch side is a bonus for shopping
thrill-seekers. The small town of Grand Case on the French side, with its multiple excellent restaurants, is considered the "gourmet
capital of the Caribbean.""

Other worthy sites she recommends include "Sunset Beach Bar & Grill, where you can literally feel the jet propulsion as air-
craft come and go alongside this beach and bar, and The Lote-
re Farm, a secret hideaway nestled in the hillside of Pic Paradis
where you can wine, dine, climb, hike and glide over the treetop
Canopy, the island," she says, "is truly an ecotourism and gastro-

nomic experience you’re not likely to forget or find elsewhere."

Susan M. Robertson,
Corporate & Incentive Travel

Susan M. Robertson, Principal
Docherty Incentives & Meetings

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ordinator to my banquet staff, banquet captain, to the restaur-

ant manager and staff, to the front desk. All truly cared and were in the know of what activities my client planned or what attended were doing off and on property. I can't tell you how many resorts I've had programs in where we never see, let alone meet, the general manager. The dedication of this staff shows, and is appreciated.

The group held two events outside. “They were spectacular,” Robertson says. “The food was delicious and our AV needs were easily met.”

As with any program, she says, there were some challenges, however, “The Westin did everything within its power to ap-

pease me and/or find solutions. I would not hesitate to put an-

other group in this hotel. They do an outstanding job.”

In October 2016, Liza Passantino Maguire, V.P. with CIMAX Inc., brought a sales incentive group from New Jersey-based Sparta Systems to The Westin. “Our clients look for a destina-

tion with not just the usual sunshine and activities, but where there are also great accommodations and exceptional service,” she says. “We also look to balance value against the ultimate product, and the island and hotel met those parameters, then exceeded them onsite.”

Like Robertson, Maguire points to the GM. “I can honestly say that, after over 26 years planning, the GM at this hotel was a big reason we booked it. And he was there every day of the pro-

gram, carrying through on every promise and more. He’s exactly the type of GM we wish were at every client event. Additionally, Paola Morales, CSM, was also right there making sure our every need was attended to.”

Maguire recommends contacting Westin’s in-house DMC, calling them “fabulous to work with.” She believes working with an experienced DMC is “key to having your visions realized. We had gorgeous evening events created per our specifications, with not one stone unturned regarding service.”

She also notes, “There are very different vibes in different parts of this island, and as planners we know what our clients are looking for. I would make sure to do a full site visit and take into account staying at the exclusive Westin, but planning for excursions to different parts of the island.”

Among the excursions she recommends is a dive-around in Grand Case. She also says planners should be aware that the hotel is on the Atlantic. “The beach and waters were not rough since it’s in a cove area,” she says, “but keep that in mind when planning watersports. Take the group off-property to enjoy a day elsewhere if that is an important factor.”

Timing also makes a difference. “Flights in October were probably the only challenge we faced,” Maguire says. “There are limited non-stops at that time of year. Otherwise, the desti-

nation has everything you could want.”

U.S. Virgin Islands

These three islands are remarkably different, but each of-

fers striking natural beauty plus resorts and facilities able to accommodate all kinds of groups.

St. Croix, one of the few islands completely surrounded by the Caribbean, is home to The Buccaneer, family owned and upscale. It was on the short list for a spring 2017 incentive program for a global technology company, HelmsBriscoe’s Nicholas says. “St. Croix is a good fit for this group due to easy access from major U.S. airports, short distance from the U.S. mainland, no passports required and lots of water activities. It’s the best of both worlds,” she adds. “It has a wonderful tour-

ism infrastructure to meet the demands of the most discern-

ing world traveler and pristine beaches and resorts offering serenity and tranquility.”

The Buccaneer works on all levels. “It offers onsite dining options and recreational activities (including golf), fabulous water views, comfortable accommodations and the ability to board a catamaran cruise directly from the resort beach with no need for ground transfers,” Nicholas says. “What is especial-

ly meaningful to our stakeholders is that The Buccaneer ranks high on TripAdvisor with excellent reviews.”

Ample function space is a necessity. “With several outside reception locations available, I can move my group from one night’s welcome reception location to another location for the closing night,” Nicholas says. “They’ll have two completely dif-

ferent outdoor dining experiences and I never have to leave the property to accomplish that.”

It’s a must to explore the island, however. “Be sure you take advantage of the water sports and activities,” Nicholas says. “St. Croix is all about the beautiful Caribbean waters. An absolute must is uninhabited Buck Island, offering world-class snorkel-

ing and diving an hour’s cruise from The Buccaneer. Several cruise options are available and can be coordinated directly with the property.”

One caveat for planners: St. Croix’s scenic roads. “Although road quality is very good, St. Croix still has that ‘countryside’ feel,” Nicholas notes. “Winding roads can be slow. When you ask for distances, say from town or the airport, be sure to ask in miles and time.”

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“Kids just turned 60, but the spa is total me time for a night. Others joined us on our Saturday night, making it a grand time!”

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Las Vegas answers the challenge for groups that return to the same destination time and again but want the experience to be new and different each time. Properties continually expand, renovate and add more meeting space, dining experiences, attractions, unique venues, upscale shopping sites, entertainment and technology. Las Vegas offers more than 150,000 hotel rooms and more than 11 million sf of meeting and exhibit space with more under development. And Las Vegas continues to develop more non-gaming activities for family-friendly meetings.

It’s no wonder that, for the 23rd consecutive year, Trade Show News Network named Las Vegas the No. 1 trade show destination in the U.S. In addition, according to the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority’s (LVCVA) 2016 Visitor Profile Study, 27 percent of visitors were in Las Vegas for the first time, compared to 11 percent in 2015.
Caesars Delivers
Las Vegas’ expertise in hosting meeting and convention groups means more groups are repeat visitors. For example, Bloomington, Indiana–based Solution Tree, an educational service provider, has held its 1,800-person, 2½-day educational conference at Caesars Palace every year since 2006. The company has signed through 2020, and plans to sign in 2021, says Renee Marshall, CMP, director of events, Solution Tree.

Caesars’ history and familiarity with the group pays dividends. “Our value is tremendous,” says Marshall. “Since we have a long history with Caesars, they give us amazing concessions that help our bottom line. We love everyone we work with from the sales team to the onsite contacts who execute the event.”

Caesars was an ideal property for several reasons. “It met our needs because of the location on The Strip, the restaurants in the hotel and the attached mall,” says Marshall. “It has flexible space to allow breakouts to be larger or smaller, and has a large room for general sessions. We don’t do a lot of entertainment and activities as we are strictly a content-based event. We sometimes do a small dinner with our presenters in the hotel, but nothing for our attendees.”

Planners like it when a property offers concessions without requesting them. That’s what Caesars did. “We increased our room pickup and food and beverage commitment due to our high registrations,” says Marshall. “Our sales manager could have just increased the room and F&B commitment, but instead of doing only that she also gave us additional concessions that help our bottom line. We love everyone we work with from the sales team to the onsite contacts who execute the event.”

One company that recently held a three-day “boot camp” training for employees at the Luxor Las Vegas chose Caesars properties “because of their reputation, location and service,” says the meeting’s planner. “This year, we chose Luxor since it provided a great location and an onsite sales team that highlighted a brand new meeting space with a stellar onsite contact.”

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Renee Marshall, CMP Director of Events, Solution Tree Bloomington, IN

Caesars also is adding newly renovated suites to its most exclusive collection of luxury accommodations at its Las Vegas resorts. By year-end, Caesars will have renovated more than 800 suites, increasing guest options from multiroom suites to elite two-story duplexes and grand villas that encompass more than 11,000 sf. More than 2,000 suites and villas are available for viewing online as part of Caesars Suites (www.CaesarsSuites.com).

Renovations include suites such as the Julius Tower and Augustus Tower at Caesars Palace; 231 newly restyled suites at Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino; and 111 newly renovated mini-villas at Caesars Palace available for booking in August 2017. The renovations come after an upgrade in 2016 of 4,800 total rooms at Caesars Palace, Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino, Paris Las Vegas and Harrah’s Las Vegas.

Small Meetings No Small Matter
Las Vegas once had a reputation for not totally embracing small meetings. Not anymore. Small-meeting groups continue to flock to Las Vegas.

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The group used two adjacent meeting rooms at the hotel, one for the general session and one for a one-on-one and vendor networking event where employees conducted individual 15-minute appointments with specific preferred partners of their choice.

For entertainment, the group held a “Welcome to Boot Camp” reception in the Velvet Room. “It was a great opportunity for everyone to network, share experiences and get geared up and ready for the Boot Camp ahead,” says the planner. “The atmosphere was perfect and everyone had a wonderful time.”

Some planners complain that Las Vegas is pricey, especially for small groups. But “the value was great,” says the planner. “The Luxor Las Vegas offers a reasonably priced destination that is easily accessible for people in many markets. The low group room rate and the meeting space fit our needs perfectly.”

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MGM Resorts International


The size, grandeur and service of MGM properties attract groups of all types and sizes. Mandalay Bay, for example, is hosting more and larger conventions and trade shows due to the $70 million expansion last year of the Mandalay Bay Convention Center. The facility added 350,000 sf of meeting, ballroom and exhibit space, bringing the total to 2.1 million sf. The improvements helped Mandalay Bay recently sign Microsoft to a multiyear contract to hold its annual event of 30,000 technology professionals at Mandalay Bay and several other MGM properties.

Another MGM property Aria Resort & Casino is undergoing a $154 million expansion of its convention center that will add 200,000 sf of meeting space with state-of-the-art technology. The project includes indoor and outdoor spaces, and a glass-enclosed venue with panoramic views of the new T-Mobile Arena and The Park. Overall, the project will add 500,000 sf of meeting and event space upon completion in February 2018.

The all-suite luxury Delano Las Vegas, one of three distinct hotel experiences at Mandalay Bay, offers 20,000 sf of indoor meeting space encompassing 31 meeting rooms. Dining and eating spaces include the South Beach-inspired Delano Beach Club, which offers group buyouts for receptions. Guests can network at Delano’s Sage Living room with its overstuffed couches, back-support chairs, coffee tables and end tables. Groups can use the room’s two 52-inch, flat-screen TVs for presentations in a relaxed setting.

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The Red Rock was perfect for a variety of activities and amenities. “A welcome reception was held in the Crimson Lounge, which is located off the casino floor,” says Jeans. “This is an excellent venue for a reception, as it allows for an indoor/outdoor reception. It has cabanas outside around the pool, which have individual heaters, if needed. They put together an awesome lighting package for us, including our logo, which just added to the ambiance.”

Off The Strip

A constant challenge for planners is keeping groups focused and in attendance at meetings in the city that never sleeps. “Vegas is high energy,” says Mike May, president and corporate meeting planner for Spear One, a meetings, incentives and event planning firm. “It’s popular for driving attendance and audience anticipation, especially for customer events, user groups, product launches, sales kickoffs, private trade shows and training conferences. But attendees might skip part of the meeting and hit the casino floor. Or, they’re bleary-eyed, exhausted and struggle to be fully mentally engaged.”

That’s why some groups elect to meet off The Strip. “Groups looking to combine networking, relationship building and educational content might enjoy an off-Strip resort in the Henderson area and have access to The Strip, without having attendees lose focus,” says May.

One choice for groups desiring to be near but off The Strip is Red Rock Resort & Casino, which recently hosted a 2½-day meeting for 350 clients of CliftonLarsonAllen LLP, a Minneapolis-based professional services firm.

“I love the location of the Red Rock,” says Lisa Jeans, project manager, executive team, CliftonLarsonAllen. “It is a 20-minute drive from the airport, and it offers all of the amenities of properties on The Strip, but on a smaller scale and much more private. Whenever I walk into the Red Rock, it feels like they have undergone a renovation. I feel that way because everything always looks new. I think that is very rare to find in a property.”

Lisa Jeans, Project Manager
CliftonLarsonAllen LLP, Minneapolis, MN

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foot boardwalk. Cabanas, attractions and food service also are planned. The phased $1.5 billion project is slated for a 2019 completion.

In addition, Wynn is expanding its distinctive luxury shopping experiences with the construction of Wynn Plaza, a 75,000-sf retail Strip-front expansion scheduled for completion in the first quarter of 2018. The Wynn Las Vegas and Encore Las Vegas already offer the 7,000-sf Wynn Collection boutique and the 99,000-sf Wynn Esplanade. And Wynn reopened Parasol Up after its renovation last year that included a new design, updated technology and new bar menu.

Guests sometimes use Wynn’s plentiful space for interactive and teambuilding activities, including a program of workshops that Wynn Las Vegas introduced recently. The workshops are led by Wynn experts including master chefs, mixologists, DJs and sommeliers.

Experiential Events

The Wynn’s offerings are examples of how Las Vegas continues to offer new activities to provide fresh experiences for groups that return again and again. But some groups prefer the same activities, according to Elizabeth Hansen, national sales manager, AlliedPRA Las Vegas.

“One thing to keep in mind is that sometimes it is OK to offer an activity again, especially if it was very popular and not every guest was able to participate,” says Hansen. “One easy way to reinvent Las Vegas for repeat visiting groups is to try and choose a theme that we can embrace in décor, entertainment, activities and events.”

Hansen offers an example. “One group, for example, was an incentive trip that came to Las Vegas for several years in a row and hosted a poker tournament each time,” says Hansen. “In order to make it feel exciting and new we changed the theme to it each time — Vintage Vegas one time and James Bond the next time, with entertainers on hand to help set the scene.”

The millennial generation has impacted the ways in which Las Vegas is reinventing itself. “Las Vegas has embraced the experiential state of mind that millennials have pushed forward but other attendees are really on board with at their events,” says Hansen. “This means that the typical four-walled nightclub or restaurant with a pretty view just isn’t enough anymore.”

Hansen says that participants want events that encourage interaction among attendees and with the venue. “You no longer have to bring in those activities to a lot of the venues here in Vegas now because they are already there,” says Hansen.

More Changes Afoot

Other venues throughout Las Vegas are offering more of everything.

A stand-alone option is Meet Las Vegas on South 4th Street, a high-tech venue with three floors of event and meeting space where groups can take over one floor or all. Because each floor is truly a blank space, the possibilities for creating a one-of-a-kind event are limitless. The first floor offers a total of 5,427 sf, the second 5,131 sf and the third 2,775 sf. In addition, an outdoor pavilion provides an additional 8,412 sf. Sales, event and catering teams can assist with every phase of planning and designing.

Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Las Vegas has completed phase one of its $13 million Casino Tower remodeling, which included renovation of 640 guest rooms and suites. In addition, The Hard Rock added about 18,000 sf of meeting and convention space, and the 28,000-sf Artist Ballroom was remodeled. MB Steak debuted earlier this year at the Hard Rock, following the opening of Oyster Bar, a full-service bar and restaurant offering seafood.

After a recent expansion, Tropicana Las Vegas’ all-new conference facility is divisible into as many as 38 breakout rooms and includes a 25,000-sf ballroom, the 55,000-sf Trinidad Pavilion — suitable for large general sessions and exhibiting accommodating up to 4,800 attendees — and elaborate venues such as the Havana Room and Sky Beach Club. The newly transformed Tropicana Theater is a modern-yet-classic venue featuring a magnificent crystal chandelier, custom banquette seating areas, dark wood flooring and premium audio-visual technology. Overall, Tropicana Las Vegas offers more than 100,000 sf of flexible meeting and exhibition space in a convenient location on The Strip just minutes from the airport, major convention centers and top entertainment stadiums.
The 3,500-room Flamingo Las Vegas will commence a $90 million renovation of 1,270 rooms in August 2017 and complete the project in the second quarter of 2018. The renovated rooms will keep the property's signature pink theme and feature retro-chic designs reflecting the hotel's history as a mainstay of the Las Vegas Strip. New room designs feature hues of gold and flamingo pink, reflecting the Flamingo's flamboyance.

MGM Grand recently broke ground on a 250,000-sf expansion of its conference center that will connect to the existing conference center on all three levels. Scheduled for completion in fall 2018, the new space will include two large ballrooms spanning 49,000 sf and 32,000 sf, three junior ballrooms and an outdoor event space. When complete, the expansion will give MGM Grand a total of 850,000 sf of meeting and convention space. As part of the expansion, Stay Well Meetings — the industry’s first-ever wellness meetings experience, which launched at the hotel in 2014 — will expand its footprint by 22,000 sf and encompass the conference center’s entire second floor.

The 1,003-room Plaza Hotel & Casino, which has the largest ballroom in downtown Las Vegas at 19,000 sf, is currently conducting a multimillion-dollar renovation to the 30,000 sf of ballroom and convention space on its third floor. This renovation, to be completed this summer, will include numerous upgrades including partitioning, lighting, projection capabilities, a new portable stage and more. The Plaza also plans to expand its convention space with 12,000 sf of additional breakout rooms and a new business center to open fall 2017. Also recently opened was the Plaza Event Center, a 5,000-sf special event space with two stages, 18 large screen HD televisions, two projectors and a modern sound system. The Plaza Event Center accommodates 200 people in a range of seating options, and hosts live entertainment crowds of up to 300 people. The space is available for private-party buyouts.

The Westin Lake Las Vegas Resort & Spa is undergoing a multimillion-dollar renovation that includes all 493 guest rooms and is expected to be completed by fall. Meeting space is plentiful with 100,000 sf of indoor and outdoor space, including a 20,000-sf ballroom and 30 flexible spaces. Other meeting areas include gardens, poolside decks and lakeside beaches. In addition, The Westin provides access to three golf courses including the 18-hole Reflection Bay golf course designed by Jack Nicklaus.

Guests at The Venetian Resort Hotel Casino, The Palazzo and Sands Expo can network in small groups, get online and relax in a 1,170-sf pop-up lounge. The lounge, created in conjunction with Zappos and staffed by its team members, is located on The Venetian’s second level and includes a six-seat conference room. The Venetian also launched its Facebook Messenger direct booking channel, allowing guests to book directly through social messaging.

The planned Las Vegas Convention Center expansion and renovation will be completed in a phased approach with a projected completion date of 2023. Phase one will be the construction of the new 1.4-million-sf expansion with 600,000 sf of exhibit space and the accompanying meeting rooms and support space. This phase is projected to be complete by 2021. The second phase will be the complete renovation of the existing 3.2-million-sf facility. The phased approach allows for continued use of the facilities without disruption during the construction. Upon completion, the LVCC will have 2 million sf of exhibition space, more than any facility except Chicago’s McCormick Place. The project also includes a major technology upgrade over the next six years that allows companies to illustrate their brands throughout the LVCC. Maps, schedules and information will be added to digital service kiosks.

Being the nation’s No. 1 destination isn’t enough for Las Vegas as it relentlessly strives to boost its advantages over competitors. Part of the effort is continuing the transition from the gaming capital of the U.S. to a well-rounded entertainment capital to ensure an even more eclectic menu of options for planners and their groups.

Elizabeth Hansen
National Sales Manager, AlliedPRA Las Vegas

After more than $200 million in South Beach-inspired transformations, Tropicana Las Vegas, a DoubleTree by Hilton, provides an entirely unique experience for conference attendees. From luxurious rooms and top-ranked restaurants to over 100,000 square feet of flexible meeting and exhibition space, including unconventional meeting settings such as the Havana Room™ and Tropicana Theater, outdoor events surrounded by our lush pool gardens and a convenient location on the Strip just minutes from the airport, major convention centers and top entertainment stadiums, come see why so many meeting planners are rediscovering and choosing Tropicana Las Vegas – a DoubleTree by Hilton!
The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe in Truckee, California, has named Marian Wilson as director of sales and marketing. She formerly served as director of sales at Horseshoe Bay Resort in Austin, Texas.

Lee County (Florida) Visitor & Convention Bureau welcomed Jill Vance as its new director of sales. Most recently she worked as group sales manager at Westin Cape Coral Resort at Marina Village in Cape Coral, Florida.

Kathryn Morgan has joined Visit Tampa Bay as regional account director responsible for the mid-Atlantic region. She most recently was the Washington, DC-based representative for Visit Indy, the tourism marketing organization for Indianapolis, Indiana.

Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa in Rancho Santa Fe, California, has promoted Mark Philips to director of sales and catering. He most recently served as director of leisure sales at Rancho Valencia.

Ronnie Collins has joined Visit Phoenix’s convention sales team as director of sales. He most recently served as director of sales and marketing for the newly opened Hilton Cleveland Downtown in Ohio.

Randi Talmage was named sales manager for the JW Marriott Grand Rapids in Grand Rapids, Michigan, part of the AHC+Hospitality portfolio of hotels. She previously was director of convention services for the hotel. She will also lend sales support to the Amway Grand Plaza and the Downtown Courttyard by Marriott in Grand Rapids in the regional market.

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