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CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

It's a Giving Thing

Meetings With Meaning Are
More Important Than Ever for
Companies and Their Employees

PAGE 38

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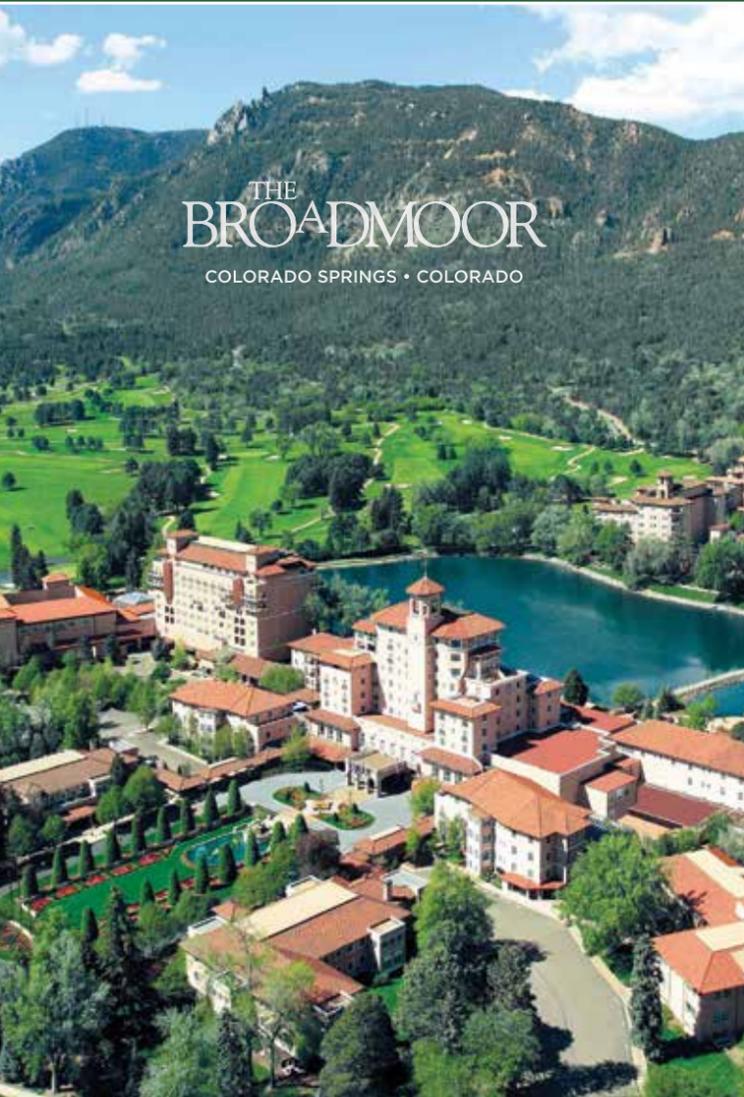
**2018
Industry Forecast**

Optimism Mixed With New Challenges
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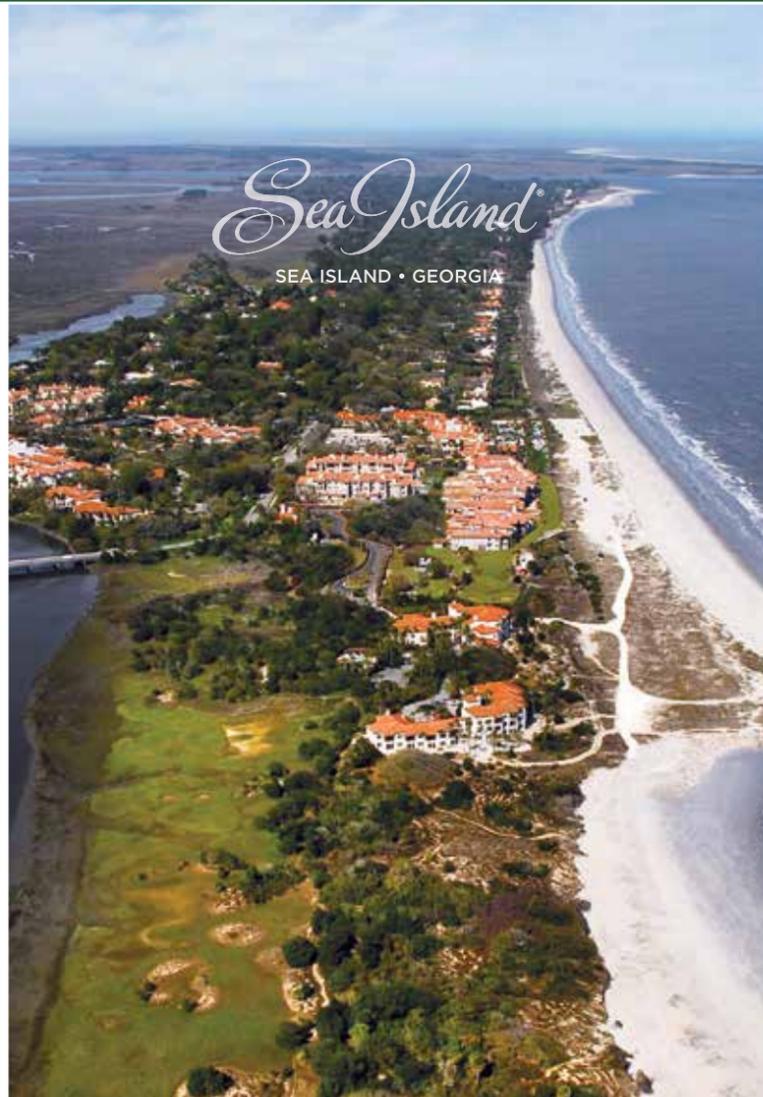


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Jessie States, CMM, manager, professional development at MPI, weighs in on meeting industry trends. **PAGE 18**

Credit: MPI



Aria Resort & Casino in Las Vegas is the quintessential under-one-roof property for meetings, entertainment, dining and more. **PAGE 50**

Credit: Aria Resort & Casino



Attendees of Experian Information Solutions' Sales Summit enjoyed a uniquely Texas welcome in San Antonio. **PAGE 60**

Credit: Kellie Medvitz

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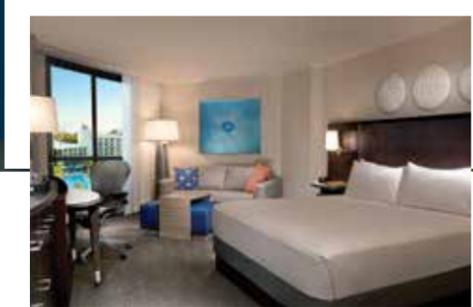
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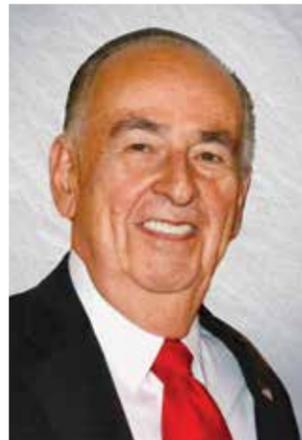
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Publisher's Message

People Matter

The 2018 meetings forecast is much the same as it was this time last year — a healthy meetings market coupled with rising costs and budgets, a continuation of the seller's market, a heavier emphasis on safety and security, and a sharper focus on experience-driven meetings that also make room for Corporate Social Responsibility programs. More than ever before, attendees — especially millennials — are looking for meeting experiences and environments that engage them with the content,



facilitate networking and incorporate opportunities to do some good through hands-on community service activities. It is this last area that resonates most deeply these days in a society where technology tempts us to disconnect from others, when coarse discourse seems to dominate the airwaves and when active shooters shatter our sense of security.

IMEX has its finger on the pulse of our "new age of anxiety" with their recently released 2018 meeting trends. The core message: "Humanity in the world and in the meetings industry will be the central common theme to the key trends of 2018." IMEX is predicting a return to a focus on people despite ongoing technological innovations that continually

change how we connect and communicate with one another.

We welcome this renewed recognition of the value of meeting face-to-face and building relationships — something that will never change, despite the many challenges we face, from robots to social media mania, to fears of safety and security that threaten to keep us home.

Carina Bauer, CEO of the IMEX Group summed it up best: "This is, as often said, 'a people industry' and while we promote and support technology, we must take note of these trends and look after our people, their health and safety, their sense of fulfillment and their futures."

A good people-centric place to start is with Corporate Social Responsibility programs. In "It's a Giving Thing" on page 38, Lauren E. Richardson, CMP, meeting manager for Medtronic, expresses a common sentiment among today's workforce: "I want to work with other companies and vendors that support CSR activities and foster a giving culture." The important thing is to start: Says Rochelle Karr, director of CSR and alumni relations for O'Melveny & Myers LLP, "Incorporating CSR into your meeting or convention doesn't need to be something grand. Impactful can be small."

Harvey Grotsky
Publisher

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News & Notes

Caesars to Develop \$375M Conference Center in Las Vegas



LAS VEGAS, NV — Caesars Entertainment Corporation has announced plans to develop a 550,000-sf conference center in Las Vegas, named Caesars Forum, featuring the two largest pillarless ballrooms in North America.

The cost of the conference center is estimated to be approximately \$375 million. When completed, it will feature 300,000 sf of flexible meeting space, equivalent to more than five football fields, and will be located east of the Las Vegas Strip with bridge connections to Harrah's, Linq and the Linq Promenade.

As part of a series of transactions with VICI Properties, Caesars Entertainment recently announced its intention to acquire 18.4 acres of land as part of its plans to develop this new conference center.

Scheduled to officially open in 2020, Caesars expects to break ground on Caesars Forum early in the second quarter of 2018. Friedmutter Group and PENTA Building Group have been awarded as the architect and general contractor, respectively. www.caesarsmeansbusiness.com

Newly Renovated Hilton Denver City Center Unveiled

DENVER, CO — Denver community leaders gathered to celebrate the opening of Hilton's newest hotel, Hilton Denver City Center, a modern, upscale retreat in the heart of the city. The ribbon-cutting ceremony introduced the 613-room hotel, which towers 20-stories high and features newly renovated public spaces, guest rooms and dining venues following the completion of a \$27 million multiphased renovation. The ribbon-cutting ceremony was attended by Visit Denver CEO Richard Scharf and Councilman Albus Brooks as well as Tim

Benolken, Hilton's senior vice president of operations for North America.

Towering above the Mile High City, Hilton Denver City Center offers breathtaking views of the Rocky Mountains and city skyline and is conveniently located near main downtown attractions including the Colorado Convention Center, 16th Street Mall, Pepsi Center, Sports Authority Field and Denver Art Museum. The hotel has 581 guest rooms and 32 suites, and expansive, flexible events space ideal for conferences and receptions. www.hilton.com

Hilton to Roll Out Smart Hotel Rooms in 2018

MCLEAN, VA — Hilton has unveiled Connected Room, a first-of-its-kind, high-tech guest room that enables guests to personalize and control every aspect of their stay from one central point — their mobile device. Currently in beta testing, Connected Room is live in one hotel, will deploy in coming weeks in several more and will begin to scale rapidly to hotels across the United States in 2018.

Guests who stay at Connected Room-enabled properties soon will be able to use the Hilton Honors app to manage most things they would traditionally do manually in a room, from controlling the temperature and lighting to the TV and window coverings. Guests also will be able to personalize their room with technology that loads the most popular streaming media and other accounts to in-room TVs.

In the longer-term, Connected Room will support a range of connected devices, engagements and experiences. Guests will be able to use voice commands to control their room or access their content, and to upload their own artwork and photos to automatically display in their room. Guests also will be able to set various preferences in their Hilton Honors account profile to further customize their in-room experience to their individual preferences.

With Connected Room's introduction, Hilton is delivering the industry's first truly mobile-centric hotel room, building on the success of the award-winning Hilton Honors app. Hilton Honors members are already using the app to check in, select their room and open their hotel room's door with Digital Key. www.hilton.com

Resorts Casino Hotel Updates Ocean Tower Guest Rooms



ATLANTIC CITY, NJ — All 480 rooms in the Ocean Tower have been renovated at Resorts Casino Hotel, a Mohegan Sun property in Atlantic City, including 112 junior suites, 14 parlor suites and one Presidential suite. The recently completed update is part of approximately \$100 million that was earmarked for expansion and renovation of the hotel, which included \$35 million spent on the Jimmy Buffett-themed Margaritaville entertainment complex and a state-of-the-art conference center, which opened in 2015.

The \$25 million investment in newly renovated deluxe rooms is inspired by a tropical fun theme and Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville with sand-inspired carpets, coral patterns and tropical dark woods. The rooms include free in-room Wi-Fi, LCD televisions, a refrigerator, laptop-sized safe, iron and ironing board and coffee/tea maker. Connecting rooms are also available.

Aptly named for its close proximity to the beach and Boardwalk, the Ocean Tower has been a favorite of Resorts' guests since the property opened as Atlantic City's first casino in 1978. It offers spectacular views of the Atlantic Ocean, beach, the world-famous Boardwalk and the back bays of the Atlantic City region. www.meetatresorts.com

Tips & Trends

10 TIPS TO FOLLOW WHEN CONSUMING ALCOHOL OVERSEAS

Last summer, Mexican authorities seized more than 10,000 gallons of tainted alcohol and opened an investigation into an illicit manufacturer who had been supplying numerous resorts, nightclubs and restaurants. In light of these findings, Allianz Global Assistance shares reminders of important alcohol consumption safeguards while traveling overseas.

"Whether staying at an all-inclusive resort or an Airbnb within the city, staying alert and being prepared when traveling is vital," said Kimberly Seay, RN, director of assistance at Allianz Global Assistance USA, and a former ER/trauma nurse. Seay recommends the following 10 tips for travelers to follow when consuming alcohol on vacation:



1. Drink in moderation/limit alcohol usage.
2. Insist on watching your drink being made.
3. If you are suspicious of the color, then trust your instincts and do not drink it.
4. Bottled or canned beer does appear to be a safer option.
5. Insist that the beer is opened in your presence.
6. Buy your own alcohol at duty free and only drink what you brought, even if you are required to pay a cork fee.
7. Never, ever leave your drink unattended.
8. Be observant and aware of your surroundings.
9. If you do feel ill, seek attention, don't delay.
10. Call your travel insurance provider if you need help finding medical care, or if you are admitted to a hospital.

While destinations cannot guarantee that visitors will remain 100 percent safe on their vacation due to unforeseen situations that can occur, it's important that travelers remain vigilant and take the necessary precautions.

For more information on Allianz Global Assistance and the policies offered for travelers, please visit: www.allianztravelinsurance.com.

Hilton Announces Mexico Expansion



Waldorf Astoria Cancun.



Hilton Cancun.

CANCUN, MEXICO — Hilton has announced plans to welcome the luxury Waldorf Astoria Cancun and the all-inclusive Hilton Cancun resort to the global hospitality company's growing portfolio in Mexico. Developed by Parks Hospitality and set to open in 2021, the neighboring properties will feature distinct characteristics and amenities across 100 acres of Caribbean beachfront.

The Waldorf Astoria Cancun will feature 150 guest rooms and suites, the signature Waldorf Astoria spa, state-of-the-art fitness facilities, two plunge pools and two exquisite dining experiences. The neighboring all-inclusive Hilton Cancun, which will offer 600 guest rooms, invites guests to experience curated adventures in local art, gastronomy and culture. The hotel also will feature six all-inclusive, unique culinary experiences. Both properties will offer expansive meeting and event space. www.hilton.com

SLS Baha Mar Now Open in The Bahamas

THE BAHAMAS — The 299-room SLS Baha Mar hotel is now open within Baha Mar, the \$4.2 billion beachfront resort destination in Nassau with an elite collection of global luxury brands set along 3,000 feet of sparkling white sand beach and crystal clear waters.

SLS Baha Mar features 299 rooms and suites, an award-winning collection of culinary masterpieces, exciting nightlife venues, and captivating design and décor. Baha Mar's shared world-class amenities complete the luxe experience with guest access to the beach and shared pools, the Caribbean's largest casino, 18-hole Jack Nicklaus Signature-designed golf course, a flagship ESPA spa, and a wide variety of restaurants and lounges including Cleo, Monkey Bar (the signature SLS lobby bar) and Bungalov

Pool Bar & Grill. Looking ahead for the hotel, Privilege will open in December and Skybar will follow in early 2018. On the Baha Mar Casino floor, Katsuya opened in mid-August, and Fi'lia by Chef Michael Schwartz, the James Beard Award winner, is slated for a mid-December opening.

Additionally, the nightlife concept Bond will debut at Baha Mar in mid-December with a grand opening on December 31st. Bond will be the place to be for New Year's Eve and beyond, offering late night sizzle and cutting-edge entertainment as the see and be seen spot in the Bahamas.

SLS Baha Mar was brought to life by Dakota Development, sbe's real estate development subsidiary, and international interior design firm Avenue Interior Design. www.slsbahamar.com

Wyndham Launches Newest Dual-Brand Concept in Miami

PARSIPPANY, NJ — Wyndham Hotel Group has announced the signing of the largest hotel development in the Brickell district of Miami to its managed hotel portfolio: a new 445-room, dual-branded hotel leveraging a never-before-seen combination of the Wyndham Grand and TRYP by Wyndham brands.

The combination of brands celebrates Miami's distinct spirit — both the upper-upscale Wyndham Grand brand and select-service, lifestyle TRYP by Wyndham brands embrace the charm and character of the local destination — incorporating Miami style into each brand's unique elements and enabling travelers to stay the way they want in one of the most diverse cities in the world.

Owned by Brazilian developer Galwan and designed by award-winning firm Aquitechtonica, the agreement comprises 445 guest rooms in Miami's trendy Brickell neighborhood. The hotel, expected to open in late 2019, is the first U.S. development for Galwan, one of the largest residential and hotel developers in Brazil.

The 41-story hotel will offer 200 rooms under Wyndham Grand and 245 rooms under TRYP by Wyndham, including the brand's signature family rooms with extra space and bunk beds for kids. The hotels share a lobby and lounge space on the first floor, an eight-story parking garage, a pool deck, a fitness center and 8,000 sf of meeting space including a library, boardroom and flexible event spaces. The hotel's rooftop will feature a three-meal restaurant and bar inspired by the TRYP brand's Mediterranean roots. www.wyndhamrewards.com



Credit: IBTM World



The 30th anniversary edition of IBTM World 2017 — which took place at Fira Gran Via, Barcelona on November 28-30, 2017 — recorded more than 74,000 appointments (up 23 percent compared with 2016) having taken place during the three-day event, setting a new record for the show. Some 3,000 exhibiting companies from more than 150 countries were joined by 3,463 buyers and thousands of visitors for a packed schedule of meetings, networking and high quality educational sessions. Said IBTM's Portfolio Director, Kerry Prince, "We're always looking to the future and we're committed to remaining on the cutting edge of the industry. There will be more innovations to come next year, including the introduction of a third keynote speaker session, following the success of this year's program. We're already looking forward to coming back to Barcelona for IBTM World 2018."

By Vicki Lepore, CEM, CASE

Leveraging Event Technology to Accommodate Disabled Attendees

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's data, more than 53 million adults in the U.S. have a disability; that's one in five adults. Disabilities range from hearing and vision problems to physical functioning difficulties and complex activity limitations. There is legislation to prevent discrimination against the disabled, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments of 2008. It applies to all settings including conferences, trade shows and other meetings, which must be accessible to those with disabilities.

Still, if you polled individuals with disabilities who have recently attended a large event, their feedback likely would point to more than one obstacle they had to overcome. Barriers, poorly lit areas, doorways unable to accommodate wheelchairs or other mobility devices, and no provisions for service animals, etc. — the list goes on. It doesn't have to be that way. Meeting planners can mitigate these challenges by understanding common obstacles facing attendees with disabilities and implementing advanced planning regarding venue selection and the application of technologies to create a more accessible event.

Event Obstacles

A prevalent problem the disabled face when entering a venue is barriers prohibiting easy access for them, their wheelchairs, scooters and/or service animals. Scrutinizing a potential location from the perspective of a disabled individual is essential. Try maneuvering through a venue on a wheelchair to experience the event as a disabled individual might. While many event venues have bathroom stalls for those with physical limitations, smaller venues often do not, nor do they accommodate service animals. Seek out other locations and those with:

- Wide doorways (32 inches with the door open to 90 degrees) and aisles in conference, breakout and dining rooms.
- Easy-to-open doors with automatic/push-button openers or lever handles; not revolving doors.
- Handicapped-accessible elevators, ample lighting and call buttons with visual and audio signals that can be reached from a wheelchair or scooter.
- Stairways with closed risers and handrails on both sides.

- Ramps with handrails on both sides.
- Slip-resistant and level surfaces.
- Clearly marked entrances and exits with Braille and tactile signage for the visually impaired.
- Guest rooms with hearing aid-compatible and volume-control telephones, televisions with closed-captioning, and adjustable lighting.
- Assisted listening devices, adaptive computer devices, roving microphones for audience questions and speaker podiums placed at ground level or accessible via a ramp or lift.

Accessible events can further be achieved through event technologies, which enhance the experience for individuals with disabilities, while benefiting meeting planners, exhibitors, sponsors and non-disabled event-goers.

Transformative Event Technologies

Meeting planners can demonstrate their consideration for individuals with disabilities through the use of advanced event technologies that are particularly beneficial to those with disabilities:

Web-based event registration software. Enables registration online or onsite using self-serve kiosks, with or without assistance, helping to alleviate long lines. Onsite registration desks should be height-accessible with ample clearance for wheelchairs or scooters. This software facilitates easy registration, payment processing, badge creation and data capture through barcodes with embedded attendee profile data easily scanned for attendee tracking. It also features reporting tools.

Event check-in and badge-printing software. Makes processes faster and easier, accommodating those who tire easily or whose disability involves limited functioning. It also offers: connecting attendee lists with online registration platforms, onsite badge printing and real-time reporting for event planners.

Mobile event app software. Helps individuals with disabilities easily navigate an event by providing easily accessed program information/schedules, personalized event agendas and venue maps that limit unnecessary movement. The apps also provide exhibitor information such as booth locations and product information as well as information on the host city (transportation systems, restaurants, cultural attractions, etc.). These apps integrate with social media, have networking ca-

pabilities and convey a concierge-type experience, especially helpful for those with disabilities.

Interactive kiosks. Assists individuals with disabilities in navigating a venue and accessing helpful information (agenda, exhibitors, floor plan, etc.). They also prevent a disabled individual from expending unnecessary effort going from one activity to another. Place kiosks in highly visible, high-traffic areas, near entrances and restrooms, in social media lounges, cyber cafés and dining areas. For event planners, exhibitors and sponsors, kiosks offer outstanding branding opportunities.

High-resolution, big-screen displays in LCD and LED format. Offers easier viewing of presentations and exhibitors' in-

formation, especially helpful for those with vision limitations. They deliver a high engagement factor while supporting administrative and marketing processes such as registration and product demonstrations.

formation, especially helpful for those with vision limitations. They deliver a high engagement factor while supporting administrative and marketing processes such as registration and product demonstrations.

Giant iTab. Transforms a typical touchscreen display into a giant smartphone format, accommodating individuals with developmental or vision disabilities and encouraging engagement. The technology projects apps in their native environment just as they appear on mobile devices, but on a huge display. Content options include: product selector guide, smart-pad app, Salesforce app, product configurator, websites, video showreels, PowerPoint slides, brochures/PDFs, picture galleries, gaming, Twitter and Facebook.

Charging stations. For many individuals with disabilities, mobile devices serve as a lifeline and must always be charged. Having charging stations available throughout the venue is a convenience for all attendees, but for the disabled, it offers peace of mind and alleviates unnecessary worry. Like kiosks,

In The Words of Individuals with Disabilities

An interview conducted by Alice Wong with Sarah Blahovec, a disability voting rights activist and blogger with Crohn's disease, and Laura Halvorson, a disability rights advocate with muscular dystrophy, and reported on by the Disability Visibility Project (disabilityvisibilityproject.com), sheds light on how the disabled feel about their event experiences.

In speaking about an experience at a get-out-the-vote event in September 2016, Sarah noted how she was "astounded by

“Try maneuvering through a venue on a **wheelchair** to **experience** the event as a disabled individual might.”

the line” and expected “there would be a separate ADA line” and “ADA section well separated from the general audience.” Because Laura uses a non-invasive ventilating machine for breathing and a power wheelchair for mobility, she was concerned that others would bump into the ventilator and disrupt its performance. When they arrived, their concern grew as they realized the space was not conducive for Laura's situation. The crowd crossed the ADA section barrier, creating an upsetting and potentially dangerous situation as the force of the crowd began moving Laura's wheelchair and ventilator. Among Sarah's recommendations to event planners were: have stronger, sturdier barriers for ADA sections, have crowd control in place, and recognize that disabled people want to participate and should not have to “weigh whether they, their medical equipment or their mobility devices will be at risk.”

The right venue selection and event technologies can make participation in events a positive experience for all attendees, especially those with disabilities.

C&IT



Vicki Lepore, CEM, CASE

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By Vivian Marinelli

Monitoring Social Media During a Crisis

When disaster strikes, it's easy to get caught up in the minutia of problem solving. Whether it's a natural disaster, civil unrest, an active shooter or another type of large-scale crisis situation, attention is focused on assessing the scale and scope of the situation, notifying the emergency response teams and ensuring that medical and safety needs are addressed. Executing all the necessary tasks in a high-pressure setting along with keeping everyone updated with current information on your response, without forgetting an important step, can be a challenge.

No matter the crisis, remember that those in need of information extend beyond those directly impacted. With

vide a broad audience with news delivered in a far more instantaneous fashion than traditional media can. Effective social media management during a crisis helps communicate safety information to relevant audiences and monitor the pulse of public opinion. It also can help communicate information on your organizational response, which will help to prevent the spread of rumors, misinformation and false narratives.

The Danger of Uncontrolled Messages

News travels fast on social media; personal reports from the site of a crisis, whether accurate or not, can go viral in front of the eyes of thousands in minutes. In fact, speed can be both a blessing and a curse on social media during a crisis situation.

People at the scene of a crisis may post information and photos that may be taken out of context without knowing the whole story. These initial posts often get reposted on Facebook and Twitter, and get picked up by news outlets, leading to the mass distribution of unvetted information about a situation you're in the process of managing with both internal and external resources. These initial posts may stir up a frenzy of reports in the media that are eventually proven to be inaccurate or false. However, in the meantime, your communications

team will need to not only get the accurate information out but also address the misinformation as well.

Social media messages also are persistent. Active engagement can keep stories in circulation for hours or, depending on the situation, days. These posts do not always clearly identify the source so the identity can be easily hidden. It makes it much easier for someone to post or comment on a situation when there's no onus on them to prove the statements. When your official messages finally appear in social media feeds, potential contradictions with previously distributed information from external sources can

today's 24-hour news cycle, we're used to receiving breaking news on our smartphones, computers, tablets and TVs. A lack of communication from an organization during a crisis is quickly recognized and perceived in a negative light. During the first 24 hours of a crisis, response teams are so focused on managing the situation that they sometimes fail to effectively communicate with outside audiences and track public opinion, which can potentially lead to brand/reputation damage and potential safety concerns.

Monitoring social media during a crisis is vital. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram pro-



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Perspective

lead to confusion and distrust. Timely posts on social media and monitoring false or misleading information is critical to addressing messages on social media. And tracking false or misleading information early is critical to handling both negative opinions and potentially harmful situations.

Be Smart About Social

Tracking of news and messages on social media is especially challenging during major crises. Even large event firms can run into limits on just how much their employees can manage at once while in the thick of a crisis. Hiring an outside crisis communications service provider to assist

with a summary of what is being said about the response on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other social platforms.

Gathering positive feedback can be conducive to keeping morale up during trying times. Firms can share kind comments and words of encouragement with team members to reinforce that the work they're doing is important and that they're making an impact. Keeping spirits high is important when it comes to recovering from a potentially traumatic crisis situation.

Negative feedback provides your organization valuable information on where it may need to focus attention currently or to adapt for future crisis events. Sometimes negative comments arise from errors in communication, and sometimes

“When a crisis strikes at your event, **false reports** and **misinformation** threaten to **damage** your brand, your client, the venue and public safety.”

with social media monitoring can prove invaluable when keeping lines of communication open.

External crisis management and public relations service providers have years of experience helping clients draft templates for initial holding statements both for social and traditional media outlets and updates on the crisis response, which will help to keep the community informed during a crisis situation. Increasing the messaging generated by the organization will allow the event planners to focus on the details of the onsite support, help to decrease confusion and increase trust with the organization to provide information.

Monitor the Public Pulse

External crisis and PR firms are highly effective at monitoring what people are saying about your organization both during the crisis and afterwards. These firms will track and document the posts and sources to provide your organiza-

tion they arise from issues with your actions. An external service provider will use negative comments to help draft responses and, in extreme cases, offer guidance on changing organizational behavior to satisfy the public.

Consider retaining your external crisis communication team to help with the recovery phase as well. Compiling all social media feedback received during an event will provide an understanding of what your event team or organization is doing well and what work still needs to be done to win back public trust.

Social media has created a culture of information that is virtually instant, but difficult to verify. When a crisis strikes at your event, false reports and misinformation threaten to damage your brand, your client, the venue and public safety. Being savvy about social media will save reputations—yours and your client's—and prepare the organization for effective communication and response tracking before disaster strikes. *C&IT*



Vivian Marinelli

is Senior Director of Crisis Management Services for FEI Behavioral Health. She holds a doctorate degree in clinical psychology and is a licensed psychologist in Wisconsin. She brings more than 20 years of experience in direct clinical services specializing in trauma and grief counseling to her position, which focuses on assisting individuals involved in critical incidents. She is responsible for leading and directing a full complement of emergency support services for corporate customers in accordance with industry requirements, company policies and procedures as well as overseeing the internal and external FEI Crisis Support Team members to ensure a high level of response capability.

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2018 Industry Forecast



“As attendees look increasingly for answers to their specific challenges and problems, meeting professionals are turning to technologies that help their participants curate unique experiences.”

Jessie States, CMM
Manager, Professional Development
Meeting Professionals International
Dallas, TX

Optimism Mixed With New Challenges

By Monica Compton, CMP

The meetings outlook for 2018 is positive as the demand for meetings remains consistent. But along with that demand come the challenges: The industry continues to be a seller’s market due to an imbalance in supply of hotels and meeting venues, causing rates to rise. And concern with security risks is top of mind as companies implement plans for the first time or adapt their existing plans to meet a rise in terrorist attacks and natural disasters. On the positive side, creating unique attendee experiences with new technology tools continues to be a main goal.

“Following the shifting sentiment in 2017, next year should be more positive around the world in terms of spend, number of meetings and attendees,” says Issa Jouaneh, senior vice president and general manager, American Express Meetings & Events. “Meanwhile,

meeting owners are prioritizing attendee experience and engagement over scale. As a result, we expect to see shorter, more focused meetings. Economic and geopolitical influences will continue to create uncertainty, but we anticipate ongoing industry resilience and continued focus on successful experiences.”

According to American Express’ 2018 Global Meetings Forecast, the number of meetings held in 2018 is predicted to remain flat with a change in numbers of less than 0.5 percent. International hoteliers are suggesting a slightly greater increase in the number of meetings — 2 percent to 2.3 percent for product launches, incentives, conferences and trade shows. The length of meetings will remain static while the number of attendees will increase by 1.8 percent, especially in the conference and trade show meeting type.



“Meeting owners are prioritizing attendee experience and engagement over scale. As a result, we expect to see shorter, more focused meetings.”

Issa Jouaneh
SVP and General Manager
American Express
Meetings & Events
New York, NY



Budget Forecast

Rhea Stagner, CIS, DVP, sourcing and supplier relations for Maritz Travel – a Maritz Global Events Company, is seeing a larger spend per attendee in the area of incentive meetings. “As all expense categories have risen in costs — air, hotel rooms, food and beverage and more complex technology — the total cost will be about \$3,000 to \$4,000 per attendee,” Stagner says.

Stagner points to the imbalance in the ratio of meeting space to hotel rooms as the main reason for pressure on space. “There are not a lot of upper upscale or luxury new builds in North America, which is another reason for the pressure on space and increase in room rates,” Stagner says. “Booking windows are getting longer as planners compete for space availability.”

According to the BCD Meetings & Events Global Industry Trends Report, even when



“By creating flexible menus, not necessarily discounting menu items, planners will see a savings to their overall budgets.”

Mike Dominguez
Chief Sales Officer
MGM Resorts International
Las Vegas, NV

new convention hotels have opened up in cities such as Austin and Denver, they are booked at a pace for as much as five years in advance. The high demand is causing planners to miss out on their first choice of a destination or they are having to change the time of year the meeting is held.

The BCD report suggests that higher prices are not necessarily due to higher rates, but due to a decrease in discounts for an existing rate, especially for bookings during peak times. A planner's power of negotiation is then reduced in areas that were formally complimentary. BCD points to the addition of meeting space rental costs, which were traditionally waived based on achieving a guarantee in overall spend.

While room rates are rising, Michael Dominguez, chief sales officer for MGM Resorts International, says static airline prices and a weakening dollar could help meeting budgets. Decreasing oil prices have helped fares to stay stable or decrease compared to 18–24 months ago when oil was priced at \$100 a barrel. “This is the first time since the recession that all major economies — North America, Europe and China — are on the uptick,” Dominguez says. “And with the shrinking dollar, exports are less expensive, and more people are looking at taking groups to the U.S.”

In response to higher costs, planners are forced to increase their budgets. MPI's Meetings Outlook report shows that 47 percent of planners are increasing their budgets over the next year. The amount of increase, however, is not a large percentage. “Meeting and event budgets are increasing by a rate of only about 0.8 percent, and the majority of that isn't going to increased costs in food and beverage or space rental or transportation,” says Jessie States, CMM, manager of professional development for MPI. “It's going to safety and security and risk management.”



Trends in Food and Beverage

After guest rooms, food and beverage spend is the largest area of a meeting budget. Dominguez sees a disconnect in this area between planners and the hotel. “Planners' budgets are getting less, but they don't always understand that the food costs have increased,” Dominguez says. “By creating flexible menus, not necessarily discounting menu items, planners will see a savings to their overall budget.”

As an example, Dominguez points to the cost of shrimp, which was at an all-time high three years ago due to the oil spill and disease in Asia. As the price has come down, it's more sensible to replace lobster with shrimp.

Dominguez also sees a trend in passing bite-size and small plates portions. “This ‘feast on the move’ allows for a better return on engagement as attendees are able to interact with a greater number of attendees rather than a sit-down meal where they are locked into a table,” Dominguez says.

Stagner is seeing an increase in the food and beverage budget, typically for higher-end meetings. “Planners are trying to be more thoughtful on how they spend their money and are getting away from the traditional banquet menus,” Stagner says. “There is more conversation on what is best for the customer as the trend is on a healthier lifestyle and quality food.”

Stagner says more planners are going offsite for their meals, allowing attendees to

better experience the local flair. “The restaurants don't have to be high-end; it could be barbecue and food trucks, but an authentic local experience,” Stagner says.

Venues are responding to an increased call for health-oriented foods. The IACC survey “Trends in Nutrition and Delegate Wellbeing” reports that venues are changing how their menus are prepared and are using less salt, sugar and fat in their menus. They are increasing the amount of dairy-free and gluten-free options and are preparing smaller portions.

The IACC survey revealed a need for venues to take a proactive approach in promoting healthy options rather than waiting for the planner to raise the issue. In response to this, 87 percent of venues made changes to their menus based on health and wellness principals or feedback from clients.

“Meeting professionals are also continuously asking for continuous food breaks to fuel their attendees,” says States. “The nutritional needs of an audience are as diverse as the individuals who comprise it. And people need the food that fuels them at a variety of different times. As organizers look to customize the onsite experiences of diverse audiences, food becomes a major player in the design of welcoming and inclusive experiences.”



Travel and Hotel Booking Trends

While some companies are booking their meetings farther out due to increased demand, other companies continue to book late. That window can be as short as 60 to 90 days. However, lead time shortens as buyers are concerned with political volatility.

“Geopolitical risks, uncertainties in emerging markets and ever-changing political environments in Europe and the United States mean today's travel professionals more than ever have to take into account when building their travel programs,” says Jeanne Liu, GBTA Foundation vice president of research. “The most successful programs will have to keep a watchful eye on both geopolitical risks and a rapidly changing supplier landscape as they reevaluate strategy often and adapt as necessary.”

According to the BCD Meetings & Events Survey, the demand for meeting space is causing hotels to hold bookings for a shorter period of time and selling on a first-come, first-served basis. And, hotels are being more selective about their customers, choosing those they believe will bring a higher overall revenue once food and beverage spend is taken into consideration.

On the airfare front, Stagner says lift continues to be a problem especially in cities such as Nashville that were once considered second tier, but are now popular. “The airlines' available flights haven't caught up with cities in demand,” Stagner says.

The lift issue might improve in 2018. GBTA's 2018 Global Travel Forecast shows that airlines will add 6 percent capacity next year. Their predicted 2.3 percent rise in U.S. airfares will force travelers to look at basic economy fares and restricted fares versus upgraded options.



“As all expense categories have risen in costs... the total cost will be about \$3,000 to \$4,000 per attendee.”

Rhea Stagner, CIS
DVP, Sourcing and
Supplier Relations
Maritz Travel - A Maritz
Global Events Company
Fenton, MO

GBTA estimates ground transportation rates will rise only 0.6 percent in 2018. An increase in corporate travel will cause rental car rates to rise. Rental car companies are using this revenue to invest in technology to better manage fleets and improve utilization. Sharing economy companies such as Uber and Lyft will see growth of more than 10 percent. However, their growth is threatened by government bans and costly regulations.



Meeting Design and Innovation

Experience-driven meetings will continue to be the focus into 2018. Stagner sees a turn in conventional room design to a format that fosters better networking. "I've seen room sets that represent a coffee shop with espresso machines," Stagner says.

Hotels are now building their meeting rooms with environments intended to stimulate learning. Dominguez points to the Monte Carlo hotel in Las Vegas, which is being redesigned to the Park MGM hotel. Meeting rooms will have conference tables that are 12 inches taller than traditional tables. "This allows attendees to be eye-to-eye with the presenter," Dominguez says. "Everything from lighting to air quality will be focused on boosting mental acuity."

Embracing adult learning is a key factor in designing engaging content. States sees meeting owners creating hands-on learning experiences and designing peer-on-peer classes to better foster learning. "They are building an arsenal of unique session formats and learning autopsies, finding the experts in the room and ultimately delivering education that capitalizes on the way adults learn, remember, recollect and apply knowledge," States says.

Kelly Peacy, CAE, CMP, founder and CEO of Insight Event Strategy LLC, sees a trend toward more informal learning environments and a need to move attendees from passive observers to active and engaged participants. "Adults learn differently, and research shows that adults retain content when it's applied learning and interactive or in small groups," Peacy says. "This is affecting room sets and the desire/need to be flexible with movable furniture and/or walls that can be used to share information with magnets, push pins or dry-erase boards."



Incentive Travel Trends and Destinations

Incentive travel programs will continue to be popular in 2018, increasing at a rate of about 1.2 percent according to MPI. However, in an effort to cut costs, many groups will stay in North America. Others will look to Mexico and the Caribbean as popular destinations. City experiences and individual customization are high priorities. "It's as

much about what the group does once they get to a destination as it is the destination itself," Stagner says.

On the international front, luxury cruises and river cruises are popular as well as untouched destinations such as Slovenia and Iceland. Stagner also sees Cuba as a future target after issues with the country's infrastructure are resolved.

Dominguez agrees that experiential incentive trips provide the best attendee engagement. "Planners are focused on the unique aspects of a destination," Dominguez says. "In Vegas they are not just staying on The Strip. They are taking a helicopter to the Grand Canyon and having a picnic on the base of the canyon."

According to Linda McNairy, vice president of global operations for American Express Meetings & Events, Orlando, Las Vegas and Chicago are the most popular destinations for incentives in the U.S. In Latin America, Rio de Janeiro, Cancun and Mexico City are favorites. London, Barcelona and Berlin are at the top of the list in Europe, and Singapore, Sydney and Bangkok are the most popular in Asia.



Sustainability and CSR

While many event budgets reduced CSR initiatives during the recession, 2018 sees a strong return. Rather than simply donating money to a cause, attendees are looking for experiences that put them in the community. Dominguez says many venues assist planners by having a menu of CSR options to choose from, making it easier for the organization to implement the program.

And if a CSR activity doesn't fit into the agenda, Stagner says organizations are placing donations in an attendee's name or removing an element of the program — an attendee room drop, for example — and giving the equivalent cost to charity.

On the sustainability side, Dominguez says planners have become more conscious of waste, especially in the banquet areas. They are giving better attendee numbers to help reduce unused food.



Technology

Technology tools are being used to foster attendee engagement on a greater level. Innovations in virtual reality and artificial intelligence are creating unique opportunities for attendee interaction. Human-shaped holograms, for example, are being used to provide attendees with directions and soon will be able to answer questions. Other tools, such as Social Tables, are helping planners create better room setups, and Slido, a crowdsourcing tool, allows attendees to interact during sessions from their mobile device.

"Technologies that help participants connect and engage with each other are in-



// The most successful programs will have to keep a watchful eye on both geopolitical risks and a rapidly changing supplier landscape. //

Jeanne Liu
VP Research
GBTA Foundation
Alexandria, VA



// Adults learn differently. ... This is affecting room sets and the desire/need to be flexible with movable furniture and/or walls. //

Kelly Peacy, CAE, CMP
Founder & CEO
Insight Event Strategy
Austin, TX



“There is still a need for organizations to be more proactive when considering security. ...Terrorists are quick to evolve their tactics.”

Pete Murphy
Operations Director
Priavo Security
Mayfair London

creasingly important in the eyes of meeting organizers,” States says. “As the reasons for attendance continue to evolve and as attendees look increasingly for answers to their specific challenges and problems, meeting professionals are turning to technologies that help their participants curate unique experiences. These are technologies that recommend courses, subject matter experts and peers based on attendee profile, that connect buyers to the suppliers who directly meet their needs, that bring like minds together to solve problems and find solutions.”

Planners are continuing to use hybrid meetings to increase the audience, but not to replace live events. The AMEX forecast reports that fewer than one-third of planners said hybrid meetings would be more than 10 percent of their meetings. Rather, hybrid meetings are being used to join regional offices that cannot participate onsite. They hybrid experience is becoming richer as well, offering virtual attendees a greater depth of learning.

“They are no longer simply streaming content from their keynotes and concurrents, but creating an exclusive online experience during which facilitators and speakers talk directly to the online audience, devise homework or group work for virtual attendees and host private Q&As with the online cohort,” States says.



Security and Risk Management

Planners are looking to create new risk management plans or redesign what they have in response to heightened security concerns. MPI reports that although meeting budgets are increasing by only 0.8 percent, the majority of this increase is going to safety and security measures.

Pete Murphy, operations director for Priavo Security, performs risk assessments for events and advances venues to assess the threat mitigation measures put in place. More often than not, his team finds areas for improvement in the security infrastructure.

“There is still a need for organizations to be more proactive when considering security,” Murphy says. “Terrorists are quick to evolve their tactics, techniques and procedures; currently doing so at a higher tempo than the counter terror policies and measures put in place to prevent them.”

Cyber security is another concern for planners. In many cases, planners are not even aware that they have suffered a security incident or data breach. Murphy says that attackers are motivated to keep an initial breach hidden so they can penetrate deeper into the organization to perform identity theft or deploy large-scale fraud. “Monitoring, threat analytics and incident response are key as we see clients, event organizers, venues and agents targeted with what is frequently a blended attack where cyber is only one component,” Murphy says.

Medical risk management is another area of focus for planners. With recent natural disasters, clinical assessments can help organizers understand country health risks, medical considerations and capabilities. “Deployments for large-scale events include the setup of remote medical clinics, and clinical and medical staff globally,” Murphy says.

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Incentive Programs

Incentive Travel Planning

Budgets Are Up, and So Are the Program Management Challenges

By Maura Keller

According to the 2018 SITE Index, optimism is high for incentive travel, with most incentive program buyers recognizing its consequential power to motivate and drive performance, resulting in increased company sales and profitability. Also important is the engagement component, which helps cement relationships between organizations and stakeholders — from employees to partners. Indeed, evidence that organizations are “all in” on incentive travel programs can be found in the Incentive Research Foundation’s (IRF) 2018 Outlook Study, which shows that incentive travel budgets are up with an average per-person spend of \$3,915, an increase of 4 percent over last year.

But as every meeting planner knows, pulling off a successful incentive travel program is no walk in the park. First, the program has to be perceived as desirable and inspire people to do more to reach their goals. Participants also must have reason to believe that they can attain the reward, and that it will be worth the extra effort. Then, each participant — from employees, to customers, to senior leaders — expects to enjoy a flawless experience from the moment they find out they qualify for the trip to the time they arrive back home.

Of overriding importance is meet-



Susan Adams
Vice President of Engagement
Next Level Performance
New Brunswick, NJ

“(Planners) must balance guest experience with responsibility, and ensure that the company’s interests are served at every step.”

ing the organization’s expectations for a return on the significant investment they’ve made in the program.

Program Stewards

Susan Adams, vice president of en-

gagement at Next Level Performance and former board member and current member at Incentive Marketing Association, understands the planning challenges full well. “Managing an incentive program is both an art and a science,” she says. “While planners create a magical, memorable experience for participants at the destination, they are also the stewards of the program finances and reputation. In an increasingly regulated environment, and one in which there are increasing disruptions for reasons from weather to social media, planners face new challenges. They must balance guest experience with responsibility, and ensure that the company’s interests are served at every step.”

According to Adams, end-user clients are very focused on the relationship between the organization and eligible participants, from initial communication to the post-program survey. Adams sees the most dramatic results when the audience has a range of communications — from video to print — at a fairly frequent cadence. This ensures that the program plays into decisions and efforts throughout the year.

“An amazing destination also helps,” Adams says. “It’s essential that the actual program experience is in line with everything the participants have imagined and wished for throughout the qualification period. When program participants can see themselves there, then have an even greater experience onsite, there is a tremendous emotional payoff for their hard work. That is a powerful representation of the company’s brand and the organization’s commitment to its people.”

This level of experience with incentive programs gives employees a reason to stay and to connect to the organization. Linking the anticipated experience to the actual experience amplifies the power of the program.

Inherent Challenges

The obstacles to a flawless incentive program are many and can pop up when least expected. As Adams explains, many incentive programs oc-

cur in the winter or early spring, just after program results are verified. This means that weather can have a significant impact, as airlines scramble to get people safely from the stormy Midwest



Jeff O'Hara, CMP, DMCP
President
AlliedPRA New Orleans

“As soon as we create and implement a brand new, out-of-the-box experience, it is all over social media and local websites, so it loses some cachet.”

to sunnier locales. Cultural differences or miscommunications also can create a host of challenges to even the most thoroughly planned event.

As a former planner, Adams has learned that careful, exhaustive planning not only results in a better event, it also gives meeting planners the bandwidth they need to react to challenges or emergencies. Just as important is effectively communicating the plan to the rest of the team. Because no program goes off without some surprises, it is essential that everyone on the travel staff knows what to do and has the information they need so that they can jump in and make good decisions when the unexpected happens.

“Planners face difficulties, which can include everything from guests who are unwell to motorcoaches with flat tires,” Adams says. “You just never know. And no matter how much planning experience you have, it always seems that there is some new, unheard of challenge on every program. The ability to react to the unexpected is what really sets a great planner apart.”

For Jeff O’Hara, CMP, DMCP, president of AlliedPRA New Orleans, incentive programs offer a myriad of challenges for corporate meeting planners. One of the biggest is staying with the same theme. “As soon as we create and implement a brand new, out-of-the-box experience, it is all over social media and local websites, so it loses some cachet,” O’Hara says. “We have to work hard to keep things fresh, and some-

times keep a trick or two in our pocket to enhance future experiences.”

To make incentive programs work well, O’Hara stresses that planners have to know their group well. “Since we are designing hyper-local, unique experiences, they have to be the right fit for the group,” O’Hara says. “I can tell right away if a client knows their group well. When they don’t, it prolongs the proposal process and costs everyone money and time.”

Incentive travel continues to be strong. Businesses value rewarding and recognizing their top performers with group incentive travel. But, the challenges include the continued responsibility of providing unique experiences and elevating the elements each year, but on a flat budget — and also managing safety and risk concerns.

In fact, security and risk management are of major concern to stakeholders and planners today.

“Whether it be terrorism, weather or health-related outbreaks, it is important to have a crisis management or emergency response plan in place,” says Jill Anonson, manager, event solutions, ITA Group in West Des Moines, Iowa. “Even though we are unable to control everything, this can ensure that the team and their suppliers know what to do. A lot more time is being dedicated to determining best destinations and managing the disruptions.”

Mark Herbert, president of Incentive Solutions in Atlanta, Georgia, says that managing an incentive travel program can be a daunting task. One of the hardships planners face is avoiding having to pay any attrition fees. Avoid-

ing attrition fees is one feat; getting attendees to register in a timely manner may feel nearly impossible.

“However, registration is a huge necessity so we can collect important



Jill Anonson
Manager, Event Solutions
ITA Group
West Des Moines, IA

“A lot more time is being dedicated to determining best destinations and managing the disruptions.”

data on attendees, such as dietary needs and restrictions,” Herbert says. “Once a planner has a way to get the attendees to register, be sure to have a registration system to collect and store that data. They are going to want to be able to access attendee information efficiently should they need it for any reason.”

Needless to say, stakeholders in the incentive program arena expect to see a healthy return on their investment.

“The incentive needs to drive a change in behavior and have an impact on profits and brand awareness,” Anonson says. It is important to develop a rule structure that drives those results and then be able to look at various metrics to determine success. Many busi-

nesses have data, but are unsure how to utilize it to truly measure the impact.

Enhancing Incentive Programs

And these days, planners are finding that they need to up their game in meeting or exceeding participant expectations.

“People are so much more well-traveled now, and see so much on social media, that you can’t slip a routine trip by them. In the case of customer incentives, most times your best customers are all millionaires themselves, so (they are) that much more experienced and hard to impress. They have choices on which companies to spend their time with on incentive travel, so yours must stand out in the pre-marketing but also be flawless in execution.”

Most important, the planner should understand the company’s goals and brand. Even seemingly small decisions reflect on the organization with an important audience — top employees or partners. By taking the time to inquire about the purpose of the event, the overarching messaging and the tone set by the client corporation, a planner can better integrate those threads into everything from how the welcome materials are written to the entertainment selected for the final night.

“Some brands are fun by nature, and others are serious in style,” Adams says. “Some clients want to encourage networking and mingling, while others are more interested in formal recognition for top achievements. The same cut-and-paste evening event will not appeal to both groups. Nor will the same tone of voice among staff at the desk. The best planners learn as much as they can about the style of the organization and the intent of the client contact, and reflect that in every decision.”

Asking questions and developing awareness of the brand — even if it’s gleaned from the corporate website and advertising — can go a long way towards a successful program.

And proper incentive program management is key to ensuring a successful event. By having each component of the program laid out in advance allows

a meeting planner to see where the program may be lacking, giving them the opportunity to enhance those pieces.

“Also, there are many cases in which additional support staff are hired on a per-event basis,” Herbert says. “Without proper program management, it can be challenging for the support staff to fully grasp and understand what is needed from them — which, in turn, could affect the attendee experience and overall program satisfaction.”

When managing incentive programs, planners and companies are trying to provide unique and exciting programming that appeals to all the attendees. Providing experiences that showcase the location of the incentive trip, while also providing enough variety for all the



Mark Herbert
President
Incentive Solutions
Atlanta, GA

“Attendees are starting to expect to be told where they need to be via some form of (text message or mobile app) notification rather than look it up.”

attendees, can be challenging and budget-constraining.

“The more activities that are offered, the higher the budget, but at the same

Upping Your Game

Many incentive programs are looking for increasingly unique and authentic experiences. Planners should strive to find opportunities that reflect a region’s uniqueness and that attendees are unlikely to experience anywhere else. This could be through food and beverage, entertainment and/or cultural experiences.

Provide personalized experiences. “Personalized gifting is another trend that makes a big impact on attendees,” says Meredith Olson, program manager of meeting management at Minneapolis-based conference and events production company metroConnections. Attendee favorites (snacks, beverages, magazines, etc.) can be captured through a registration questionnaire and provided upon arrival for a personal touch. The opportunity to choose your own gift from a gift room and/or monogrammed items such as throw pillows, blankets or travel mugs also are good ideas.

Get attendee feedback while planning. This will pay off in a big way during and after the meeting. Karen Shackman, president, Shackman & Associates in New York City, has found that some of the most successful meetings her firm has helped manage were the result of a collaborative effort throughout the company to find exactly what kind of takeaways attendees wanted. “Attendees won’t think asking around is a hassle when they know it will pay off when onsite,” Shackman says.

Provide destination experiences that few will ever have. In New York City, says Shackman, arrange a private, pre-opening shopping experience at one of city’s most iconic or exclusive stores. She has orchestrated dinners in historic bank vaults, galas at major museum exhibits, backstage tours on Broadway, and scavenger hunts that take attendees to some of the city’s most remote and secret locations.

Create unique food and beverage experiences. As incentive groups have increasingly chosen trendy venues with high design elements, there are new venues in this category that include kitchen components where you can bring in a celebrity chef for a private tasting event. “This is also advantageous for groups with diverse dietary requirements,” Shackman says.

Be flexible with attendee downtime, especially at the last minute. Today’s attendees want to experience the local vibe of the destination, so be flexible enough to make changes to an after-hours idea attendees want. It can be done by working with a well-connected DMC and having an all-contingency transportation plan ahead of the meeting. — MK

time, not everyone wants to have a spa day or golf," says Emily Griesser, director of meeting management at Minneapolis-based conference and events production company metroConnections.

"Many attendees also will want to do something that will showcase the cultural and historical side of the destination they are in. With planning a multitude of activities, make sure that there is enough variety, but also that take into account attendee numbers as well. Many activities have group minimums in addition



Meredith Olson
Program Mgr., Meeting Management
metroConnections
Bloomington, MN

"The best way to guarantee success with future incentive program management is to stay on top of the trends and strive to continue elevating the experience."

to maximum attendee numbers, and a meeting planner doesn't want to have to go back to the group and make people choose something different, because there wasn't enough interest in their activity."

A growing expectation among participants is for events to have mo-

bile options available, if not some form of mobile app.

"Mobile apps have started replacing paper on both the planner and attendee sides," says Herbert. "Text messaging and mobile app notifications are now a must-have — attendees are starting to expect to be told where they need to be via some form of notification rather than look it up."

On the Horizon

From the recent major weather events to new regulations affecting program rules, there is a great deal of disruption in the incentive marketplace. As such, the planner's role as guardian of the client's interest is more important than ever.

"The incentive program — rules, communications, results, reward — is far greater than the dates and location of the trip, and the planner's work influences both the onsite experience and long-term success of the program year-over-year," Adams says.

According to O'Hara, all of the recent surveys indicate incentive travel spending is on the rise. Companies realize the value that is created by having this quality time with their top customers or employees.

"As it is ever easier to gain knowledge about what is out in the world, selecting motivating destinations that are appealing to the type of traveler in the group and providing unique, personal and brag-worthy experiences becomes ever more important," O'Hara says. "While some groups will still like to go to a resort, lounge around the pool and get spa treatments, more want to experience a destination and discover its unique offerings."

Anonson says that there are many factors that will drive us to adapt and change. The political and global climate will continue to affect the industry and global events. Government regulations, acts of terrorism and natural disasters are factors which are difficult to predict, but will continue to be obstacles for planners and industry suppliers.

"We will see a growth in employee incentives," Anonson says. "Companies need to build loyalty within their em-

ployee base to help with talent retention. Incentives will go beyond sales, and also recognize innovation and high levels of service."

Incentive programs recognize the best of the best. As such, it's crucial to have proper program management

Emily Griesser

Director of Meeting Management
metroConnections
Bloomington, MN

"Many attendees also will want to do something that will showcase the cultural and historical side of the destination they are in."

to guarantee a smooth, carefree and enjoyable experience for all attendees. "Planners are the ones charged with making sure everything is up to par and exceeding expectations — from the registration process, to the airport transportation, to the hotel check in and activity participation," says Meredith Olson, program manager of meeting management at metroConnections. "Nothing should fall through the cracks on these types of programs."

Incentive programs continue to grow and evolve in the meetings market, and it is important for the industry to evolve with the demand for these types of programs. Increasingly, companies are looking for new and authentic experiences for their incentive programs, while also being sensitive to company perceptions and budgets.

"Incentive trips aren't going away," Olson says. "There will continue to be demand for luxurious, and new and different experiences. The best way to guarantee success with future incentive program management is to stay on top of the trends and strive to continue elevating the experience so your clients continue to surprise and delight their incentive winners." **C&IT**



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Setting the Stage for Event Entertainment

By Cynthia Dial

These days the seamless coordination of an event with its entertainment is as carefully orchestrated as a successful Match.com date. Akin to assembling a puzzle from an assortment of such fundamental pieces as location and budget — as opposed to sharing one’s favorite rainy-day pursuit — practice indeed makes this meeting planning challenge perfect. So, follow us through a collection of tips given by pros who have a triumphant track record in the arena of amusement.

“If you can, it is always important to your event to include some sort of entertainment,” states Jessica Rienecker, CMM, CTA, CTP, HMCC, meeting sales director, Pacific Northwest region, Visit Anaheim.

Catering to the Crowd

“Matching the entertainment to the setting and the crowd is key,” continues Rienecker “because the audience’s reaction to the entertainment will make or break your event.” Catering to the group’s needs is a principle to which she adheres. As a meeting planner, consider what you want the group to achieve during the event. Define the event. Is it a celebration, a training session, a networking opportunity? Then ask: “How can I weave the entertainment into that goal?”

“Do you want guests to engage with each other?” queries the meetings specialist. She shares that if you are having a networking event, loud music not only will interrupt conversations but cause guests to move away from the entertainment itself. Her advice: “Choose a volume, style and pace of entertainment that matches

your event’s goals and the vibe you are looking to achieve.” If you want guests to interact with the entertainment, consider options beyond musicians — such as a comedian, mentalist or even an acrobat walking through the crowd. And if there is a dance floor, keep it near the music so there is a connection between the performance and the audience.

With respect to budget, Rienecker’s advice is simple: “More budget doesn’t always equal better.” She suggests a unique two-piece band or a solo singer during dinner as opposed to a five-piece band playing music that may not resonate with the crowd. An additional cost-saving measure is to seek en-



Credits: Visit Anaheim
Pop star Andy Grammer entertains 2,500 IAEE annual meeting attendees on the Grand Plaza at the Anaheim Convention Center.

ertainers who will be performing in the area during the same week — saving on travel expenditures.

The audience's reaction to the entertainment is key, says Rienecker. She cites an event with a small budget that selected a celebrity impersonator with a tie to the theme. However, the impersonator bore no likeness to the celebrity and left attendees wondering who the stranger was wandering around in costume — doing more harm than good.

With a larger budget, attention to detail can make the difference. Rienecker illustrates this advice with her mention of a minor but significant embellishment a planner can add if the enter-



"Matching the entertainment to the setting and the crowd is key because the audience's reaction to the entertainment will make or break your event."

Jessica Rienecker, CMM, CTA, CTP, HMCC
Meeting Sales Director, Pacific NW Region, Visit Anaheim

be unique, memorable and 'insta-worthy,' concludes Rienecker. "The most standout entertainment moments are ones that beckon to be shared on social media." Looking ahead, the meetings specialist expects to see virtual reality and augmented reality entertainment coming online more and more.

"The perfect entertainment choice adds excitement to the event and creates emotionally charged moments for attendees," concurs Kris Young, director of speakers and entertainment with Bishop-McCann — a noted expert in suggesting and sourcing speakers and entertainment.

Young's advice is basic: "Know your audience, not just the demographics, but also how they respond and what they like." Get answers to an assortment of questions. Do they like to observe? Do they love a party and like to dance? Are they from all over the country or regionally based? Is this an international audience? Is the audience mostly men (or women)? Are guests invited or is the event only for employees or conference attendees?

Speaking from 25 years of insider experience, Young's budget guidance

is multifold. Make sure you have all associated costs estimated up front. Get your production company involved before you place a firm offer. Ask that your technical director and producer speak to the talent's production manager once it is booked, ensuring there are no onsite surprises and to guarantee the best show possible. Also, make certain it is possible to produce the show in the event space you have, referencing the hypothetical possibility of the Peking Acrobats flying midair and almost hitting the ceiling due to the room's lower ceiling height. "Give the act what they need to perform at their best," summarizes the entertainment expert.

"Who is the ultimate decision-maker, who are we trying to please? This is a tough question, but one that needs to be asked," says Young. Get an answer to this query: When all is said and done, is it the audience you want to blow away or does it matter more that you please the person who is writing the check (or giving consent to pay for the act)?

Making a Good Offer

What goes into submitting a good offer for event entertainment? "It's very important to thoroughly qualify the buyer and event before submitting a firm offer to the talent. This actually protects all parties and involves educating decision-makers with respect to the

"Know your audience, not just the demographics, but also how they respond and what they like."

Kris Young, Director of Speakers and Entertainment
Bishop-McCann, Minneapolis, MN



A concert event at the Chicago House of Blues.

Credit: Scott Cook/Bishop-McCann

tainment is an '80s band — pass out fingerless gloves and inflatable guitars to encourage crowd participation.

A word of caution regarding F&B is to not let its setup detract from the entertainment. Example: A great buffet or a bar that keeps everyone turned away from the stage not only will distract your performer but also may divert the audience's attention from the show.

Generate pre-event meeting interest by revealing the entertainment in advance, suggests Rienecker. "Every year, Blizzard Entertainment produces BlizzCon at the Anaheim Convention Center. One way they create buzz is to announce a musical act in the weeks leading up to the program to build excitement." Past performers include blink-182, Metallica, and this year, Muse will be taking the stage.

"Entertainment, like venues, should

Best U.S. Cities for Entertainment

The 2017 U.S. Tourism Quality Index names U.S. cities and regions in terms of entertainment ranking. With New York City topping the list of 10, here are the results in order of preference.

- | | |
|------------------|------------------|
| 1. New York | 6. Los Angeles |
| 2. Las Vegas | 7. Seattle |
| 3. Chicago | 8. San Diego |
| 4. San Francisco | 9. Orange County |
| 5. New Orleans | 10. Oahu Island |

Addressing specifics of the two top faves, here are their draws, according to Resonance, creator of the Index.

New York: "The high-end pedestrian-accessed boutiques of the Hudson Yards mini-city rising on the city's West Side will eventually house more than 100 shops ranging from indie to international. Then there's the much anticipated 2019 opening of the three-level, 10,000-sf Hermès temple in Manhattan's Meatpacking District."

Las Vegas: "Sin City comes in a close second for Entertainment, topping three sub-categories: Zoos and Aquariums, Casinos and Gambling, Fun and Games." — CD



offer's legal ramifications," shares the Bishop-McCann pro. It's vital to note that once the artist accepts, the buyer may not cancel without penalty (typically 50 percent of the artist's fee, but can be as high as 100 percent).

Young gives insight into constructing an offer. She suggests working with someone who has experience negotiating and managing the entire process regarding the venue (from the offer and contract to the advancement of a rider and onsite management). "Their experience will save you money and minimize your risks and headaches," she states. Additional considerations include whether the venue has a curfew, expected show billing (an important detail with multiple performers) and if a meet-and-greet is expected (if so, does it include photos, autographs and for how many people?).

Though the situation is rare, it's important to prepare for an artist's cancellation by including an extended artist "out" clause. This details the number of pre-event days that the entertainer can opt out, giving you time to find a replacement (in most cases, it's possible to stretch the out clause to 60 or even 90 days). She suggests always having a

second and third choice as your emergency backup (checking from time to time to see if they're still available). Final advice: "It's important to put everything into the firm offer, as you are less likely to get a 'yes' once the offer is accepted. At that point, your request will be considered an optional add-on."

Regardless of dotting all of the contract's "i's" and crossing its "t's," a good match is critical. "A poor entertainment choice is one that doesn't surprise or delight the audience. If your entertainment isn't exciting, is it entertainment? Nope. It's a waste of money," Young states emphatically.

Speaking of money, there's the "b" word — budgets. "Nobody likes them. Everybody has them," says Young. She insists that meeting

planners don't have to spend a lot of money to have great entertainment and a knockout event as many of the best acts are not the biggest names. Her suggestions: Preview on-their-way-up artists and consider established entertainers who continue to perform regularly, such as the rock band Foreigner and American blues musician Keb' Mo'.

Aiming for the 'Triple Wow!'

On the flip side of this coin, and when dealing with a generous budget, the buyer expects what Young terms the "Triple Wow!" Definition: Attendees say "Wow!" when they hear who is performing. Attendees say "Wow!" during the performance. And after the event they say "Wow, you'll never believe who I got to see!"

Among Young's "Triple Wow!" enter-



Credits: Industrial Rhythm

Industrial Rhythm is a corporate entertainment company specializing in high-energy performances for meetings, trade shows and conferences.



Blue Man Group performances can be customized for corporate groups.

Credit: Blue Man Group

story fit right in with the event's overall theme and purpose."

In contrast, the planner details a small annual event held several years ago for another organization at North Carolina's historic Omni Grove Park Inn. Though the venue was a rustic, mountain-themed lodge, the company committee insisted that it be paired with a futuristic and space-age theme, including an indoor laser light show during the closing dinner — all against her advice. The result: Midway into the light show, board members insisted it end early, reconfirming Ferguson's instincts.

Additional tips from pros are to use caution when going the comedy route. Translation: no off-color jokes and when

troupe — appeals to planners for their creative ability to encourage, revitalize, stimulate and amuse groups. Performed without using spoken language, the blue-toned trio's show has been described "perfect for diverse and eclectic groups of all ages, languages and cultures."

Tom Deluca, coined "the corporate hypnotist," is said to be an effective balance of entertainment and meaningful content — a performer who creates group camaraderie through his signature combo of humor, interaction and imagination.

More alternative options can be to incorporate a spa break, sports outing (from a participatory golf tournament

tainment choices are such notables as Katy Perry, Lionel Richie, Kelly Clarkson — and the Neon Trees: "Imagine being surrounded by dark, eerie prison cells on the island of Alcatraz," she says. "The band enters the stage dressed in prison stripes! The Trees rocked the 'house' that night! Talk about talent being present for an audience (audience composition: store managers, salespeople and service personnel in their 20s and 30s). It doesn't get any better than that."

In addressing today's trends, Young remembers when the only available entertainment was Huey Lewis & The News and very few others because most artists didn't want to perform for corporate or association events. "Things couldn't be more different today. We've also got 'The Voice,' 'American Idol,' 'America's Got Talent,' 'Dancing with the Stars' and more from which to draw." Referring to country music and country crossover music, she says, "It's everywhere. It's the new rock and roll. And there are so many excellent young artists. It's a very exciting time in entertainment!"

A favorite event entertainment experience of April Ferguson, CMP, CMM, senior event logistics manager with BCD Meetings & Events, a full-service, global meetings and events agency, involves a Broadway actress and an executive-level occasion. "With a goal to promote diversity and inclusion in the corporate sector, the closing keynote speaker was Ali Stroker, a 20-something up-and-coming star, who happens to be in a wheelchair," says the event manager. After sharing her inspiring journey, Stroker ended by singing a song from "Wicked." Bottom line: "Her personal life



"If people have been sitting for days in meetings, they need time to relax and have fun. Incorporating entertainment into your event is a way to do that and still keep them engaged."

April Ferguson, CMP, CMM, Sr. Event Logistics Manager
BCD Meetings & Events, Raleigh, NC

"roasting" company executives, make certain it is appropriate for the industry and audience.

Can't-Miss Options

"Well beyond traditional" best describes today's entertainment. Industrial Rhythm — a corporate entertainment company specializing in high-energy performances for meetings, trade shows and conferences — has such clients as Coca-Cola, Nike and AT&T. Described as similar to off-Broadway shows such as "Stomp" and "Bring in Da Funk," the six-member cast (can be as many as 12) use common items such as brooms, briefcases, pill boxes, etc., for musical instruments. The lively results can and have doubled for high-energy conference kickoffs, CEO/speaker introductions, teambuilding exercises and audience participation segments.

Scattered throughout the U.S. in an assortment of such cities as Las Vegas and Orlando, Blue Man Group — a three-man imaginative performance

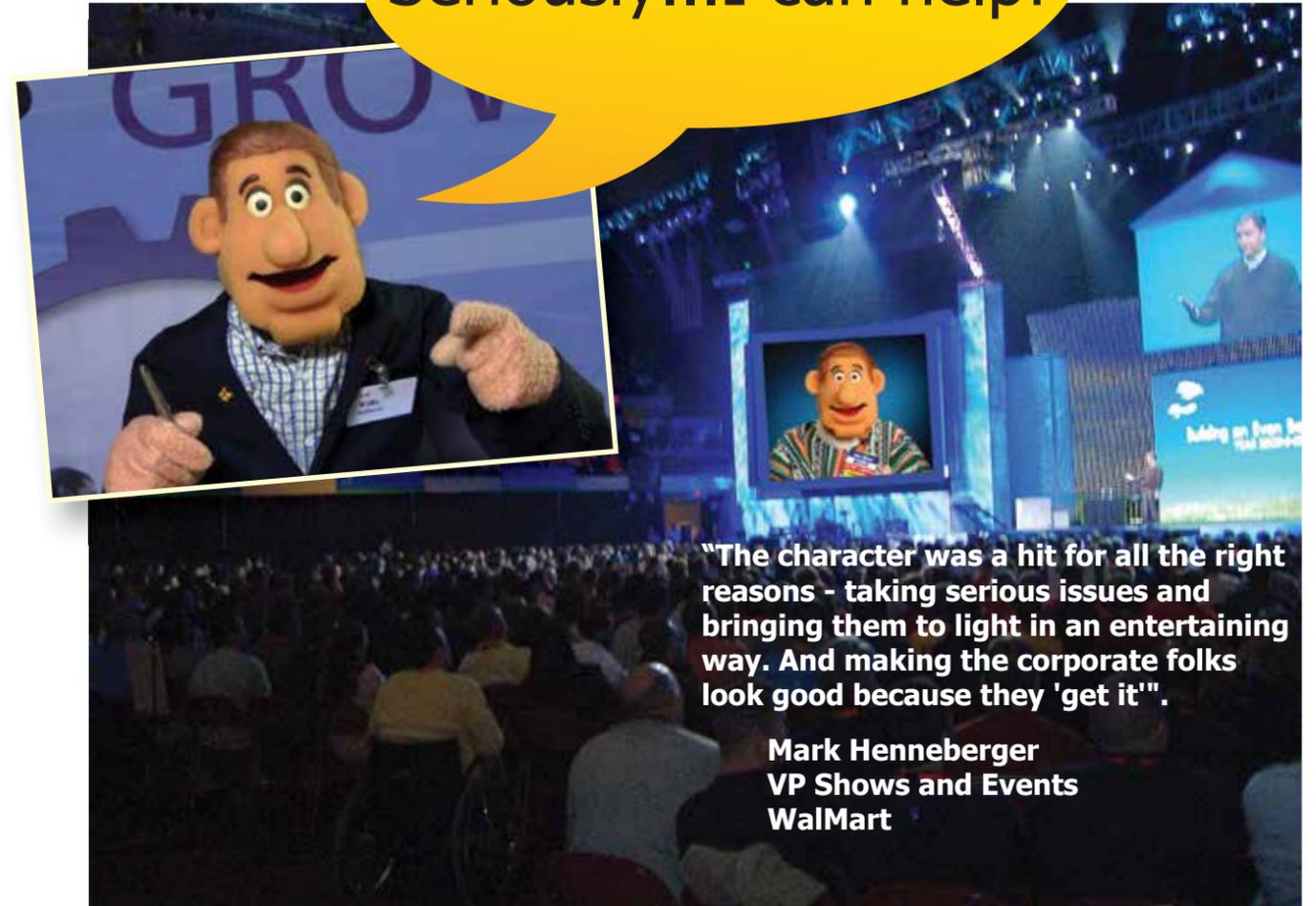
and attending a major league baseball game to a day at the thoroughbred races or a NASCAR motor speedway event), cruise excursion or culinary arts show (a live cooking or mixology demo by a noted chef or mixologist).

Ferguson has paired many groups with assorted cooking competitions. "The more competitive groups prefer a cook-off of judged items, whereas other groups seek a hosted cooking class where they are coached through the preparation of a full meal by a professional chef."

And for family-focused events, Ferguson has brought in local vendors to set up bounce houses, batting cages and other fun activities for attendees and their guests of all ages.

In conclusion, Ferguson says: "I think entertainment is important. If people have been sitting for days in meetings, they need time to relax and have fun. Incorporating entertainment into your event is a way to do that and still keep them engaged." **C&IT**

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By Mark Rowh



Meetings With Meaning Are More Important Than Ever for Companies and Their Employees

Meetings often provide the best opportunity for companies to demonstrate their dedication to corporate social responsibility, whether through group community service programs, sustainability initiatives or both. And among attendees, the popularity of participating in “giving back” programs is growing as socially conscious millennials begin to dominate the workforce.

“CSR is an important component for meeting planners to address as they plan their own meetings and events,” says Matthew Marcial, CAE, CMP, vice president, education and events for Meeting Professionals International. “Corporations and other organizations face increased scrutiny for their impact to the environment and local communities. Having a thoughtful CSR strategy is one way for a company to address these concerns.”

He notes that CSR encompasses several factors including environmental sustainability, community giving, food waste and more. The range of possibilities offers planners a variety of ways to make an impact with a CSR strategy, even if that means beginning with small steps.

At MPI’s annual World Education Congress, the host committee has a dedicated subcommittee that assists staff in identifying a CSR project for the event, as well as any other opportunities to engage and educate attendees about how they can incorporate CSR initiatives within their own events. Past projects have included hands-on opportunities to give back to the local community, as well as offsite community volunteer activities.

“Corporate social responsibility ranges from giving back to your community to protecting the environment,” says Raven Catlin, CEO and lead trainer for Raven Global Training in the Washington, DC, metro area. “Failure to demonstrate this responsibility may be detrimental to the enterprise’s reputation, particularly in today’s social media-driven society.”

“It’s important to me to work for a company that supports CSR activities,” says Lauren E. Richardson, CMP, meeting manager for Medtronic, a medical technology and services provider with offices in Santa Rosa, California. “I also want to work with other companies and vendors that support CSR activities and foster a giving culture.” She notes that at a recent convention in Paris, her com-

pany raised more than \$10,000 for SAMS (Syrian American Medical Society). She is now starting a project to collect needed amenities at programs for Syrian refugee camps.

“I also partner with vendors who have food donation programs or green practices like a linen reuse program,” she says.

Such efforts are not unusual. In fact, social responsibility seems to be generating ever-increasing interest on the part of both meeting planners and event attendees.

Upsurge in Popularity

“There has been an upsurge in popularity regarding CSR events,” says Ryan Shortill, founder of Positive Adventures, a San Diego firm specializing in team-building, company retreats and organization development. “Many employees,



WellCare Health Plans meeting attendees worked in teams to assemble wheelchairs for those in need.

especially the younger ones, want to know how the company they work for is making a difference.” He notes that altruism is strong within the millennial population, and if companies are not considering this, they are missing a chance to keep staff long-term and avoid costly turnover.

“Meeting planners have to consider this as an integral component of the time spent together,” he says. “Planning



“Corporations...face increased scrutiny for their impact to the environment and local communities. Having a thoughtful CSR strategy is one way for a company to address these concerns.”

Matthew Marcial

Vice President, Education and Events
Meeting Professionals International
Dallas, TX

a golf offsite is no longer going to cut it.” He notes that today’s employees want hands-on experiences and to know they work for someone who cares for the community.

Planning Challenges

Certainly, meeting such expectations can bring challenges.

“There are many legs to a corporate social responsibility program,” says Jody Hall, CMP, manager, corporate events and volunteerism for WellCare Health Plans in Tampa, Florida. “CSR is important but how to integrate the level and focus depends on the objectives of the meeting, the audience, the company and its culture. There are many ways to incorporate facets of a CSR program into a corporate meeting or event, and we have done so many times.”

Hall’s company makes it a practice to incorporate a community give-back element as part of its annual conference.

“With a packed agenda and limited space, we often have to get creative,” she says. At one conference, a local non-profit had its troupe with developmental disabilities perform a musical revue during dinner. At another, a professional artist auctioned artwork painted at the event as a fundraiser for an upcoming awareness walk. Other activities have included splitting attendees into teams to build bikes for autistic children and wheelchairs for those in need.

"It takes additional coordination, budget and often space, but is worth it for the experience of the attendees, the performers, the recipients of the items and the non-profit organization that benefits from additional awareness," Hall says.

Although on the surface everyone may seem to be supportive of CSR, choosing topics and activities can be problematic. But while some topics can be controversial, others may represent beliefs embraced by virtually everyone.

"Reducing waste and incorporating green practices into meetings is pretty standard in today's world as it is not only good for the environment, but also offers proven cost savings," Richardson says.

In incorporating CSR into meetings,

"I want to work with other companies and vendors that support CSR activities and foster a giving culture."

Lauren E. Richardson, CMP
Meeting Manager
Medtronic
Santa Rosa, CA



Kraft Heinz employees participate in a Rise Against Hunger event building and packaging meals for malnourished people overseas.

Hall advises pausing to identify the most critical elements. The focus could be on using sustainable products or ensuring that leftover, unserved food can be donated locally. Or it might mean engaging the attendees in a meaningful volunteer opportunity, such as a simple collection drive for a non-profit in need.

"If this is a new element to your meeting, maybe pick one thing to focus on," she says. "If you are partnering with a non-profit, be sure you have vetted them and ensure their cause aligns with your company's mission and values."

She says it's also important to understand just what partners really need. "There is no point in building 50 bikes for children if the non-profit has no place to store them," she says. "You want to create a memorable and meaningful experience for the attendee as well as bring awareness and provide benefit to the non-profit."

Aligning With the Company Mission

A major point to consider is whether the subject of a CSR program aligns with the meeting or hosting company's

Credit: Rise Against Hunger

5 Planning Tips

Krystal Rogers-Nelson, sustainability and safety expert at ASecureLife, an online provider of security information, offers these CSR tips:

- 1. Choose a strategic location for your meeting.** A LEED-certified building is ideal. If that is not possible, look for a building that is powered by solar panels or has unique architecture with lots of natural light and living plants.
- 2. Make conscious food choices when selecting caterers.** Pay attention to where the food is sourced (if they utilize any products from local farmers, that is ideal), where the company is based (local is best when possible) and their company values (do they have a CSR plan?).
- 3. Reduce waste.** Whenever possible, use a caterer who will provide reusable dishes, or if that is not possible, choose plates, cups and utensils that are recyclable or compostable. Selecting products that have post-consumer recycled products is ideal. Use water dispensers rather than bottled water and provide BPA-free water bottles or encourage others to bring their own.
- 4. Organize a volunteer project in your community.** This is great to include as part of a conference or weekend seminar for a change of pace. Check out United Way or Hands On Network to connect to local non-profits that have expressed a need for corporate volunteer groups.
- 5. Encourage people to give back.** Crowdfund as a team on a local citywide giving day such as "Love Utah Give Utah" or the international #Giving Tuesday after Thanksgiving every year.

— MR

mission, according to Brian Doyle, vice president, client solutions for Pacific Consulting Group, a customer research and consulting firm in Redwood City, California. If a food company is hosting the meeting, a likely topic might revolve around feeding hungry people. If the meeting subject is about housing, then a fitting activity might be partnering with Habitat for Humanity.

"When the CSR subject is different from the host, like if the host builds computers and everyone is asked to volunteer at an animal shelter, it can feel disingenuous," he says. "Instead, that computer company should be refurbishing computers for local schools."

Another reality is the effort required for a CSR event and whether it is the best use of time that may be limited. That was the discussion when Doyle, at that time with a different employer, was planning a national meeting for sales personnel.

"Our conversation was around whether we should use two or three hours building meals for the hungry or using the time to better teach our sales people techniques to sell our product, more product knowledge or provide them greater context from our leadership team," he says. Ultimately, the decision was that CSR event's resulting energy and motivation was a better use of time and more important, that 20,000 meals for hungry people would be created.

"It worked out to be the right deci-

sion and we did it the following year as well," Doyle says.

Other Considerations

Hall notes that incorporating some elements may cost more than expected. "Do your research, and find partner organizations if the undertaking is huge," she says. "Don't force it — it will be disingenuous."

Participants' physical abilities also need to be considered when planning a CSR event, Doyle says. "For instance, Habitat for Humanity is very physical and requires strength and an able body," he says. "If your audience is older or disabled, it's not a very good choice. Since events often bring people from all walks of life, it's important to have CSR activities where people can sit down, the temperature is controlled and so forth."

Rochelle Karr, director of corporate social responsibility and alumni relations at international law firm O'Melveny & Myers LLP, says that CSR efforts need not be elaborate.

"Think local," she says. "Incorporating CSR into your meeting or convention doesn't need to be something grand. Impactful can be small."

At one of her firm's partner retreats, attendees planted a community garden in New Orleans. At an event in Las Vegas, they paired with band students from a local high school in a karaoke



"If you are partnering with a non-profit, be sure you have vetted them and ensure their cause aligns with your company's mission and values."

Jody Hall, CMP
Manager, Corporate Events & Volunteerism
WellCare Health Plans Inc.
Tampa, FL

contest before surprising the young musicians with new instruments.

Amanda Ponzar, chief marketing officer for Community Health Charities in Alexandria, Virginia, says that corporate meeting planners always can reach out to local nonprofits and CSR leaders in the city where an event is being hosted.

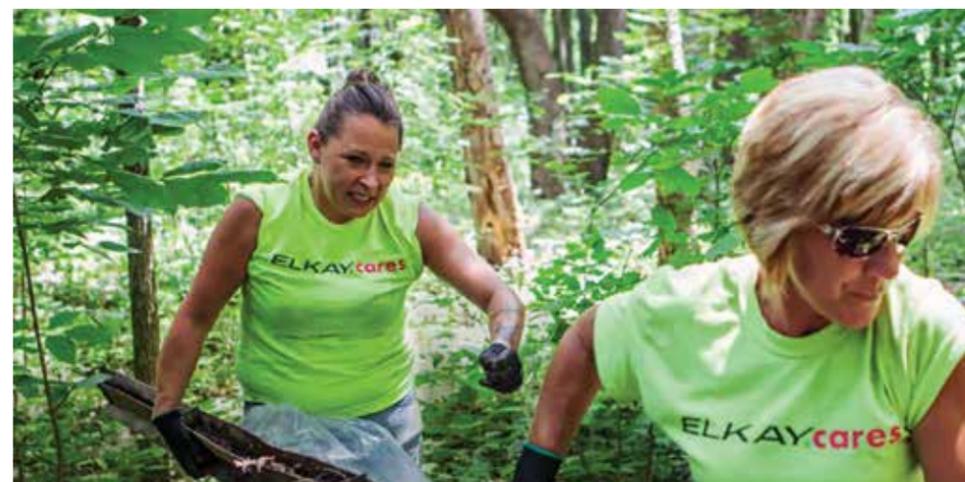
"It's a great way to identify community needs and partner together to create a positive social impact wherever you are hosting your event," she says. "These local contacts could help you find socially friendly or women-owned businesses to hire for needs such as catering, plus help you with volunteer opportunities either onsite or off."

Karr says staying relevant is a key. "Look for where there is a real need in your community or in the world," she says, "whether that's making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the homeless in your own neighborhood, or donating backpacks full of school supplies for Afghan children in Kabul."

She notes that even simple efforts can allow people to have a hands-on role in making a difference in someone else's life. She also advises asking for help.

"Corporate meeting planners should contact local community service organizations or clients in the area to see what opportunities for a one-day service exist," she says. Karr notes that websites such as *volunteermatch.org* can be useful tools in identifying time-specific opportunities.

"Make sure that you have the support of your upper management and



The Elkay company's Elkay Cares program gives back to local communities through hands-on CSR activities, such as this one done in partnership with Community Health Charities.

Credit: Elkay

your compliance office before you start your project," Richardson advises. "And do your research about any charity you may be partnering with or helping."

Catlin advocates specific planning combined with a high level of awareness. "Create a list of elements of CSR important to you and develop a scoring model to evaluate venues," she says. "While onsite, meeting planners should observe good and poor CSR practices, and promptly communicate them to the venue for recognition or correction, if needed."

Scheduling Considerations

Shortill recalls an occasion where a CSR program had been scheduled for a time slot that conflicted with several concurrent sessions, and some potential participants were unable to attend.

"The following year they went with an all-day, come-as-you please version where they built dollhouses for children as well as care packages for homeless vets, among many other activities," he says. "This open-flow version allowed several thousand people to help out in the ways they had time for."

"We did a bike build for a company that helped children with skin conditions," he says. "We were then able to partner with the doctors and gave the bikes to kids who used that medication."

As for scheduling, he notes that a two-hour ballroom event can be easy to set up and fit into a tight timeline.

"Offsites can be more complex with buses and travel time as well as taking more time, but you can get folks out into the fresh air and into the local community," he says.

"When planning a CSR event, if you want a charity and donation recipients to be present at your event, take their schedules into consideration," says Lisa Jennings, chief experience officer for Wildly Different, a corporate teambuilding and networking firm based in Orlando.

"For instance, if you're building bikes for kids in need and you want them to

be at your event to receive them, do not schedule the activity during school hours."

She recalls working with one client who was adamant about having children attend a CSR event at 9:00 a.m. on a Friday. But all the charities her firm reached out to said the same thing — that they promote school as the one way these disadvantaged kids can get ahead in the world, so they can't pull them out of school just to get a bike.

"In the end, we were able to get preschoolers to come to the event so it turned out alright, but it was a struggle there for a while," she says.

Keys to Success

She adds that any activity related to social responsibility should be reflective of your company and its culture. "Weave CSR into various touchpoints of your meeting or event," Hall says. "Make it meaningful."

Collaboration is a key, according to Marcial. "Work closely with your venue and destination partners to understand what CSR initiatives they currently have in place," he says. "There may



"Incorporating CSR into your meeting or convention doesn't need to be something grand. Impactful can be small."

Rochelle Karr
Director of CSR and Alumni Relations
O'Melveny & Myers LLP
Los Angeles, CA

Jennings says the creative touch will always be appreciated. "Get creative when it comes to planning a CSR activity," she says. Instead of a build-a-bike program in a community where that has already been done, for example, consider an activity in which teams play games with sporting equipment that's donated to kids.

She says that tying a CSR activity into a meeting theme can be an effective way to complement a meeting. For a theme such as "breakthrough performance," an option would be hosting a movie-making activity in which teams make a mini-movie for



"When the CSR subject is different from the host, like if the host builds computers and everyone is asked to volunteer at an animal shelter, it can feel disingenuous."

Brian Doyle, Vice President, Client Solutions
Pacific Consulting Group, Raleigh, NC

be natural tie-ins for how your group can get involved."

He also says starting small can be a good strategy. "If this your first time considering a CSR strategy for your events, don't feel overwhelmed by all the various components," he says. "Start small and utilize some of the industry resources that are available, including education from industry associations such as MPI."

their company, complete with costumes and props that could be donated to a youth theater program following the meeting.

Richardson affirms that planners can play an important role in creating a successful CSR culture. "If we can advertise and communicate our goal effectively," she says, "we can create a successful CSR project that really can make a positive impact." **C&IT**

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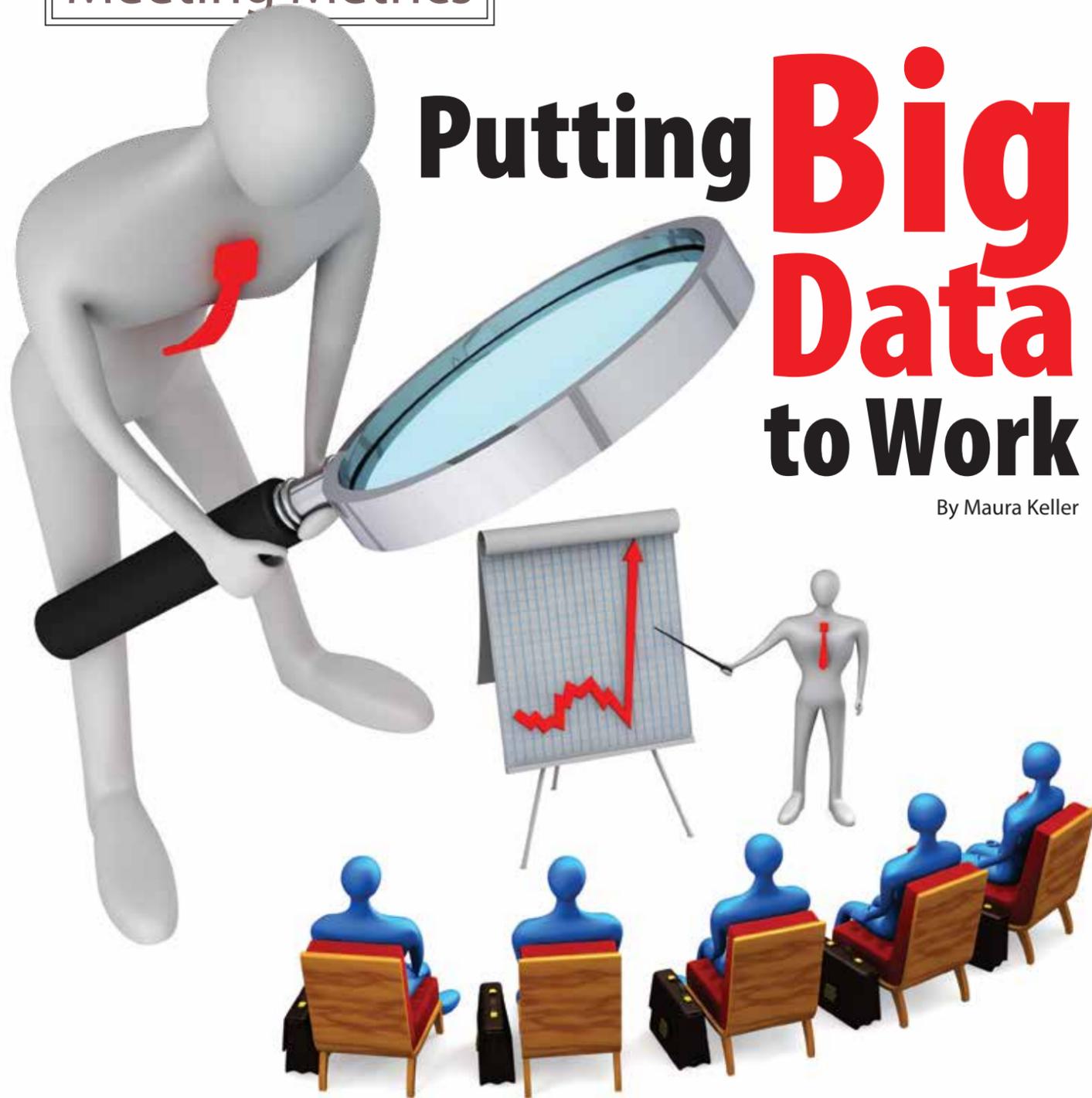
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Putting Big Data to Work

By Maura Keller



Crunching the Numbers to Create Better Events and Improve Meeting Outcomes

Big data means big business for many corporate and incentive travel planners. Take David Saef, EVP of strategy and marketing at global event marketing company GES, for example. For Saef and his corporate meeting clients, big data plays an important role in the corporate and event meeting management activities he orchestrates. In fact, Saef has worked with many corporations to use big data analysis and insights to improve meeting outcomes in order to retain and grow audiences.

"We've used big data to adjust pricing to increase attendance, and we have used big data to analyze and customize marketing to attendee segments, recommended at-show activities to different types of attendees, and monitored social and traditional marketing tactics to improve open, click-through and conversion rates," Saef says.

In addition, Saef has used big data to improve site selection by using data and focus groups to determine where to hold meetings, what type of venue and range of hotels and city offerings are key to multigenerational groups of attendees, and the format and content to improve the value offered to attendees, and sponsors and exhibitors.

Finally, Saef has worked with corporate groups to revamp post-meeting surveys to understand not only what attendees value, but most important, benchmarking a corporation's offerings and value to other meetings and conferences attendees.

Saef is just one meeting professional who understands that big data can have a big impact on corporate meetings and events.

According to Meta S. Brown, author of *Data Mining for Dummies* (For Dummies, 2014), coauthor of *Big Data Analy-*

tics (Prentice Hall of India, 2016), there's certainly a need to make better use of data within the corporate meetings and events environment.

Big data is a loosely defined term, at best, says Brown, who also is president of A4A Brown Inc., a consulting firm focused on data storytelling and effective communication about data and analysis. It implies both quantity and complexity that push the limits of available technology for data management and analysis. It may include a lot of information that you may not think of as data, including text, photographs, audio and video.

For instance, think about the information gathered by a casino and resort chain: website activity logs, customer service requests, video surveillance, loyalty cards for gambling, movement tracking technology tracking customers as they change locations throughout facilities, and more. This is true big data.

Define the Goals

But it's important for meeting planners to decide what they want from data before it's collected. Defining these goals enables planners to determine what data is needed, how to get it and how to analyze it.

"Aim for data that's relevant for solving

business problems as it relates to corporate meetings and events. That means a meeting planner first must identify and acknowledge that a problem exists," Brown says. "With that as a starting point, think through what kind of data is needed, and research the options for collecting and analyzing it."

Recently Brown learned of an exhibition company that used location tracking technology to observe meeting attendee movement in real time. When overcrowding occurred, a staff member was sent to assess the situation, determine the cause, such as a registration bottleneck, and then call in help to immediately correct the problem.

"And if the crowd was enjoying something — like a great presentation — that called for action too," Brown says. "Just different action."

As this example shows, the object of any data mining exercise is to produce "actionable" intelligence.

"Businesses too often spend far too much effort analyzing data that yields little real intelligence when they should be focusing on actionable knowledge that can strengthen and improve their business," says Mark Heymann, CEO and cofounder of UniFocus. "Organizations need to understand clearly what they

“The industry absolutely should be leveraging data and analytics to drive insights and increase value — for meeting organizers, attendees and sponsors.”

David Saef, Executive Vice President of Strategy and Marketing, GES, Las Vegas, NV



are trying to achieve and then design the needs and analytical approaches they will use to meet those defined goals. It's this information in relation to a comparative parameter — which can come from inside or outside the organization — that really tells the story.”

Why Big Data?

David Saef has led a myriad of projects with top event organizers to refine event strategies, grow an audience through segmentation and targeted messaging, deliver creative marketing campaigns, and identify improvements through event audits, focus groups and surveys.

According to Saef, using the phrase “big data” in the meetings and events space is tricky, and here's why. While the

- **Customizing experiences.** Today when we buy a book on Amazon, the company recommends 10 other books we might like. Yet when attendees register for a conference little insight is provided on how to spend their time or with whom to connect. “No longer. Big data analysis will provide customized recommendations on sessions, people to meet and important experiences to advance one's career,” Saef says.
- **Marketing metrics.** Millennials have been slower to embrace meetings and live events than older generations. In addition, they are not receptive to standard, email messages. As Saef explains, many people in this critical generation for live events

meeting organizers provide relevant and impactful communications and recruiting activities.”

- **Measuring effectiveness.** Too often meeting planners collect information on satisfaction. Did you like the hotel? Was the food good? Are you likely to return? In this new data-driven world, it is time to ask relevant questions that will measure business outcomes and identify improvements: What were your priorities from attending the meeting? How well did we meet or exceed your expectations? Which elements were most effective? How does this meeting compare to others that you attend or consider attending yearly? How has attending the meeting changed your percep-



“Aim for data that's relevant for solving business problems as it relates to corporate meetings and events. That means a meeting planner first must identify and acknowledge that a problem exists.”

Meta Brown, President, A4A Brown Inc., Chicago, IL

meetings industry does have significant amounts of data and metrics to mine, due to the infrequent nature of events relative to other industries, it would be inaccurate to say that this industry is handling big data.

“With that said, the industry absolutely should be leveraging data and analytics to drive insights and increase value — for meeting organizers, attendees and sponsors,” Saef says. Some key areas in which big data should play a role include:

has a visceral reaction to convention marketing — email, direct mail, Facebook, etc. “In this new era, it is important to mine data to know where people spend their time at the conference and online, what issues and topics they care about, and how they want to consume information,” Saef says. “Analyzing data from marketing tactics and utilizing insights from education sessions, speaker Q&A and online discussions will help

tion of the meeting organizer? The profession? Are you likely to return next year? Which meeting elements were most impactful?

Asking the Right Questions

The magic question that corporate meeting planners must ask is, “What do we do with all this data?” According to Erick Harlow, principal at Forensic IT, a St. Louis forensic technology and data solutions firm, there are three questions

What to Know

Some of the most important elements to glean from big data include attendee and sponsor information, and meeting activity. It is critical to know:

- Who is attending and why.
- What they hope to get out of the meeting.
- Which elements attendees most value.
- How sponsor participation/activities enhance the meeting while providing meaningful business impact to the sponsor.
- How different types of attendees and sponsors participate in different meeting activities.
- Where people stay, what activities they engage in and how much time they spend in and around the meeting.
- What people discuss prior to and after the meeting.
- How the meeting influences their business, their thinking and their effectiveness.

Also, think about what the key stakeholders in the meeting are seeking for a strong outcome:

- If it is the CEO or leadership team, what opinions are they hoping to change or what skills and business understanding are they hoping to achieve?
- Which elements of the meeting best achieve these business outcomes (rated not only for effectiveness of presentation or speaker quality, but, most important, the motivation of attendees to embrace and implement change)?
- What means of data collection is appropriate? Does a company want to know exactly which attendees participated in each activity, or are the meeting planners trying to measure the traffic flow of the meeting?
- Does the planner want to have attendees “check in” to activities to certify their participation, or do they want to passively track how attendees spend their time?
- What information do we need to improve business outcomes and to enhance the experience at our meetings?

— MK

meeting planners should ask when looking for the “magic” in big data.

- What do we know? That is, why are we thinking about big data? For example, we know travel to location A is down 10 percent.
- What do we need to know? Why is travel to location A down 10 percent? Is overall travel down?
- How do we get there?

For example, as Harlow explains, a travel company can observe that they

are selling many fewer cruises than in previous years. Perhaps they sold 100 cruises in 2015, but only 75 in 2016 and only 50 are on the books for 2017.

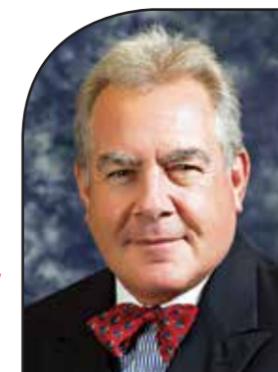
So they can ask, “What do we know now?” We are selling many fewer cruises than the last two years. “What do we need to know?” Why we are selling fewer cruises. And then, “Let's look at the available data specific to sales and cruises and determine why this is happening.”

The data, based on feedback from cli-

ent forms and sales data, can reveal that people are afraid of cruises based on hurricanes and other stories in the news. It can reveal that the salespeople are pushing and selling more airline trips than ever and aren't focusing on the cruises. It also can reveal that cruise prices have gone up, and that has had an impact on this type of travel, or perhaps sales commissions are greater for airline travel than cruise travel and salespeople are more focused on earning bigger commissions.

“Businesses too often spend far too much effort analyzing data that yields little real intelligence when they should be focusing on actionable knowledge that can strengthen and improve their business.”

Mark Heymann, CEO and Cofounder, UniFocus, Carrollton, TX





“Once you have the data you need and have a strategic plan on how to use it, you can answer key questions to help you focus on activities that are a more efficient use of your time.”

Erick Harlow, Principal, Forensic IT, St. Louis, MO

“In a nutshell, big data should allow planners to drill into data in order to answer questions,” Harlow says. “A question might be ‘What location has 30-minute access to a major airport and has more than three five-star restaurants within 20 miles?’ Once you have the data you need and have a strategic plan on how to use it, you can answer key questions to help you focus on activities that are a more efficient use of your time.”

Other questions that corporate meeting planners need to ask regarding how to best use the data gathered is: What are they trying to learn? For what purpose and how will this information be used to drive performance and enhance the meeting experience? This is a very important step — figuring out why a planner is collecting the data, what they hope to learn and what they will do once they have data and analytics in hand.

“Really think through the registration form,” Saef says. “Oftentimes this is the most important layer of data. Many meeting organizers omit questions that are critical such as ‘what are you seeking to achieve at the meeting’ and at the same time, ask other questions which are not relevant and not likely to be used later.”

Getting Started

As previously described, attendee movement tracking via RFID and other technologies is a good example of data that readily yields actionable intelligence. This information can be used to identify places and times where crowding occurs in real time, as well as areas that are not getting traffic.

“For corporate meetings and event environments, location-based services is an example of one application that

could create a ‘big data’ requirement,” says Daniel Rodriguez, chief technology officer at United Data Technologies. “Using public data as well as private data about attendees can also create a more accurate picture of the attendee’s interests and consumption characteristics.”

Social media monitoring and web alerts also are data mining opportunities that can be used even for small meetings. Tracking enables planners to be aware when people are talking about events online, to know what’s said and to respond quickly if needed.

Another example of an easy, low-risk place to start using data and analysis to drive action is through the use of email. Corporate meeting planners send many emails, and every message has a subject line. Testing variations of those subject lines on small groups will help determine which version gets the most conversions (opens, sales or any similar measure), and use the ones that work best on the full mailing list.

Why is this a good starter application for big data?

“You’re sending email already,” Brown says. “Most email software includes subject line testing functions — you’re paying for this now, yet may not even be aware of it. Anyone can put the information to work — just use the subject line that worked best in the test. It’s easy to do. And it’s easy to put the results into action.”

Finally, remember that big data does not need to be BIG. It simply needs to be relevant. “In fact, small-meeting planners can make significant changes by focusing on one or two areas initially,” Saef says. “Then, as they expand, the big data program uses the insights to drive improvements.”

Avoiding Mistakes

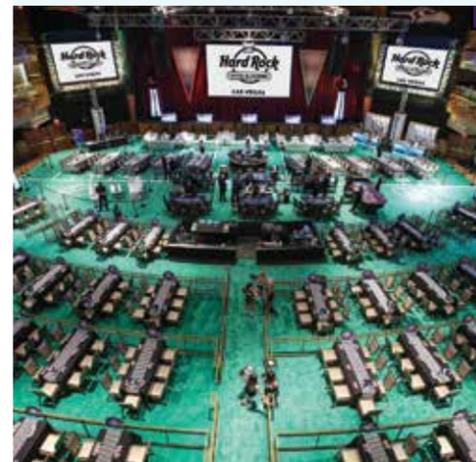
There are key mistakes that corporate meeting professionals should avoid when it comes to big data. These include:

- Collecting lots and lots of data and not knowing why.
- Being too ambitious and collecting loads of data, analyzing and then doing nothing with the analysis or insights.
- Starting too aggressively on collecting and analyzing data but not educating and drawing “data-phobes” into the conversation. It is then just a matter of time before the program drops or dies.

Saef predicts the corporate meeting and incentive travel industry will see maturation in the use of data. “Hopefully there will be greater comfort of meeting professionals to embrace data to understand and improve meeting offerings and format,” Saef says. “This includes the expansion in the use of big data throughout the whole year to understand how one- to three-day meetings influence activity 24/7/365.”

Remember, the data gathered does not lie and will reveal the answers that are being sought by the planner. In order to be effective, however, the right questions need to be asked so that the data can be properly analyzed and put to work in the right way.

“If one cannot do this in-house, the right type of data specialist should be brought in to assist in this process,” Harlow says. “This includes utilizing the proper software for data collection, proper setup to look for exceptions and focus on the biggest need, and proper analysis once the data has been collected.” **C&IT**



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Site Selection



Aria Resort & Casino in Las Vegas offers 300,000 sf of meeting and event space with more on the way (shown here).



Gaming Resorts

By Keith Loria

Play a Winning Hand With Everything Your Meeting Needs Under One Roof

Las Vegas is considered the gambling mecca of America, and Atlantic City has long been known as the gambling capital of the East Coast, but there are dozens of luxurious casino resorts throughout the country that provide meeting planners with a fabulous venue for those who like a little action in their events.

The appeal of these resorts is that attendees can do it all under one roof — meet, eat and sleep, as well as enjoy some incredible amenities, such as a fitness center, spa and an array of dining and entertainment options just steps from the meeting rooms.

Kait Busone, events director at The Annexus Group in Scottsdale, Arizona,

enjoys hosting events at casino resorts due to their convenience, versatility and entertainment for guests. She regularly runs meetings at Talking Stick Resort.

“They offer unique spaces for all size groups from outdoor poolside receptions for large events to private dining space in their restaurant

for small meetings,” she says. “There are also plenty of activities for our guests to enjoy on-property during their downtime.”

Tina-Marie Wassman, principle, TNC Events LLC, most recently held a 500-person meeting in August at Aria Resort & Casino in Las Vegas, and has run large conferences at other casino

resorts as well. “They offer a dedicated conference space with lots of natural light, high-tech guest rooms where almost everything can be operated from an iPad, a variety of different dining experiences, great networking areas, entertainment, a fabulous spa and fitness centers, plus a professional business center,” she says. “It’s an easy sell

to get people to come when it’s being held in Las Vegas.”

Susan McGonigle is a 40-year independent planner who handles the annual Chrysler meeting, and this year’s conference was the largest meeting Atlantic City’s Resorts Casino Hotel has hosted in the past 15 years. “They bent over backwards to give us even more



The 5 O'Clock Somewhere Bar at Resorts Casino Hotel in Atlantic City.

says. "Extensive planning, a solid team and great relationship with the local partners will always help surmount the biggest hurdles."

A Solid Bet

Just eight years old, Talking Stick Resort in Scottsdale offers more than 100,000 sf of both indoor and outdoor meeting space, as well as 50 table games, 800 slot machines and poker tournaments almost every day.

"Our main ballroom is 25,000 sf, and when you exit into our prefunction space, all of our glass walls completely disappear and guests can experience the fresh air coming in," says Michael Maggart, director of sales for the resort. "Additionally, we have 12 breakout rooms, six of which offer natural light, and one unique space in a two-story 650-foot showroom, with built in AV and an amphitheater-like setting."

Don Ross, vice president of catering and convention services, Las Vegas Caesars Entertainment, which represents nine hotels in Nevada, notes the company has more than 1 million sf of meeting space in Las Vegas, with Caesars Palace offering 300,000 sf connected to the newly redesigned Palace Tower. These include both large and small ballrooms that are extremely flexible and can be turned into a countless number of configurations that can accommodate hundreds of breakouts.

"There are lots of aspects that make Las Vegas great for meetings, and we can accommodate meetings of all sizes,"

than promised, and that's something that you appreciate being in this business," says McGonigle, who is president of Susan McGonigle Corporate Events in Carle Place, New

York. "When you need something done and you don't have to wait for it, that's what we look for. It's a trust factor that makes events run smoother."

McGonigle also has run meetings at Mohegan Sun in Uncasville, Connecticut, and finds that casino resorts are in high demand among conference attendees. What she looks for when deciding on where to host a meeting is a venue that's ready when they're supposed to be, that someone is there coordinating the program and that the quality of the food is tops. These are all things that she

finds in spades at both casino resorts she has worked with. Guillaume Beland, president and general manager of MSOP Entertainment Inc., Montreal, Canada, recently held an event at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, and says when planning a meeting at a casino resort, it's important to meet directly with the people who work on the event; visit the location several times; and develop a local network of resources that can facilitate the creation of an ultimate experience.

"Pretty much anything can happen. Only two weeks before our event, a gunman opened fire on a crowd of 22,000 concertgoers at the Route 91 Harvest music festival, one block away from our event site," he

"As event planners, there are some situations we just can't plan for, but I never stress because I know the resort staff will accommodate my needs...with a smile."



Kait Busone
Events Director
Annexus Group
Scottsdale, AZ

finds in spades at both casino resorts she has worked with.

Guillaume Beland, president and general manager of MSOP Entertainment Inc., Montreal, Canada, recently held an event at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, and says when planning a meeting at a casino resort, it's important to meet directly with the people who work on the event; visit the location several times; and develop a local network of resources that can facilitate the creation of an ultimate experience.

The Salt River Grand Ballroom Terrace at Talking Stick Resort in Scottsdale, Arizona.



Credit: Talking Stick Resort

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WSOP

The Colonnade at Dover Downs Hotel & Casino in Dover, Delaware.



Credit: Dover Downs Hotel & Casino

he says. "Attendees can take an elevator right down to the meeting space from their hotel floor. It is so convenient and everyone loves it. Meeting planners have unlimited options when it comes to dining, entertainment and special venues. We have the resources to virtually fulfill any request."

Caesars Entertainment in Las Vegas also offers a special venue program allowing planners to contract one property and have access to everything all nine hotels have to offer. For example, you can host your general session at The Colosseum, have lunch in the Versailles Ballroom at Paris, and then a closing party at Drai's night club at the Cromwell, all under one contract.

William H. Jackson, director of sales and marketing at Resorts Casino Hotel in Atlantic City, says the hotel can provide rooms for up to 1,000 people for meetings in its 64,000 sf and 24 different meeting rooms.

"If you are a meeting planner that requires a lot of meeting space, this is a good location for you to consider because of our large block of space and number of breakout rooms," he says. "We have a very caring, professional staff, and 70 percent of our meeting clients have been here before."

Ann W. Stack, director of marketing

"From a corporate standpoint, not everyone is into the casino aspect of it, so you need to make sure there are other things that can occupy their time."

Susan McGonigle
President
Susan McGonigle
Corporate Events
Carle Place, NY

for Dover Downs Hotel & Casino in Dover, Delaware, says the great thing about hosting a corporate meeting at any casino resort is the fact that everything is all under one roof.

For example, at Dover Downs Hotel & Casino, there are nine restaurants, lounges and bars, an award-winning spa, nightclub, retail shopping and a large variety of gaming options including slots, table games and poker.

"We have over 40,000 sf of versatile meeting space, from a boardroom for 14 people to expo space for 1,600 people," Stack says. "We offer full-service meeting planning, a dedicated onsite convention services manager to handle all the details leading up to the event,

throughout the event and post-event wrap-up meetings."

The Inn of the Mountain Gods, located in Mescalero, New Mexico, features more than 40,000 sf of indoor meeting space, as well as some outdoor dining opportunities such as the Deck on the Green, which offers a beautiful view of its golf course, and the Deck on the Lake, where meeting guests can enjoy a delicious barbecue lunch and take a boat out on the lake.

"We are the perfect location for corporate meetings because of our beautiful facilities, from large, comfortable meeting space to our brand new boardroom that has four LED high-definition satellite programming, HDMI connections, dedicated wireless connections and much more," says Charles Meeks, executive sales and catering manager for the resort. "We offer all the AV any meeting would need to make their meeting a productive and successful one. You can also bring in your own equipment at no charge."

With 1,470 rooms available, the Tropicana Las Vegas is a bit smaller than some of the other hotels and resorts in the Sin City, but that's why Gavin Mealiffe, vice president of sales, says it's perfect for corporate meetings.

"We create a more focused and comfortable experience so attendees truly can feel like they 'own' the place," he says. "We offer just over 100,000 sf of meeting space as well as some incredible outdoor meeting spaces including Sky Beach Club, our Resort Pool and sev-

Caesars Palace boardroom.



Credit: Caesars Palace

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Gaming Resorts Up the Ante

Although casino resorts are already spectacular places to host meetings, they don't just keep playing the same winning hand — they constantly up the ante on the experience with new upgrades and renovations.



Rendering of the Live! Casino Hotel ballroom.

Live! Casino Hotel Maryland, located in the Washington, DC, Baltimore corridor, boasts one of the country's largest casinos, as well as world-class dining and entertainment. Coming in 2018 is Live! Hotel, a 17-story tower adjacent to the casino with 310 guest rooms, including 52 suites. Live! Hotel will offer more than 20,000 sf of customizable event space, including a large ballroom with six breakout rooms, expansive prefunction space and an executive boardroom. Live! Hotel also will house a grand event center; 1,500-seat concert venue; built-in performance stage; and banquet seating for up to 800 people.

In the summer of 2018, **Mohegan Sun**, in Uncasville, Connecticut, will open the Mohegan Sun Exposition Center, featuring 125,000 sf of flexible meeting space. "There will be an Expo Hall with an additional 20,000-sf ballroom and breakout rooms, and we're going to have what I call an 'Uber Boardroom,' where we will be highlighting the uniqueness of the room and inlays," says John Washko, V.P. exhibitions and convention sales for the resort. "As we look at the next-gen meeting attendee — the millennial — one of the areas the hotel industry as a whole has really fallen off on is that millennials don't learn in the same environment that the baby boomers did. We address that with our new space."

The Inn of the Mountain Gods just completed a full guest room renovation in 2017, complete with new bedding and

furniture, while the **Talking Stick Resort** just completed a full guest room refresh in the summer of 2017 and replaced all the carpet in its Grand Ballroom.

This past summer, the **Tropicana Las Vegas** opened up Robert Irvine's Public House, which offers upscale and reimagined comfort food in a casual atmosphere, with its specialty being the Fork & Knife Burger.

Yousfi is jazzed about Aria Resort & Casino's planned \$165 million expansion, which will consist of another 200,000 sf of meeting rooms opening in February. The space will be situated on four different levels and offer two verandas that overlook the T-Mobile Arena.

The Strip's most storied property, the **Flamingo Las Vegas**, has completed a \$6.5 million meeting space renovation, which began in April 2017. A \$90 million renovation of 1,270 guest rooms began in August, with completion scheduled for the second quarter of 2018. Caesars describes the new look as "unique, contemporary and retro-chic designs with accents that celebrate Flamingo's rich history." The 70-year-old hotel offers a total of more than 3,500 guest rooms and



Gordon Ramsay Hell's Kitchen will open soon at Caesars Palace.

a 73,000-sf Corporate Convention Center and Executive Conference Center.

"The Palace Tower at **Caesars Palace** underwent a renovation of its 1,181 guest rooms and suites with Caesars investing \$100 million in the redesign," Ross says. "The first Gordon Ramsay Hell's Kitchen is expected to open early next year, giving guests a feel for the actual TV show. The restaurant will be located at Caesars Palace, right off The Strip. It is available for group buyouts as well." — KL

eral terraces. What makes it special is the size, where groups will be meeting in our space that conveniently connects to our Club Tower, creating fantastic networking opportunities."

The full-service experience includes

the most advanced audio-visual equipment through its partner Encore Event Technologies, as well as fast and reliable internet connections from COX Communications.

Tony Yousfi, vice president of sales for

Aria Resort & Casino in Las Vegas, says the best thing about holding a meeting at the hotel is that meeting guests are just five minutes from their sleeping room to the meeting space, and there's no need to walk through the casino.

"We have 300,000 sf of meeting space, and while we have groups of up to 5,000, about 80 percent of our business is 200 or less," he says. "Our meeting rooms have natural light, and our corporate planners know that when they come in, we mean business. They have their objectives, and we focus on helping them achieve them."

A Winning Hand

When working with casino resorts, meeting planners often look for partners who can help them put on a perfect event in the smoothest way possible.

"It's important to arrive at a complete understanding of both the client's expectations and vendor's expectations, and take the venue's best practices and maybe alter those expectations if needed," says Ric Smith, an independent meeting planner based outside of Chicago, who has worked with at least seven different casino resorts in his 25-plus years in the biz. "Casinos aren't for everybody, so you want to ensure that there's enough that everyone is happy, and all needs are met."

Busone can't overemphasize how important it is to be able to trust a resort to anticipate one's every need, and she has found that in spades with Talking Stick.

"As event planners, there are some situations we just can't plan for, but I never stress because I know the resort staff will accommodate my needs... with a smile," she says. "That begins with communication before and after each event and eventually builds a relationship where everyone's invested in success."

Maggart says the best way to do that is by understanding all needs at the beginning, knowing what they want to accomplish and what all meeting requirements are.

"We want to understand what was successful in the past for them and really build on the concept at our resort," he says. "It's asking the right questions, understanding their goals, and then doing everything in our power from the sales person to conference

services manager all the way down to the banquet team to help them accomplish those goals."

More Than Gambling

When meetings aren't in session, attendees may love playing slots, throwing craps or sitting down for some blackjack, but not everyone wants to take the risk required when gambling.

"From a corporate standpoint, not

everyone is into the casino aspect of it, so you need to make sure there are other things that can occupy their time," McGonigle says. "There should be a spa, golf nearby and other fun things to take advantage of. These resorts offer those things so everyone is happy."

The Inn of the Mountain Gods is nestled in the Sierra Blanca Mountains away from traffic and noise, so attendees can find some peace and tranquility.

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The Inn of the Mountain Gods, located in Mescalero, New Mexico, features more than 40,000 sf of indoor meeting space.

"After a long day in meetings, you can step outside for some fresh air and beautiful surroundings. We have mountain bikes, horseback riding, clay shooting, golf, skiing, zip line, boating and walking trails," Meeks says. "Although we are about 2½ hours from Albuquerque, most meetings and conventions see a very large increase in attendance because of our location. Once we get a new group to meet here, we have them for a very long time."

Outside of the Dover Downs Hotel & Casino, there's plenty to do for non-gamblers.

"We offer tax-free shopping, live harness racing, simulcast horse racing, and the Dover International Speedway's Monster Mile is located onsite and hosts daily tours of the NASCAR track," Stack

says. "Delaware does not have sales tax, which results in a significant saving for the planner."

Taking advantage of the beautiful Scottsdale weather, Talking Stick Resort boasts an open-air spa on the top of its 14-story building overlooking Camelback Mountain, 36 holes of golf and live entertainment options throughout the property.

In Las Vegas, Mealiffe says meeting guests can take advantage of the Tropicana Las Vegas' award-winning pool surrounded by lush landscaping; the Mandara Spa, which offers relaxation and an opportunity to revitalize both before and after the meetings; and a wide variety of restaurants.

The Las Vegas Strip also offers plenty to do. At Caesars Palace, the two larg-

est ballrooms are adjacent to the iconic Garden of the Gods pool, so meeting planners can take a break or hold a reception at the pool.

"Qua Baths and Spa at Caesars Palace is another wonderful option for after hours. The design is beautiful and calming with large facilities and is available for a group buyout," Ross says. "Attendees can enjoy the Linq Promenade where the High Roller (observation wheel) is located. It's a great place to people watch and to have dinner or a drink. Street entertainers and musicians perform nightly."

Being on the Atlantic City Boardwalk is popular with meeting guests, Jackson says, because it has access to the beach, shops, an aquarium and the Steel Pier amusement area, which has the third-largest observation wheel in the country.

Everyone Makes Mistakes

At some resorts, sometimes problems arise — such as sharing your space with other groups; noise and disruption beyond your control; overspending on unnecessary items; and not living up to your contractual agreement. The fix, most planners agree, is being able to offer solutions that work for both sides, mediate and produce.

Wassman says there always will be things that go wrong, but it's how planners react to these challenges that define them and the success of a meeting.

"It's important to work with the team to present and find a solution to the problem or challenge," she says. "Communicate your expectations and set the tone."

C&IT



The Tropicana Las Vegas offers just over 100,000 sf of indoor meeting space.

Credit: Inn of the Mountain Gods

Credit: Tropicana Las Vegas



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Destination

Texas

A Larger-Than-Life Destination Made for Memorable Meetings

By Cynthia Dial

leadership conference. A high-energy event that combines a week of celebration, education and service for approximately 1,200 attendees, the 2017 BEDTalks was held at the 1,000-room Marriott Marquis Houston.

What factors led Bilder and Mattress Firm to this property? Encore Live's event specialist cites several components necessary to pull off an event of this magnitude — big ballrooms (including Houston's largest at 40,000 sf), ample space for breakout sessions (100,000 sf of meeting/event space), branding opportunities, competitive food and beverage choices, good hotel rates, nearby city attractions and loading dock accessibility. Bilder elaborates: "The Marriott Marquis met all of our needs and offered a uniquely designed meeting place that embodied Houston's charm — providing stunning views of local artwork and the world's only Texas-shaped lazy river. It was the perfect location for our Houston-inspired BEDTalks."

The meeting's objective is to promote a strong and positive relationship between Mattress Firm and its employees — giving attendees renewed inspiration, rejuvenation and a commitment to take the company's mission home to their local districts and stores. As BEDTalks is not a typical corporate conference,

Texas is big. Texas is bold. Texas is beautiful. It's this trio of attractions and more that make the Lone Star state a magnet for meetings. This bigger-than-life destination offers an impressive range of options tailor-made for corporate meeting planners seeking a Southwestern flair.

Recent years are akin to a sonic boom for Houston, beginning with the December 2016 unveiling of the \$175 million Avenida Houston (the pedestrian-oriented campus that connects visitors to the George R. Brown Convention Center, Minute Maid Park, Toyota Center, BBVA Compass Stadium and Discovery Green) and having continued with around-the-globe attention focused on 2017's Super Bowl LI. The city is also home to MSN's named Best Hotel in Texas — Hilton Americas-Houston, a AAA Four Diamond-rated property with 1,200 guest rooms and 91,500 sf of flexible meeting space over three levels. All contributed to the city booking a record number of room nights in 2016 tied to future conventions for the second year straight. "The world is waking up to a new Houston," says Mike Waterman, president of Visit Houston. Having already made significant progress in its recovery from this summer's devastating hurricane and bringing home a World Series win for the first time ever in the fall, Houston best embodies the state's "can do" spirit — with a future that is positive.

High-Energy Houston

Maddy Bilder, creative department manager with Encore Live — a self-described one-stop shop for planning, managing and executing corporate and private events from start to finish — selected Texas for BEDTalks, Mattress Firm's annual national



JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa was the site of Experian Information Solutions' Sales Summit with 800 attendees who enjoyed Texas-style hospitality on the event lawn.



Credits: Kellie Medwitz



Credit: Trey Daugherty, Encore Live

The closing night Gulf Coast Pool Party for Mattress Firm's national leadership conference was held at Marriott Marquis Houston.

achieving these goals in the span of three days is accomplished in a multi-prong approach and with the incorporation of several offsite events.

The week kicked off with Art in the Park at Discovery Green and included a variety of local food trucks, well-known Houston artists (The Suffers, a Gulf Coast soul band and Houston graffiti artist GONZO247), custom art installations and outdoor

"The Marriott Marquis met all of our needs and offered a uniquely designed meeting place that embodied Houston's charm."

Maddy Bilder, Creative Department Manager, Encore Live, Fort Worth, TX



games. With the goal to motivate through topics — from industry trends to personal stories — this year's keynote speakers included Apple cofounder Steve Wozniak, former Southwest Airlines CMO Dave Ridley and Pastor Dan Hall (whose ongoing rehabilitation from a recent injury is exceptionally inspirational).

Guests were transported to the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts for the formal awards gala, with the after-awards ceremony celebration back in the hotel at "Studio 8" nightclub (a custom-created entertainment venue for the evening).

Day three was about giving back to the Houston community and raising funds for the company's charitable foundation, Foster Kids. Attendees were bused to Mattress Firm's BEDQuarters where they participated in a Foster Fitness Fair, which included a fitness duffle bag assembly, an obstacle course, a fun-run and the introduction to Houston Texans' renowned defensive end, J.J. Watt.

Of all the events, however, Bilder deems the closing night's Gulf Coast Pool Party the one which most engaged the guests. "It truly reflected Houston's personality. The view from the pool deck is breathtaking and overlooks Discovery Green, the George R. Brown Convention Center and the skyline. It was an effortless evening with backyard games, pool floats, jazz music, a crawfish

boil and Gulf Coast-inspired buffets. Guests felt like we were paying tribute to the city and a wonderful week at BEDTalks."

Bilder's bottom line: "BEDTalks is one of the events that attendees look forward to year long, and they respond very well to the activities and stories that are shared with them year after year. 2017 was no different. If anything, guest excitement and reactions were amplified because Mattress Firm was founded in Houston 30 years ago, so the pride for the city and for Mattress Firm was intensified."

In agreement with Bilder and Mattress Firm, Kara MacDonald, director of marketing operations for HCSS (an industry pioneer and leader in construction company software), also selected Marriott Marquis Houston — in no small part due to its large size.

"We selected this property because it gives us the ability to really grow our event, but keep it in one venue as long as possible," says the planner of its two upcoming January and February 2018 Users Group Meetings (an expected combined attendance of approximately 1,500). "The past few years we had to spread our meals, breakouts and hotel rooms across multiple (Houston) hotels." A first-timer to Marriott Marquis Houston, MacDonald is committed to this property through 2022 and adds: "We will be able to keep it all in one location for the next several years."

Advice the planner would give others considering this property: "Explain fully any challenges you have had in the past and be open to new ideas." She cites this example: HCSS's meetings require significant pre-event AV setup, and over the years attendees have questioned the Wednesday through Saturday timing. Marriott's suggestion was to shift the days to Monday through Thursday, allowing the group time for AV setup on Sunday (a typically slower day for the hotel) and making it possible for attendees to return home Thursday night, enabling a visit to the office on Friday.

With the main objective of the meetings to educate HCSS's customers on the software, significant time is devoted to breakout sessions (155 sessions in January; 195 sessions in February). "Since this is the bulk of the schedule, we spend months planning course tracks, content and making final preparations (room setup, AV required, etc.) for the sessions," says MacDonald. She likens the process to an analogy: "The rest of the event I consider to be decorations on the cake...people might think



Mattress Firm's conference week kicked off with Art in the Park on Discovery Green at the convention center.

Credit: Trey Daugherty, Encore Live

it looks beautiful, but if it doesn't taste good, time is wasted decorating it."

The icing on the cake: "Most of our attendees come from the Midwest and the Northwest, so they love Houston's weather, even from late January to mid-February," concludes the planner.

Au Courant Austin

Moving to the heart of the state is its capital, Austin, the center of government and the home base of The University of Texas. Additionally revered as the "Live Music Capital of the World" (host to more than 250 live music venues) and named "The Next Great Food Town" by *Travel + Leisure*, it is becoming a significant player in the meetings arena.

Sitting on the UT campus the recently renovated 297-room AT&T Executive Education and Conference Center features 50,000 sf in 37 different meeting spaces. The property will be further enhanced with its expansion in the works — a 15,000-sf ballroom, 5,000 sf of prefunction space and a 5,500-sf banquet kitchen (slated for completion in January 2018).



Credit: Hilton Austin

Austin Taco Project bar at Hilton Austin.

Scheduled to open in early 2018 is the \$370 million Fairmont Austin, which will connect to the Austin Convention Center via an elevated bridge called the Red River Street CanopyWalk. The hotel will offer 1,048 guest rooms (including 131 luxury rooms on four private floors); 138,815 sf of state-of-the-art meeting, convention and outdoor space, and birds-eye views of Lady Bird Lake, the Capitol and the cityscape.

The latest trend in the meetings industry is embraced by Hilton Austin with its top-of-the-line onsite dining options conceived with attendees in mind. Its newest eateries include Cannon+Belle, which serves up Tex fresh fare and local spirits; Austin Taco Project, known for fusion tacos and custom cocktails — it's described as "the endless pursuit of the world's perfect tap and tacos" — and The Reverber, an events venue designed to replicate Austin's recording studio vibe. At 31 stories, additional meeting planner perks include 801 newly renovated guest rooms, 80,000 sf of flexible meeting space and an adjacent-to-the-convention-center location.

Hyatt Regency Austin is fine-tuning its \$70 million renovation with the redecoration of its welcoming lobby and the refreshing of its meeting spaces. The renovation began in 2014 with the addition of the 14,136-sf Zilker Ballroom and 2,700-sf open-air Zilker Terrace (putting the hotel in the league with



"We selected this property because it gives us the ability to really grow our event, but keep it in one venue."

Kara MacDonald, Director, Marketing Operations, HCSS, Sugar Land, TX

the city's largest meeting venues) and continued in 2015 with the full renovation of all 448 guest rooms showcasing a music-inspired décor that is reflective of Austin's melodious roots.

New on the scene last year was the luxury 171-room Archer Hotel Austin located in Domain Northside (an upscale 300-acre mixed-use north Austin destination/development). The boutique hotel describes its Texas chic décor in fashion-attire terms: "Think designer dress worn with the perfect cowboy boots." Among its rustic luxe touches are wall coverings comprised of reclaimed leather belts, leather trunks in many guest rooms (most of which have floor-to-ceiling windows) and a native Texas limestone grand staircase with floating glass handrails. Of particular appeal to planners is more than 16,500 sf of indoor/outdoor event space and a 100 percent smoke-free environment.

Showcasing its typically one-step-ahead-of-the-game mentality, Visit Austin recently launched a new digital meeting planning tool that provides information on the city's meeting facilities, accommodations, convention services, etc., in a format created after researching those of most value to planners.

Austin's corporate commitment captured the attention of Lisa Frodge — senior administrative assistant, global accounts sales, Dell account, Intel — when selecting Archer Hotel Austin for the 2017 Intel/Dell Worldwide Team F2F meeting of 90 people.

"We chose this property primarily due to JaiSauna Thompson, director of group sales, Archer Hotel Austin. Someone mentioned the hotel and we stopped by to view the property. JaiSauna gave us a personal tour, showing the meeting rooms, conference rooms and individual hotel rooms. We were won over not just by the beautiful, unique space, but by JaiSauna's hospitality, as well as that of the rest of the staff." She continues to name names. "Aaron Wagner was wonderful with the AV setup and always a text away from any issues."

The meeting objective is to get the worldwide team together to network and share ideas. The Archer setup provided the perfect setting — with the terrace off the conference area serving as a prime impromptu meeting area that encouraged significant teambuilding.

Frodge cites the hotel's Texas-inspired F&B a real hit, from the "Lone Star State of Mind" breakfast (featuring jalapeno cornbread with honey butter) to a lunch of Texas chili; but also gives kudos to the Domain Northside's many eateries visited the first night (Culinary Dropout, NoRTH, CRÚ, Maggiano's and Gloria's Latin Cuisine). However, its most popular event with attendees

"It (Archer Hotel Austin) worked perfectly! Employees were very impressed."

Lisa Frodge, Senior Administrative Assistant, Intel, Austin, TX



began with drinks and heavy appetizers at downtown's Easy Tiger, followed by a visit to Cedar Street Courtyard to see the Spazmatics, described as the "ultimate new wave '80s show."

Planning to return in May 2018 — same time, same place — Frodge summates: "It worked perfectly! Employees were very impressed. Management was happy that it was reasonably priced and employees assumed we were paying too much."

Success in San Antonio

A bit farther south is San Antonio, named in 2016 as the state's No. 1 choice for meetings and conventions, and known for its meandering River Walk, Mexican flair and the famed Alamo. Only steps from these historic enticements is Hotel Contessa. Noted as the only AAA Four Diamond all-suite hotel situated on the River Walk, it recently announced a partnership with The Briscoe Western Art Museum, which gives groups the flexibility to take advantage of the hotel-to-museum proximity and combine their one-of-a-kind offerings and meeting space.

Located in San Antonio's famed surrounding hills is the JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa, the brand's largest in the world. Serving up more than 265,000 sf of customizable convention, meeting and event space, one of the hotel's most unique venues is located at its center — a 30,000-sf lawn enhanced by limestone waterfalls and fireplaces, along with

surround-sound-like views of the environs and the first hole of its AT&T Canyons Course.

Responsible for the core events of Experian Information Solutions Inc. — the Vision Conference, Sales Summit and Elite Award Trip (incentive trip) — Melanie Haywood, senior manager corporate events, selected JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa for the company's April Sales Summit of approximately 800 attendees for a variety of reasons.

"Texas is always an ideal location since it is a central destination in the U.S. This

Hotel Contessa, on the River Walk in San Antonio.

property offers an upscale resort feel with large meeting space custom-made for big conferences; but it also offers the feeling of exclusivity, unlike many convention-sized hotels.

Details are an important component of Haywood's decision: a large and flexible main ballroom with great ceiling height, impeccable grounds and numerous outdoor options large enough for evening parties. However, of greatest importance to this planner is the availability of work space located next to the registration desk. Haywood explains: "I always struggle to find hotels with office space large enough to accommodate my team and all of our boxes comfortably — which is also in a location that makes it easy to manage the conference floor throughout our long days."

With the theme "Make it Happen," content of this internal sales conference focuses on four pillars: educate, celebrate, collaborate and inspire. Survey results indicate that its objectives to motivate and educate the salesforce, as well as provide them with the necessary training and tools to achieve the coming year's revenue goals, were met. Results specific to the hotel received high remarks: Attendees appreciated the variety of hotel restaurants/bars, the quality of overall service and the attributes of guest rooms. With respect to rating the meeting facilities and technology, Haywood's score for JW Marriott San Antonio: "A++ — some of the best in the industry!"

The best part is that though the hotel is a bit removed from the downtown action (though easily accessed by taxi), the property has a resort feel. It also kept the attendees en-



"We opted for a Texas feel with Southern-style food (and) regional décor."

Melanie Haywood, Senior Manager Corporate Events, Experian Information Solutions Inc., Costa Mesa, CA

gaged and enabled them to focus on the content versus possible distractions. In the end, with the resort ambience, as well as the hotel's multiple food outlets, attendees did not miss the city vibe.

One particularly memorable night was the networking dinner event on the hotel's lawn. "We opted for a Texas feel with Southern-style food, regional décor and such fun elements as a photo booth in an Airstream trailer, ice-carved beer mugs and lawn games. The attendees loved being outside, enjoyed the casual environment and the lawn setting was perfect," says the planner.

Final result: Though Experian Information Solutions Inc. does not return to the same destination year after year, it is bringing its Vision Conference to JW Marriott San Antonio in 2019.

With a pride that is exceeded only by its homespun amenities and genuine hospitality, Texas is becoming a top destination in the world of meetings. **C&IT**



Credit: Hotel Contessa

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On The Move



HURLEY

Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill has named **Michael Hurley** as senior sales manager. He was senior sales manager for JW Marriott Los Angeles L.A. Live, and The Ritz-Carlton, Los Angeles.

Tricia Eschle was named director of sales and marketing at The Westin South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa, California. She was director of sales for



ESCHLE

The Inn at Laguna Beach and The Laguna Beach House.

Montage Palmetto Bluff, Bluffton, South Carolina, has named **Alex Gregory** as director of sales and marketing. He was director of sales and marketing for Omni Homestead, Hot Springs, Virginia.

Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek has appointed



GREGORY



KINGSTON

Dawn V. Kingston as senior sales manager, Midwest market. She was national account manager at Eaglewood Resort & Spa in Itasca, Illinois.

James Anderson was named director of sales and marketing at JW Marriott Desert Ridge Resort & Spa, Phoenix, Arizona. He was director of group sales for Gaylord Texan Resort & Convention Center in Grapevine, Texas. **C&IT**



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