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Outlook 2013

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Gold accents add glamour and glitz to an annual conference in California.



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Photo courtesy of Hyatt Regency Trinidad

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The lobby terrace of the Hyatt Regency Trinidad.

Photo by Tomasz Rosca

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Publisher's Message

Here's to a Better Year Ahead

As I write this we have yet to learn our fate. Will we drop off the “fiscal cliff” or will our leaders compromise and find viable solutions to fix our economic woes? In any event, the forecast to date for the meetings industry is shaping up very nicely. Industry leaders say the demand for meetings is healthy, international travel is back, and even though meeting budgets are still mostly flat, there is some slight growth.

As David Huether, senior vice president of research and economics for the U.S. Travel Association recently said, “Businesses continue to have a heightened focus on the value and bottom-line benefits of travel. We feel the slight increase in business travel next year continues to reflect demand for face-to-face meetings that drive growth and productivity.”

Pressured to “do more with less” for the past few years, meeting professionals learned how to stage successful meetings the hard way. No matter what obstacles they face, planners prove again and again that face-to-face meetings are the way to go.

How do they do it? In our cover story Outlook 2013, Steve Bova, CAE, executive director of Financial & Insurance Conference Planners, says: “We have a very creative bunch of folks in our industry. Our planners work very, very hard. Our industry has come a long way with data and showing the value of face-to-face meetings.”

Bova sees the cup as half full: “A lot of the good that has come out of (the recession) is that companies are more prepared to be accountable for the meetings that they’re planning and able to rationalize and explain the ROI that they’re getting. Our planners are coming with a more strategic, end-results-oriented mindset to the planning of meetings. They’re asking different questions than they did before, and they’re keeping different metrics so they’re prepared to talk to the higher ups in their company and prove that the work that they’re doing is bringing value to their companies.”

David Gabri, president and CEO of Associated Luxury Hotels International (ALHI) agrees: “The incentive market is growing, I’m happy to say. (Incentive trips) cannot be replaced by salaries and other kinds of things, and I think corporate America is beginning to spend more on them.”

Spending more. Sounds like a good idea.



Harvey Grotsky

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Hard Rock Hotel Cancun Opens



The traditional "guitar smash" at the grand opening of The Hard Rock Hotel Cancun.

MIAMI, FL — The Hard Rock Hotel Cancun, the All Inclusive Collection's third all-inclusive Hard Rock Hotel in conjunction with Hard Rock International, held its grand opening with a guitar smash and performances by the Grammy Award-nominated recording artists Goo Goo Dolls and Flo Rida. The 12-story hotel has more than 600 rooms, five restaurants, five bars/lounges on property and 45,000 sf of meeting space. Hard Rock International is owned by Seminole Hard Rock Entertainment Inc. www.hardrockhotels.com

Dittman Incentive Marketing Wins Sixth IMA Circle of Excellence Award

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – Dittman Incentive Marketing was recognized by the Incentive Marketing Association (IMA) as a winner of a Circle of Excellence award for creating a sales incentive program for Huntington National Bank. The campaign used a rewards incentive program to Optimize Customer Relationships (OCR) and drive record revenue. The goal of the "Journey to the World Series" sales campaign was to drive behaviors consistent with the OCR program that result in completed comprehensive OCR Plans and generate \$500,000 in treasury revenue, according to Dave Dittman, E.V.P. of Dittman Incentive Marketing. "The bottom line result for the 2011 Huntington National Bank six-month sales campaign was that a goal of 20 home runs were envisioned, but a record-breaking 42 home runs were realized, an increase of 110 percent over the projected goal," said Dittman. "Plus, the home runs generated \$1.2 million in treasury revenue, more than double what was expected." www.incentivemarketing.org, www.dittmanincentives.com



DITTMAN

Marriott to Double Number of Properties in Asia Pacific

BETHESDA, MD — Marriott International Inc. announced that it expects to more than double the size of its portfolio in the Asia-Pacific region in the next few years. With 132 hotels open in Asia today and a total of 143 property deals signed and approved, the company expects to grow to at least 265 hotels by 2016, with more than 80,000 rooms in 16 countries. www.marriott.com

Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa Offers Updated Amenities

DESTIN, FL — Starting January 2013, the 598-room Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, the largest full-service beachfront resort on Northwest Florida's Gulf Coast, will offer new updated amenities. In addition to numerous cosmetic changes, the resort's 32,000 sf of flexible indoor meeting space, award-winning Seagar's Prime Steaks & Seafood, and Kids Krew program will all be enhanced as part of a \$5 million renovation taking place over the winter season. The 9,504-sf Emerald Ballroom will be completely overhauled, while the 5,600-sf Coral Ballroom will feature all new state-of-the-art touch-screen lighting. The new boardroom also will include state-of-the-art teleconferencing facilities. www.hiltonsandestinbeach.com

FICP Raises Nearly \$75,000 for Junior Achievement

LOS ANGELES, CA — Meeting planners and hospitality partners at the 2012 Financial & Insurance Conference Planners (FICP) Annual Conference (also see opposite page) donated a record-breaking total of \$74,244 to Junior Achievement of Southern California and Junior Achievement USA. Contributions were raised through the FICP Annual Conference Silent Auction. For 11 years, proceeds from the auction have been donated to a local charity. This year, proceeds of the silent auction will benefit Junior Achievement of Southern California. A portion of the proceeds also will benefit Junior Achievement USA through FICP's new philanthropic partnership. The auction provides a way for conference attendees to take an active role in making a difference in the communities that support their business. www.ficpnet.com



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Photos by redutton166

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The 2012 Financial & Insurance Conference Planners LIVE Annual Conference took place November 11–14 at the JW Marriott Los Angeles L.A. LIVE. New this year was the Technology Showcase, featuring technology services for mobile apps, social media, event management software and more. FICP unveiled a new logo at the conference, and officially launched the organization's new website. Other highlights included The Network event, which connected industry peers and hospitality partners, plus two high-energy evening networking events. Keynote speakers included Laura Schwartz, former White House director of events for the Clinton administration, and Roger Dow, president and CEO of the U.S. Travel Association. **1** Kelli Livers, CMP, Forethought Financial Group and FICP chair addresses the more than 675 planners and hospitality partners in attendance at the conference. Todd Zint, CMP, CMM, NFP, was the chairperson of the 2012 Annual Conference. **2** Kileen Roach, Securian Financial Group and 2012 FICP chair welcomes "Dancing with the Stars" alums Edyta Sliwinska and Alec Mazo. **3** Conference attendees pose on the red carpet before the final evening event at The Beverly Hilton. **4** Attendees head to one of more than 25 education sessions offered at this year's conference. **5** Attendees enjoy entertainment by Grooveline and **6** pose on the stairs for a group photo. **7** Conference attendees network on the rooftop at ICON LA Ultra Lounge. The 2013 FICP Annual Conference will be held at the Sheraton Boston Hotel in Boston, MA, November 17–20, 2013.

Social Responsibility

By Chris Lee, DMCP

Putting Meaning Into Meetings



Professional meeting planners know how to make a big impact on their participants... and on the communities where they meet.

Each year, meeting planners direct thousands of people and millions of dollars in travel spend. According to the April 2012 Economic Impact Study by Financial & Insurance Conference Planners (FICP), FICP member organizations inject between \$659 and \$913 million into our economy annually. This can have a sizable impact on the destinations they visit. In addition to the direct spending, they also affect communities by incorporating activities that benefit the local people and/or the environment.

The term corporate social responsibility, or CSR, was coined years ago to encourage executives and shareholders to embrace responsibility for the company's actions and encourage a positive impact through its activities on the environment, consumers, employees and communities. Originally, this concept manifested itself in the meetings industry through community service projects or activities that would benefit a particular charity. More recently, CSR has expanded to include not simply a one-time project here or there but an entire way of thinking about meeting planning. Today, meeting planning includes consideration for the community and environmental responsibility, as well as how to use the least amount of resources and make the most positive impact.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Access Destination Services is a pioneer in incorporating corporate social responsibility into meetings. We call it putting Meaning into Meetings. Over the years we have developed a number of

different CSR activities for our clients, from comprehensive multiday projects such as rebuilding an entire computer lab that was destroyed by hurricane Katrina, to organizing a teambuilding activity that gave teddy bears created from the Build-A-Bear Workshop to hospitalized children.

Regardless of the size and scope of the event or activity, we've established some simple guidelines that have proven successful and create positive results:

- **Build a team.**

Teambuilding events are an ideal framework for CSR. Pulling together groups to complete a philanthropic activity encourages people to work together for the good of others and builds camaraderie.

- **Strike a match.**

Find a worthy charity to work with that complements the philosophy, culture, skills, products or services of your group.

- **Mix it up.**

When possible, enable your group to interact with the beneficiaries of their CSR program. Studies show that both parties enjoy getting to know each other and making a personal connection.

- **Be considerate.**

Customize your CSR activity level to the energy level of your group. If, for example, your group has been sitting in a conference room all morning, choose an afternoon CSR event that is more active. Conversely, if they've been physically active don't tax them further by having them, say, raise a barn.

Environmental Sustainability

Responsible meeting planners incorporate

into their planning process consideration for leaving a positive "footprint" on the local environment. We've found the easiest place to start is by incorporating the three R's — Reduce; Reuse; Recycle — into our events, right from the start:

- **Reduce energy consumption.**

At meetings use less lighting and turn off lights and equipment between sessions. Reduce waste by asking food and beverage service providers to use bulk dispensers for sugar, salt, pepper, cream and other condiments. Print materials using both sides of the page and on recycled paper. Better yet, go paperless, using electronic technology instead, such as cloud-based handouts and text messaging. Finally, minimize harmful transportation emissions and traffic by providing group transportation versus individual rental vehicles.

- **Reuse items where possible.**

For example, we encourage recycling fresh florals and centerpieces over multiple events. Talk to your hotel representative about a modified linen and towel laundry service and room amenities in guest suites. Request dishware that can be washed and reused, or recycled, rather than using disposable items.

- **Recycle (nearly) everything!**

Ask the meeting venue to provide visible and accessible recycling containers for paper, metal, plastic and glass. Ask the hotel or caterer about donating leftover food to a local charity, or composting food scraps instead of depositing them in landfills.

Conrad Hilton said that philanthropy "is the virtue that unites men and inspires their noblest

efforts." At Access Destination Services, we make sure to remind our suppliers, hotel partners and staff of our green goals, and we enlist their help on each program.

Most people in the meetings industry welcome the opportunity to work together for the common good. Sharing a commitment to corporate social responsibility and environmental sensibility strengthens our relationships and creates lasting benefits for us all.

I&FMM

Today, meeting planning includes consideration for the community and environmental responsibility.

Chris Lee, DMCP, is chief executive officer of Access Destination Services, one of the leading destination management companies in the nation. He has been involved in the hospitality industry since 1987. Chris is a co-founder and past president of the Association of Destination Management Executives, a contributing author to The Guide to Successful Destination Management, and the more recent Best Practices in Destination Management. He is a past Destination Management Professional of the Year honoree, the highest peer award in the industry. For more information visit www.accessdmc.com.

Outlook 2013

By Karen Brost



Trends and Tactics for a Better Year Ahead

There is good news on the horizon. The demand for meetings is healthy, growth in meeting budgets is slowly returning, and the taboos and political potshots seem to have finally subsided. Another sign of recovery is that international travel is coming back.

As we get ready to begin a new year, here are some of the trends that will impact the industry in 2013.

Proving ROI

Meeting and incentive programs for insurance and financial services companies suffered a big hit during the recession, necessitating a new mandate for enhanced transparency and ac-

countability. Steve Bova, CAE, executive director of Financial & Insurance Conference Planners (FICP), described a silver lining in the recent dark cloud of economic challenges.

"Anytime you go through a period of change, then something good has

to come out of it. A lot of the good that has come out of (the recession) is that companies are more prepared to be accountable for the meetings that they're planning and able to rationalize and explain the ROI that they're getting. Our planners are coming with

a more strategic, end-results-oriented mindset to the planning of meetings. They're asking different questions than they did before, and they're keeping different metrics so they're prepared to talk to their higher ups in their company and prove that the work that they're doing is bringing value to their companies." (See related story on page 18.)

Doing More With Less

On the topic of budgets, Bova shared some findings from FICP's 2012 Economic Impact Study. "There's been a slight upward trend since we did (the survey) last in 2006, which you would expect. I think another important comment is that after the recession, a lot of companies are just getting back to 2007 and 2008 levels.

"Most budgets are increasing slightly or staying the same," he continues. "We are not seeing budget reductions. I just think it's a tougher sell. A lot of corporations are sitting on a lot of cash and they're not hiring, and we're wondering, not just in our industry, but everywhere, when is it going to change?"

"What we're seeing and hearing mostly from members is the message that 'we're doing more with less,'" says Bova. "We've been saying that for a very long time now, so how long can you continue to do more with less and experience growth? You resort to having to be more creative. We have a very creative bunch of folks in our industry. Our planners work very, very hard. Our industry has come a long way with data and showing the value of face-to-face meetings, however, budgets are tight. My concern is that you're still going to do the same number of meetings if not a little bit more, but what's going to be the impact? Is it going to be in transportation or entertainment or décor or the quality of educators?"

Kelley Bolender, business development, Southwest Conference Planners, a DMC Network Company in Scottsdale, AZ, is accustomed to thinking creatively when budgets are tight. "Lately, I've been working with the planners on moving budgets around. When I'm asked to provide entertainment and décor for both the welcome reception and the awards dinner, I put less into the welcome reception, so that I can build up to an amazing awards dinner. I also work closely with the client and the hotel to make sure we're getting the most for the money. Why bring in folding chairs and votives, if the hotel already provides them for free? I take that money and put that into amazing and interactive entertainment. What do you

is being felt by many planners, says Bova. "I'll go to events and whenever I talk to people, the first words out of their mouths are 'Yeah, I've never worked harder. Yes, it's stressful, but I love what I do.' We have to accept it, but at the same time, we also share the need to balance. I've even heard of some companies implementing rules that people can't touch their BlackBerrys after a certain time or they have to take the weekends off and can't respond to emails because people are getting so burned out. But there's the other side of it, too. If you don't check in, then it just keeps piling up, and you know that your return is going to be even tougher on Monday. I do feel that with the technology that



Steve Bova, CAE, Executive Director
Financial & Insurance Conference Planners, Chicago, IL

"Our planners are coming with a more strategic, end-results-oriented mindset to the planning of meetings. They're asking different questions than they did before, and they're keeping different metrics."

remember about the last awards dinner you went to — the centerpiece (sorry, my florist peeps) or the awesome band that had the attendees on the dance floor all night?"

Bolender adds, "Time is money, and this is where we can really assist. We've already hand-selected our suppliers, and we know that they are reputable, competent, insured and experienced. Lastly, the amount of volume that we give to our suppliers allows us the ability to negotiate rates below retail. We collaborate with them independently to ensure we are designing new and unseen concepts that direct clients wouldn't have access to."

Elusive Work-Life Balance

The stress of producing high-quality events with smaller budgets,

we have today it is good to keep up with routine things and to keep things manageable because balancing it that way works. At the same time, companies are a little more flexible than they've ever been in letting people tend to family issues."

Incentive Programs Growing

Bova commented that while FICP members mostly handle conferences, sales training meetings and product launches, the majority of the industry's big meetings are in the incentive sector. "There have been many studies that show the value of incentives and especially in this industry, where you're dealing with top performers who are highly compensated and who can generally go to the type of places or do some of the things

that are included in the incentive. So what we have to be able to do as an industry, as an association, is to do things that people would not be able to do on their own."

He says the solution to this challenge is to tap into the expertise of DMCs. "They might be crunched a little bit with the budgets, but we need to rely on their creativity. Nobody knows their business like (they do). So the partnerships in this business have never been more important, and they'll continue to grow more important."

Not surprisingly, Bolender agrees: "DMCs are the local expert in their destination. We know when to use certain venues, and when not to. Our value is derived by being a one-stop shop. We take care of all the coordination, contracting, negotiating and facilitation — before your group even arrives. And, if there are last-minute needs and changes, our relationships with the suppliers are critical in making everything happen as smoothly and seamlessly as possible."

David Gabri, president and CEO of Associated Luxury Hotels International (ALHI) comments, "The incentive market is growing, I'm happy to say. (Incentive trips) cannot be replaced by salaries and other kinds of things, and I think corporate America is beginning to spend more on them. It's certainly an indication of the way our bookings have been."

In a recent *USA Today* feature "Incentive Travel Makes a Comeback," Craig Reid, president of hotel operations for Four Seasons' Americas division, comments that group and incentive business has been the strongest segment for the luxury chain post-downturn. "The storm's behind us," he says in the article. "People are out there looking for a brighter tomorrow. Now people are trying to move forward with spending time with their best customers

and ensuring that they're recognizing employees."

Hotel Rates on the Rise

Rates are back on the rise, so Gabri recommends that planners book now. "2014-16 is forecasted by Pannell Kerr Forster Market Research and by Smith Travel to be more of a seller's market," he explains.

Gabri described a few factors that are contributing to this shift, particularly in top-tier cities. "City hotels have had tremendous occupancy this year, a few pockets didn't, but generally their occupancies for 2013 look

may more "value pockets" to be found in these cities. "There will still be a better value, perhaps, but everything's relative because in climbing back up the economic ladder, the city hotels have been on sale essentially for several years, and now they're getting back towards where they were before the 'bake sale' started in late 2008."

Gabri stated that resorts now have more business on their books for 2013, '14, '15 and '16 than they have in recent years, but that there are still some bargains to be found. "We call it 'luxury on sale' because we deal in the four- and five-diamond kind of hotels and resorts. The opportunities in 2013 would be less so, only because many people have already



"Many city hotels have actually lowered their group ceilings (maximum room blocks), which puts a premium on group space. Consequently, that has an impact on supply and demand."

David Gabri, President and CEO
Associated Luxury Hotels International, Orlando, FL

to continue to be good and strong. There has been stronger business on the books from all the different segments, including the business traveler, even leisure travelers. In many cases, many city hotels have actually lowered their group ceilings (maximum room blocks), which puts a premium on group space. Consequently, that has an impact on supply and demand. Therefore, we can expect in primary cities, tier-one cities, probably double-digit rate growth into 2013 from 2012 simply because of the demand factors. Simultaneously, that would coincide with a reduced leniency when it comes to the terms and conditions such as minimums or the percentage of attrition or cancellations, those kinds of things."

He notes that while second-tier cities have experienced some of this increased demand, their rates aren't growing quite as quickly, so there

booked, taking advantage of the buyer's market over the last several years and eating up some of the inventory. The resorts that are more remote are still the rare areas that have a little bit better values, but they may not have the same air access, therefore their backlogs haven't been built up so strong.

"We encourage planners to work with their national or global sales offices coast to coast because they can identify those value areas when the financial and insurance services groups have their opportunities to have their meetings," he suggests.

Extravagance Out, Luxury In

Fortunately, the days of resorts having to tone down or hide their luxury image seem to be a thing of

the past. "In the general market, there seems to be no lingering taboos with regard to venues for meetings," Gabri explains. "It seems that we're going in that direction. We've matured through this thing. Everybody has taken their political shots, but now all venues are on the table. Extravagant is still out. Luxury is in. Quality is in."

He defined the difference between luxury and extravagance. "Luxury is paralleling the nature of the organization with quality facilities, services, food and beverage, and so on. Extravagance means overspending and flashing and kind of going over the top. It seems to us that extravagant is not the appropriate mood, still. However, luxury is in, and it's the upper tier in the luxury sector that is exceeding the growth trends from the industry reporting organizations. It's because quality organizations, distinctive organizations, like to parallel their brands with distinctive facilities to deliver their messages."

The Year of Global Sales

While many organizations have made it a point to keep their meetings closer to home in the past few years, that trend also appears to be changing. "I would call 2013 the beginning of a whole new phase of the year of global sales," Gabri notes. "Caribbean sales are up significantly. Europe is bouncing back very, very well. The dollar versus the

mand where organizations are now again searching for opportunities for 2013, '14 and '15 on the international markets. It's a good time to buy there, because of the kind of unrest all over the world with regard to the economic cycles and good value with the U.S. dollar."

"It seems to go in cycles," Bova explains. "Financial services is maybe leading a little more than the insurance folks, but we're seeing a little bit more movement with international meetings than we did a couple of years ago. They're more likely to hold events outside of North America."

The Technology Curve

Not surprisingly, the use of meeting apps and other technology is on the rise, so for its annual conference in November, FICP is creating a "meeting technology immersion experience" for every attendee so they can "test drive" what's out there. The association even committed extra funds to ensure that attendees who don't own an iPad will have access to one during the conference.

"We've seen (the use of technology) become more widespread," Bova notes, "but according to the information that we received, even though people are using technology more and more, we're not seeing that it has boosted the effectiveness of the meetings yet. It doesn't mean that it's not

"When I'm asked to provide entertainment and décor for both the welcome reception and the awards dinner, I put less into the welcome reception, so that I can build up to an amazing awards dinner."

Kelley Bolender, Business Development
Southwest Conference Planners, a DMC Network Company, Scottsdale, AZ



euro is becoming very attractive, as well as the pound. There's also been an enormous amount of pent-up de-

good. We're still trying to find ways to make things better. There are increased costs, and an increased ef-

fort to educate not only the meeting planning industry but also the users, the attendees. Some people are just beginning to see what the capabilities are, so it's really been difficult to measure the effectiveness."

Bova admits that the insurance and financial industry hasn't embraced technology quite as quickly as some other industries. "It's been a little bit behind the curve because of the number of regulations and the amount of confidentiality that there is. But we're not the only industry, of course, that has confidentiality sensitivity, so we always need to keep an open mind to how this is going to make the experience of the event better and more memorable for the attendees."

There was one surprising finding in FICP's Economic Impact Study in regard to technology. Only 15 percent of respondents reported that their companies use social media for their meetings, although they believe that meeting sponsors should take advantage of Internet forums and blogs to engage their attendees.

Generational Differences

In the 2012 annual Business Barometer published by Meeting Planners International (MPI), the need to meet five different sets of generational expectations was named as one of the top challenges planners are currently facing. Given the fact that pre-boomers, baby boomers and members of Generations X, Y and Z may all be attending the same meeting, a "one size fits all" approach will no longer work.

According to the MPI report, "Meeting professionals say younger generations have shorter attention spans and demand more succinct and relevant information in smaller units than older gens." It further adds that "networking within and

among generations is increasingly difficult to manage as audience demographics become more diverse.”

Meeting the needs of multiple generations involves a whole new set of challenges. For example, schedules may need to be provided in both print formats and on mobile apps. Meeting spaces and schedules must be designed to accommodate two styles of networking — electronic and face-to-face. Even food and beverage decisions may be impacted as many younger attendees may be more health-conscious. The key to a successful meeting is to take the time to understand how each generation operates and how they prefer to learn and communicate.



“We’re also seeing requests for behavioral economics. ...It’s this relatively new topic of the science of the brain — how it relates to salespeople or leaders, or managers, that kind of thing, understanding behavior.”

Diane Goodman, President
Goodman Speakers Bureau, Windsor, CT

wanting some moment of laughter or levity. It puts it all in perspective because everyone needs to have fun.”

Goodman also notes that experts on the economy, both domestic and international, are also in demand because so many companies are now global. Futurists are in demand, as well. “We’re also seeing requests for behavioral economics,” she notes. “What makes people buy? Why do people make the decisions they make? It’s this relatively new topic of the science of the brain — how it relates to salespeople or leaders, or managers, that kind of thing, understanding behavior.”

Corporate Social Responsibility

“(In terms of) going green and being socially responsible, I think what we’re seeing is that it’s more the fabric of the meetings now,” Bova explains. “Our planners have done a lot of things to show that they’ve reduced the carbon footprint, and we’ve elevated everybody’s awareness. It’s still playing an important role in their meetings, but it’s not having the same impact perhaps it had at first when it was new. That doesn’t mean it’s going away.”

Only 30 percent of the respondents to the FICP survey indicated that “going green” has had an impact on their meetings and events, and only

a few of the respondents reported that they included Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities in their meetings.” Bova notes, “We still do

see our companies engaging in it, it just isn’t on the front page.”

Bolender adds, “In order for (CSR) to be impactful, the activity needs to be relevant to the company’s mission and the program’s intent. Involving and benefiting the local community is a plus, as attendees want to feel like they are a part of the area they are visiting.”

The Future Looks Bright

Gabri says, “We know that the business community, particularly corporate America, now better understands that meetings mean business. They are, in fact, creating significantly more demand on RFPs for where they’re going to put their business opportunities, both for the retention of their customers as well as the retention of their staff and the development of their objectives. So meetings have come back in a very big way.

“Our message is, ‘Don’t wait (to book), because that inventory will be taken up because the sale rack over the last couple of years has been picked through pretty finely. You might have to buy closer to retail, but you’ll still get a good place.’ I’m encouraged by 2013. I’m encouraged by the direction of the business community. They’re reinforcing not only the need, but the desire for meetings to advance their business.” **I&FMM**

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By
Timothy
Herrick

Good times or bad, budgets must be determined. The difference is that in bad times, there's less budget to go around and more pressure to justify each and every line item in that budget. For meeting planners and incentive travel program managers — especially in insurance and financial services, a sector of the industry hit excessively hard by eco-

economic sluggishness — the pressure has intensified the entire Return On Investment (ROI) measurement process.

Embracing complexity seems to sum up how meeting and incentive planners now approach ROI measurement, which encompasses more data from a wider variety of sources than ever before. The current business climate of belt-tightening has really put the squeeze on planners to expand data collection. Says Dahlton A. Bennington, CMP, CMM, "The economy should not be what drives how an organization measures ROI."

She is managing director of Bennington Meetings and Motivation, a meeting and incentive planning consultant and contracting firm in Hollywood, FL. "The pressure for ROI measurement has become more prevalent because of the down economy and the need to justify why and what we spend on,

but there are fewer resources to use, and people have more and more to do," says Bennington, who also has 15 years experience as a meeting planner

and incentive manager at SFM Group, a global investment firm.

According to Steve O'Malley, senior vice president of Maritz Travel in Fenton, MO, and immediate past president of Site, the sobering difference between the recent recession and previous economic downturns is that "no other recession had this steep of a cliff. The fall-off in incentive programs was violent and sudden. But it has bounced back, not quite to the same level yet, but the bounce back has also been dramatic. The programs work. Better measuring of the ROI allows a company to find how close the programs are to achieving the goals and how other factors, such as the economy, affected the ROI."

Melissa Van Dyke, president of The Incentive Research Foundation in St. Louis, MO, says, "Our pulse surveys, which started just before the recession, show that incentive travel programs were hit hardest and first in the economic downturn. These have started to bounce back. Merchandise

programs were hit harder and, timing-wise, farther into the recession. They too have started to bounce back."

Mary MacGregor, senior director, events, North America, for CWT Meetings & Events in Minneapolis, MN, and a former president of Site, notes, "What is interesting about the trends of measuring ROI, is that despite the tumultuous ups and downs of the industry, the one constant has been incentive travel. Measuring ROI validates performance and is needed to assure that you are awarding that performance," she says. "Regardless of the state of the economy, the studies indicate that the programs are effective."

But that bounce back also has accelerated — from planning to event to post-event data collection — the entire ROI measurement process. “In my experience, ROI has helped justify and maintain programs, but the long-term view is completely dependent on how the company itself forecasts,” says Van Dyke. “Many organizations now are moving from five-year planning to one- to two-year planning at a maximum.”

When sifting through the added layers of complexity when measuring ROI, planners and program managers must first fully understand the goals of the meeting or program. While they, like the executives they report to, have to keep their eyes on the ultimate prize of incremental sales increases, other goals directly or indirectly related to improved performance must be understood prior to the event so a more meaningful measurement of ROI can be attained. "All businesses have different levels of justification that may be required by top management," says Van Dyke. "We find that when speaking with planners, it is necessary to use all the data to reaffirm that the project supports major executive initiatives."

Says O'Malley, "Look at all the objectives of the company, and if you are clear as to why and what you are measuring, then you have a broader idea of what kind of ROI you're expecting."

A better understanding of those objectives will mean you have a broader understanding of what to measure, the true benefits of a program and what should be done in running a proper meeting or incentive travel program.”

The approach suggested by O'Malley — specifying all objectives then measuring the ROI in correlation to those objectives — indicates that issues beyond incremental sales increases must be taken into account. While those issues, which can include everything from brand recognition, product understanding and customer loyalty to employee engagement, may seem more nebulous and less quantifiable as a bottom-line sales figure, O'Malley insists that “with the right surveys and survey questionnaires, they can be measured and that data can be utilized.”

The basic formula for ROI Measurement hasn't changed:

But, Van Dyke points out, “there are several important changes to how the formula was being used,” such as augmenting the ROI measurement with additional program-benefit data.

The current trend in calculating ROI is that higher accuracy means providing deeper analytics of each program component, often entailing gathering data from a wider cross-section of departments within an organization. “Planners and incentive program managers are building better relationships within all areas of an organization so more data can be measured,” Van Dyke adds. “There are less and less silos among the different departments of many companies.”

Many planners and incentive program managers now must seek to quantify — once all the objectives have been identified — categories of data that are not as easy to ascertain. “Intangible, non-monetary benefits

also have important value, such as improved public image, increased job satisfaction, increased organizational commitment, reduced stress and improved teamwork," says Connie Nau, CMP, CRP, director of global meeting services for Caledonia, WI-based

“Measuring ROI validates performance and is needed to assure that

you are awarding that performance. Regardless of the state of the economy, the studies indicate that the programs are effective.”

Mary MacGregor
Senior Director, Events, North America
CWT Meetings & Events
Minneapolis, MN

Meetings & Incentives. “Intangible benefits are not typically converted into measurable financial data. However, this intangible information can still drive important continuous improvement,” she says.

Sales figures may be paramount, but when seeking justification for a program, a new level of creativity is required. Planners now disseminate a vaster array of variables to achieve what the new standard ROI measurement requires. "Most organizations have sales goals, but there are other things they are looking for, such as customer satisfaction, all different kinds of business needs," says Van Dyke. "Innovation is a key point of executive management, for example: if not only our sales program led to sales increases, but the round tables that were held led to two or three ideas, and that led to innovations that salesmen were able to use. Ideas and innovation are measurable."

Van Dyke recommends multiple metrics, i.e., using a wider selection of data, including outcomes such as

“The pressure for ROI measurement has become more prevalent because of the down economy and the need to justify why and what we spend on, but there are fewer resources to use.”

Dahlton A. Bennington, CMP, CMM
Managing Director
Bennington Meetings and Motivation
Hollywood, FL

“Software has helped improve the amount of data that planners can get.

...It can’t, however, do the heavy lifting of working with management to determine what the key priorities are and what the key metrics should be.”

Melissa Van Dyke
President
Incentive Research Foundation
St. Louis, MO



creativity or satisfaction that on the surface may seem to elude quantification. “Planners will want to look at several pools of data to tell the story of a meeting or program’s ROI. Organizations with advanced HR metrics were now able to say definitively that a certain increase in program participation would lead to a specific percent increase in customer satisfaction, which would lead to a certain percent increase of profit.”

The starting point is for the planner to have a more detailed analysis of management expectations and then devise ROI measurement protocols that address those expectations. “Knowing what you need drives a lot of outcomes,” says O’Malley. “The central objective may be sales, but there are many externalities to that objective that should be part of the program and what you are measuring because frankly, those externalities can dramatically affect the bottom line.”

The Holistic ROI

Nau recommends that planners who take this holistic approach should include pre- as well as post-event surveys and in-depth questioning for a more inclusive, thus more accurate and useful ROI measurement. “Don’t limit yourself to just the standard post-meeting survey,” she says. “Poll your attendees in advance of a meeting to determine areas of need for learning opportunities. Even on an incentive

program, if you have your key players in attendance, take that opportunity to engage them as a group on a topic of value.”

In addition to more inclusive internal research, planners and program managers are now mining data from sources outside the organization as part of the ROI measurement process. “Costs truly define ROI,” says Bennington. “The other piece of the puzzle is knowing the value of your program to your partners — the destinations and other suppliers — and knowing how much revenue you can bring them and understanding all the ancillary costs. That will build a stronger partnership and help the planner to sell the program successfully to stakeholders.”

Old School, New Tools

With ROI measurement now requiring more extensive data gathering, what are the best tools for planners and program managers to utilize? For Bennington, the most effective measurement tools remain surveys that feature key questions that are as incisive as they are concise. “Satisfaction survey questions and application surveys are the most (effective),” she says. “Did you find it valuable? What did you learn? When do you think you can apply what you learned? When did you apply what you learned and what were the results? Those are examples of the content questions that you have to ask, but the surveys cannot be too long or the responses will be incomplete.”

According to Van Dyke, determining what the true impact of the program is and of course quantifying — or in bottom-line speak, monetizing — that impact are the two biggest challenges. “Better software helps planners and practitioners capture the different facets, such as customer satisfaction, higher sales, greater recom-

mendations, etc., that their programs might affect. But there is still a great deal of the effort that must be spent on forging positive relationships between planners, the departments that own the data (operations, HR, etc.) and the management team.”

While new software programs are available and utilized when calculating ROI, the data gathering needed often requires a human element planners and program managers cannot avoid. “Software has helped improve the amount of data that planners can get about the programs they run,” says Van Dyke. “It can also help crunch numbers. It can’t however, do the heavy lifting of working with management to determine what the key priorities are and what the key metrics should be.”

Meeting-Incentive Merger

Adding another layer of complexity to ROI measurement has been the increasing mergers of meetings with incentive travel programs. Osmosis has long occurred between the allure of a vacation reward for sales performance and the informative and educational

“The trend is that the combining of meetings and incentive travel is growing. ...But there is a need to measure what is coming from the meeting and what is coming from the incentive travel program.”



Steve O’Malley
Senior Vice President
Maritz Travel
Fenton, MO

opportunity of a sequestered gathering of peers, colleagues and coworkers, but the lines between meetings and incentive travel were sharp and distinct.

That was then, this is now. With

insurance and financial services companies facing deep cost-cutting initiatives, stiff government regulations and a heightened sensitivity to public perception, that line separating meetings from incentives has not just been blurred, in many cases, it has been erased. “In our (Incentive Research Foundation) 2011 study ‘The State of Awards in Organizations,’ we found that 67 percent of planners were merging meetings with their incentive travel programs,” says Van Dyke. “The impetus for the merging is oftentimes the tax codes, and that makes the meetings deductible if they meet a certain criteria, and this led some organizations to add meeting components to a program. What is often happening is that financial or insurance companies who have a long-running travel incentive program, in order to drive synergy, merge it with a meeting.”

“Some programs have been merged,” Nau agrees. “When that occurs, it is important for the program manager to ensure that pre-meeting polling and post-event evaluations are addressing all of the objectives of the program. This in turn ensures that they can provide leadership with the appropriate metrics to focus on continuous program or company improvement.”

Planners and program managers must also combine their ROI measurement procedures to gauge how effective the fusing of content with an incentive program has been. Van Dyke is optimistic about the ramifications of assessing the ultimate profitability of this new paradigm. “Incentive programs are often targeted at a specific improvement in performance, making the calculation of the ROI program benefit a bit easier than a meeting,” she adds.

“The trend is that the combining of meetings and incentive travel continues and is growing,” agrees O’Malley, who cautions that content can potentially overshadow incentives in this new hybrid model. “The inclusion of meetings content only makes sense, but within any given company, there is a need to strike the right balance

between the two, and also to measure the right return on the investment: what is coming from the meeting and what is coming from the incentive travel program.”

In addition to the dilution of incentive travel, planners must organize the event so the potentially fragile fusion of business and reward still results in improved employee performance.

“The actual event must find the effective blend of meeting and leisure. When merging the two, you need to find the right mix between meeting content and downtime,” says O’Malley. “The right mix is what will motivate the attendees and achieve your objectives.”

AIG Effect Fading

Cost savings, higher scrutiny and enhanced pressure to justify programs are obvious forces pushing the transmutation of a meeting and incentive travel program into one event. Along the same lines, similar concerns about the AIG effect have made planners and incentive program managers skittish about ROI measurement in order to avoid negative publicity, both within and outside of an insurance or financial services organization.

While the AIG effect may have been a prevalent factor, planners and program managers have made an effective effort to ensure that the AIG effect no longer lingers. The AIG effect refers, of course, to insurance giant American International Group, who days after receiving government bailout money during the height of the financial crisis, paid for its executives to go to an expensive, high-profile resort. The fiasco generated massively negative publicity.

The media has long moved on to other headlines, but for meeting planners who must justify everything from meeting content to facilities, amenities and other costs, the AIG effect is far from forgotten. But MacGregor points out that the tide has turned, aided by more inclusive ROI measurement. “There is a renewed notion of the val-

ue of meeting face-to-face,” she says. “There is a renewed commitment to getting people together, because of the business benefit of face-to-face interaction, when it comes to performance as well as other issues such as the culture of a company and consistent messaging. We are seeing increased activity of meetings and incentive events. Our

“Poll your attendees in advance of a meeting to determine areas of need for learning opportunities. Even on an incentive program...take that opportunity to engage them as a group on a topic of value.”



Connie Nau, CMP, CRP
Director, Global Meeting Services
Meetings & Incentives
Caledonia, WI

experience, even with cost containment and budget management, with the clients that we work with (is that) there is an overall business case to getting their meetings done. The same outcomes cannot be projected through teleconferencing.”

Since the AIG incident, planners and program managers have improved their communication with other sectors of a company. “Organizations found better ways to market these programs internally and externally, says Van Dyke. “There is a better understanding of the importance of the program, and because of the marketing, what might have been perceived as extravagance, is seen to have value. There may be tighter benefits or a reduction in the number of amenities — the programs are shorter and closer to home. But the companies and the employees are pleased with the program and understand its motivational benefit.” **I&FMM**

Gaming Resorts



Photo courtesy of Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino

What's New From Coast to Coast

By George Seli

How are gaming resorts faring in today's meetings market? One naturally looks to Las Vegas' performance as a way to answer that question, and it seems that the city's resorts are on a roll, particularly in terms of the number of group bookings. Group visitation to Las Vegas is up according to the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority's (LVCVA) latest stats: The number of conventions and meetings increased by 16.3 percent this August year-to-date over 2011, and overall convention attendance by 2.3 percent.

Helping to bolster those figures was Duluth, GA-based World Financial Group's (WFG) Convention of Champions, which brought more than 17,000 registrants to Las Vegas in June. WFG, a business platform for independent financial services professionals, also found Las Vegas advantageous for a smaller group of about 125 senior leaders that it brought to Aria Resort & Casino in January. Paul

D. Mineck, chief marketing officer, cites the property as an exemplar of the modern gaming resort. It's a stylized, sophisticated, high-tech facility with strategically designed meeting space, top-tier restaurants, a luxurious spa and a great casino almost as an afterthought. While about half of the WFG group took advantage of the onsite gaming, it wasn't a major site-selection criterion. "We wanted a newer, more contemporary property, and Aria is gorgeous," Mineck says. "We really like it from a design perspective. They used very contrasting materials; for example, the business center is all reclaimed farmhouse wood and then they juxtaposed that against a marble floor. The way they used these mixed materials is really unique. I don't think there is anything else like it in Las Vegas." And Aria's 300,000 sf of meeting space, which Mineck says has a "very open architecture," is well separated from the casino and features three levels connected by escalators,

allowing WFG's relatively small group to find a place to meet secluded from the traffic of larger groups convening in the 4,004-room property.

Las Vegas Innovations

While Mineck may be right about Aria's décor and design being unique among Las Vegas hotels, it's arguable that nearly every property in the city interprets the concept of a "gaming resort" in an innovative way, whether it's the opulence of the 2,716-room Wynn Las Vegas, the re-creation of Venice that is the 3,036-room Venetian, or the sleek, trendsetting 390-room M Resort Spa Casino, which recently expanded its meeting and event space to 92,000 sf. And while such properties do offer the latest table games and casino technology, the news seldom stops there.

For example, on the entertainment front, Le Rêve – The Dream at Wynn Las Vegas has been voted Best Production Show for the second year in a row in the Southern Nevada Hotel

Concierge Association Choice Awards. On the technology front, The Venetian/The Palazzo Pocket Concierge now allows attendees to navigate the resorts' 16-million-sf campus with a wayfinding mobile app powered by Meridian. And on the culinary front, Block16 Hospitality is opening the legendary Pink's Hot Dogs, a 2,000-sf restaurant, at Station Casinos' 816-room Red Rock Casino Resort & Spa, which houses 94,000 sf of meeting space and a 25,000-sf spa. Complementing the Red Rock is Station Casinos' 495-room Green Valley Ranch, which offers 79,000 sf of meeting space as well as Hank's, one of the top steak houses in southern Nevada.

Northern Nevada Player

Groups interested in gaming properties in Northern Nevada are lucky indeed, as the area's largest casino can be found at an outstanding upscale resort, the 2,000-room Grand Sierra Resort and Casino in Reno. The casino floor spans 80,000 sf of slots, video poker, table games and more. But from the perspective of a business meeting, that space is in proper proportion to the more than 200,000 sf of meeting space on-property, including a nearly 40,000-sf Grand Ballroom and Grand Salon, the 40,000-plus-sf Nevada Conference and Exhibition Center, and the Grand Theatre, with a seating capacity of 1,800. And outside the meeting room, attendees can avail themselves of skiing, golfing, rafting, paddlewheel boat tours and myriad other activities in the Reno-Tahoe area, not to mention The Beach at Grand Sierra Resort.

Native Inspiration

Speaking of massive casinos, the Talking Stick Resort's 240,000-sf facility is one of the largest in Arizona. The Scottsdale property, developed by the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, also houses 100,000 sf of meeting space, including a 25,000-sf Grand Ballroom. Physically active attendees will naturally want to

venture out into Scottsdale's section of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, which is set to undergo a major renovation over the next two years as the city invests \$4 million in repairing and rerouting trails. Onsite highlights include the 15th-floor Orange Sky restaurant with floor-to-ceiling windows for panoramic views, and The Spa at Talking Stick, which features products and treatments inspired by the local Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian community.

Gaming doesn't exactly qualify as an educational activity for attendees, but it happens that at many upscale gaming resorts, they can get a brush with Native American history and culture. One such resort is the Inn of the Mountain Gods, located in the mountains of Mescalero, NM, near Ruidoso and owned by the Mescalero Apache Tribe. Financial Security Credit Union (FSCU), based about 120 miles away



The design and décor at Tulalip Resort Casino in Washington state integrates Native American artwork.

Steak and Seafood Restaurant & Lounge, located on-property, as "beyond fabulous," and adds that the group enjoyed both the casino and the Inn of the Mountain Gods Championship Golf Course, one of three stellar courses in Ruidoso.

"And then some of our ladies went into Ruidoso and took advantage of some spa facilities," says Carrasco. "The town is a year-round resort with a lot of skiing and winter sports, and then in the summer they have the racetrack, where American Futurity is held." (American Futurity is race for 2-year-old American Quarter Horse racehorses run at Ruidoso Downs Race Track on Labor Day.)

On the West Coast lies an equally luxurious property also immersed in Native American heritage: the 370-room Tulalip Resort Casino, located just 30 minutes from downtown Seattle. Washington's only resort-casino award-

ed an AAA Four Diamond rating, Tulalip greets meeting groups with 25-foot house posts hand-carved from a 1,000-year-old red cedar, and accommodates them with 30,000 sf of meeting space including a 15,000-sf Orca Ballroom, two executive boardrooms and several breakout options. Tulalip is ahead of

the technology curve, offering free Wi-Fi in all meeting rooms, which are equipped with drop-down screens and LCD projectors. Adjacent to the meeting areas is the Indoor Oasis Pool, which also can serve as a unique function space, as can the 450-seat Canoes Cabaret. The Coast Salish artwork of the Tulalip Tribes, found throughout the resort, makes a great conversation-starter among attendees.

Admittedly, the idea of meeting at a casino hotel tends to conjure up the image of attendees spending their days cooped up in meeting rooms and their evenings surrounded by the neon lights of the gaming floor. But resorts like Grand Sierra, Talking Stick and Inn of the Mountain Gods prove that outdoorsy attendees can feel quite at home at a gaming property.

Photo courtesy of Tulalip Resort Casino



Photo by Andy Anderson

Beau Rivage Resort & Casino, on the Gulf in Biloxi, MS, hosted the Southern Farm Bureau Life Insurance Company's incentive program, which featured networking, fishing, golf and gaming.

Betting on Biloxi

Another case in point is the Beau Rivage Resort & Casino in Biloxi, MS, where Southern Farm Bureau Life Insurance Company has held several incentive programs, most recently in May. "While we're there, we use a lot of what that area has to offer, golf being one, fishing being another, because we're right there on the Gulf of Mexico," notes Tommy Doolittle, CLU, ChFC, director of agency administration and career development, who planned the event. "And the property has some backwater areas, so in case you don't want to be in the Gulf you can fish from river channels. We also take a group of people to shoot sporting clays."

That's not to imply that gaming takes a back seat to these activities; about 60–70 percent of the group visited the casino, Doolittle estimates. He also commends the resort's tropical deck that affords panoramic views of the Gulf. "Behind where the pool is located, is a very large multipurpose area that we use for a welcome reception." Apart from that function space, The Beau Rivage offers 50,000 sf of meeting space and 1,740 newly remodeled rooms, of which the Southern Farm Bureau group used about 350, says Doolittle. About 50 percent fly in to Gulfport/Biloxi International Airport, and "you can get a good flight to a number of connecting points, whether you're coming from the east or the west," he adds.

Northeastern Winners

The East Coast has long been a competitor in the gaming market with Atlantic City, and one of the town's popular meetings properties is Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa, a mecca for avid gamers, with 161,000 sf of ca-

sino space and the city's largest poker room. Groups have 70,000 sf of meeting space at their disposal, along with 11 retail boutiques, six fine-dining restaurants, four nightclubs and an expansive spa. This summer Borgata completed a renovation of its 1,566 classic guest rooms and corridors.

Despite some damage from the superstorm Sandy, The Boardwalk, all 12 casino resorts, the Atlantic City Convention Center and Historic Boardwalk Hall are open for business.

Connecticut also has come on strong in the gaming market over the



Paul D. Mineck
Chief Marketing Officer
World Financial Group
Duluth, GA

last decade with Mohegan Sun opening in the mid-1990s, offering an alternative to the equally majestic Foxwoods Resort Casino. Both properties house ample meeting facilities.

Mohegan Sun's 100,000 sf of meeting space includes the 38,000-sf, pillar-free Uncas Ballroom, and its in-house event service managers have CMPs and CMMs. Top-name entertainment, from Meatloaf to Journey, might coincide with a group's visit here, and there are always popular dining options such as Bobby Flay's Bar Americain, Michael Jordan's Steak House and Todd English's Tuscany.

"We wanted a newer, more contemporary property, and Aria is gorgeous."

Foxwoods, along with the MGM Grand at Foxwoods, offers a total of 150,000 sf of meeting space. In October, Pandora jewelry debuted at Foxwoods, and there are plenty of fine eateries available to complement the fine retailers, including three top-notch steak houses: Cedars, Craftsteak and David Burke Prime.

But the real newcomer to the East Coast gaming market is Pennsylvania, with the Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem's opening in 2009 and the Valley Forge Casino Resort's debut in March of this year in Philadelphia. The 300-room Sands offers 5,000 sf of meeting space and three signature restaurants from celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse: Emeril's Chop House, Burgers And More by Emeril, and Emeril's Italian Table. The Shoppes at Sands outlet center launched at the property in November 2011, and recreational options were further enhanced in May of this year with the addition of The Sands Bethlehem Event Center, an SMG-managed venue. Acts such as The Beach Boys, Melissa Etheridge and Paul Anka have performed at the Center. The 486-room Valley Forge Casino Resort features a total of 100,000 sf of event space, including four ballrooms, upscale dining at Pacific Prime, and Valley Spa.

The Southeastern Scene

One can't leave Florida out of the East Coast gaming scene, given the 2,500 slots and 90-plus tables at Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood. The property completed a \$7.8 million renovation of its 481 guest rooms this year. Despite the laidback Florida environs, there is a certain Las Vegas-like energy at this resort, generated by 18 restaurants and lounges, the Body Rock Spa, 23 boutique shops, 13 nightclubs, the 400-seat Paradise Live theater and the 5,500-seat Hard Rock Live concert arena. The AAA Four Diamond resort, which is Green Lodging Certified by the state of Florida, offers 40,000 sf of meeting space.

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Creative Galas

It's All About the Experience

By Stella Johnson

What element from your most recent corporate gala do your attendees remember best? The party-until-the-wee-hours-of-the-morning part? The overall enjoyment of a glamorous, one-of-a-kind evening? The extraordinary entertainment? The elaborate atmosphere and delicious cuisine? The recognition of achievement at the awards ceremony? The overarching message from your CEO?

An effective and memorable corporate gala should create a rarified atmosphere far different from an everyday event. If your gala includes all of the above AND engages attendees, boosts corporate morale, rewards top performers, shows true appreciation to clients and customers, and helps build professional relationships among all participants, then you've reached the pinnacle of success in creative gala planning.

That's why any respectable insurance company or financial firm that's worth its weight in flow charts almost always includes a high-impact, dazzling gala at the end of its annual

meeting or conference. Indeed, every year it's a much-anticipated affair by corporate attendees as meeting and event planners tirelessly try to top the prior year's gala. Traditionally, we know them as black-tie galas, with carefully chosen table linens and menus, beautiful floral arrangements, speeches from C-suite officials, a guest speaker or two, award presentations and a little dance music before it's time to call it a night.

Well, there's nothing wrong with traditional, simple and straightforward, as black tie is still the way to go for many groups. Catherine P. Saxton, CEO and founder of the New York City-based The Saxton Group Limited, for one, believes, "Dress-down parties are strictly for the younger set. Big galas deserve black tie simply because it reflects the event's significance and importance. It means the people attending are important, too."

Nowadays, perhaps because of a struggling economy, planners search for more creative and cost-effective

ways to rendezvous at gala events — doing more with less sometimes but always focusing on the takeaway.

As Stacey Crivello, account director of Access Destination Services located in San Diego, CA, claims: "It's not about the color of the linen, or the beautiful centerpiece, it's about the overall experience planners create for the attendees."

Crivello also notes that galas are steadily becoming a far more common element of today's meetings and conferences because companies are recognizing the motivating factor a gala event can have, resulting in increased production from its employees and a higher ROI.

Corporate Branding in a Social Atmosphere

CEO Andy McNeill of American Meetings Inc. (AMI), located in Fort Lauderdale, FL, notes that in almost any economy, and when performed properly, planners should expect gala events to almost pay for themselves. "The tone that comes out of these galas can set the stage and the trajectory

of the upcoming year," says McNeill. "For our clients, there is a consistent feeling that a gala awards dinner is not only a time to celebrate achievements, but set the stage and deliver a message in a powerful and inspiring atmosphere. Of course, this has been a challenge in the current downturn of the economy, but it's the smart companies that do not cut the budget on this, or if they do, they try their hardest not to diminish the experience."

Looking back to 2006, McNeill recalls that during the boom of the last economic upturn, companies were spending healthy budgets on both galas and the awards presented. For instance, several years ago, he says, AMI produced what he calls a jaw-dropping, 3,000-person gala awards dinner for a financial services company based in New York.

"We totally repurposed the Chelsea Pier into a 300-plus table event, which was amazing," he says. "From the week-long setup, which included Cirque du Soleil performers, an A-list Hollywood celebrity and some of America's top politicians, it was, needless to say, a most memorable event. The goal was focused on celebrating the unprecedented financial year of the firm and to insure the success of the following (year)."

More recently, however, AMI held a much smaller event, a 500-plus attendee gala awards dinner at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, DC, for one of the largest financial services companies in the world. The mission for this gala was to re-energize the account reps after three disappointing years of sales decline.

"Strategically, the CEO wanted to receive a 'bounce of sales' out of the dinner, so we developed an attendee experience that weaved that message throughout the evening. From the red-carpet entrance, to advance audio-visual and media elements, the gala award dinner crowd was wowed, and award winners were treated like celebrities in both the announcement and level of awards," says McNeill.

As a great believer in corporate branding within a social atmosphere, McNeill says: "Today, many companies have learned how they could do more with less; and we have found integrating social media, before, during and after the event provides an effective bridge of communications and helps create an experience that few other platforms allow."

Mission Accomplished

According to Crivello, Access Destination Services recently staged an event for a client who wanted a one-of-a-kind gala with a touch of adventure and mystery. Designed to leave a lasting impression on its employees, Access implemented the company's plan just prior to the gala and continued it right through the event itself, which was held at an active military base. The "experience" started during the general session when, from out of the blue, executives were "kidnapped" from the stage during the keynote address by what appeared to be members of a competing company.

"Masked competitors rushed into the room and whisked away the CEO, V.P. and another top executive," explains Crivello. "Then, the host addressed the group, expressed astonishment and stated that while the kidnapping was under investigation everyone should proceed as originally planned to the evening's gala as buses were ready to depart to the military base. Guests departed as they wondered, 'What just happened here?'"

Once at the military site, all the guests were ushered through military security by active duty officers, adding extra excitement, tension and curiosity.

According to Crivello, guests were driven directly onto the flight line where the festivities for the evening were about to begin. "After a 45-minute reception, long velour drapes were pulled back, revealing a glamorous space that, only hours ago, was an active hangar for a C130 aircraft. Guests entered the space and walked

down the red carpet as crystal chandeliers set the tone for the gala event," says Crivello.

As guests were seated and welcomed, Crivello explains that "a ruckus broke out," drawing everyone's attention to the 100-foot ceiling overhead. "The 'kidnappers' were spotted and rappelled down from the rafters. When, out from behind the curtain came all three corporate 'hostages,' wearing the very same jumpsuits as those who had swept them away. They then unzipped the jumpsuits, revealed tuxedos underneath and stated that they had just 'stomped' the competition," she adds.

"The evening continued with wel-



Held on an active military base, Access Destination Services developed a mysterious "kidnapping" of top execs for a client who wanted a real adventure.

come speeches from the base commanding officer and an awards recognition program for the top producers within various divisions of the company," Crivello says.

Gala excitement was further enhanced by large video projectors

which aired real aviation footage and illuminated the interior hangar doors. In addition, an extensive lighting arrangement, along with still images of aircraft and corporate branding elements, completed the event.

“The overall gala experience was complete when immediately following the awards presentations, a lively USO show took to the stage. Without missing a beat the guests took to the dance floor and danced the night away,” says Crivello.

Building Corporate Morale

The Saxton Group is planning the fifth annual gala in New York City for the Foundation of the European School of Economics, a private college of higher education in international business and finance, which offers various degrees and programs at its centers in London, New York, Rome, Milan, Florence and Madrid.

Donald J. Trump and Rick and Kathy Hilton are the guests of honor for the gala to be held December 5 at



The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel offers nearly 30,000 sf of meeting, conference and banquet function space including 18 unique venues for groups from 10–700 attendees.

Cipriani 42nd Street, a sophisticated Italian Renaissance-style venue complete with soaring ceilings, marble columns, dazzling chandeliers and outstanding classic cuisine.

Catherine Saxton, whose corporate clients include Citigroup and Montauk Credit Union, has created “thousands of events from soup to nuts.”

She says this gala, however, will be an artful blend of corporate and social elements, bringing glitz, glamor and the world of business and high finance to the gala,” she explains. “We anticipate some 500 guests, plus the top level of social and business

VIPs, a heavy press corps and some great entertainment.”

What’s important about gala events in today’s world, Saxton points out, is that they build camaraderie among various groups of people. “Sometimes, it is the senior management who attend, while at other events (it is) lower level groups, sometimes both,” she states. “People get to know people they work with on a personal level. People can relax and share information, which is so good for corporate morale and builds a stronger team spirit. If people don’t leave an event practically humming, it’s not a success.”

Upbeat Songs

When planning a major annual meeting, Paula Eddy never cuts corners on the special gala awards program. Eddy, a project analyst for Republic Finance LLC at their branch office in Baton Rouge, LA, says it pays to go the distance with such events because they “reimburse” the company in more ways than one.

“These programs are important because they are a once-a-year, and employees look forward to them with much anticipation,” she notes. “More than that, gala awards programs build the morale of the team and send them back to their branch offices with a renewed spirit of building a great company through sales and impeccable customer service. Gala-style awards are how individuals get recognized for performing at top level as they inspire others to be the best in the upcoming year,” says Eddy.

For instance, Eddy helps plan the annual manager’s meeting that is usually held in February every year. Although

the event is a one-day affair, every attempt is made to make it the most productive, informative and imaginative day ever, especially when it comes to its gala awards program. For this year’s event, Eddy says that post-evaluation comments suggest it was the best ever — a fact which she attributes to Song Division, a first-of-its-kind global team-building and experiential marketing company with offices all around the world. Song Division’s mission is to work with groups of all sizes “to build energy, reinforce key company messaging, and enhance creative thinking and performance in any industry through collaborative songwriting sessions.”

According to Song Division’s website, the company creates customized musical experiences that not only entertain, but engage, motivate and educate attendees. For instance, at award ceremonies, “the Song Division band plays honorees on and off the stage with appropriate, high-octane hits such as ‘We are the Champions,’ maintaining energy levels that ensure an unforgettable eve-

ning.” The company also says they will “substantially increase your meeting’s ROI,” which is music to a planner’s ears.

“Their expertise allowed us to feed on each other’s ideas and to create a most memorable event,” Eddy says. “Approximately 140 team members attended the awards gala. Song Division provided queue music for each award, which allowed us to put on a Grammy theme. We built on the Grammy theme not only for music, but décor and attire as well, all the way down to the envelope used to announce winners. Song Division made this super easy for us to achieve.

“Utilizing the same band for the gala dinner and awards program as we did for the teambuilding program we had scheduled in the afternoon provided a consistent music theme throughout the entire day and into the night. The band then capped off the evening by performing fun and popular songs for the party, filling the dance floor and sending all of the attendees away on a very upbeat note,” Eddy says. **I&FMM**

Roth Capital Partners’ Dueling Galas

Party, festival, celebration and ball are all interchangeable words that can describe the word gala. In the corporate realm, “gala” also means “all of the above,” except that it takes on a different connotation as the grand event is often the highlight of the meeting program or the capping extravaganza before everyone heads back home the next day. Elite Productions International, based in Laguna Niguel, CA, produced multiple-day events for the annual Roth Capital Partners conference. Elite’s CEO and creative director Lili Shadab shares her story.

I&FMM What was so different about Roth Capital’s gala event?

Shadab The events were held in a tent that we built in a parking lot near the conference venue, just walking distance from The Ritz Carlton hotel in Laguna Niguel, CA. Multiple permits had to be obtained in order to produce these events and create the event venue. We also were facing multiple challenges in order to transform a parking lot into a luxurious event space. There were a number of existing rather large planters, 30-foot trees, facility lighting and parking meters in the lot, as well as having to fit a large performance stage, furniture and seating while keeping it all very unique.

I&FMM How many attended?

Shadab There were over 1,400 guests each night of the conference. The events provided food and beverage with headline entertainment. The conference attendees were a combination of national and global investors and presenters for this investment banking firm.

I&FMM So, how did you pull it off?

Shadab We built a clear span tent creating an indoor-outdoor feel. A combination of 25,000 sf of space needed to have a cohesive look and be transformed each evening, visually, complete with a different headline entertainment each night. We worked diligently to design the environment in a cost-effective way where some of the elements were being used for both evenings yet creating a definite transformation and bringing wow factors to each event.

I&FMM How were the two nights different then?

Shadab The first evening had a rock ‘n’ roll theme with the rock group Cheap Trick as the headliner. The look and feel of the space was designed with an infusion of rock and mod in order to depict the music era. Black and white checkered patterns with pops of color here and there, and retro-style furnishings were our direction for the first evening.

The second evening was inspired by a Miami club-lounge concept with rapper and singer-songwriter Flo Rida as the headliner so that was something far different than the prior night. We stayed with the black but added gold accents to bring glamour and glitz and a very different feel to the same space.

I&FMM How did food and beverage tie in to these two concepts?

Shadab To continue the cool factor and staying very cost-effective while having an out-of-the-box overall concept, we came up with a different kind of food service. We hired eight different food trucks with a variety of selections including a desert truck. The food trucks were also different each evening to bring more of a transformation and variety to each event. The guests loved the idea, and it was a huge hit. This created a casual environment outside for most of the food service while the indoor area brought a sense of luxury. In the meantime, with the clear tent the guests felt as a part of the same event whether they were indoors or outside.

I&FMM What was the feedback from the Roth Capital gala event?

Shadab Our client was very pleased, and we look forward to producing the two gala events again next year and whatever that set of challenges will be. **— SJ**



Roth Capital Partners’ tented parties featured Pitbull (center, flanked by Susan and Bryon Roth) for their 23rd Annual OC Conference in March 2011 in Dana Point, CA. CEO Roth says, “This is our flagship conference, and we look forward to this event each and every year.”

Caribbean Meetings & Incentives

The Choices Just Keep Getting Better

By Karen Brost

As an overall destination, the Caribbean virtually sells itself. After all, what's not to love about white sandy beaches, turquoise seas, tantalizing cuisine and a chance to experience life and culture on island time? The real trick lies in deciding which Caribbean destination and property is right for your group.

"The all-inclusive resorts in the Caribbean are still very much on top of our clients' lists as well as cruises," comments Genevieve "Genny" Castleberry, director of operations for Dallas, TX-based Sunbelt Motivation & Travel Inc. "The value is such that it is really hard to find a competitive option with an EP (European Plan) resort anywhere, even when those offer a meal plan."

She described a few other advantages of meeting in the Caribbean. "The appeal is always there — you are almost certain to have good weather at any time of the year, keeping in mind that hurricane season can bring a few challenges." Plus, she says, "There's good airlift to most of the islands."

Puerto Rico

Claudine Auge is president of The Travel Store, a Williamstown, MA-based company that has been working with the insurance industry for more than 30 years. "I just recently had a program in Puerto Rico, and I can tell you that I think Puerto Rico is going to become one of the No. 1 destinations for incentives," she states. "The main reason is air service. JetBlue is adding flights from all over the U.S. to Puerto Rico, and they're going to keep adding some. For most of my clients, that was the factor in choosing Puerto Rico. A lot of incentive programs are shorter (now) and so the time that it takes to travel is important."

JetBlue, Puerto Rico's largest airline, offers 40 departures a day from San Juan's Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport as well as service to Aguadilla and Ponce. Delta recently expanded its service to San Juan from New York City, Detroit and Minneapolis; and AirTran introduced nonstop service from Fort Lauderdale in May.

Castleberry explains what

makes Puerto Rico a very attractive destination for her clients. "No passport required, and it offers great value. The Puerto Rico Convention Bureau constantly offers value-added incentives for companies to bring business to Puerto Rico — whether it's a credit to the master account by using certain service providers or some airline credits."

Richard Zick, CEO of Utica First Insurance Company in Utica, NY, brought an incentive program with 100 attendees to Puerto Rico. "We looked at five different resorts, and the Puerto Rico Convention Bureau was extremely helpful. Ultimately, we ended up choosing the Ritz. It was excellent."

The Ritz-Carlton, San Juan is located in Isla Verde, just minutes from historic Old San Juan and includes a 24-hour casino and state-of-the-art spa and fitness center. The property completed a multimillion-dollar renovation of its 416 rooms and suites late last year.

"We took (our attendees) down-

town, and we took them to a couple of different restaurant venues," Zick explains. "Most of it was actually R & R for our people. They're mostly high-powered New York City types, and it was an opportunity for them to bring their spouses and relax a little bit. They loved the Ritz."

A new Ritz property, The Ritz-Carlton Reserve Dorado Beach Resort and Spa will offer 114 rooms when it opens in December. One of its most unique event spaces will be Su Casa, a colonial-style four bedroom hacienda.

Another new luxury hotel, the 450-room Condado Vanderbilt is scheduled to open in 2013 in the heart of the Condado tourist district in San Juan. Its amenities will include a full-service spa and dedicated butler service.

The first Caribbean hotel in Starwood's St. Regis brand, The St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort, has earned AAA's Five Diamond rating. It is the only property in Puerto Rico to receive this honor. The resort is set on 483 acres on a two-mile stretch of private beach between the El Yunque National Forest and the Espiritu Santo River. The resort offers 139 guest rooms including 35 suites, as well as St. Regis' legendary butler service and the first golf course in Puerto Rico designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr.

Virgin Islands

The Virgin Islands, located east of Puerto Rico, are divided into sections — the British Virgin Islands and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The Scrub Island Resort, Spa & Marina, part of Marriott's Autograph Collection, opened in 2010 on the east end of the island of Tortola in the British Virgin Islands. The intimate resort offers 52 guest rooms as well as two-, three- and four-bedroom villas; three private beaches and a 55-slip marina. Enhancing these amenities is the fact that the resort is perched on a cliff overlooking the Atlantic, Caribbean and the neighboring uninhabited islands.

On the island of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, another Marriott property the Frenchman's Reef Mar-

riott Resort, recently completed a six-month, \$48 million renovation, which completely transformed the property. Each of the resort's 302 newly renovated guest rooms offers

The 3,400-room ocean-themed resort is built around a 141-acre waterscape filled with fresh and saltwater lagoons, pools and habitats. It's something of a culinary paradise, as well, thanks



"The all-inclusive resorts in the Caribbean are still very much on top of our clients' lists as well as cruises. The appeal is always there — you are almost certain to have good weather at any time of the year."

Genevieve Castleberry, Director of Operations
Sunbelt Motivation & Travel Inc., Dallas, TX

views of Charlotte Amalie Harbour and easy access to Morning Star Beach. Other highlights of the resort's new contemporary design include elegant Caribbean-themed décor, ergonomic workspaces and Marriott's signature bedding.

Cruise ship service to St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands is brisk, with a total of 55 ships scheduled to visit the island between October 2012 and September 2013. Some of the larger ships include Royal Caribbean's 3,360-passenger Jewel of the Seas and Brilliance of the Seas, and Vision of the Seas and Enchantment of the Seas, which can each accommodate more than 3,200 passengers.

Last summer, the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Tourism made a free smartphone app available to travelers who want to explore St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas. Available for most devices, the app offers many features that do not require an active network connection. These include listings for activity operators, restaurants, shops, hotels and services; travel tips; events and promotions; and a trivia game.

The Bahamas

Located just a short flight from Florida, The Islands of the Bahamas offer another excellent option in the search for a Caribbean paradise. Atlantis, one of the island chain's most spectacular resorts, is located on the appropriately named Paradise Island.

to its collection of restaurants from world-renowned chefs such as Nobu Matsuhisa, Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Bobby Flay.

Grand Bahama Island is home to The Grand Lucayan, Bahamas, which offers 90,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space, the largest on the island. The resort's Great Lawn can accommodate up to 2,865 guests, and Chop Beach offers seating for 1,700. The AAA Four Diamond resort is located just 75 miles from Florida and



A grand massage for an attendee at the Grand Lucayan, located in Freeport on Grand Bahama Island.

offers 519 guest rooms including 27 suites, a 25,000-sf oceanfront spa and two golf courses.

All-inclusive properties are also easy to find in The Bahamas. Sandals operates two resorts in The Bahamas — Sandals Royal Bahamian in Nassau and Sandals Emerald Bay on Great Exuma island. The company offers its trademarked "Luxury Included" pro-

gram, which gives groups the flexibility to customize an all-inclusive program to meet their needs. Groups also can arrange for special events such as a formal awards dinner, a junkanoo celebration (a street parade with music) on the beach or a jazz concert under the stars.

There will soon be a new player in the Nassau resort market, and it's making a splash in a big way. Baha Mar, the largest single-phase resort development in the history of the Caribbean, is slated to open in December 2014. The \$3.5 billion resort, gaming and entertainment complex will feature several major hotel brands, including Mondrian, Rosewood and Grand Hyatt, as well as The Baha Mar Casino and Hotel. Overall, the new complex will offer more than 2,200 hotel rooms, golf, spas, gardens and luxury retail shops. It's being billed as "The New Riviera."

Nevis

"The Four Seasons Nevis has always been a big seller for us, and I'm in the process of contracting several programs there again in the coming year," Auge explains. "That's one of the top

Caribbean destinations." The five-star 196-room Four Seasons Resort Nevis offers golden beaches, three infinity-edge pools, beachfront cabanas, island tours, 10 tennis courts and a pristine golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones, II.

St. Martin

The island of St. Martin, nicknamed "The Friendly Island," is home to the Radisson Blu Resort, which is set on 18 acres on a secluded cove in a national nature preserve. The property offers a variety of intimate beachside settings where groups can enjoy seafood buffets, elegant parties and pool-side cocktail receptions. The resort is located just a short distance from the oceanfront village of Grand Case, considered to be the "Culinary Capital of the Caribbean," and the town of Marigot, famous for its chic boutiques and sidewalk bistros.

Aruba

Late last year, the Radisson Aruba Resort, Casino & Spa completed an overall property transformation that included updated furnishings and a new, open-air lobby. The AAA Four

Diamond resort occupies 15 acres on Palm Beach, the island's premier beach. The property offers 355 guest rooms, including 30 suites as well as Plaza Club accommodations. Martini-lovers may be interested to know that the hotel is home to the island's only martini bar, which offers a choice of 52 martinis.

Dominican Republic

Thanks to the all-inclusive programs offered by Club Med Groups at Club Med Punta Cana, everything a group needs for its meeting or incentive program is included in one price, which takes the worry out of going over budget. Prices can include items such as breakfast, lunch, dinner and anytime snacks; sports and activities, airport transfers, taxes and tips. The resort also offers an Individual Incentive Reward Program.

Earlier this year, another new all-inclusive resort opened in Punta Cana — the Riu Palace Bavaro is located on the beach at Arena Gordo. The resort offers multiple pools and a spa, and guests have access to the Pacha discotheque and the El Millón casino.

St. Lucia

The former Jalousie Plantation on St. Lucia will soon be rebranded as Sugar Beach, a Viceroy Resort. The resort will offer Luxury Sugar Mill Rooms, Luxury Villas, Villa Suites and Luxury Beachfront Bungalows offering stunning views of the nearby towering volcanic Pitons and overlooking the Caribbean. The Pitons are part of a World Heritage site. For corporate events, Sugar Beach offers a variety of scenic settings, including the Sunset Deck and Great Lawn, or events can be held right on the beach.

Jamaica

Earlier this year, Sandals unveiled the results of a nearly \$60 million renovation of its all-inclusive Grand Riviera Beach & Villa Golf Resort in Ocho Rios. Set on a spectacular beach, the resort is divided into three areas: the Riviera Seaside, Riviera Great House



A pool deck setup at the 317-room Westin St. Maarten Dawn Beach Resort & Spa, one of the largest upscale resorts in the Netherlands-governed province.

and Riviera Villas. All of the resort's 529 rooms and suites have been refreshed and upgraded. The Red Lane Spa also has been given a new color scheme, and its plunge pools have been redesigned.

Refreshing Cruise News

There's a lot happening in the Caribbean from a cruise perspective. "Private islands, new ports and new itineraries are all creating new experiences to keep refreshing the experience, even for people who have been to the Caribbean," explains Jo Kling, president of the cruise brokerage firm Landry & Kling, located in Coral Gables, FL. The concept of including a private island on a cruise itinerary has been around since Norwegian Cruise Line established Little Stirrup Cay in 1977. Now, Kling says, just about every major cruise line has a private island. Royal Caribbean has Coco Cay, Holland America has Half Moon Cay and Disney has Castaway Cay, for example. "These islands, located primarily in The Bahamas, are often included in short itineraries, making them attractive to cruise groups (fun beach day, teambuilding games, etc.). We've had a number of groups who've used a private area of Coco Cay beach, with games, scavenger hunt, bar and music," she says.

Kling says that the cruise lines are now making improvements to their islands. "Norwegian, for example,

invested \$25 million to update, preserve and enhance the flora and fauna and the fun of their Bahamian island." The 250-acre island offers parasailing, an eco-adventure boat tour, kayak tour and snorkeling, and it now offers a larger area for activities such as beach olympics. The island also sports a new dock, new dining facilities, a straw market, island bars and beach volleyball.

"Royal Caribbean also has Labadee, which is on the coast of Haiti," Kling explains. "It's a beautiful beach. The attraction here is that it's everyone's idea of the perfect beach day, because there are these large shelters where lunch is served, and that's all included in your cruise fare. It's a fabulous lunch. For corporate groups, if you're on a charter, for example, you can even upgrade that to steaks and lobster."

Kling describes how the goal of a program can have an impact on the choice of destination. "People that have more meeting content to include seem to like the Eastern Caribbean because they can usually get three sea days versus two on the Western Caribbean. That's on seven-night itineraries. The incentive groups like the Western Caribbean because there are more ports. On the Western itineraries, sometimes you have four port days and two sea days."

She says that Cuba is the dividing point between the Eastern and

Western Caribbean. "The other really nice choice is the Southern Caribbean," she adds, "which involves cruises departing from San Juan. For example, the Jewel of the Seas, which is one of Royal Caribbean's ships, is starting a series out of San Juan in May of next year. From San Juan, they have St. Maarten, St. Kitts and St. John's. "The very cool thing is that you've got the mix of cultures here, so in St. Maarten, you've got the mostly Dutch, but there's a little bit of a French side there, too. St. Kitts and St. John's are more British. St. Lucia has a bit of the French, and then Barbados is very British, so you have that mix of cultures that is a really nice travel experience."

Kling also shared information about new Caribbean ports that have been built. "In Jamaica is this new port called Falmouth. It's a historical recreation of their early days in colonial times when there was a lot of shipping activity there. It's midway between Montego Bay and Ocho Rios, so shore excursions can go to both places. This has been built to accommodate the larger ships of today. For example, the Oasis, the Allure can call there." Royal Caribbean's Oasis of the Seas and Allure of the Seas can each accommodate 5,400 passengers.

"Another big development is in Honduras, and they're calling it Banana Coast," she adds. "Their tag line is 'Where the rainforest meets the sea.' It's got a lot of natural beauty. It was originally a colonial Spanish town. They've got a wide array of shore excursions there as well as a two-berth dock. They can even accommodate what they call the post-Panamax ships — ships that are too large to go through the Panama Canal."

Something for Everyone

"Truly, the Caribbean has got as much adventure and differentiations as you're looking for," Kling sums up. "It can be very familiar and comfortable and clean and neat or it can be wild and wooly on a sailing ship. And it's close to home for so many people." **I&FMM**



LEE

Michael Chagnon was named director of sales and marketing for Villas of Grand Cypress, Orlando, FL. He was director of sales and marketing for The Equinox, Manchester, VT.

The Sheraton San Diego Hotel & Marina, San Diego, CA, has named **Russ Mitchell** as director of sales and marketing. He previously served as director of sales and marketing for The US Grant, San Diego, CA.

M Resort Spa Casino, Las Vegas, NV, has named **Christopher Baran** assistant director of sales, responsible for the Western region of the U.S. and the Pacific Rim. He was national sales director at Loews Miami Beach Hotel, FL.

Tiago Sarmento was named director of sales and marketing at The St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort, Rio Grande, Puerto Rico.



STONE

He formerly was the director of sales and marketing who launched the recent opening of The St. Regis Tianjin, China, as well as the opening of The St. Regis Mexico City.

Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, Destin, FL, has appointed **J. Brian Lee** as regional sales manager for the Midwest region. He was regional director of sales for Guoman & Thistle Hotels, UK.

The Broadmoor, Colorado Springs, CO, has named **Pierrette (Pierre) Stone** as director of incentive and insurance sales. She was The Broadmoor's conference manager.

The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa, SC, has named **Lauren House** as sales manager responsible for Midwest markets, and **Stephen Legg** as sales



HOUSE



LEGG

manager for small groups. House was leisure and business group sales manager for The Ritz-Carlton, Denver, CO. Legg was a freelance meeting planner for U.S.-based insurance, pharmaceutical and food service industries.

Tania Lynn was named national sales manager responsible for the Southeast market at The Renaissance World Golf Village Resort, Convention Center & Beach Club, Jacksonville-St. Augustine, FL. She was senior sales manager at Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa, Ponte Vedra Beach, FL.

Kathy Botero Frantz, CMP, was named Southeast regional director of meeting and incentive sales for the All Inclusive Collection's Hard Rock Hotels in Mexico and the Dominican Republic. She was regional director of group sales for Melia Hotels International. **I&FMM**



LYNN

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