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THE MAGAZINE FOR INCLUSIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS



The Great CMM Debate

Critics and
Supporters of
the MPI Program
Speak Out
PAGE 12

Value Driven

These Eight
Destinations Offer
Planners More
Bang for Their
Meeting Bucks
PAGE 16

Small, Intimate Meetings

That Spark Genuine
Connections Among
Attendees

PAGE 22

**CLICK HERE TO
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Karie Timion
Marketing Director
Matrix Communications Inc.
Plymouth, Minnesota

Inspiring CSR Events
PAGE 26

● **Las Vegas**
PAGE 30

● **Mexico**
PAGE 46



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ISSN 0739-1587

USPS 716-450

Contents

VOLUME 32 NO. 5

MAY 2014

FEATURES

12 The Great CMM Debate

Critics and Supporters of the MPI Program Speak Out

By John Buchanan

16 Value Driven

These Eight Destinations Offer Planners More Bang for Their Meeting Bucks

By Christine Loomis

22 Small, Intimate Meetings

That Spark Genuine Connections Among Attendees

By Gabi Logan

26 Corporate Social Responsibility

Make Your CSR Event a Memorable Source of Inspiration

By Derek Reveron

DESTINATIONS

30 Wowed in Las Vegas

Where Dazzling New Developments and Spectacular Spaces Will Captivate Your Crowd

By Karen Brost

46 Mexico on the Move

A Renewed Commitment to Positive Change — and Meetings

By Karen Brost

DEPARTMENTS

4 Publisher's Message

6 News & Notes

9 Snapshots

10 Perspective AIBTM and Education: Perfect Together By Michael J. Lyons

50 People on the Move

50 Reader Services



The cityscape skyline of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, featuring the Milwaukee Art Museum overlooking Lake Michigan. **PAGE 16**



Shimmer Events' Jeffrey Cesari says attendees felt good after volunteering at the Cradles to Crayons children's charity. **PAGE 26**



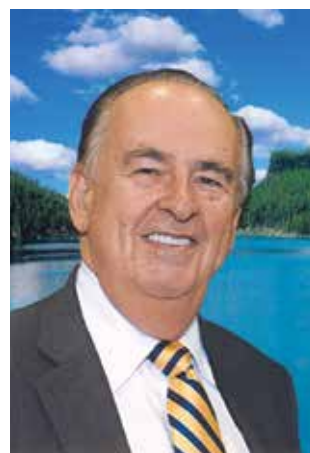
Las Vegas' Mandalay Bay Convention Center has been home to UBM Tech's annual Interop Las Vegas since 2005. **PAGE 30**

Corporate & Incentive Travel (USPS 716-450) is published monthly by Coastal Communications Corporation, 2700 North Military Trail — Suite 120, Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394; 561-989-0600. Single copies \$12.00 U.S.A. only. Yearly subscription price is \$125.00 in the U.S.A.; Canada and foreign is \$165.00. Back copies \$14.00 U.S.A. only. Distributed without charge to qualified personnel. Periodicals Postage Paid at Boca Raton, FL, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to Corporate & Incentive Travel, 2700 North Military Trail — Suite 120, Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394. Nothing contained in this publication shall constitute an endorsement by Coastal Communications Corporation (Corporate & Incentive Travel), and the publication disclaims any liability with respect to the use of or reliance on any such information. The information contained in this publication is in no way to be construed as a recommendation by C&IT of any industry standard, or as a recommendation of any kind to be adopted, by or to be binding upon, any corporate/incentive travel planner or agent. Reproduction of any portion of this publication by any means is strictly forbidden. Editorial contributions must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care. However, the publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited photographs or manuscripts. Subscribers: Send subscription inquiries and address changes to: Circulation Department, Corporate & Incentive Travel, 2700 North Military Trail — Suite 120, Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394. Provide old and new addresses including zip codes. Enclose address label from most recent issue and please allow five weeks for the change to become effective. Printed in U.S.A. © 2014

Publisher's Message

A Buoyant Business Mood

Ray Bloom hailed this year's IMEX 2014 in Frankfurt as the largest edition of the meetings, incentive travel and events industry trade show in its 12-year history with nearly 9,000 participants. At a press conference, the respected IMEX group chairman also said there was "a more positive and buoyant business mood than we've seen for some time" at the annual event.



Meeting Professionals International's Spring 2014 Meetings Outlook predicts "continued growth in virtual and hybrid meetings and slight shifts in budgets." In fact, 73 percent of respondents say they are optimistic about future business, and 43 percent predict a budget increase.

Clearly, this positive news bodes well for the continued growth of corporate group business; and this issue is chock full of great features to help you map out tried-and-true strategies for making hay while the sun shines.

Take "Small, Intimate Meetings That Spark Genuine Connections Among Attendees" on page 22, in which Karie Timion, the marketing director of Plymouth, Minnesota-based Matrix Communications Inc., shares her views and best practices on

how to produce an intimate, memorable and cost-effective incentive program in the Caribbean. A fan of Sandals Resorts, Timion, who graces our cover this month, said, "We have found the Sandals brand focuses on complete customer satisfaction, and it aligns perfectly with what our organization looks for in a resort and destination." Specifically, Timion complimented the staff of the recently opened Sandals LaSource Grenada, and added, "the property was incredible from the room configurations, amenities, décor, waterfalls, pools, which were all over-the-top gorgeous."

But what about the inevitable budget increases that come hand-in-hand with increased business? Don't fret, as you will discover extraordinary values in "Value Driven: These Eight Destinations Offer Planners More Bang for Their Meeting Bucks," on page 16 and in these two fabulous destination reports: Las Vegas on page 30 and Mexico on page 46. Adam Lawhorne, CITE, CIS, the CEO of Meeting Incentive Experts, hit the nail on the head when he said, "Planners are really starting to see the value for Puerto Vallarta, the cobblestone streets, the beautiful history, all the shopping, all the great dining."

Harvey Grotsky
Publisher

www.TheMeetingMagazines.com CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

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More Business Conducted at Largest IMEX in 12-Year History

FRANKFURT, GERMANY — The 12th IMEX in Frankfurt closed May 22 at Messe Frankfurt amid what IMEX Group Chairman Ray Bloom described as “a more positive and buoyant business mood than we’ve seen for some time.”

In his remarks at the show’s closing press conference, Bloom stated that IMEX 2014 had been the largest edition of the meetings, incentive travel and events industry trade show in its 12-year history. Feedback from exhibitors about the many refinements made to the show’s unique online appointment system, the expanded education program, the specialized pre-show events and the show’s app had been very positive, which he claimed resulted in more overall business.

From a visitor total of nearly 9,000 participants at IMEX this year, just under 4,000 hosted buyers from 77 countries participated. Approximately one-third of the hosted buyers came from long-haul markets particularly Brazil, Russia, China, India and Mexico together with North America and the Middle East. Long-haul buyers attend IMEX for three full days. These buyers



Ray Bloom, chairman of IMEX Group, opens the Politicians Forum 2014.

also frequently take part in FAM trips, which are organized by exhibitors either before or after the show.

The new IMEX App has had a positive impact on industry professionals’ experience of the show. The number of downloads of the new enterprise app, which was developed in partnership with QuickMobile, were slightly higher than last year although usage increased 600 percent.

Bloom closed by expressing his satisfaction at the continuing growth and authority of the IMEX Politicians Forum, which was attended for the first time by Taleb Rifai, secretary-general of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the United Nations Specialized Agency for Tourism and David Scowsill, president and CEO of the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC). www.imex-frankfurt.com

DMCs Report Greatly Improved Business and Shorter Response Times for 2014

DAYTON, OH — The majority of DMC members of the Association of Destination Management Executives International (ADMEI) report business was much improved for the first quarter of 2014 compared to the first quarter of 2013, and the outlook for the second quarter of 2014 is that the improvement in business will continue. Even more important is that the majority of member DMCs anticipate that 2014 will be more profitable than 2013.

ADMEI-member DMCs participated from Europe, Mexico, and the Caribbean as well as the United States.

When questioned about the time interval between receiving an RFP and the date of the event, more than 60 percent

responded that this interval is decreasing. Most notably, 20 percent of these respondents asked, “What interval? We are asked to respond within two weeks of the event!”

“DMCs provide significant value to clients with a very short planning period,” notes Jennifer Patino, DMCP, ADMEI president and CEO of Hosts Global Alliance. “A DMC has the most unique venues, exceptional caterers, and matchless suppliers with whom they collaborate to produce programs and events that meet their clients’ goals and exceed their expectations.”

For more information about ADMEI, or to find a member DMC, please visit www.admei.org.

Dittman Incentive Marketing Launches Enhanced 2014 Great Escapes Individual Travel Program

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — Dittman Incentive Marketing has released the fully revised 2014 Great Escapes rewards program, showcasing individual travel incentive solutions to boost sales activity and reward top achievers for their accomplishments.

Great Escapes was created in 2009 to offer individual incentive travel as a scalable solution. The improved features include a brand new look and feel to the materials, and updated travel selections with new destinations and activities.

Susan Adams, director of engagement at Dittman said, “Great Escapes allows us to offer the best individual travel programs, which create exceptional desirability and flexibility. Individual travel incentives consistently generate the excitement needed to reach challenging goals, which increases company revenue and brand loyalty.”

Great Escapes offers 10 levels of travel experiences ranging from drive-to destinations to weeklong luxury cruises, and all are designed for a winner and a guest. It has a winner-centric philosophy with enhanced tiers of individual travel packages to correspond to the effort and achievement required to succeed. With no minimum purchase or upfront payment, there is no commitment for the client, who is charged only when a winner is identified. Travel experience specialists are available for advice and assistance. Winners choose when, where and with whom they want to travel.

For more than 35 years, Dittman Incentive Marketing has been an award-winning, quality leader in providing incentives, recognition and rewards programs. www.dittmanincentives.com

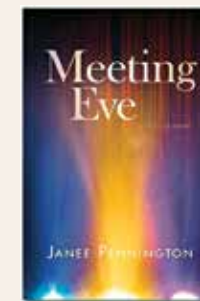
Janee Pennington Publishes Debut Novel

SEATTLE, WA — Janee Pennington, an author, publisher and producer in Seattle, Washington, recently published her debut novel. *Meeting Eve* (Newton and Crockett Publishing, November 2013) is touted as a charming story about Evelyn Walker, a single, confident 30-something running her own international meeting



PENNINGTON

and event planning company who embarks on a journey that “lands her in a variety of odd places, spaces, and situations that she never could have imagined. Can she actually pull off one of the biggest events of her career? . . . Can she have a life while trying?”



A Los Angeles native, Pennington enjoyed a varied and successful career in the hospitality and meetings industries. She served as director of sales and marketing at a destination management company, dabbled as a travel director, and in her 30s, opened her own meeting and event planning company.

Meeting Eve is now available in hardcover, paperback or digital format from these websites: Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Indiebound or iTunes. For more information, visit www.janeepennington.com or contact the author at info@janeepennington.com.

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News & Notes

The Westin Palace Hotel Madrid and DMC Spaintacular Named as Dittman's Travel Partners of the Year

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — Dittman Incentive Marketing announced that their Travel Partner of the Year Award for 2013 was presented to The Westin Palace Hotel Madrid in coordination with DMC Spaintacular. The Westin Palace Hotel and Spaintacular helped to create and deliver a seamless incentive travel trip for Santander Bank Top Performers. The program included an awards event, Magical Madrid, which won Dittman the 2013 Site Crystal Award for most outstanding single motivational event within an incentive program.

Marty Doyle, Dittman's director of travel experiences, said, "From the level of attention the hotel's team demonstrated during our pre-con meeting, the extra effort made to ensure that not one guest out of 240 waited for their room on arrival day, to the proactive and extremely responsible approach they took in preparing us for the impending public protests on Plaza Neptuno, the entire team of The



Marty Doyle (l), Dittman's director of travel experiences, presents the company's award to Robert Lee, director of sales for DMC Spaintacular.

Westin Palace Hotel demonstrated just how important our guests and our business were."

Spaintacular helped create a variety of custom excursions highlighting the city's most appealing attractions. This event was carefully crafted to drive the branding and vision of the organization throughout,



Displaying their Travel Partner of the Year award for 2013 are (l to r) The Westin Palace Hotel Madrid Sales Manager Celia Laguillo, Event Coordinator Fabian Michel and Director of Sales Sophie Clauze.

and to celebrate the new link between the Spanish and American groups. www.dittmanincentives.com

Site Study: Group Travel Is Top Motivational Tool

CHICAGO, IL —Does prior experience with a supplier influence program decisions? This and related questions were the focus of a second joint research study conducted by the Site International Foundation and IMEX. The study asked industry professionals to comment on their experiences in purchasing motivational travel. Of the participants, 40 percent are Users of incentive travel and 60 percent represent Providers.

• **Group Travel is growing in importance.** It leads the list of motivational tools in User's programs (62 percent) with Recognition (44 percent) and Training (40 percent), surpassing Individual Travel and Family Travel.

• **Past relationships with a supplier matters.** 83 percent of Users said that prior experience with a supplier and/or brand relationship significantly influences or influences their decision, up significantly from 2013. Providers (60 percent) also confirm that loyalty continues to have a strong influence on their selection of suppliers.

• **Higher management and purchasing departments influence buying decisions.** The majority of User respondents (59 percent) said that a single decision-maker did not make incentive travel decisions. However, primary decision-makers were in top management and 60 percent identified them as authorized to make

unilateral decisions about motivational travel.

• **Providers believe that price is the major factor in not winning a bid.** The majority of Providers (65 percent) said that price is the main reason for losing a bid as compared to 53 percent in 2013. However, a smaller percentage of suppliers (48 percent vs. 57 percent) feel that lead time affected the quality of their submissions.

• **Trade shows are a valuable source for identifying service providers.** Both Users (79 percent) and Providers (81 percent) said that they attend trade shows for the opportunity to find new suppliers or meet with existing ones. www.siteglobal.com

Snapshots



1 Facilitator Barb Taylor Carpender, CMM, CHSC, of Denver-based Taylored Alliances, addresses a group during a breakout session at The Destination Hotels & Resorts (DH&R) Advisory Council Meeting, held recently at the Royal Palms Resort & Spa, Phoenix, Arizona. **2** Participants at the DH&R council meeting included (l to r) Mark Lindsey, director of sales and marketing for Royal Palms Resort and Spa, Phoenix, the host hotel for the event; Ty Brassie, director of sales and marketing at La Cantera Hill Country Resort, San Antonio, Texas; and Larry Colton, director of sales and marketing, Resort at Squaw Creek, Lake Tahoe, California. **3** At the Destination Hotels' teambuilding event, attendees broke into teams to assemble wagons, which were donated to a Phoenix organization. Also, Richard Harper delivered a keynote entitled "U.S. Travel: Their Mission and Support of the Travel Industry." **4** The opening of IMEX 2014, Messe Frankfurt, Germany, which boasted record-breaking attendance of nearly 9,000 participants of which almost 4,000 were hosted buyers. **5** Visit Orlando recently hosted a FAM for 15 clients who visited 10 hotels and experienced Cirque du Soleil's show "La Nouba." Janice Middlestadt, senior sales manager, Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista, located in the Walt Disney World Resort (second from right), toured the hotel with (l to r) Matt Rust, Kylene Hong and Walt Viera. **6** The 13th Annual Mexico Showcase & Travel Expo, which was held in April at Moon Palace Golf & Spa Resort, Cancun, Mexico, hosted 86 buyers from the U.S. and Canada and 38 exhibitors from Mexico at the new Moon Palace Arena.

By Michael J. Lyons

AIBTM and Education: Perfect Together

There has never been any controversy over the value of professional credentials such as the CMP and CMM designations as career advancement tools. But until now, monitoring and managing certifications has often been a time-consuming and sometimes complex challenge.

The Americas Incentive, Business Travel & Meetings Exhibition (AIBTM), produced by Reed Exhibitions, aims to make that task easier with a new alliance with RecertTrack's Association & Meeting Professional Advancement Portal.

The Web-based RecertTrack platform allows planners and other industry professionals, such as destination management executives, to track, update and store ongoing education information, as well as remind users when recertifications are due.

Career advancement for certified professionals in the meetings, incentive, conference and exhibition industry is highly dependent on education, and keeping track of continuing educa-

tion unit (CEU) and other documentation is vital. The industry has been in need of automated re-certification tracking for a long time, and AIBTM is pleased to join with RecertTrack to offer the Association & Meeting Professional Advancement Portal at our show in Orlando June 10-12.

AIBTM is the first and only meeting industry organization to partner with RecertTrack and offer online document management and automated recertification tracking, notes RecertTrack founder and CEO Cedric Calhoun, who will head a "To Certify or Not to Certify" education session at AIBTM next month.

Achieving certifications and continuing education credits and then storing and managing them can be considered too time-consuming or even overlooked altogether. Is that the next "meaning of life" question for the meetings and events industry? The meeting and events industry generates substantial revenues that support the gross domestic product. However,

meeting and event professionals do not receive the recognition for the work that they do from government entities and industry largely because there is a lack of a formal structure for continuing education, and the industry is largely disjointed. There are many event management programs throughout the U.S. and Europe, but what happens after the program is completed? Where is the formal structure to continue the learning process? Is there a place for certification that requires continuing education and demonstration of knowledge over time?

- **Leveraging Mobile for Better, Greener and More Profitable Events.** Using mobile has a number of advantages — for the user and the environment.

The key to AIBTM's excellence is that all the educational content presented at our event is delivered in direct response to surveys that ask people what they most want to learn about. We ask them what sessions they want to see at the next year's show. So it's not like we're guessing at what meeting planners will find appealing. We're giving people exactly what they tell us

“We ask them what sessions they want to see at the next year's show. So it's not like we're guessing at what meeting planners will find appealing. We're giving people **exactly what...they want.**”

Such existential questions and many more will be discussed by our education session panelists in an interactive format with the audience at AIBTM.

AIBTM works closely with CIC, PCMA, IAEE, Site and MPI to ensure the relevance of our educational content. Topics include hot current issues such as SMM, certification, global meetings, experiential design, content creation, the use of technology and even what food to serve. At this year's event in Orlando, MPI will make a presentation on the future of meetings.

More than 20 complimentary sessions make up the education lineup in the Innovation Zone at AIBTM June 11 and June 12. Sessions include:

- **12 Ways to a Great User Experience.** Put yourself in the position of attendees and learn how to avoid that one bad experience that can color an entire event.
- **Unlock Your Event Data — The Smart Path to Enlightened Event Intelligence.** How data can help you pick the right people and right place to create the right event.
- **Hot Tech for Meeting Design.** This is an interactive primer on using tablets, smartphones and laptops to enhance session design.
- **Open TechBar.** Here is where you can experience the latest technology and get the upper hand on how to use it.
- **Surf the Content Marketing Wave.** Learn to stand apart from the volume of material on the Internet and master content curation.
- **Meeting Planning Automation.** Put technology in perspective without getting left behind.

they want. And we know from our surveys that the education is the No. 1 reason why planners come to our show.

And perhaps no industry topic is more important at the moment than education.

C&IT



Attendees at an education session at a recent AIBTM.

Credit: AIBTM



Michael J. Lyons

is exhibition director for Reed Travel Exhibitions, responsible for the management of AIBTM (The Americas Incentive, Business Travel & Meetings Exhibition). Lyons is a respected veteran of the meetings/travel industry who held senior level posts with Carlson Wagonlit Travel, EGR International and McGettigan Partners (now Maritz). He was also the president and CEO of GEP Philly, a premier Destination Management Company. www.aibtm.com

The Great CMM Debate

Critics and Supporters of the MPI Program Speak Out

By John Buchanan

The meeting industry is not known for controversy. With the exception of the “AIG effect” explosion during the financial crisis or the occasional outcries from Congress that a government agency such as the General Services Administration has fleeced taxpayers with an overly extravagant conference, the industry has a remarkably placid history.

But earlier this year, a major eruption occurred when Meeting Professionals International (MPI), as part of a new alliance with the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), announced changes to the coveted Certificate in Meeting Management (CMM) credential originally created in 1998. There are currently 938 holders of the designation, with 47 of them named in 2013.

The initial changes announced in December:

- The eligibility requirements for professional experience were reduced from 10 years to five years.
- The formerly mandated 5½ days of onsite education was reduced to 3½ days and two webinars.
- The longstanding and highly respected CMM acronym was eliminated and replaced with a new name, CMM

Designation Program, making CMM a trademark.

- The assessment previously involved taking an essay exam and writing a business plan. The changes eliminated the exam and only required development of a “business case assessment.”

There was further controversy concerning a decision to award a CMM credential to about 90 former holders of the GBTA-created strategic meetings management certification (SMMC), which was intended to foster consolidation of corporate business travel and meetings management, but was discontinued in 2011 only two years after it launched.

The reason for the changes to the CMM program, according to MPI, was



“Nothing is perfect in any certification program and never will be. But in the end, I think, MPI listened to the community and made changes to the program that are in the best interests of the program as they see it.”

Tony Lorenz, CMM, Founder and CEO
BxB Online, Chicago, IL

to broaden its reach. But existing CMMs — and particularly some well-known industry veterans — claimed that the changes diminished the prestige of the designation.

Ann Rebentisch, CMP, CMM, principle of Handshake Events in Thousand Oaks, California, is leader of a LinkedIn Group of 456 CMMs. She launched an online survey in mid-February in which about 20 percent of existing CMMs participated. Based on her research, Rebentisch said in a statement, 88 percent of CMMs opposed the overall program changes. Rebentisch submitted the survey to MPI on March 5.

On March 14, MPI president and CEO Paul Van Deventer responded to this and other objections with a letter that indicated the objections and specific suggestions for revision were under review.

In April, in another letter, Van Deventer informed CMMs and all MPI

members that some revisions to the original plan had been made:

- Eligibility requirements were amended to include a minimum 7–10 years of professional experience in the



meeting and event or business travel industry and a minimum of 3–5 years of management experience with two years of profit-and-loss responsibility, and a personal statement and letter of recommendation from a professional colleague or supervisor.

- Amended assessment requirements: “Each future CMM Program participant will be required to develop a business case in which they must

“I believe MPI has now made the necessary revisions to maintain the integrity of the original program intent, although to get to this place they might have alienated even further that senior planner audience.”

Carolyn Pund, CMP, CMM, Senior Manager
Global Strategic Meetings Management, Cisco, San Jose, CA



apply the course materials learned. The business case should reflect real situations, address current challenges that need to be resolved and be actionable — meaning the participant must have responsibility and influence over the challenges’ outcome. Each participant’s business case will be evaluated and scored against a pre-established standard of performance or rubric by CMM Program faculty,” said Van Deventer.

- It also was agreed that the program would maintain its Certificate in Meeting Management branding and restore the CMM acronym as a recognized and established designation.
- Van Deventer also clarified: “Professionals who achieved the Certificate in Meeting Management from MPI prior to 2014 will retain the CMM designation, which is now supported by both MPI and GBTA. GBTA will communicate directly to individuals who achieved the comparable GBTA certificate (formerly SMMC) regarding parameters for using the CMM designation.”

MPI will re-issue new certificates to existing CMMs with the correct Certificate in Meeting Management branding, although no details have yet been announced.

As of press time, a resolution of that key issue had not been announced by GBTA.

Adding to the confusion and consternation is a basic misunderstanding among some planners and even some MPI Chapters over certification vs. certificate. MPI spokesperson Sonya Thorpe clarifies: “The CMM Program has been incorrectly branded/marketed as Certification in Meeting Management in the past; however, it has always been

CMM, principal of Meeting Strategists LLC in Falmouth, Massachusetts. King earned her CMP credential in 1996 and became a CMM in 2005. Until recently, she served as a member of the CMM faculty, teaching the strategic financial management module.

Based on her 20 years of experience as an MPI member, King says she has an idea why things went wrong with the CMM initiative. “MPI frequently makes decisions without doing their due diligence,” she says. “And this incident was a perfect example of that, in the sense that they have now come back and said that because of the feedback they got from everyone that maybe they didn’t do the work they should have done before they made the decisions. It is unfortunate that MPI does not reach out to people before they do things.”

King also says she has a clear sense of MPI’s original motives which led to the controversy. “As a large organization, MPI has to target the lowest common denominator, which is your mid-level planner,” she says. “I think that for senior-level planners, they are missing the boat. And that’s why senior-level planners are looking for an alternative now.”

Carolyn Pund, CMP, CMM, senior manager, global strategic meetings management at Cisco in San Jose, California, is another veteran, high-profile CMM who took umbrage at the changes originally announced by MPI. “CMMs represent the industry’s senior meeting professionals — a group that MPI has struggled with over the past few years to retain,” Pund says. “I didn’t quite understand

a certificate program since continuing education credits were not required to maintain the CMM.”

The Controversy Continues

Despite Van Deventer’s April letter, the controversy over the changes lingers.

“I was disappointed by what MPI did, because I don’t feel that they engaged even the faculty from the CMM program, much less the existing CMMs out there,” says Karen M. King, CMP,

their strategy — or lack of strategy — to dismantle, reassign or revise something that was well-respected as a meetings management designation. The passion and pride of those of us holding a CMM were made quite obvious when significant changes were announced with minimal input from the CMM community.”

There is a certain irony, Pund notes, in the fact that the CMM designation has long focused on “leadership and acting strategically. I think in general, and

from the discussions I heard and online forums I read, the initial execution by MPI/GBTA leadership was anything but strategic — it was a disconnect.”

That disconnect, King says, was largely based on a commercial desire by MPI and GBTA “to get more people into the (CMM) program. In 2005, when I achieved my CMM, we were doing Harvard Business School case study work to achieve our CMM. It was then, and still

should be, essentially like getting a master’s degree — not just (undergraduate) degree work. So to change it the way they have, I do think they have diminished what it used to be.”

‘A Disservice to the Meeting Industry’

Erin Stahowiak, CMP, CMM, project manager at McDonald’s Corporation in Chicago and manager of the company’s SMM program, found the MPI situation “somewhat discouraging and disappointing.” Stahowiak earned her CMM certification in 2011.

She agrees with many other CMMs that the prestige of the designation has been diminished. Like many of her peers, she is not completely satisfied by the revisions announced in April. And like a

“I was surprised that the matter wasn’t handled as well as it could have been. And we didn’t get the feeling that they asked the opinion of any existing CMMs. It was like they just took the changes out of a box and said here they are.”

Donna M. Patrick, CMP, CMM, Associate Director, Global Meetings and Conventions, UnitedHealth Group, Minnetonka, MN

number of CMMs she knows, she is not convinced the process has been concluded, because in her opinion MPI still has work to do to correct its mistakes and repair the damage done.

“It’s a disservice to the meeting industry and to meeting professionals to take away from the most prestigious certification that we have,” Stahowiak says. “People who hold that credential worked

hard to get it through a rigorous program. And it’s rewarding to accomplish that. And when you tell people you’re a CMM it means something.”



“It’s a disservice...to take away from the most prestigious certification that we have. People who hold that credential worked hard... And when you tell people you’re a CMM it means something.”

Erin Stahowiak, CMP, CMM, Project Manager
McDonald’s Corporation, Chicago, IL

But, she says, the actions by MPI have downgraded it and harmed its value. She also is frustrated by what she sees as poor handling of the episode by MPI, especially when it comes to communication. “They have suggested they included people in the decision-making process, but it lacked a collaborative approach that could have made the process much more positive for all sides,” she says.

Donna M. Patrick, CMP, CMM, associate director, global meetings and conventions at UnitedHealth Group in Minnetonka, Minnesota, agrees that MPI fumbled the ball in terms of how it handled its decision-making process.

“I was surprised that the matter wasn’t handled as well as it could have been,” says Patrick, who earned her CMM in 2001. “But with any change,



there are things that are done right and things that aren’t. But there were things that just didn’t go right initially, and that included the communication of it. And we didn’t get the feeling that they asked the opinion of any existing CMMs. It was like they just took the changes out of a box and said here they are.”

Patrick was among the CMMs who had interaction with MPI after the initial

announcement last December. She and her peers tried to focus on protecting the integrity of the respected and prestigious credential.

As a result of the ongoing debacle, she says, she is considering not renewing her MPI membership when it expires in August.

CMM Supporters Say Program Is Enhanced

Although there is no existing research that shows critics versus supporters of MPI’s updated changes announced in April, MPI president and CEO Paul Van Deventer says that a majority of CMMs now support the resolution agreed to based on the feedback received after the first announcement in December.

Among those who do support MPI are Tony Lorenz, CMM, founder and CEO of Chicago-based BXB Online. “I’ve been a CMM since 2000,” Lorenz says. “And since that time, just as you do with any program, I’ve seen that it needed to evolve and change. And there have been changes several times to the program before the most recent changes.”

Even Lorenz, however, acknowledges that Van Deventer and MPI chief operating officer Cindy D’Aoust could have done a

better job of engaging the CMM community and making its initial decisions and announcement. “To be straight about it, with regard to Paul Van Deventer and the team at MPI, there may have been in hindsight a different approach to the input from the community that might have yielded a different response to phase one of the changes,” he says. “Those original changes were not very fa-

vorably received. And that caused a lot of reaction from the CMM community.”

At the same time, however, he takes issue with the CMMs who had such a vehement reaction to the changes. “My reaction was not so much to the changes themselves, but to the process by which people reacted to the changes,” Lorenz says. “I think there’s a right and wrong way to bring feedback to an organization like MPI, and I didn’t feel it was done in the right way. It should be transparent and fact-based. And I didn’t see enough of that.”

Today, Lorenz says, he is satisfied with the revised changes announced in Van Deventer’s April letter. “I accept them as favorable to the program overall,” he says. “Nothing is perfect in any certification program and never will be. But in the end, I think, MPI listened to the community and made changes to the program that are in the best interests of the program as they see it.”

He also notes that he knows a number of other CMMs who are satisfied with the changes and supportive of MPI. In the long run, he says, the new partnership between MPI and GBTA will enhance the CMM program and broaden its reach beyond just the meeting industry. “I think the program will now be more relevant to a wider business community than it was before.”

Pund also is personally satisfied with the revised program. “I believe MPI has now made the necessary revisions to maintain the integrity of the original program intent, although to get to this place they might have alienated even further that senior planner audience,” she says.

Van Deventer Says Changes Strengthen Program

MPI president and CEO Paul Van Deventer, who spoke exclusively with *Corporate & Incentive Travel* after reportedly declining other interviews earlier in the controversy, makes clear that he will not respond to the individual criticisms expressed in this article.

“I don’t want to speak to those statements, because I think we have a much

broader community here. But the intent throughout this process was to enhance and to increase the value of the CMM program and to provide a program that continues to evolve and change as the industry evolves and changes.”

MPI moved forward with its new alliance with GBTA because a number of GBTA members are involved in meeting and event planning, Van Deventer says. “So we worked with them, as well as a task force group, to design a new (CMM) program,” he says.

Once the controversy over MPI’s original announcement in December became known, Van Deventer says, “The approach we took was to say we appreciate your concerns. We will listen to you.



“We feel really good about the changes. We feel that the program is still a very prestigious program, and that it is strengthened not only by the partnership with GBTA, but also by the partnerships we’ve created.”

Paul Van Deventer, President and CEO
Meeting Professionals International, Dallas, TX

And we will ensure that where those concerns make sense and your recommendations make sense, we will integrate those to the (final) program to continue to enhance it.”

Like Lorenz, Van Deventer cites the fact that the program has undergone three cycles of revisions in its 16-year existence. “And for these most recent changes, we listened to the community, and we got some great feedback from a number of sources. We consolidated that feedback and worked with GBTA to get consensus with them on how we could make the program stronger. And those are the changes that we announced in the April letter and that are now being implemented.

“We feel really good about the changes, Van Deventer continues. “We feel that the program is still a very prestigious program, and that it is strengthened not only by the partnership with GBTA, but also by the partnerships we’ve created with prestigious universities such as the University of Virginia Darden School of Business. And those kinds of relation-

ships add levels of consistency and credibility to the program, both inside and outside the meeting industry, that we really think enhance the program.”

Despite any lingering negativity to the contrary, Van Deventer says, the revisions announced in his April letter are acceptable to a majority of the CMM population. “In the broader community, including online CMM forums, they have been extremely receptive and very positive and fully behind the changes that have been made. And they are also supportive of the fact that MPI listened to the community.”

Both MPI and GBTA, Van Deventer says, are satisfied that the process has been favorably resolved in everyone’s

best interest and any isolated opinions from people still making criticisms after the April letter do not represent a dominant opinion, as demonstrated by the many positive comments MPI has received.

For their part, however, King and a number of her peers still object to the changes. “I just do not think they should be changing the CMM program at all,” she says. “I feel that they’ve dumbed down the CMM credential a number of times over the last 10 years. And I think they’re doing that purely to increase the number of people they can put through the program. It’s become more and more of a revenue generator for MPI. That’s the reality.”

She believes the recent controversy and lingering bad feelings from many veteran CMMs will do permanent damage to MPI’s reputation and credibility. “My fear is that they are going to lose their stronghold in the industry as the leading organization,” King says. “It saddens me to see that MPI is where they are. But they got themselves there.” **C&IT**

Site Selection

Value Driven These Eight Destinations Offer Planners More Bang for Their Meeting Bucks

By Christine Loomis

What constitutes value? Is it lower room rates or increased attendance because of a destination or perhaps above-and-beyond assistance provided by CVBs? However value is defined, these communities deliver it.



The Jacksonville skyline lights up the night and the St. Johns River.

Jacksonville, Florida

"Jacksonville is a destination with so much to offer, and value is one of our greatest assets," says Paul Astleford, president and CEO of Visit Jacksonville, the city's CVB. "Not only are our room rates very competitive compared to most waterfront destinations in the state, but our location, our accessibility by plane or car, our extensive venue selection and the overall vibrancy of our city give us an

edge when it comes to meeting a planner's needs and wants."

Astleford also notes that planners experience value in the outstanding support from the CVB's services department before, during and after their events. "This makes Jacksonville the best and smartest choice," he says.

Karen Miller, president of Seneca, South Carolina-based Miller Marketing Communications Inc., whose 2014 Motor

Operated Valve Users Group and Air Operated Valve Users Group annual conferences (MUG/AUG conferences) were held at the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront in January with 700 attendees, has already booked Jacksonville for next year's conference, and value was a key reason.

"We found hotel and restaurant costs very affordable for our attendees, and as organizers, the meeting costs at the hotel were much less than at many other Florida destinations. The hotel was very pleasantly aggressive in pursuing our group," she adds. "They offered discounts on their already reasonable food and beverage costs, and comped expo hall Internet and two receptions for the group, and provided generous room upgrades. The city's CVB provided additional incentives, including a monetary sponsorship based on room-night utilization, one incentive I have never experienced anywhere else."

The conference runs in January when finding value in Florida can be challenging. "It is a unique situation to find a Florida city at this time of year

that works hard to win your business within your budget," Miller says.

And then there's the setting. "The St. Johns River is such a beautiful feature, and the city skyline against the river and boardwalk create a fantastic setting," Miller says. "The one caveat is that planners should be aware there are not a tremendous number of restaurants, clubs or shopping options within walking distance of the riverfront, so if your group is looking for that, this may not be a match. However, if most of your evening events and activities are planned in your hotel, then Jacksonville along the St. Johns River is a beautiful and affordable location for a meeting."

Among recent enhancements at area hotels is a multimillion-dollar renovation at Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa in Ponte Vedra Beach — 30 minutes southeast of Jacksonville — where guest rooms, dining outlets, meeting space and access to the adjacent TPC Sawgrass championship golf course were updated.

San Jose, California

One rarely hears "affordable" and "San Francisco Bay Area" in the same sentence, yet groups find value here in many ways, including weekend meetings and taking advantage of free and nearly free entertainment. Planners also can do a little research to discover which local city offers their group the most value. Bea Langsdorf, corporate events manager for global technology company Nvidia Corporation, based in Santa Clara, CA, has done exactly that and believes San Jose is that city.

"The Bay Area is not an affordable meeting destination compared to many others in the U.S.," she says. "However, out of the three choices you have when you want to hold a large event in the area, San Jose is much more affordable than San Francisco or Santa Clara, particularly when comparing hotel room rates. In the last comparison I ran, San Jose room rates were about 20 percent cheaper than Santa Clara and 30 percent cheaper than



Nvidia Corporate Events Planner Bea Langsdorf says she received significant support from Team San Jose for the company's GPU Technology Conference in March at the San Jose McEnery Convention Center.

San Francisco. For us, lower room rates mean more attendees can afford to attend the conference."

Langsdorf found savings in other ways, too. "The San Jose (McEnery) Convention Center worked with us to come up with some off-the-standard-menu lunch options that met our budget. By serving lunch there we saved money and our attendees saved time as well."

Karolyn Kirchesler, CEO of Team San Jose, the city's CVB, isn't surprised. "One of the reasons 98 percent of planners say they'd return is that San Jose offers great value for corporate planners and groups," she says. "Our one-stop service saves valuable time, and our compact, walkable downtown means there's no need for group transportation. We offer competitive hotel rates on weekends and a lot of free or budget-friendly entertainment."

Langsdorf's GPU Technology Conference in March attracted approximately 3,500 attendees, and Team San Jose was integral to the meeting's success. First, Langsdorf says, "Team San Jose always helps us promote our conference with signage at the airport and around the convention center. It is part of our package deal and does not cost us extra. Second, the staff helped us put together a dining program for our attendees. They assisted in selecting venues that were walking distance from the convention center and would reserve one or two large tables for group dinners with the

specific requirement of splitting the bill between all dinner attendees. Their volunteers also manned the dinner sign-up station at the event."

Close-in restaurants booked by the group included Mezcal, Loft Bar & Bistro, Billy Berk's, Il Fornaio, PF Chang's China Bistro and Gordon Biersch Brewery & Restaurant.

Attendees who want to add vacation time to a San Jose meeting are in luck.

Monterey, San Francisco and the Santa Cruz Mountain Wine Region are all within a short drive — yet another side of the value coin.

Daytona Beach, Florida

Value isn't always about the lowest dollar amount. Stewart Doty has been bringing the Racing Promotion Monthly Promoters Workshops to Daytona for 23 years, just as his predecessor did for 19 years before that. The meeting takes place in February during the area's primo event, the Daytona 500, when prices are typically the highest of the year.



The Daytona Beach International Speedway.

"We convene at the absolute peak time each year, Daytona 500 week, so rates across the community are not as low as they might be at other times, yet they're competitive for the area at the time," says Doty, the editor of the Merrill, Wisconsin-based *Racing Promotion Monthly*. "Our event has been part of Daytona Speedweek since 1972, so the 'bang' we get is race-week ambi-

ence, the tradition in our industry that is Speedweek, the adjacency of numerous events and the festival atmosphere of race week. It strengthens the draw of our own event by adding the opportunity

“Since we are small by comparison to the (Daytona Speedweek) races in terms of public attendance and corporate participation, the CVB has been extremely helpful in explaining the value of our event to Daytona hoteliers.”

Stewart Doty, Editor
Racing Promotion Monthly, Merrill, WI



to attend events during and around our dates at nearby race facilities.”

Doty, whose group of about 350 was based at the Hilton Daytona Beach Ocean Walk Village in February, also points out the “value-added assistance of the CVB. “Since we are small by comparison to the races in terms of public attendance and corporate participation, the CVB has been extremely helpful in explaining the value of our event to Daytona hoteliers, as we must compete with the corporate money surrounding the big race, which has at times been a challenge. The CVB has also assisted us in locating facilities and in recruitment of speakers from the Central Florida area for our events.”

Sharon Mock, who was serving as interim executive director of the Daytona Beach Area CVB at the time of this interview, says that in addition to the International Speedway, NASCAR and the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) have a major presence in town. “These organizations offer one-of-a-kind offsite venues ideal for meetings, special events and teambuilding activities,” she says. “Attendees can take three hot laps around the World Center of Racing with the Richard Petty Driving Experience or host a charity golf tournament at LPGA International. The added value Daytona Beach provides is unmatched.”

Those top-tier businesses create a local pool of speaker

talent, as do the area’s three universities, including Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. Daytona also is within range of three airports, making getting there easy, and offers 23 miles of beaches, mak-

ing it a place attendees want to be. All of that combines to make Daytona a value-laden destination at any time of year.

Among the latest developments are enhancements at the Speedway and several new hotels, including the Marriott at Daytona Beach Shores, scheduled to open this fall.

Charlotte, North Carolina

“From the hundreds of affordable flight options and ease of accessibility at Charlotte Douglas International Airport to a wide array of economical hotels all within walking distance of the Charlotte Convention Center, Charlotte brings tremendous value to the table,” says Mike Butts, executive director of Visit Charlotte.

The value extends to city facilities. “The Charlotte Convention Center has also created value through a one-of-kind asset, the NASCAR Hall of Fame,” Butts continues, “which is attached to the fa-



The NASCAR Hall of Fame in Charlotte, North Carolina.

cility and serves as a truly unique special event venue or easy escape for attendees during their downtime. Attendees can conveniently experience the venue with reduced \$10 admission thanks to our new Show Your Badge program.”

Charlotte has a lot going on, including the recent opening of Skye Condominiums, a mixed-use high-rise featuring a Hyatt Place and an 8,000-sf open-air rooftop restaurant and sky bar. A Sheraton Charlotte and a Le Meridien open this year as well.

As for venues, Charlotte-Concord Sea Life Aquarium opened in February, and among its attributes is Tropical Bay of Rays, a mesmerizing backdrop for events of up to 80 guests. And in April, Charlotte’s LEED-certified ballpark for its AAA baseball team opened to rave reviews just four blocks from the Charlotte Convention Center.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

One upshot to saving by choosing a value destination is that planners can use those savings to create a more robust meeting experience for their attendees.

“The real advantage to Milwaukee as a destination is that you can spend more money on your meeting because the cost of accommodations, food, attractions and events is lower than most first-tier cities,” says Paul Upchurch, president and CEO of Visit Milwaukee. “Planners rate the experience in Milwaukee as exceptional and have the money to invest back into a quality meeting experience.”

Monetary incentives also can positively affect the bottom line for planners.

Visit Milwaukee currently offers a \$5,000–\$10,000 cash incentive to groups booking meetings in the Wisconsin Center from September 2014 through December 2016 (there are restrictions). The center, part of Milwaukee’s budget-friendly convention campus, includes the historic Milwaukee Theatre with 2,500–4,100 seats depending on configuration, and the U.S. Cellular Arena, with additional function and



The “winged” Milwaukee Art Museum overlooks Lake Michigan in downtown Milwaukee. The museum’s dramatic architecture invites awe-inspiring event options (right).

trade-show space plus 12,700 seats of its own. A convenient skywalk connects the Wisconsin Center to more than 1,200 rooms at the newly renovated Hilton Milwaukee City Center and Hyatt Regency Milwaukee, making inclement weather inconsequential.

One of the city’s most notable attractions also is a spectacular setting for a gala or opening reception. The Milwaukee Art Museum, overlooking Lake Michigan, is an architectural wonder, particularly its postmodern Quadracci Pavilion with an evocative 90-foot glass ceiling and outer “wings” that unfold and fold twice daily. Planners who want wow with their value need look no further.

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Brian Fullerton, assistant director of events with Bloomington, Indiana-based Solution Tree, a leading provider of educational strategies, planned the Minneapolis Professional Learning Communities at Work Institute in Minneapolis last July. He calls Minneapolis extremely affordable. “This is one of the major reasons we continue to return,” he says. “Hotel rates are very affordable, especially with the quality of hotels our staff and attendees reserve. In addition, with the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport being a major Delta hub, flights are easy to find and afford.” In 2014, Solution Tree will return to the city for the sixth consecutive year.

The Minneapolis Convention Center provides additional value for the meeting, which attracted 2,200 attendees last year. “We get amazing space for our group size that is really budget friendly,” Fullerton notes. “Our type of meeting requires not only

a single space for all attendees to listen to keynote speakers, but also up to a dozen large rooms for breakout sessions. The convention center provides all this under one roof for an affordable price. And the center’s service providers (catering, Internet, security) always deliver top-quality service at some of the lowest prices we see in the country.”

Melvin Tennant, president and CEO of Meet Minneapolis, calls the city’s compactness a value element. “There are thousands of hotel rooms within a mile of the Minneapolis Convention Center, saving groups on transportation costs,” he says. “Attendees also can easily access the restaurants, attractions and downtown-located sports facilities after hours by walking around our vibrant downtown or using our terrific free bus rides on Nicollet Mall, which will save them money, as well.”

Fullerton agrees. “The city is very walking friendly; you are never too far away from anything, and if you do need public transportation, it is nearby, easy and al-



The Minneapolis Convention Center hosted Solution Tree’s Minneapolis Professional Learning Communities at Work Institute last summer.

ways feels safe.” His group has frequented many of the city’s close-in restaurants, including Brit’s, the Butcher and Boar,



The Local and Zelo’s, all of which he says provide a great atmosphere and value.

Additionally, Meet Minneapolis offers many free services to planners. In October, for example, it launched Go Minneapolis Signature Experiences, putting the best of the city in one value-packed package for groups. And if planners or attendees wear out their shoes during a conference, no problem: there’s no tax on shoes (or clothing) in Minnesota. Now that’s value.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Planners who haven’t been to Oklahoma City, or haven’t been recently, may be surprised by what this city offers.

Over two decades Oklahoma’s capital has been transformed by more than \$5 billion of public and private investment and improvements. The CVB is anxious to show it off.

Mike Carrier, president of Visit Oklahoma City, says, “Oklahoma City is a value-oriented city well known for being a great place to do business. Our culture is built on the ideals of good value for price paid and an honest return on your investment. With an average cost of living here more than 10 percent lower than

the national average and our ranking in *Business Travel News* at 74th in per diem cost out of the top 100 cities in the na-



Credit: Oklahoma City CVB

Water taxis cruise the Bricktown Canal along Oklahoma City's Bricktown entertainment district.

tion, OKC provides an affordable location for planners.

"We have numerous top-quality, full-service hotels in the downtown core with ease of access from Will Rogers Airport, and within an easy walk of several entertainment areas featuring a wide variety of

activities such as dragon boating and kayaking. Also in the district are the Devon Boathouse and Chesapeake Finish Line tower, both with event space and primo views.

Not yet visible but on the horizon, thanks to a 2009 vote approving \$252

"(Minneapolis) is very walking friendly; you are never too far away from anything, and if you do need public transportation, it is nearby, easy and always feels safe."

Brian Fullerton, Assistant Director, Events
Solution Tree, Bloomington, IN



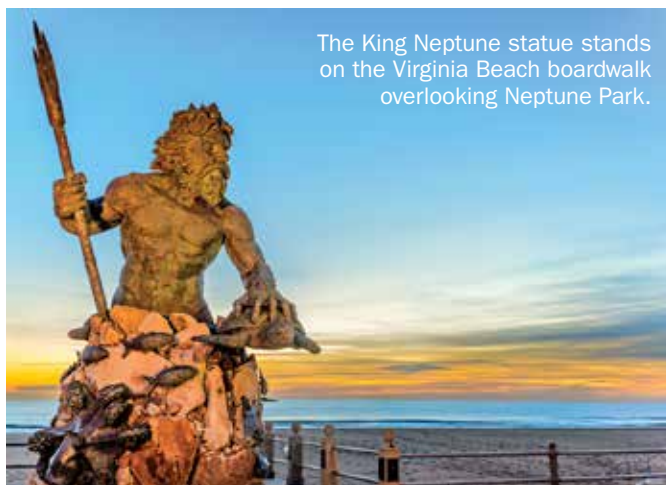
restaurants including Automobile Alley, Bricktown and Film Row," he says. "Add such attractions as the Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum and the Civic Center Music Hall and the area provides an outstanding array of facilities and amenities to make any meeting a success."

In the heart of downtown, the Cox Convention Center offers more than 150,000 sf of total meeting space including a 25,000-sf ballroom and 100,000 sf of exhibit space. The center also includes a 15,000-seat arena. There are currently 12 hotels and nearly 2,200 rooms within walking distance, including the Renaissance Oklahoma City Convention Center Hotel, connected to the center via a skybridge. Two blocks north, the Skirvin Hilton offers a historical setting with origi-

million in funding, is a new, expanded downtown convention center slated for completion in 2019.

Virginia Beach, Virginia

A popular coastal community, Virginia Beach has a relatively short peak season and, happily for planners, a relatively long value season.



The King Neptune statue stands on the Virginia Beach boardwalk overlooking Neptune Park.

Credit: Virginia Beach CVB

nal woodwork and architectural details from its 1911 grand opening.

Oklahoma City has an abundance of intriguing offsite options, including its Boathouse District, located along the Oklahoma River on the southern edge of downtown. The Chesapeake Boathouse offers space for meetings as well as teambuilding

"Virginia Beach is a perfect setting for corporate meetings and is an especially excellent value destination for the corporate meeting planner from October through May," says James B. Ricketts, director of the Virginia Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau. "During this eight-month period, we are able to offer a wide array of convention hotels with affordable rates on the oceanfront, on Chesapeake Bay and in our downtown community, Town Center of Virginia Beach.

"One benefit for corporate meeting planners in choosing Virginia Beach is that they will work with one team when they book our award-winning convention center and when seeking the ideal hotel," Ricketts continues. "Our CVB sales and services team has been recognized nationally as a team that gives attention to detail and provides excellent customer service."

While the term "award winning" is often overused, Virginia Beach has garnered well-earned accolades for its stellar LEED Gold-certified Virginia Beach Convention Center. With more than 516,000 sf, the center is ideal for groups of all sizes, especially those wishing to make their meetings environmentally friendly.

Virginia Beach combines the best of urban and resort offerings, giving attendees a downtown core and 35 miles of shoreline and beach. Attractions include the Virginia Aquarium with its live shark gallery, Sandler Center for the Performing Arts, Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art and the new Adventure Park, where groups can book teambuilding sessions. The CVB also puts corporate groups in touch with local charities and non-profits for CSR events via its One Beach, One World program. Given the city's location and strong military presence, popular options include beach cleanups and assistance to veterans.

The bottom line is that from coast to coast, planners can find value — and quality — just by looking beyond the most obvious choices. **C&IT**

TODAY'S AGENDA

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Enjoying the Matrix Communications Inc. reception at Sandals LaSource Grenada are (l to r) Karie Timion, Mark and Jocelyn Hechtl, John and Carolyn Mirviss, Brian and Lisa Finnvik, Craig and Suzanne Nordstrom, Dan Galbraith, Mary Jo McGowan, Charlie and Lori Eicher, Ann and Tom Pearson, Tammy Peterson and Jim Peterson, Steve and Kareen Ferry, Mike and Paulette Parrott, Frank Millo, Susan and Kevin Peters, Peter McAllister, Lori Robbins, Mike Ellis, Shannon and Jason Cardwell.

That Spark Genuine Connections Among Attendees

At last, it seems the meeting industry can breathe a collective sigh of relief. After years of worrying whether the economy would take another dip or how things would play out for the industry, The Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) in early April significantly increased its forecast for the year, driven in large part by healthy corporate profits, rising management confidence and increased job development — a continued positive sign for the U.S. economy.

GBTA's outlook for group travel was revised to increase 7 percent in 2014 to \$126 billion — up from the 6.5 percent growth GBTA predicted last quarter.

While corporate meetings in many industries have remained relatively healthy throughout the recession, small meetings and executive retreats have increasingly come under scrutiny. Because they affect fewer people — and thus can be seen to have less valuable results for the expenditure — and can be perceived as “splashy” spending that only benefits up-

per management, many small meetings face the prospect of being replaced by lesser digital versions or phased out.

Always an inventive group, planners have responded to these challenges by showing why small meetings and executive retreats serve a crucial role for corporations. Planners today are engineering the intangible: intimate meetings that spark genuine connections among attendees.

Unique Venues and Unusual Spaces Help Planners Create Connections

As technology has become ever more integrated into meetings, and the recession has made budget and ROI come into focus more than ever, many fear that meetings — particularly small, face-to-face meetings — are in danger of losing out in the digital revolution. According to Meeting Professionals International's Outlook 2014, 54 percent of meeting professionals are using digital or hybrid meetings.

But corporate planners — and their companies — still believe in the significance of face-to-face interaction. MPI's study, based on a survey of meeting planners around the globe conducted by Association Insights, reports that only 3 percent of meeting planners are using virtual and hybrid to completely replace face-to-face meetings.

One of the key ways planners are continuing to demonstrate the value of in-person interaction is by putting extra effort into fostering attendee interaction through the specific spaces they're choosing for their meetings. “I deal with investor meetings, executive retreats, strategy summits, board meetings and dinners, and corporate golf and tennis tournaments here and have in the past for other small- and medium-sized businesses that I've worked for, and I've found that companies are going more towards smaller venues,” explains Christine M. Eggert, CAP, MCT, executive assistant and office supervisor at Ewing, New Jersey-based Celator Pharmaceuticals Inc.

“I find that small venues are great because they provide us with personal attention in a private setting. It's very important for our people to maximize interaction among attendees. I see better interaction when it's a relaxed setting,” she says. “For instance, when I'm looking out of town, I don't look for a conference room but rather a hotel suite living room, because there is more comfort there but there is still catering capability and the same quality of audio-visual capability. When I am booking a meeting that's local, I insist that I go to the site before booking to check it out and make sure it has the meeting space we're looking for but it's also intimate.”

Increasingly, venues are responding to planners' need for intimate spaces that foster interaction by renovation or restricting their venues to create unique spaces. In an interview in the MPI report, Darren Temple of the MPI Dallas Fort Worth Chapter and chief sales officer for the Dallas Convention & Visitors Bureau explains that the CVB is planning to reconfigure their ballroom space to accommodate these requests for smaller meeting and multi-use spaces.

“It's about unique spaces for people to collaborate. We think that's what meeting planners are requesting. There's an emphasis on education and ways to collaborate. Sometimes that takes place in very small environments,” Temple says in the report.

Hilton Worldwide also has already responded to this need by launching a small-meeting-specific planning tool in November of last year as part of their Connect online meeting-planning portal. Called “Meetings Simplified,” the tool highlights properties that offer packages for 25 or few attendees with Wi-Fi, flip charts and beverages automatically included, and options for meals and guest rooms.

Planners and Hotel Staff Work More Closely Together

As the meeting planning business picks up and expands, hotels have been

reacting to the increase in demand as basic economics dictates, raising prices when they can't increase supply. But while planners around the U.S. have been struggling to find space for many of their events, small and executive meetings are experiencing an interesting inverse of that: increased hotel availability and attention as venues look to cater to this market share.

Associated Luxury Hotels International (ALHI) has responded to this need



Karie Timion
Marketing Director
Matrix Communications Inc.
Plymouth, MN

“We have found the Sandals brand focuses on complete customer satisfaction, and it aligns perfectly with what our organization looks for in a resort and destination.”

on the part of small meeting planners by creating the U-200 Gems Collection — a new specialty segment of their portfolio that highlights more than 20 member hotels with 200 rooms or fewer. “These gems can provide a wonderful, secluded atmosphere for your group, which can be particularly appealing if you have a very tight-knit group, one that requires privacy or total confidentiality, or one that wishes to utilize the property's beautiful public spaces for private functions,” says David Gabri, president and CEO of ALHI in a statement on the new collection. “These hotels and resorts also enable smaller groups to be the main program at their property, which can have its benefits too.”

For planners looking to engineer an event that fosters interaction and breeds

connection, buy-in from hotel staff is a key piece of the puzzle. “Besides booking early to make sure you get the space you want, I think having a terrific rapport with the site is one of the most important parts of planning small meetings, because if they know you're organized and detailed oriented, they're more likely to bend over backward,” explains Eggert.

Karie Timion, marketing director at Plymouth, Minnesota-based Matrix Communications Inc., agrees. “The success of our Grenada trip began far before we arrived with the talented assistance of Antonecia Sweeting, Sandals group events coordinator, and Francine Stewart, Sandals resort sales manager. Antonecia worked with me remotely prior to our trip to ensure our group was registered accurately and our group celebration dinner was planned down to the last detail.

“On the property, I began working with Francine Stewart, and I knew from the moment I met her that our group was in very good hands. She took care of our group with grace and excellence that made our entire party feel like we were the only guests she had to attend to on the entire island. Francine went above and beyond to always make herself available to assist during the entire stay to ensure our group was completely satisfied,” adds Timion.

“In general, we have found the Sandals brand focuses on complete customer satisfaction, and it aligns perfectly with what our organization looks for in a resort and destination,” says Timion. “You can always rely on Sandals as they focus on the ultimate experience for their guests.”

When hotel staff treats your attendees as if they are special guests, they feel increased connection to the location, event and each other. Carol A. Monaco, executive assistant of Netherlands-headquartered Damco Distribution Services Inc., has experienced this during her company's executive retreat at The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs. “We're a company that provides service to clients, so we know how important that is, and we want people to come back to us.” Monaco, who is located in Damco's

Madison, New Jersey, office, explains, “One thing that stood out for us during our executive retreat at The Broadmoor was definitely their customer service. The moment you check in to when you’re having breakfast to when people are just walking by, people who work at the hotel greet you by name.”

Like Eggert and Timion, Monaco has found that securing a connection with hotel staff early on in the planning process goes a long way to ensure an intimate event that goes off with a hitch. “We originally went last November to speak to the folks that would handle our account, and they were wonderful,” Monaco explains. “We went back in January, and there wasn’t anything that wasn’t covered. They work with you, and they will do anything they can to make sure you are completely happy. The food, the facilities, the cleanliness, and we had quite a few things that we did offsite that they arranged for us and all went perfectly.”

Activities That Create Unexpected Connections

Planners have long understood the value of giving meeting attendees an experience they couldn’t have anywhere else as a way to bond them, but today, one of the best ways to do so is to tie your activities to your location.

The days of flying in top singers,

bands or comedy headliners are gone, and not just because of budget. When you provide attendees with an activity or experience you could only have in the location you’re in, it provides an extra element of exclusivity that also ties in to the rest of the meeting and reinforces the memory of the event for attendees.

Timion has planned incentive trips for her company’s “President’s Club” for 13 years, and this year, she found a way to make the flight home into an experience attendees won’t soon forget. On the way back from Grenada, the flight scheduled necessitated that her group have a long layover in Miami. Rather than have attendees pass the time in the airport, she arranged an excursion into Miami’s most exciting neighborhood for the afternoon. “The group ventured out to South Beach to check out the local fare on the way home. It turned a long travel day into yet one more day of vacation in the sun,” she says.

When Monaco held her executive retreat at The Broadmoor, the hotel delivered everything she could have hoped for as far as the meeting was concerned, but it was the activities the hotel helped her organize that really stayed with attendees. “All our meetings were at the



Carol A. Monaco
Executive Assistant
Meeting Planner
Damco Distribution
Services Inc.
Madison, NJ

“One thing that stood out...at The Broadmoor was definitely their customer service. People who work at the hotel greet you by name.”

hotel, and they had the Cheyenne Lodge located on their premise, a seven-minute drive up a mountain,” she explains. “We went up with provided vans for dinner one evening, and a local woman who raises wolves as her pets brought them into the lodge during dinner. We did it to surprise my boss because it was his birthday. They were very sweet, and there were a couple (of pets) that were there for an hour. People were petting them, and it was a very surprising experience.”

The Broadmoor’s 6,300-sf Cheyenne Lodge, adjacent to the Mountain golf course, offers both indoor and outdoor event and conference space.

“One night we had dinner offsite at the Olympic Training Center (in Colorado Springs),” she continues. “The chef from The Broadmoor came and cooked for us and three Olympic gymnasts performed for us. They don’t just let anyone have dinner there. We were able to go because The Broadmoor has a relationship.”

Relying on the relationships of the venue and their staff allows planners to create an experience for attendees that highlights parts of the meeting location planners might not know about otherwise. “For our incentive, we had 30 attendees, basically the employee who had been awarded the trip and their guests,” says Timion. “Sandals LaSource Grenada had just opened December 2013, and the property was incredible from the room

configurations, amenities, décor, waterfalls, pools, which were all over-the-top gorgeous.”

But rather than stick with beach and pool time, she followed the hotel’s recommendations to integrate an exploration of Grenada, including St. Georges, the capital of the Grenada, known for its market square where locals shop for fresh fruit and fish. “We had a sunset cruise along the coast of Grenada organized by Island Routes, the Sandals excursion desk, and a trip to St. Georges to experience the local market and restaurants,” she says.

How Do You Decide When to Go Digital?

Deciding who travels and when is a decision that ultimately comes down to senior management, but it appears that more and more meetings are taking place across city, state and country lines.

MPI’s Outlook 2014 reports that 30

Christine M. Eggert
CAP, MCT
Executive Assistant and
Office Supervisor
Celator Pharmaceuticals Inc.
Ewing, NJ



“Videoconferencing has become more widely used, and we’re using conference calling more.”

percent of respondents are using digital or hybrid components to integrate onsite and remote meeting elements. “Videoconferencing has become more widely used, and we’re using conference calling more,” says Eggert. “If we’re so busy in one area of the country, we can’t be everywhere, so we might meet individuals in New York, but then need to ‘meet’ individuals in San Francisco in another hour.”

“Most meetings can be WebEx, and

most of mine are,” agrees Danell Smith-Wright, senior executive assistant, meeting planner, at Hillsboro, Oregon-based Grass Valley USA LLC. “Not board meetings, obviously. We have 100 percent attendance for those, though I suppose if one of the members had to be teleconferenced in you could, but that would be on an emergency basis.

“The CEO makes the call on whether a meeting should be face-to-face or digital, sometimes based on information I don’t have, but there is always a specific reason for a face-to-face meeting. In my experience, it’s been because he wants to impart some critical information to the leadership team to do with acquisitions, layoffs, reorganization or information that he needs to share and would like to share that face-to-face.”

“But with our technological tools, we’re able to not necessarily have face-to-face meetings or need them that often,” she explains. “I’m located in Northern California, and so we’re always looking

at what kind of tools we can use to have cost savings and increase efficiency.

“Leadership team members don’t need to fly across the country to have a meeting, we can use tools like WebEx and even Skype once in a while, to have digital face-to-face meetings and be just as effective.

We use other technology to share documentation, like DropBox, then everyone has the documents and we jump on, and we’re all set, says Smith-Wright.”

The MPI study also found that 24 percent of meeting planners are using digital or hybrid tools to enhance face-to-face meetings. Increased incorporation of technology into small meetings often has more to do with ease than need, however. While planners once risked wasting valuable meeting time making sure everyone was properly connected to a video conference or online PowerPoint presentation, the mainstreaming of digital meeting technologies — along with lower prices that are easier to fit into budgets — has made it more of a no-brainer to incorporate a digital element into meetings.



The intimate lobby of La Posada de Santa Fe, New Mexico, which surrounds guests with local artwork, adobe architecture and luxurious casita-style accommodations.

“I find that now technology is easier and more affordable,” Eggert explains. “Recently we got involved with Office 365, and I personally ran a workshop recently that used Microsoft Lync. The whole webinar, including video, PowerPoint and audio, ran online from the beginning, and it was a cinch. It’s extremely affordable, just \$2 or \$5 per month per user. Now you don’t necessarily have to purchase GoToMeeting because you can do it so much more affordably now.”

Small Meetings, Strong Results

While you may keep seeing sensational headlines touting that digital is killing face-to-face meetings or that small meetings are getting the budget axe, planners’ experiences, hotel programs and raw data still speak to the contrary.

Companies, particularly upper management, continue to see the value in small meetings for connecting employees for meaningful results, strategizing and delivering key information, while planners work more closely than ever with venues to create intimate meetings in unique spaces that make successful small meetings practically a guaranteed result. **C&IT**



The oceanfront firepit at the Lodge & Club, Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida — an ideal setting for an executive retreat as it boasts 66 designer rooms overlooking the beach.

Corporate Social Responsibility



A volunteer prepares a heart-healthy low sodium soup, which the charity organization Manna makes from scratch for their clients battling life-threatening illnesses.

Credit: Manna

Rich and Meaningful Experiences

Make Your CSR Event a Memorable Source of Inspiration

By Derek Reveron

Meeting planners face the constant challenge of creating unique and fun teambuilding activities that generate a buzz among attendees. That's why nowadays more and more meetings and incentives include Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs that are designed to inspire attendees, create memorable experiences and help the community at large.

Companies also find that CSR programs stretch budgets because they are typically less expensive than traditional activities and entertainment. "You don't have to spend a lot of money on a CSR event," says CSR manager Kate Wetzel, who plans CSR programs for Queens, New York-based JetBlue Airways. "You can spend \$3,000 or \$30,000. You can create something for any amount of dollars you want to set aside. Money doesn't have to be the driver of the experience."

The definition of CSR programs is

broad and includes community service projects that benefit charities, people and the environment. Programs can range from volunteering at food banks and making toys for hospitalized children to rebuilding homes lost in disasters and helping military families. Most CSR programs take place away from the meeting site but also can occur onsite. The best CSR programs are truly meaningful.

For example, last fall JetBlue employees visited a local Boys & Girls Club of America during a two-day meeting on best practices in Fort Lauderdale. About 80 flight attendants and airport and ground operations workers headed for the Boys & Girls Club shortly after arriving at the B Ocean Hotel Fort Lauderdale. "We had boxed lunches in the lobby for them to pick up and board a bus to the club," says Wetzel. "They split into teams and did activities like cooking, soccer, after-school reading and

garden beautification projects. One of our more entrepreneurial participants organized a foosball tournament."

During the three hours of volunteering, JetBlue employees also helped prepare and serve dinner. "That was one of the most meaningful pieces of the activity, because we were all doing it together as opposed to separate team activities," says Wetzel. "It was meaningful because it propelled them to establish stronger relationships with each other."

The connection was evident as the group returned to the hotel on a bus. "People who volunteered together shared stories from the day that meant something to them," says Wetzel. "One person from Newark, New Jersey, who helped kids with arts and crafts walked around showing photos to people she didn't necessarily know. It brought cheer and good will to other people."

Wetzel purposely planned the CSR ac-

tivity to take place right after the group's arrival at the hotel to help set the tone for the meeting. "It was a good way for them to get to know each other and gain common ground," she says. "It provides participants with a common experience that creates a connection so that nobody goes into the day of learning feeling that they don't have familiar faces to connect with."

Following the meeting, Wetzel posted a story about the activity along with quotes from participants on what it meant to them. Post-meeting feedback shows that JetBlue's CSR activities are popular with attendees. "The community service component is always considered the highest return on value," Wetzel says. "When we ask what they get the most out of, it's usually the volunteer event."

Timing is Everything

Matching a corporate meeting with the right nonprofit organization can be more difficult than it seems. It is often easier to schedule a CSR event between companies and nonprofits that already have an ongoing relationship. Still, many organizations are in high demand and book assistance from groups several weeks in advance. In addition, it's sometimes tough to match a meeting's date and itinerary with the schedule, needs and requirements of nonprofit groups.

Even basic communications can be a challenge. "They run such bare-bone organizations, and their staffing is so minimal that it can take weeks to get a response," says Lucy Eisele, CITE, principal of Integrity Incentives, a Big Lake, Minnesota-based meeting and incentive planning firm that specializes in arranging CSR activities. "The natural thought is, 'Wait a minute. We are trying to help them, and they aren't even getting back to us.' It can be frustrating. It can take several emails and phone calls. It depends on whether there is someone dedicated to replying to people who want to help."

It can be even more frustrating to plan a CSR event on a short turnaround. One planner learned that lesson while planning a CRS activity for a meeting in the Philadelphia area last fall for 23 managers of a pharmaceutical company. About one month before the meeting date, the company's planner asked Jeffrey Cesari, president, Shimmer Events, a Philadelphia-based meeting



Kate Wetzel, Manager, CSR Programs
JetBlue Airways, Long Island City, NY

"It provides participants with a common experience that creates a connection so that nobody goes into the day of learning feeling that they don't have familiar faces to connect with."

and event planning firm, to plan the entire four-day meeting including a teambuilding activity. At that point, after considering several options, the pharmaceutical company planner decided upon bowling at a high-end facility as a teambuilding activity.

Cesari started scouting bowling alleys. "We had a contract but I decided to wait until the last possible minute to sign it," he says. "Thank goodness I did because they came back a week later and

Philadelphia area," says Cesari. "We were also limited in time. We already had the meeting agenda published and flights already set. We were in a tight time frame about who could do what, when and how to make it work"

Cesari talked to several nonprofit organizations. "We talked to about six before we found one," says Cesari. "One organization had certain slots of hours

open that didn't match the meeting agenda. The other organization was booked with volunteer help more than a month in advance. Another could hold only 12 volunteers at one time. I was a little nervous because there were so many things up in the air. As a planner, you like to have details set in stone with a backup plan in place."

About 10 days before the meeting Cesari finally found a charity — Cradles to Crayons (www.cradlestocrayons.org), a children's charity with an office in W. Conshohocken, Pennsylvania. The nonprofit had an opening because another corporation had canceled a day or two earlier. Attendees volunteered at Cradles to Crayons for three hours, splitting into groups. One group inspected children's donated clothing and repacked them into boys and girls apparel according to sizes. Another group cleaned and repackaged toys.

The experience inspired attendees. "After they finished and boarded the bus, the laughter was joyous," says Cesari. "There was a closeness that's more than that from a non-CSR program. People talked about it throughout the rest of the day. They said it feels good to give back. There was a sense of giving themselves to something greater."



JetBlue Airways crewmembers and New Yorkers helped restore Highland Park in Queens, New York.

said they wanted something completely different — something to give back to the community. This was three weeks before the meeting."

Finding the right charity under a tight deadline proved to be challenging. "We were limited geographically to the

Another organization Cesari recommends is Manna (www.mannapa.org), which offers corporate partners a variety of opportunities such as event sponsorship, traditional marketing support, cause marketing, interactive social media connections and employee team-building possibilities. Manna, based in Philadelphia, develops custom-made partnerships based on a company's goals.

The most memorable CSR experiences result in an intimate person-to-person experience. For example, earlier this year 15 female salespeople for a woman-owned direct sales company volunteered at an orphanage in Montego Bay, Jamaica, during a five-day incentive trip. The group spent five hours at the orphanage, which usually had only one local volunteer for every 15 children. Volunteers fed, held and rocked babies, folded many bins of laundry, built bookcases and donated books.

Volunteering at the orphanage was the talk of the meeting. "We had a reception and dinner that evening where they shared stories about the children and work," says Eisele, who planned the entire meeting and CSR event. "It may be hard to believe that something that simple could have a profound impact, but some people went as far as saying it was life changing. They were nurturing children. They learned a lot about Jamaican families."

Eisele found the orphanage during a site visit to Montego Bay. "I was driving back from a horseback riding activity and mentioned to my guide that I needed to find a 'give-back' activity for the group," says Eisele. "The guide said her mom has worked for an orphanage for 30 years. I asked if she could bring me there now, and she did. I met the director and asked her to let me know how we could be helpful. I wanted to start a relationship, find out what they needed and then look at our budget."

Following the orphanage experience, the volunteers returned to their hotel for a reception and dinner at a local restaurant before heading home the next day.



Cradles to Crayons provides children living in homeless or low-income situations with the essential items they need to thrive — at home, at school and at play.

Scheduling the dinner after the event was purposeful. Providing post-CRS networking time reinforces the value of the event and attendee relationships, says Eisele. "You cannot end a give-back on your last day and then put them all on a plane to go home or say tonight you are on your own, see you tomorrow. It's crucial that everyone be brought together after

impactful for the attendees involved and the recipients.

The following advice will help planners set up meaningful CSR event and programs.

- Find out what the company's CSR philosophy is and recommend projects that match the goals of the organization. Match the nonprofit organization with the meeting's theme,



Lucy Eisele, CITE, Principal Integrity Incentives, Big Lake, MN

"It's crucial that everyone be brought together after the event to debrief each other. People really want to talk to each other about what they just did. I've seen it every single time."

the event to debrief each other. People really want to talk to each other about what they just did. I've seen it every single time."

Solid Advice

CRS programs run the gamut from helping large organizations to smaller projects, such as aiding a military family with a parent serving overseas. Large or small, these programs can be equally

company products and services, and attendee demographics and interests. Determine whether the client seeks meaningful CSR teambuilding or simply wants to meet a company philanthropic goal for the year, Eisele advises.

- Contact at least two or three nonprofit organizations. Be considerate of what the organization needs and when they need it. Don't impose the

group's needs on those of the nonprofit. Organizations don't want to be told what they need and can afford. "The volunteer experience needs to be beneficial for the company and the nonprofit," says Wetzel. "It can be disruptive to ask for a certain time on a certain day. That doesn't always work for organizations, especially small ones. It's important to listen, figure out what the needs are and support them."

- Wetzel advises planners to remember that volunteering isn't free. "There is a cost for the non-profit to organize the event for you and figure out what you can do. Most nonprofits track their cost per volunteer. That's why it's important to also make a donation along with volunteering." She says.

a good way to do it is to have a top executive put out an email or letter describing what was done and take testimonials from the group to add to that. That is powerful."

How Hotel Brands Give Back

Many hotels have their own in-house CRS programs that planners can use. For example, Fairmont Hotels & Resorts offers its Meetings that Matter program. Here's how it works: Planners booking a 2014 meeting prior to December 31, 2014, with at least 50 room nights can donate 10 percent of the hotel's room revenue to a charity of their choice. Participating companies have donated room revenue funds to a range of organizations including those involved with HIV/AIDS and disabled children,

"There was a closeness that's more than that from a non-CSR program. People talked about it throughout the rest of the day. They said it feels good to give back. There was a sense of giving themselves to something greater."



Jeffrey Cesari, President Shimmer Events, Philadelphia, PA

- Nonprofits typically don't allow planners and volunteers to take pictures that include their staffers and people who receive help. But pictures and videos (especially group shots) of volunteers are usually allowed. "You almost never can take pictures, especially of children, so you have to take what you can get," says Eisele. "You can sometimes take video and pictures of your group inside the venue but it's hard to get people there into the picture. That's usually a no-no. You have to sign waivers saying what you plan to do and when you will arrive and leave."
- Use any photos, videos and other information gathered during a CSR activity to publicize it to participants and the company's employees. "People who didn't earn the incentive trip this time will hear about it from coworkers so you need something to promote it," says Eisele. "Usually

according to Fairmont's website.

Kimpton Hotels are affiliated with local non-profit organizations, including those that benefit the arts, education and neighborhood beautification. In addition, Kimpton Restaurants are involved in their local communities by hosting and teaching cooking classes along with other charitable events and promotions throughout the year. On a national scale, many of Kimpton's chefs and restaurants are involved in Taste of the Nation, a program for Share Our Strength.

At the national level, Kimpton is a strong supporter of numerous charities, including Dress for Success (www.dressforsuccess.org) by providing financial and volunteer aid. During March and April, Kimpton highlights its partnership with Dress for Success with a special campaign called "Suited for Success."

In addition, Kimpton's Red Ribbon Campaign — an HIV awareness and fundraising program in November and

December — involves all hotels throughout the United States.

Some hotels are giving back in other ways. For example, Las Vegas Sands Corp. announced that it will contribute \$7 million to the University of Nevada Las Vegas William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration over five years.

The resort company also will donate \$1 million to nonprofit Clean the World, which recycles hygiene products from hotels and distributes them worldwide.

Marriott is committed to investing in the communities where they do business through their "Spirit To Serve Our Communities" social responsibility and community engagement initiatives. All over the globe, their properties are involved in five areas of giving: shel-

ter and food, environment, ready for jobs, vitality of children and empowering diversity.

For example, Marriott associates have helped build thousands of homes in 15 countries for Habitat for Humanity. Also, Marriott is a partner with Back on My Feet, a program to help the homeless prepare to return to work.

Furthermore, The Ritz-Carlton brand, a proponent of Succeed Through Service, encourages their employees to mentor students in disadvantaged communities. This program brings students to the hotels and Ritz-Carlton employees go into the classrooms to share the importance of social skills (eye-contact, a great smile and a firm handshake); healthy eating habits and how to safely handle food; group presentation skills; and the value of teamwork and collaboration.

The company shares their Succeed Through Service toolkit on an open source, non-proprietary basis to inspire others to get involved in helping young students.

There was a time when today's CRS programs were uncommon and corporations helped others largely through philanthropy in return for positive publicity and tax breaks. That window-dressing approach has evolved so that more and companies are pursuing truly meaningful ways for employees to give to others. **C&IT**

Destination



Where Dazzling New Developments and Spectacular Spaces Will Captivate Your Crowd

It's great to be in Vegas, says this enthusiastic attendee of Interop Las Vegas 2014 at Mandalay Bay. High attendee engagement in a destination is important to UBM Tech, which has held the Interop annual technology conference in Las Vegas since 1994.

By Karen Brost

Numbers matter in a big way in a destination like Las Vegas, whether you're talking about the stakes at the gaming tables or the number of visitors the city attracts. For the latter, that number reached nearly 40 million last year, and, according to the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority (LVCVA), 2013 attendance at meetings and conventions reached a five-year high, with more than 5 million attendees participating in a total of 22,000 meetings. Here, attendee engagement with the destination is never in question, with spectacular shows, showplace hotels, and exceptional special event venues from pool piazzas and ultra-lounges to downtown museums and even an observation wheel 550 feet off the ground.

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Rendering of the Las Vegas Arena's balcony. The 20,000-seat indoor sports and entertainment venue, which will be situated on The Strip between New York-New York Hotel & Casino and Monte Carlo Resort and Casino, is slated to open in 2016.

Don't Mess With Success

UBM Tech, headquartered in San Francisco, doesn't seem to be one of those companies that believe in moving their event from city to city each year. The company has held its annual Interop technology conference in Las Vegas every year since 1994. This year, the event attracted approximately 12,000 attendees and 300 exhibitors.

"For Interop, the sense of community is perfect in Las Vegas," explains Jennifer Jessup, general manager for Interop. "The majority of the attendees are traveling in, so we want it to be a destination event. We find that the engagement in a venue like Las Vegas is quite high because you see those same attendees and exhibitors 24 hours a day the week that you're there, whether that's in a class, on the show floor, in the convention center or in the connected hotels and restaurants. That's really important to us."

The Mandalay Bay Convention Center has been the site of the event since 2005. Jessup describes why it works for them. "Having a hotel connected to the venue and having almost a hotel feel to the convention center is really appealing. The way the

space is configured at the Mandalay Bay is very comfortable." She added that her event requires about 15 breakout rooms and approximately 359,000 gross sf of exhibit space.

In addition to Mandalay Bay Resort and THEhotel, housing options for Interop attendees included the Excalibur Hotel and Casino, Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas, Luxor Las Vegas, New York-New York Hotel & Casino, The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas and Tropicana Las Vegas - a DoubleTree by Hilton Las Vegas.

The Mandalay Bay contains 3,211 guest rooms, and its separate all-suite tower, THEhotel at Mandalay Bay, is being reflagged as the Delano Las Vegas, scheduled to open in the fall with 1,100 suites.

"The Mandalay Bay has a really strong convention services department, so for the majority, we keep our ancillary events within the Mandalay Bay center," Jessup explains. This year, for its Wednesday night party, Interop booked the Light Cirque du Soleil nightclub at the Mandalay Bay. "We invite all paid attendees, press, speakers and exhibitors to one party. It takes place early evening from 7-10, and the club actually has cirque performers. It's a fascinating experi-



Aria Resort & Casino's pool area and its nightlife venue Haze Nightclub offer planners buyout opportunities for private events.

Credit: AEG and MGM Resorts International

Credit: Aria Resort & Casino

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“We find that the engagement in a venue like Las Vegas is quite high because you see those same attendees and exhibitors 24 hours a day the week that you’re there, whether that’s in a class, on the show floor, in the convention center or in the connected hotels and restaurants. That’s really important to us.”

Jennifer Jessup, General Manager, Interop
UBM Tech
San Francisco, CA

ence watching the performers. There’s a lot of dancing and food. I did not expect our market to be such avid dancers,” she laughs, “because it’s IT professionals, but they were out there on the dance floor!

“Because we do have quite a strong alumni base, they almost feel like this is their vacation,” Jessup explains. “This is their one time of year to meet with each other, to learn. They’re also very dedicated



Credit: The Mirage Hotel & Casino



The Mirage’s St. Croix Patio and Siegfried & Roy’s Secret Garden and Dolphin Habitat (inset), which is available for after-hours events, where attendees can mingle with dolphin trainers.

fun-seekers, so we try to provide as many fun networking opportunities as possible.

“I cannot say enough about the Mandalay Bay sales and convention services groups,” she sums up. “They are extremely helpful, extremely professional. When you go to a city like Vegas, hospitality is their business.

She describes another factor that sets Las Vegas apart from some of the other destinations she works with. “In Las Vegas, they just think about the experience constantly, not only for convention-goers, but for tourists, as well. There’s always something new that we can latch onto in terms of ideas or new venues or new restaurants. There are always gems to be found.”

‘Where People Want to Go’

Ed Chase, vice president of conferences for LRP Publications in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, describes the factors that made Las Vegas a good choice for his company’s HR in Hospitality Conference & Expo. “Las Vegas has all the attributes we look for in a conference destination. It’s convenient to get to, there is a wide array of beautiful hotels and ample meeting space from which to choose, sales and convention staff there are professional and intuitive in anticipating your needs, and, let’s face it — Las Vegas is a place where people want to go.”

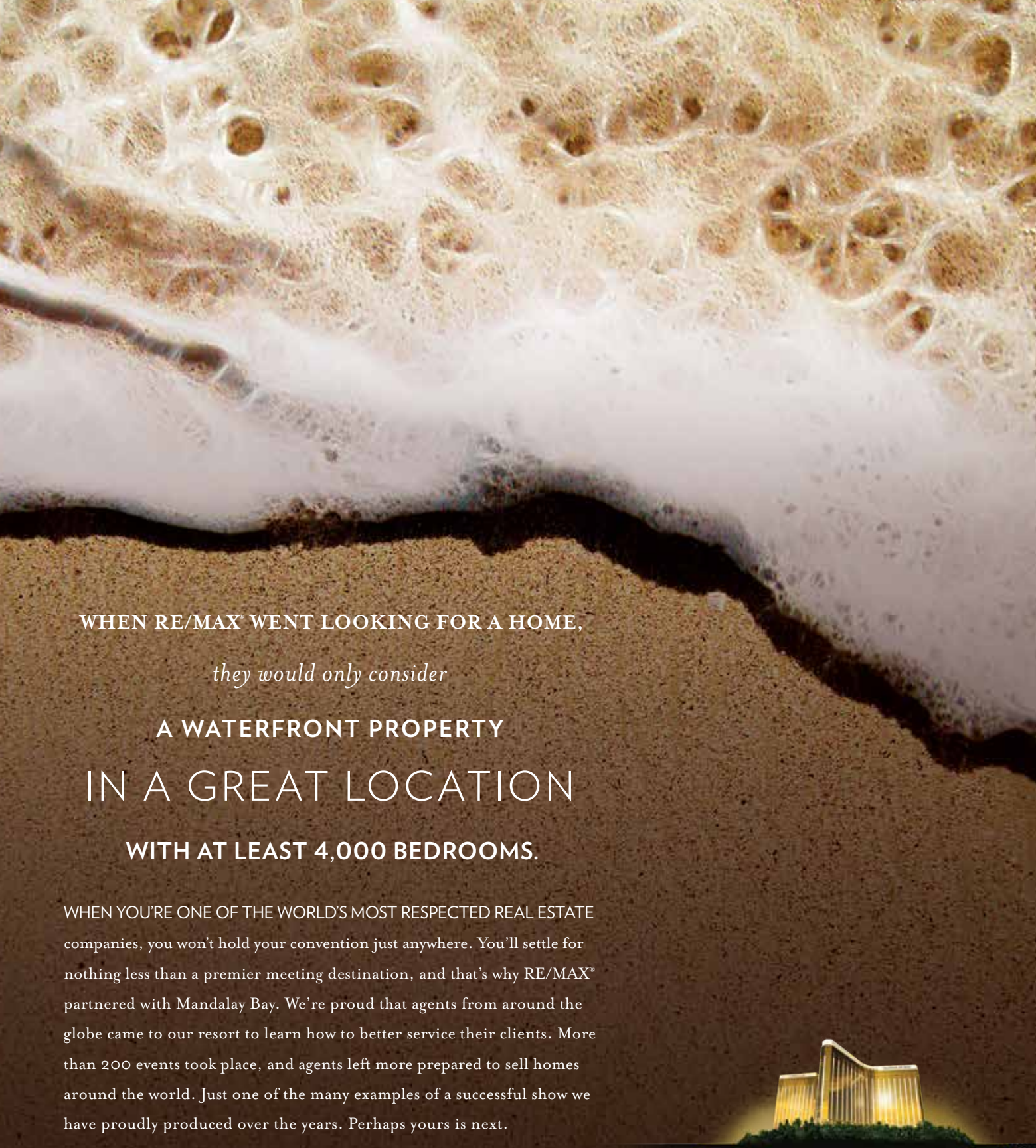
LRP chose the Aria Resort & Casino for its event. “We held our inaugural Health & Benefits Leadership Conference there last year, which was our first time at the Aria,” Chase explains. “Our attendees loved the hotel and conference space there, and we knew it would be a draw for our hospitality industry HR professionals this year. We are expecting more than 500 attendees with 44 exhibitors in our Expo Hall. Our numbers are up significantly from 2013.

“We have a relatively small footprint of just over 38,000 sf, including a 20,000-sf exhibit hall,” he continues, “but the hotel has worked closely with us to make efficient use of our space. We love the appeal the Aria has. Its convention area, with a three-story wall of windows bathing the convention area in natural light, gives such a bright and energetic vibe to an event there. You can actually see the positiv-



A private beach barbecue event at Mandalay Bay. Mandalay Bay Beach features real sand, a wave pool, personalized villas, the Beachside Casino and more.

Credit: Mandalay Bay



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Credit: Exhibitor Magazine

Fancy Shindigs conducted a Las Vegas unique-venues field trip for trade show planners that included The Mob Museum (above) and the private wine cellar in the Barrel Room at Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino. Rio Rita greets the group at the hotel.

3,044 guest rooms and more than 170,000 sf of function space, including unique special event venues such as Siegfried & Roy's Secret Garden and Dolphin Habitat, the Bare Pool Lounge and 1 Oak nightclub.

Unique Venues on Tour

Las Vegas boasts an ever-changing menu of interesting venues to choose from for private events. Lisa Gentilin, PhD, CMP, and president of Fancy Shindigs Inc., conducts a half-day workshop and field trip titled "Four Exciting Las Vegas Venues That Will Dazzle Your Guests" at the annual Exhibitor Conference & Exhibition, a training conference and expo for



Credit: Matthew Carbone

The Frank Gehry-designed Keep Memory Alive event center.

trade show exhibitors and event marketers held in Las Vegas. Gentilin's session has become so popular that it is now offered twice at each conference.

"It's all about finding a special event venue that's not necessarily in a hotel ballroom," she describes. "We talk about the pros and cons of different locations, and I reach out to different venues that I've either done things at myself or I have become aware of. We really try to get some of the new venues."



"It's all about finding a special event venue that's not necessarily in a hotel ballroom. We talk about the pros and cons of different locations, and I reach out to different venues that I've either done things at myself or I have become aware of."

Lisa Gentilin, PhD, CMP, President
Fancy Shindigs Inc.
Castro Valley, CA



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Credit: Tropicana Las Vegas

Tropicana Las Vegas - a DoubleTree by Hilton recently added two new event venues: the outdoor Beach Club and the Havana Room.

The first venue they toured was the **Keep Memory Alive** event center. Located in downtown Las Vegas at the Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, the venue was designed by famed architect Frank Geary and features a dramatic, undulating exterior made of stainless steel. “It’s so lovely, and one of the great things that people don’t realize until they’re taking part in the tours is that every penny that they spend for an event actually goes back into the research facility that’s there,” Gentilin explains. The venue can accommodate 400 for a sit-down event or up to 700 for a reception.

“Next, we went over to **The Mob Museum**, which is in the old courthouse,” she continues. The interactive museum is dedicated to the history of organized crime and law enforcement, and offers a variety of spaces for private events. The entire museum also is available for a buyout.

“And then we went over to the **Rio** (All-Suite Hotel and Casino), which is a Caesars property, because that offered us so many different things within one location. I highlighted the Palazzo suites, showing how you could do hospitality events in the suites and combine them with sleeping rooms, since they can be locked off.” The Palazzo suites are located in their own tower at the Rio and range from 3,900 to 13,950 sf. “A lot of the hotels have villas and suites that aren’t on their sales list. You just have to know to ask for them.”

The next stop on the tour was the **Penn & Teller Theater** at Rio. “If you’re only going to have a general session for an hour or two hours and need space, why not use something like that? It just has a nicer feel than sitting theater-style in a ballroom,” Gentilin notes. “They’re dark during the day and two nights out of the week. And that applies to all of the theater space that’s within Las Vegas.

Next, Gentilin took her group up to the

Voo Doo Lounge located on the Rio’s 51st floor. “It’s beautiful up there. This one has the whole restaurant floor and then it’s got the club floor on the top and it’s the largest club within Las Vegas.” Gentilin explained that the Voo Doo Lounge also has an outdoor rooftop area and that they are in the process of adding a zip-line attraction to it. After that, the group had lunch in the **Barrel Room** at the Rio’s wine cellar.

Next, they went to **The Linq**, Caesars Entertainment’s new shopping, dining and entertainment district, to preview the 550-foot Las Vegas High Roller, the world’s highest observation wheel. The new ride is equipped with cabins that can hold 40 guests each. “You can rent the cabins for events, and then at the building that’s closest, where they board, there’s a small event space there and two rooftop areas.” The High Roller takes 30 minutes to complete one rotation, and Gentilin says that for a group of 25, bar service can be provided in a private cabin for a set package price.

While they were at The Linq, Gentilin also took her group to see the event space at the new 80,000-sf concert and event venue **Brooklyn Bowl**, which also includes a rooftop area.



Credit: Caesars Entertainment

Planners can reserve one of the Las Vegas High Roller’s cabins (*inset*), which can accommodate up to 40 attendees for a uniquely memorable event.

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Credit: Hakkasan Las Vegas

MGM Grand Hotel & Casino's Hakkasan features five levels of event spaces.

Gentilin, who also teaches event planning for private companies and at San Francisco State, says she gets a great response from event planners who attend these annual field trips. "They absolutely love it, and I have to say, one of the nice things about it is that they get treated well. We're planners, and we're always worried about making sure our client is getting treated well and having a good time. This is the reverse for them. They get pampered." Now, she'll turn her attention to finding four more interesting venues for her sessions at Exhibitor 2015, which will take place next March 1-5 at the Mandalay Bay Convention Center.

More Unique Event Spaces

New on the nightlife scene, as of last spring, is MGM Grand Hotel & Casino's **Hakkasan**, a five-level space that offers a variety of environments, including the restaurant, private dining room, Ling Ling level, main nightclub, pavilion and mezzanine.

Hakkasan Group recently acquired **Pure Nightclub** inside Caesars Palace. The nightclub closes this month in order to undergo a total remodel that will be completed in early 2015. Pure was named the No. 1 nightclub in the country by *E! Entertainment* one year after its opening in 2004.

Making a splash last June was the debut of the **Seascape Ballroom** within Shark Reef Aquarium at Mandalay Bay. Planners can hold intimate receptions, sit-down dinners and board meetings here, with an

area, lounge furniture and recreational game tables. M Resort Spa Casino offers 92,000 sf of conference space, with great views of the Las Vegas skyline.

The very hip 634-room Downtown Grand hotel, which



The Westin Lake Las Vegas Resort and Spa specializes in serenity with spectacular views of the mountains and lake — yet it's just 30 minutes from all the action on The Strip.



Credit: The Westin Lake Las Vegas Resort and Spa

opened its doors in December in a location convenient to the Freemont Street Experience, features a rooftop venue called **Picnic**, which can host private events for up to 1,500 guests.

Imagine Exhibitions Gallery at The Venetian debuted its third installation, Da Vinci The Exhibition, an in-depth and interactive look at the works, life and art of Leonardo da Vinci. The space features 65 fully built, life-size inventions, more than 20 fine art studies and dozens of stunning displays, making for an inspirational event space for private functions, dinners and cocktail receptions.

Planners who need an entirely self-contained sanctuary for a more meeting-focused environment can look to **The Westin Lake Las Vegas Resort and Spa** in Henderson,



M Resort Spa Casino's Villaggio del Sole Pool.

Credit: M Resort Spa Casino

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“We’re hosting five conferences in Las Vegas this year, and the LVCVA is very proactive with us. They make it a point to meet with us each time we are in town to keep us up-to-date on planned and new events, attractions and hotels, and are engaged in our long-term planning process.”

Ed Chase, Vice President of Conferences
LRP Publications
Palm Beach Gardens, FL

which underwent a major renovation before re-opening under the Westin flag in 2012. Although it’s only 30 minutes from The Strip, the Moroccan-inspired resort might as well be a world away with its tranquil setting featuring lake and mountain views, white sand beaches and any number of water activities, plus access to the Jack Nicklaus-designed SouthShore Golf Club just five minutes away. The Westin takes advantage of its stunning environs by offering 50,000 sf of outdoor space from gardens and poolside decks to a terrace overlooking the lake. There is 94,000 sf of meeting and banquet space including a 20,000-sf ballroom and naturally sunlit meeting rooms and boardrooms.

Hotel and Development News

The three-level **Mandalay Bay Convention Center** currently offers 1.7 million square feet of event space, and it re-



Rendering of MGM Resorts International's interactive environment called The Park, an eight-acre landscaped dining and entertainment zone with new Strip-facing experiences.

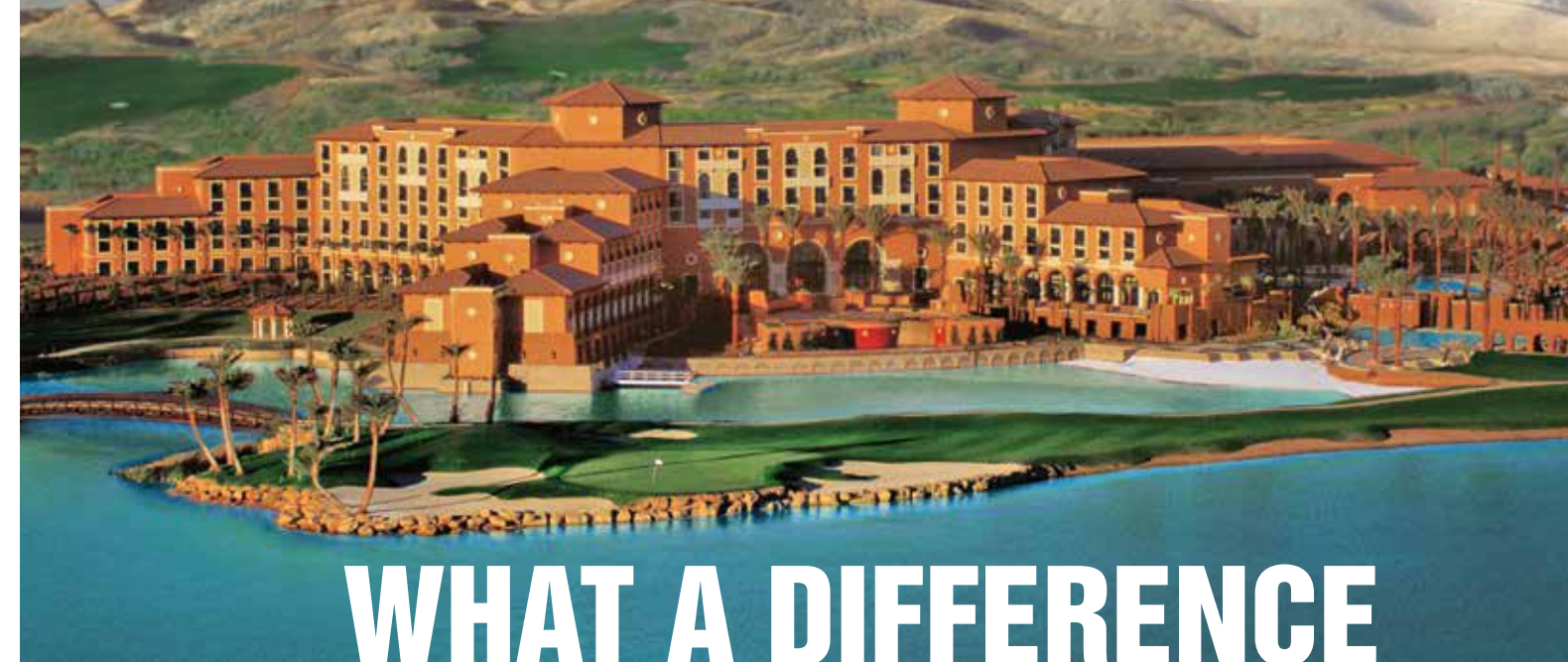
cently unveiled plans to expand the facility to over 2 million sf. Plans call for the addition of more than 350,000 sf of exhibit space, as well underground parking and additional carpeted ballroom space. Construction on the \$66 million project is scheduled to begin in the fall, and the new exhibit space is expected to be available in late summer 2015.

May 1 marked the groundbreaking for a new 20,000-seat indoor sports and entertainment arena, which is a joint venture between AEG and MGM Resorts International. The new venue, which will be located between the **New York-New York Hotel & Casino** and **Monte Carlo Resort and Casino** on the Las Vegas Strip, is expected to open in 2016. It will be part of an eight-acre dining and entertainment district called **The Park**, a landscaped area that is being designed to create an interactive neighborhood environment. The project also is scheduled to open in 2016. Both resorts are undergoing significant transformations of their Strip-facing experiences into plaza environments featuring casual eateries, bars, restaurants and retail destinations that will ultimately lead to The Park. Restaurants at Monte Carlo’s new entryway include the just-opened Double Barrel, a 12,000-sf roadhouse restaurant; Yusho, with authentic Japanese street food by celebrated chef Matthias Merges; and 800 Degrees Neapolitan Pizzeria. Anchoring the new experience at New York-New York, a 2,024-room property with



Credit: Monte Carlo Resort and Casino

New restaurants at The Monte Carlo Resort and Casino include the Double Barrel, Yusho and 800 Degrees.



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21,500 sf of meeting space, will be the two-story Hershey's Chocolate World. The interactive destination for chocolate lovers opens in the second quarter.

In response to guests' growing interest in health and wellness, **MGM Grand Hotel & Casino** recently expanded its Stay Well collection. Encompassing the hotel's entire 14th floor, the collection now includes 171 rooms and suites, all offering health and wellness features such as a vitamin C-infused shower, air purifier, dawn-simulating alarm clock and healthy menu options. Guests also have access to the Stay Well lounge, an exclusive area for registration and relaxation.

Caesars Entertainment's **The Cromwell**, the first stand-alone boutique hotel on the Las Vegas Strip, opened this month. Created through a \$185 million renovation of the former Bill's Gamblin' Hall & Saloon, The Cromwell offers 188 rooms and suites, a 40,000 sf casino, and Giada, a new restau-



Elegant oasis: The Wynn Tower Suites Cabana.

scenes of the show and see all of the props and special features that take place backstage. Also, those who take part in the diver's dream package are able to be in the water during an actual performance of *Le Rêve* to see all the magic underwater.

In January, the ESPA at **Vdara Hotel & Spa** began welcoming guests to its 18,000-sf, two-level spa experience comprising 11 treatment rooms. Attendees who are spa enthusiasts will note that this is ESPA's first branded spa on the West Coast and only the third in the U.S. The 1,495-suite Vdara, while relatively low on meeting space (10,000 sf), has a prime location in CityCenter, a mixed-use, 76-acre complex that also is home to Bellagio and Aria Resort & Casino.

The **Sands Expo and Convention Center**, which offers 2.25 million sf of exhibit and meeting space, as well as direct connections to more than 7,000 suites at The Venetian and The Palazzo, recently completed a \$37 million renovation that included remodeling the lobby and adding escalators, new carpeting, Wi-Fi hotspots and food outlets. And, the "Panda!" show has made its world premiere at The Venetian and The Palazzo. It features a combination of acrobatics, martial arts, music and dance from the China National Acrobatic Troupe.

The Numbers Add Up

Ed Chase offered a few helpful tips based on his experience planning events in Las Vegas. "Plan ahead early, and plan for the 'Vegas Bump.' We've found that Las Vegas itself will be responsible for a 10 percent increase in the number of your attendees — always a good problem to have!" **C&IT**



The Imagine Exhibitions Gallery at The Venetian, currently featuring Da Vinci The Exhibition, offers options for private functions.



Vdara Hotel & Spa's prefunction space.

rant concept by celebrity chef Giada De Laurentiis that opens in June. The hotel also will be home to a new 65,000-sf rooftop venue, **Drai's Beachclub Nightclub**, which is scheduled to open on Memorial Day weekend.

This year the Tower suites and spas at **Wynn** and **Encore** received Forbes Five Star awards. Wynn Las Vegas and sister property Encore together offer more than 4,700 guest rooms and 260,000 sf of meeting space. The luxury hotels have 32 F&B outlets boasting two signature chefs, two award-winning spas, an on-site 18-hole golf course, Maserati and Ferrari dealership, 94,000 sf of retail space, two showrooms, three nightclubs, a beach club and more. Wynn Las Vegas' aqua theater-in-the-round presentation "*Le Rêve: The Dream*" is offering backstage tours and a special "Diver's Dream" package for guests who are scuba certified. Guests can go behind the

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Mexico on the Move

A Renewed Commitment to Positive Change — and Meetings

It's no secret that Mexico has experienced its share of challenges in recent years. During that time, some companies shied away from the destination, while others relocated meetings they had initially booked there due to safety concerns. But thanks to a combination of a newly elected president (Enrique Peña Nieto) in 2012, an increased focus on safety and security, and significant investments being made in new properties and infrastructure, groups are once again heading south of the border with confidence.

Cecilia Cruz, executive director for the meetings industry for the Mexico Tourism Board in Washington DC, explained that Mexico's new government is working hard to address areas of

and wonderful destination Mexico is, find out their objectives and see which destination fits best for them."

By Karen Brost Lawhorne cited the significant investments being made in new resorts and infrastructure in Mexico as evidence of the progress the country is making. "The people that are investing in the country are not just Mexicans, but also Europeans, Canadians and Americans. I don't think they would invest that kind of money if they thought they were going to have a problem with violence and safety concerns. With this new president that has come in and the infrastructure and things that are changing and really getting better in Mexico, people are seeing a difference when they come down for a site inspection."

Major U.S.-based hoteliers, such as InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), Marriott, Hilton and W, among others, are making investments in meeting quality hotels. IHG alone will have invested \$500 million in 47 new Mexico properties by the end of this year.

And major Mexican and international hoteliers such as Fiesta Americana, Grupo Presidente, Barceló Hotels & Resorts, Palace Resorts, Riu Hotels & Resorts and AM Resorts have made significant investments in new hotels and renovations of existing properties to stay abreast of their American competition.

For example, Grupo Presidente — which operates hotels across Mexico in destinations including Cancun, Los Cabos, Mexico City, Guadalajara, Ixtapa and Merida — has undertaken major renovations at its Presidente InterContinental Mexico City Polanco and the Presidente InterContinental Cancun Resort.

There also are new convention center facilities in Cabo San Lucas, Tijuana and Puebla.

Cancun

Michelle Machado, senior manager, marketing promotions for Herndon, Virginia-based XO Communications, recently brought a 150-person group of contest winners and their guests to the Sandos Cancun. "We were looking for a beach location that was pretty easy to get in and out of, and we also were looking for an all-inclusive-type property. Those are hard to find here



An elaborate pirate shipwreck setup by Meeting Incentive Experts.

in the states, so we thought the next best thing would be Mexico. A lot of us have had experience there and really liked it, so it was a good option for us."

Prior to booking the event, Machado and her colleagues discussed safety issues and did a lot of research. "It seems that it's more in the border towns (that problems were occurring), and not the resort communities, and so we decided to go ahead and go through with it, and we're glad we did because we had a really great experience there. We didn't have anyone bring up anything that caused anybody concern about someone's safety. There were no incidents whatsoever."

She described what she liked about the Sandos Cancun, an upscale, all-inclusive resort offering 214 guest rooms, five gourmet restaurants and bars, and an award-winning spa. "It's a beautiful property. The beachfront was absolutely gorgeous — turquoise waters and white sand, and it was as clean as it could be. The food was really good. The property has a lot going on. They do a barbecue by the pool every afternoon. Our group really loved that. There were a lot of food options. The customer service is over the top. They're just very good and will do anything to make sure your stay is pleasant."

Another factor in XO Communications' decision to book its event at the Sandos Cancun is that it's family friendly. Some all-inclusive properties are adults only.

"The proximity to activities was great," she continues. "You are pretty much in the heart of town. You can walk to the main shopping areas. And they have this bus service. About every two minutes a bus passes you and it's comparable to one U.S. dollar to hop on. They're very safe and they seemed to be running from first thing in the morning to late into the evening. It was also easy to get in and out from an airport perspective."

Machado planned a welcome reception the first evening. "It was just beautiful. They set it up in their gazebo area, and we had some beautiful Chinese lanterns and lights. It was just a really nice setting as the sun was setting on the beachfront. They did a nice job accommodating our private event."

The destination and the resort were a big hit with Machado's group. "Since we've gotten back, I've had a number of my folks

ask me if I could get a discounted rate to go back with their families for a summer vacation," she says.

Lawhorne explains that Cancun had to rebrand itself after Hurricane Wilma in 2005, which turned out to be a good thing. "They did a \$20 million beach renovation in 2010, and now the beaches in Cancun are 30-40 yards deep from the hotels. It's something that Cancun has never had before. The beaches are wonderful to do events on, from teambuilding to theme parties, and we have all this room now."

He also noted all of the new hotels that are coming into play. "They're renovating hotels and turning them into deluxe all-inclusives because that seems to be the craze in Mexico, even for meetings, so the planner doesn't get a bill at the end of the program and say 'look at how much money we've spent on food and beverage.' Now they know what it will be upfront. We have a client who was doing a meeting in Chicago for 450 people...and they moved it to Cancun because it was cheaper."

Palace Resorts completed a \$55 million renovation and expansion of its landmark, 2,409-room Moon Palace Golf & Spa Resort in Cancun. The expansion included the addition of the new 140,000-sf Moon Palace Arena, which joined the resort's existing 55,850-sf Lower Level Universal Ballroom, 36,000-sf Upper Level Universal Ballroom and the 26,800-sf Galactic Ballroom.

Riviera Maya

Spanning south of Cancun along the country's Caribbean coast, Riviera Maya is a popular meeting and incentive destination known for its eco-adventures and more than 80 miles of coastline. "Cancun and Riviera Maya are so different," Lawhorne states. "They're basically two destinations with one airport. You have the whole corridor, which is about 60 miles long all the way down to Playa del Carmen and Tulum, which has beautiful new hotels, from all-inclusives to deluxe E.P. hotels that are really good for meetings and incentive programs. They're world-class hotels like Rosewood (Mayakoba) and Banyan Tree (Mayakoba). And then there's Secrets (Maroma Beach Riviera Cancun).

"The one hotel that is unbelievably gorgeous, is Nizuc (Resort



Filipe Frazao/www.Shutterstock.com

concern to make tourism in the country world class. "We are increasing security and doing many, many things in the cities, in the venues and in the resorts. I know it is one of the things that meeting planners care about. We also care very much about it. I think it is one of the most important things we're working on."

Adam Lawhorne, CITE, CIS, is CEO of Chicago-based Meeting Incentive Experts which operates offices in Los Cabos, Cancun and Puerto Vallarta. "We are a planning company within a DMC, so we do both," he explains. "We help bring people to the country, show them around, give them ideas on the hospitality

& Spa). It's a five-star hotel with five-star dining options, a beautiful beach...a huge spa and a beautiful convention center. It's absolutely gorgeous. If you're looking for a top class meeting destination, that hotel would blow away a Four Seasons anywhere in the world. It's a pretty amazing property." The 274-room Nizuc Resort & Spa, which just opened in March, is located on the Nizuc peninsula at the gateway of the Riviera Maya, and less than 20 minutes from Cancun International Airport. Set on 29 acres, the luxury resort offers multiple pools, six restaurants, a 30,000-sf spa, two exclusive beaches and easy access to the region's natural wonders, archaeological sites and attractions. All of the resort's accommodations are suites or villas.

This month, Hard Rock International opened the world's fourth all-inclusive Hard Rock property with the debut of the 1,264-room Hard Rock Hotel Riviera Maya. In addition to 88,915 sf of meeting and event space, the hotel features expansive outdoor pools, a private beach, nine world-class restaurants, and eight bars and lounges.

Barceló Maya is a 2,751-room family-friendly resort comprised of five all-inclusive hotels and one of the longest stretches of private beach access in the area. Two of the hotels, the Barceló Maya Beach and the Barceló Maya Caribe, are currently undergoing a \$48 million renovation. Phase one of the project has been completed, and the second phase is scheduled to be wrapped up by the end of 2014. The Barceló Maya complex also features one of the largest convention centers in Riviera Maya.

Los Cabos

Lawhorne says that Los Cabos was voted the safest destination in Mexico last year by the secretary of tourism. "It's really going through a growing spurt right now," he explains. "We're going to be adding about 1,000 hotel rooms in the next year, which is tremendous. We have a new Secrets project...in Puerto Los Cabos, which is a new area right by San Jose. It's a large, large area with a new marina that opened a couple of years ago. There's room for about five hotels that are being planned right now." AMResorts opened Secrets Puerto Los Cabos Golf & Spa Resort in December with 500 suites, 16,000 sf of meeting space and access to the Puerto Los Cabos community's amenities, including the full-service marina, and a Jack Nicklaus and Greg Norman-designed golf course.



Adam Lawhorne, CITE, CIS, CEO
Meeting Incentive Experts, Oakbrook Terrace, IL

"We have a client who was doing a meeting in Chicago for 450 people... and they moved it to Cancun because it was cheaper."

"Another great thing about Los Cabos," Lawhorne continues, "is our new international terminal." He notes that the new terminal can handle large aircraft, and it also has air-conditioned jetways, along with six baggage claim areas and an improved traffic flow through customs and immigration.

Lawhorne credits the G20 summit, which was held in Los Cabos in 2012, for many of the area's recent improvements. "We have a new convention center now which is green certified." The \$100 million, 72,000-sf Los Cabos Convention Center, which opened in 2012, features solar panels and the largest green wall in the world. "Right now, with the new hotel builds and the convention center, we can now do citywides, which is really important for Cabo. We're also adding more and more air lift." He noted new service from Austin, Orange County, Dallas and San Diego as examples.

The Sandos Finisterra Los Cabos Resort opened last year. Formerly known as the Finisterra Hotel, the property has been transformed into a 288-room all-inclusive luxury resort. Of particular interest to groups staying at the resort during the time frame of January through April, will be the top floor suite that has been converted into a whale-watching bar.

Also opening last year was the all-inclusive, 619-room Hyatt Ziva Los Cabos. Located just minutes from San Jose del Cabo, the AAA Four Diamond beachfront property offers all-suite accommodations, eight restaurants, a spa, nightly entertainment and more than 35,000 sf of meeting space.

Puerto Vallarta

"I want meeting planners to know that we are considering Puerto Vallarta/Nayarit a new destination altogether," Cruz states. "The two governments of those states are working together to make one destination, so we have more connectivity to this side of the country. We have good, good, venues in Puerto Vallarta, and also we have five-star hotels there, and more in Nayarit, so it is becoming one of the best destinations for meetings."

"Puerto Vallarta is one of the cities that has had a really tough time," Lawhorne notes, "it has had some bad negative press, but things are really turning around. Planners are really starting to see the value for Puerto Vallarta, the cobblestone streets, the beautiful history, all the shopping, all the great dining. Now there are two new hotel builds, and there hasn't

Need-to-Knows

All About All-inclusives

The quality of all-inclusives has come a long way, now that more four- and five-star properties are embracing the concept. "They're still using celebrity chefs, they're still having the same food and beverage outlets. They're just making everything included," explains Adam Lawhorne, CEO of Meeting Incentive Experts.

But, you may wonder, how does all-inclusive pricing work when you want to have a private event such as an awards gala? "Basically," he notes, "how it works in most of the hotels is that it would be a service charge, somewhere in the neighborhood of \$25 to \$40 per person for the setup and for the menu that you requested, which isn't a bad setup fee."

"(Live) Aqua Cancun and Fiesta Americana Condesa Cancun have a new product where they don't charge a service charge for a setup (for a private event). That's a wow factor. That's a real value if you're doing a meeting. Those are both two really good options for meetings," Lawhorne states.

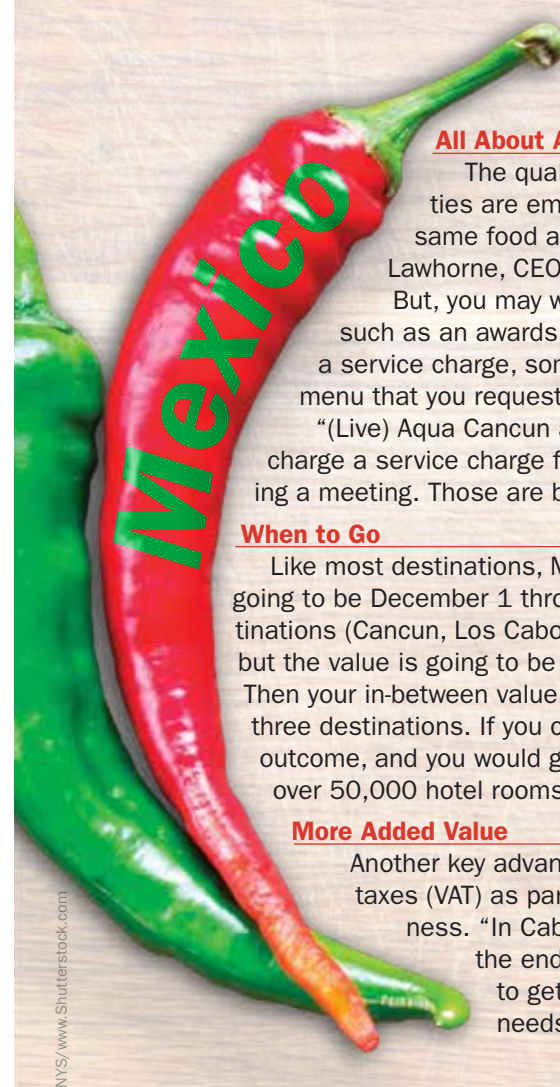
When to Go

Like most destinations, Mexico has its high seasons and value seasons. "High season in Mexico is always going to be December 1 through June 1," Lawhorne explains, "and that's going to be at all three beach destinations (Cancun, Los Cabos and Puerto Vallarta). And then you have the summer, which is going to be hot, but the value is going to be there. July, August, September, October, those are going to be your value seasons. Then your in-between value seasons would really be June and November. November is a great month in all three destinations. If you can do a program in November or June, I think you would be very happy with your outcome, and you would get a very good price. Mexico is still on sale. There are a lot of properties. You have over 50,000 hotel rooms in Riviera Maya and Cancun."

More Added Value

Another key advantage Mexico offers as a destination is that meetings are exempt from value added taxes (VAT) as part of the country's commitment to winning international meeting and event business. "In Cabo and Cancun, it's 11 percent, and in Vallarta it's 17 percent that you get back at the end of your meeting," Lawhorne notes. "Even if you do an all-inclusive, you're going to get some of that money back. That could pay for activities, that could pay for your AV needs. VAT tax elimination is something that people are finding is a value."

— KB



been any new hotel builds for 10 years. We have the first Hilton all-inclusive (Hilton Puerto Vallarta Resort). We have a beautiful convention center that was built (seven) years ago. We have a new Secrets (Vallarta Bay, Puerto Vallarta), an all-inclusive. All of these are on the beach, all of them are within five to 10 minutes from downtown and five to 10 minutes from the airport, which is a great thing for a meeting. Both of these hotels are wonderful. They're really complementing the destination.

"The history of Puerto Vallarta has always been that there was nothing bad going on within the city," he continues, "but if you went outside the city, there were some problems, but those have been corrected. I think that's making people feel safer. I'm seeing more pharmaceutical companies, more real estate companies, health companies, computer companies."

Mexico City

Mexico's capital, Mexico City, has more than 21 million residents, making it the largest metropolitan area in the Western Hemisphere. As the economic and business center of the country, Mexico City offers multiple world-class convention centers and more than 50,000 hotel rooms along with big city amenities such as art galleries and museums. It also offers easy air access with direct flights to and from cities around the globe.

The new 260-room Hilton Mexico City Santa Fe opened

this spring in the Santa Fe business district of Mexico City. The hotel provides more than 8,000 sf of flexible meeting space, including a ballroom; a business center with six boardrooms; and a rooftop-level event space.

The St. Regis Mexico City unveiled three new meeting spaces last fall. The Madelaine Ballroom includes a terrace accommodating up to 400 guests, and two Orchid rooms provide space for more intimate events with up to 30 guests each. Guests staying at the property, which offers 189 rooms and suites, can take advantage of the brand's signature 24-hour butler service.

Seeing is Believing

Cruz encourages planners to see what's new in Mexico for themselves, citing Mexico Tourism's "Live It to Believe It" campaign, launched last fall. "This campaign is really about inviting everyone to Mexico," Cruz says. "If you don't go, you can't imagine how beautiful and how amazing it is — and not just our beaches and sun. We also have good venues and good cities and good infrastructure for all of the MICE segment. I invite the meeting planners to go and visit Mexico and live it to believe it. We will welcome them when they want to go and visit on a FAM trip or come to our road shows so they can know Mexico and do business in Mexico."

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The Sky Terrace at the newly opened Hard Rock Hotel Riviera Maya.

On The Move



HARRIS

Wild Dunes Resort, Isle of Palms, SC, has promoted **Jody Harris** to director of sales and marketing. He most recently served as director of sales. **Eric Pease** was promoted to director of group sales. He formerly served as assistant director of sales.

Johnny Danrich III, CMP, CASE, CTA, was promoted to director of sales and services for the Oklahoma City Convention & Visitors Bureau. He most recently served as assistant director of sales for the bureau.



PEASE

Ty Brassie was named director of sales and marketing at La Cantera Hill Country Resort, a Destination Hotels & Resorts-managed property in San Antonio, TX. He formerly was the director of sales and marketing at Omni Rancho Las Palmas Resort & Spa, Rancho Mirage, California.

Hyatt Regency Tysons Corner Center, Virginia, has named **Ray Messina** as director of sales, marketing and catering. He was director of sales and marketing at the Hyatt Regency Reston, Virginia.



BRASSIE



RUTLAND

La Quinta Resort & Club and PGA West, a Waldorf Astoria Resort, has named **Timothy Rutland** as executive director of sales and marketing. He previously served as director of sales and marketing at Stein Erikson Lodge Deer Valley, Utah.

Meet Puerto Rico has appointed **Gabriela Ong** as national sales manager for the U.S. Northeast region, based in New York. She formerly served as sales manager at the InterContinental New York Barclay.



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