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INSURANCE & FINANCIAL MEETINGS MANAGEMENT

THE EXECUTIVE SOURCE FOR PLANNING MEETINGS & INCENTIVES

Island Allure

Caribbean and Bahamas Update

Page 34

Meeting Planners' Biggest Challenges

The Pressure's on to Think Outside the Box

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**CLICK HERE TO
DOWNLOAD/VIEW
TABLET VERSION**

Harris S. Fishman,
president and CEO
of MassMutual
Greater
Philadelphia,
and his group
are repeat
visitors to Aruba
Marriott Resort &
Stellaris Casino.

Tech Trends

Innovative New Ways to Optimize ROI

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Rewarding Golf & Spa Resorts Page 14

Las Vegas — a Prime Drawing Card Page 40



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Credit: The Broadmoor



The Broadmoor’s East Course — one of two award-winning golf courses — is perennially popular, as is its five-star spa. **PAGE 14**



Strategic thinking outside the box is essential to meet the demands of today’s meetings and events. **PAGE 24**



A virtual reality demo is just one of the many technology tools planners can use to optimize meeting ROI. **PAGE 28**



Tropicana Las Vegas’ Sky Beach Club hosts upscale events. **PAGE 40**

Publisher's Message

Up to the Challenge

If the No. 5 most stressful job, according to the 2017 CareerCast report, is “event coordinator,” imagine the stress ranking of real world “meeting professionals”! As our feature “Meeting Planners’ Biggest Challenges” on page 24 emphasizes, the profession has evolved eons beyond the coordinator realm to that of meeting professional/strategist. Dispelling misperceptions about their role is the planner’s first challenge. A perennial challenge is creating engaging and rewarding customer experiences that exceed expectations — on a tight budget. “Now more than ever, event planners are expected to ‘wow’ audiences in order to leave a lasting impression,” says Rachel Klar, CMP, events marketing and sponsorship manager for Intuit, in our story. “The challenge of delivering ‘more with less’ is a pervasive challenge within the event planning industry.”



Of course the right destination goes a long way toward achieving that goal, as Harris S. Fishman, CLU, ChFC, president and CEO of MassMutual Greater Philadelphia, attests in “Island Allure — Caribbean and Bahamas Update” on page 34. He and his group are repeat visitors to the Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino. Which brings us to another meeting planner challenge — becoming a destination expert. In this case, dispelling any misconceptions about the state of the Caribbean and The Bahamas following last year’s harsh hurricane season. Fishman, featured on our cover, knows that Aruba lies south of the traditional hurricane belt; savvy planners also know that 70 percent of Caribbean destinations were unaffected by the storms. As our story relates, islands that were hit are still in various stages of recovery, while others in the 1-million-square-mile region are open for business.

Another major challenge that adds mightily to the many complexities of meeting planning is staying ahead of the curve on event technology. Turn to page 28 for an update on ways to measure, assess and utilize data to maximize event ROI — and solidify your place at the table. Data “allows you to generate buy-in from your decision-makers, provide projections for strategic growth and justify spending,” says Sydney Wolf, senior event sales manager for metroConnections.

The planning professionals of today most certainly identify with Cheryl Schreiner, CMM, CMP, regional V.P. of HelmsBriscoe, who says in our “Biggest Challenges” story, “These are challenges, but they are obstacles we pride ourselves in overcoming through solutions. ...You must thrive in this type of environment to be successful.”

Harvey Grotsky

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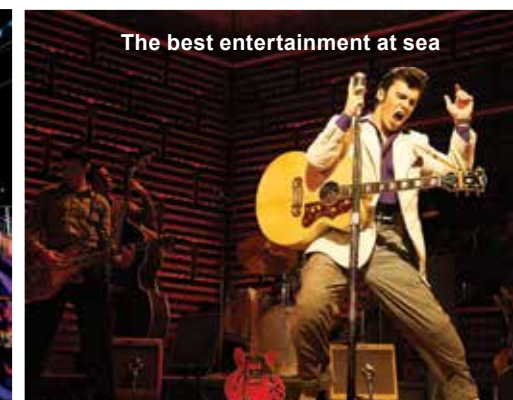
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Meliá Hotels to Open Paradisus Playa Mujeres in 2019



NEW YORK, NY — Spanish hotel group Meliá Hotels International has announced that Paradisus Playa Mujeres will debut in the first quarter of 2019. The new luxury hotel will be Mexico's fifth Paradisus-branded property. Just off the coast of Cancun, Paradisus Playa Mujeres is situated on the seafloor within close proximity of Isla Mujeres, with thriving bars, restaurants and shops, as well as a Greg Norman-designed golf course. Inspired by Mexican design and architecture, the luxury all-inclusive resort will boast 498 rooms, four swimming pools, six bars and seven restaurants serving a variety of international cuisines. Paradisus Playa Mujeres will provide four business center stations and a convention center (ballroom) with a capacity for up to 1,500 people. It will offer video-mapping technology and a state-of-the-art audio-visual system. www.paradisus.com

Paradise Point Resort & Spa Announces \$24 Million Transformation

SAN DIEGO, CA — Paradise Point Resort & Spa, a Destination Hotel, has debuted a comprehensive renovation project, which includes all 462 California bungalow-style guest rooms with eco-conscious, high-tech attributes and indoor-outdoor design. Designed by the award-winning international firm Perkins + Will, rooms are decked out in new tile floors and quartz surfaces, while a palette of navy and white is brightened by citrus hues such as lime and tangerine. Natural light floods through the fluid layout with California coastal décor including whitewashed headboards, rope tables and jute chairs. Sliding barn doors open to sleek new bathrooms with walk-in showers, and bedrooms are outfitted with new deluxe plush Sealy mattresses. Guest rooms also feature energy-saving lighting requiring guests to insert room key, multiple electrical outlets, alarm clocks with USB ports and Bluetooth capabilities, and new 4K 60-inch high-definition smart televisions. The resort's signature restaurant is newly helmed by chef Andrew Reyes. www.destinationhotels.com/paradise-point

Park MGM's Madison Meeting Center Serves Small Meetings in Las Vegas



LAS VEGAS, NV — As part of Monte Carlo Resort and Casino's transformation into Park MGM this spring, an innovative venue within the new meetings and conference space is now booking groups for this May and beyond. The Madison Meeting Center, the first of its kind in Las Vegas, will cater to customized meetings for groups from 10 to 50 people.

The 10,000-sf, modern design conference center space will offer 10 flexible rooms able to accommodate varying layouts ideal for classroom-style training, certifications, product seminars, workshops and tailored events. The Madison Meeting Center will have two self-service lounges, ergonomic movable furniture with integrated power along with built-in audio-visual equipment, confidence monitors and rolling whiteboards.

Increasing the center's appeal is the first Complete Meeting Package (CMP) offering on the Las Vegas Strip. The all-inclusive pricing allows meeting planners to pay a flat rate per attendee, providing convenience and cost-efficiency. With 80 percent of MGM Resorts' convention groups at 100 guest rooms or fewer, the CMP and Madison Meeting Center focus on providing small groups with innovative options. www.parkmgm.com

St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort to Reopen in October



RIO GRANDE, PR — The St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort, near Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, will reopen October 29, 2018 following an extensive \$60 million renovation at Bahia Beach. The renovation is inclusive of every guest room and suite; the Plantation House, the heart of the resort where guests will enjoy The St. Regis Bar and the property's signature restaurant; the seaside pool and esplanade, which will offer a casual dining option for guests; the spa; and the oceanfront golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr. The 139 refurbished rooms and suites at The St. Regis will boast a light, modern and organic aesthetic in a contemporary and residential setting.

Additionally, St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort has announced plans for a \$30 million expansion to the resort. Occupying a secluded stretch of land adjacent to the current guest room accommodations, the expansion will add 60 oceanfront rooms to the hotel's inventory and introduce a more contemporary style with family-friendly and flexible rooms to the destination.

In collaboration with the non-profit Alma de Bahia, St. Regis is offering volunteer opportunities for guests interested in assisting communities in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean that were impacted by last fall's hurricanes. www.starwoodhotels.com

Carnival Adds 20 Cruises to Cuba in 2019

MIAMI, FL — Carnival Cruise Line has added another 20 voyages to Cuba aboard Carnival Paradise from Tampa in 2019, complementing the 11 cruises to the island taking place aboard the vessel through next year. The new voyages aboard Carnival Paradise are in addition to the 17 recently announced Cuba cruises aboard Carnival Sensation departing from Miami in 2019, indicating that more and more travelers view cruising as a great way to experience the destination.

The newly added five-day voyages on Carnival Paradise will depart Tampa on Saturdays and feature a day-long or a full day and overnight call in the Cuban capital of Havana, along with stops at tropical destinations Key West and Cozumel.

Guests sailing on Carnival's Cuba cruises can select from nearly 20 different shore excursion experiences that showcase the island's vibrant culture, majestic beauty and centuries-old architectural landmarks. A variety of Cuban-themed activities and entertainment, including the sizzling "Amor Cubano: a Caribbean Dance Romance" playlist productions show. Havana-inspired deck parties, trivia contests and salsa lessons are also offered. An onboard Cuba expert discusses the country's rich history and culture.

Carnival Paradise completed an extensive, multimillion-dollar refurbishment in March that added a water park, 38 new cabins, 98 balconies to existing staterooms and a host of new food and beverage concepts.

The visits to Havana comply with regulations of the U.S. Department of Treasury that permit travel operators to transport approved travelers to Cuba to engage in activities as defined by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Office of Foreign Assets Control. www.carnival.com

Mount Airy Casino Resort Announces Major Expansion



MOUNT POCONO, PA — Mount Airy Casino Resort, Pennsylvania's first AAA Four Diamond casino resort, has announced a multimillion-dollar expansion that will introduce 100 new guest rooms, adding to the existing 188 guest room inventory, and a 16,000-sf ballroom and events center to be unveiled in spring 2019. Combined with the resort's existing 4,000 sf of flexible banquet/meeting space, the new 16,000-sf meeting and convention center/ballroom will accommodate seated dinners up to 750 guests and hold 1,200 attendees for events and concerts. A new 27,000-sf outdoor concert pavilion debuts May 2018. www.mountairycasino.com

Le Blanc Spa Resort Los Cabos Debuts

MIAMI, FL – Le Blanc Spa Resort Los Cabos, Mexico, recently celebrated its grand opening. The property features 374 guest rooms and large suites with ocean views and personal butler service. Resort highlights include several gourmet restaurants, the 29,000-sf Blancspa, live music, the Blanc Firepit and interactive mixology classes. The resort offers more than 14,000 sf of space for corporate events, including the 8,386-sf Blanc Sand Ballroom, which accommodates up to 630 people, Blanc Breeze Ballroom (924 sf), Blanc Wind Terrace (2,643 sf), Blanc Terrace (3,363 sf) and Blanc Board (659 sf). The resort offers groups the latest in technology, top-of-the-line audio-visual equipment, and a fully equipped business center, with complimentary Wi-Fi throughout the entire resort. www.leblancsparesorts.com



Las Vegas Convention Center Expansion Design Unveiled

LAS VEGAS, NV — Architects recently presented design drawings for the Las Vegas Convention Center expansion, providing a glimpse of the vibrant new look of the nearly 60-year-old facility.

The LVCCD's Phase Two is an \$860 million expansion project that will add 1.4 million sf to the current convention center facility, including at least 600,000 sf of new, leasable exhibit space. The expansion is slated for completion in time to welcome CES in 2021. Late last year, the LVCVA Board of Directors finalized the selection of tvsdesign/Design Las Vegas to provide design services for the expansion project.

Phase Three will be the complete renovation of the existing 3.2-million-sf facility, with a projected completion date of 2023. The phased approach will ensure that



no business will be displaced during the construction.

Each year, Las Vegas hosts approximately 22,000 meetings, conventions and trade shows.

In 2017, the Las Vegas Convention Center hosted 21 percent of convention attendees traveling to southern Nevada. Including indirect and induced impacts, the Las Vegas

Embassy Suites by Hilton Opens in Seattle's First Neighborhood

SEATTLE, WA — The Embassy Suites by Hilton Seattle Downtown recently opened its doors in Pioneer Square, Seattle's first neighborhood, near Pike Place Market, Pier 55, CenturyLink Field and Safeco Field. Featuring panoramic views of Seattle and Elliott Bay, the 282 all-suite hotel is comprised of two glass towers, one housing the main lobby and hotel amenities as well as guest rooms and suites above. The other houses the 7,433-sf King Street Ballroom, one of the largest and most flexible ballrooms in downtown Seattle, an outdoor event terrace, indoor pool and leased office space.

Amenities include a health club with an indoor pool, exercise room and sun deck. www.hilton.com

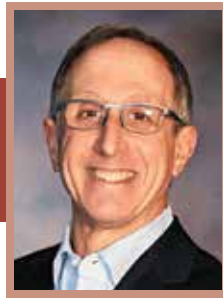


SnapShots



Credits: 1-4 SITE; 5 Visit Seattle; 6 Mark Damon/Las Vegas News Bureau; 7 NOCVB; 8 GRTA

1-4 Now in its third year, SITE Incentive Summit Americas took place April 5-8 at Montage Deer Valley, Park City, Utah. The exclusive, invitation-only event brought 120 incentive travel professionals to Utah for a long weekend filled with education, networking and destination immersion. **1** SITE CEO Didier Scaillet (l) and SITE CMO Padraic Gilligan with Daniele Menache, global head of events and sponsorships, Alliance Bernstein. **3** (l to r) SITE Foundation Trustee Chris Wheeler, executive director global incentive sales, sbe; SITE Board Member Ellie MacPherson, S.V.P., Strategic Meetings + Incentives; SITE Foundation President John Iannini, V.P. business travel and meetings and events Americas, Melia Hotels International. **5-7** Leaders from across the meetings and events industry joined together for the third annual Global Meetings Industry Day (GMID) on April 12. **5** Visit Seattle President & CEO Tom Norwalk (r) and other leaders celebrated GMID during Visit Seattle's 2018 Annual Meeting. **6** Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority staff and the board of directors gathered to recognize GMID. **7** The New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau celebrated GMID at a luncheon featuring Roger Dow (l), president and CEO of U.S. Travel Association. **8** The Global Business Travel Association Foundation's 21st Annual Gala Dinner was held March 19 at Grand Hyatt New York.



Enhance Your 2018 Conferences With Leading-edge Event Tech

If you're a financial or insurance meeting professional, you can enhance your conferences by deploying strategies that address the needs of your stakeholders. It's less difficult than you might think; if you take the time to learn about and leverage today's leading-edge event technologies. They are robust in features designed to capture valuable data, engage meeting participants, enable sponsors and exhibitors to achieve their marketing and sales goals and streamline otherwise burdensome event administration planning and processes.

We Feel Your Pain

A Financial & Insurance Conference Planners (FICP) Incentives Survey revealed that a majority of respondents (84 percent) outsource at least one service such as: AV production (62 percent), travel (57 percent), registration (36 percent) and speaker selection/management (36 percent). Typically, outsourcing of services is a way to alleviate the pain associated with certain processes. Meeting professionals in the financial and insurance sector share similar challenges with those in other industries. For example, an etouches survey of 239 event and meeting planners found they share many pain points:

- 56 percent cited targeting event attendees with the right content.
- 51 percent cited managing attendee registration.
- 44 percent cited attendee communications.
- 42 percent cited attendee check-in.

A recent survey by the Professional Convention Management Association found that meeting professionals also were challenged by:

- Competition for their audience's time and attention.
- Engagement with multigenerational attendees.
- Communicating the relevancy of face-to-face events to millennials and Generation Xers.
- Securing reliable, high-speed Wi-Fi for meeting participants.
- Keeping up with necessary technologies that increase attendee engagement at affordable prices.

Event Technology Solutions Architects

Event technology providers are helpful in defining a road map that addresses their stakeholders' endgame. That can be as easy as obtaining head-count totals to obtaining sophisticated analytics. Vendors have become very knowledgeable regarding the process and helping stakeholders achieve data that is useful in conducting future business.

How do you raise your game? Many solutions are supported by knowledgeable, experienced event technology professionals. These specialists have in-depth technical skills and knowledge of the specific technologies, their performance features and how best to leverage them. Equally important, these solutions architects and project managers are capable of managing an event technology solution project across all phases. That includes assisting with pre-event planning, budgeting and goal assessment, simplifying the technology component and generally elevating event concepts so they really shine.

The Right Solution for Each Challenge

Here are some of the most popular technologies that many meeting planners have embraced:

Registration software — Improving attendee check-in and registration processes is as simple as applying web-based event registration software. This solution offers event professionals choices on how to register their attendees (for example, online, onsite with staff or self-serve onsite registration at event kiosks). Additionally, the software captures valuable demographic data to enhance target marketing and streamline processes such as badge creation, email confirmations, reporting and data importing to CRM and lead retrieval systems.

Mobile event apps — Mobile event applications may be one of the best ways to keep your attendees engaged. They put the power of technology in the hands of the stakeholders and their attendees by providing them a way to access real-time information such as: upcoming sessions, exhibits and product demonstrations, special promotional activities, etc. They also have market intelligence functionality to capture behavioral data, which can be applied to re-engage

attendees and/or in post-event communications. Interestingly, according to the FICP Incentives Survey, 40 percent of respondents always or frequently use a mobile app at their incentive programs.

Interactive touchscreen displays — These displays are a great complement to mobile event apps and another way to engage attendees. They serve multiple purposes and offer a dynamic way to capture attendees' attention, create a wow factor, integrate with social media and deliver an enhanced experience. Touchscreen digital kiosks can be used for registration, training, presentations and demonstrations. Interactive touchscreen displays can be integrated with content management software to deliver information on a predetermined schedule.

Video displays — Large LED and 4K video displays are another way to boost engagement. When configured in multiple tile arrays, they can be real show stoppers. These displays offer high resolution (i.e., up to 1920 x 1082) and can be connected to mobile devices, PCs, Blu-rays, cameras and DVDs for purposes of interactive presentations.

Giant iTab — This technology takes the well-known format of a smartphone to deliver a high-impact display with touchscreen functionality on a grand scale. The Giant iTab is the equivalent of a fully functioning, super-sized smartphone operating on both iOS and Android platforms.

Charging stations — Given that today's millennials and Gen X event-goers are usually armed with multiple mobile devices and expect to stay connected, it's important to accommodate their needs. In addition to mobile device charging stations, many event professionals are setting up lounges with furniture that has built-in ports where attendees can plug in and charge their devices, stay connected and relax.

What's unique about all of these technologies is that they provide many ways to get the word out: LED monitors, touchscreens, video walls, kiosks and the Giant iTab are all crowd-pleasers.

Why Wi-Fi Matters — Bandwidth and Security

In the simplest of terms, it's about throughput and risk. A Wi-Fi solution specialist can discuss the various options available to ensure that the right bandwidth (cellular, satellite, microwave communications), internet service provider, signal distribution choices and network (e.g., wireless hot spot service with captive portals, virtual private network, etc.) are established, and especially that the solution is secure. Given the high incidence of cyber breaches, it's critical

that event professionals take every precaution to ensure that their stakeholders' personal and business data is not compromised. By engaging a qualified resource, you can make risk mitigation a top priority.

What's Ahead?

For meeting professionals, event technologies open a whole new universe of ever-expanding opportunities. Where meetings with a single computer or projection screen were once considered advanced, we're now seeing interactive and high visibility technologies, including those driving virtual and augmented reality experiences. Meeting professionals should be open to exploring and learning about event technologies and other solutions including audio-visual and lighting. When properly designed and implemented, these

When properly designed and implemented, technologies can transform an event from ordinary to extraordinary.

technologies can transform an event from ordinary to extraordinary, all while significantly alleviating pain points for meeting professionals. Finally, by including event technology resources at the beginning of an insurance or financial meeting's planning stages — or for any meeting or event, for that matter — meeting professionals will benefit from their expertise and ability to maximize a fixed budget so that the highest return on investment can be achieved. **I&FMM**

Ken Edwards is director, financial services for SmartSource Computer & AV Rentals with 35+ years as a skilled solutions provider serving the financial industry. His in-depth expertise covers all aspects of technology application. A well-recognized leader within the meetings industry, he previously served as president of MPI, Greater NY Chapter. www.smartsourcerentals.com



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Paséa Hotel & Spa
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GEORGIA

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InterContinental Boston

Ocean Edge Resort & Golf Club
Royal Sonesta Boston
Seaport Hotel & World Trade Center
The Langham Boston

MICHIGAN

MGM Grand Detroit

MINNESOTA

Loews Minneapolis Hotel

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Beau Rivage Resort & Casino

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The Chase Park Plaza, Royal Sonesta Hotel
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Mandarin Oriental, Las Vegas
MGM Grand Hotel & Casino
Mirage Las Vegas
Park MGM
The Signature at MGM Grand
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Hilton Head Island
The Sea Pines Resort

TENNESSEE

Loews Vanderbilt Hotel
The Guest House at Graceland
The Peabody Memphis

TEXAS

AT&T Hotel and Conference Center
Hotel Sorella CITYCENTRE
Hotel Valencia Riverwalk

InterContinental Dallas
La Cantera Resort & Spa
Omni Dallas Hotel
Royal Sonesta Houston
The Hotel Contessa
The Houstonian Hotel, Club & Spa
The Woodlands Resort

UTAH

Little America Hotel
Stein Eriksen Lodge
The Chateaux Deer Valley
The Grand America Hotel

VERMONT

Stowe Mountain Lodge

VIRGINIA

Colonial Williamsburg Hotels
Lansdowne Resort & Spa
Salamander Resort & Spa

WASHINGTON

Loews Hotel 1000, Seattle
Pan Pacific Hotel Seattle

WASHINGTON, D.C.

InterContinental Washington DC, – The Wharf
Mandarin Oriental, Washington DC
Omni Shoreham Hotel
The Washington Court Hotel
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WEST VIRGINIA

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Atlantis Paradise Island

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Fairmont Southampton
Hamilton Princess & Beach Club
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The Loren
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CURAÇAO

Santa Barbara Beach & Golf Resort

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Paradisus Palma Real Golf & Spa Resort
Paradisus Punta Cana Resort

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Trump National Doral Miami boasts the famed Blue Monster course and the Trump Spa Miami.

Credit: Trump National Doral Miami

Golf & Spa Resorts

First-class Getaways With Rewarding R&R

Producers in the insurance industry may see the golf course as a metaphor for the challenges they face and overcome in the field: closing a deal, reaching a sales quota, getting a promotion and so on. Other agents may see their experience on the greens as an escape from the pressures of the office, and still others see golf as a vehicle for networking with peers and clients.

However golf is perceived, a top-tier resort course is generally a welcome feature, whether the event is an incentive, sales training conference, annual



By Patrick Simms

meeting or client-facing program. The same is true of a luxury spa, which provides the ultimate respite from the rigors of the meeting schedule. Many of the country's finest golf and spa properties are clustered in Florida and Arizona, and it's no surprise that these resorts reliably draw insurance meetings business. The following review of developments at major golf and spa resorts focuses on those two states, along with a selection of key properties in Colorado, Texas and Georgia.

Florida

Speaking of courses that inspire overachievers with their challenging design, the **Trump National Doral Miami** is home to the aptly named Blue Monster, featuring a slew of deep bunkers, Bermuda rough and water hazards. Golfers who need a bit of help with their game before they face the Blue Monster, or the Doral's other three courses, can take advantage of the resort's new partnership with the Rick Smith Golf Performance Center. On the wellness front, the Doral offers one of Miami's most com-

prehensive spas, a 48,000-sf facility with a menu of more than 100 treatments.

Groups who have not visited the Doral recently are sure to be impressed by the property's \$250 million modernization. The hotel's 643 guest rooms and 100,000 sf of indoor function space have been upgraded as part of the project, yet the Doral still retains "a classical, traditional feel," according to Aron Steck, meeting planner with Global Event Management. Steck indicates that the Doral's aesthetic was well suited to an Insurance Designers of America (IDA) group that met at the property for the first time this spring. IDA is a consortium of about 55 insurance marketing organizations (IMOs), and their spring and fall meetings are attended by the IMOs as well as life insurance company representatives.

"Because they're financial services (professionals), they tend to be fairly conservative in terms of their tastes and values. And I think that's a reason why, at least in terms of the aesthetics, (the Doral) worked pretty well for the group," Steck comments.

But more important, the function space at the property was a match for the IDA program, which includes a general session, trade show and breakouts. "The Doral fits the bill very nicely because almost all of their (meeting) spaces are in their main building," says Steck. "It's very consolidated and central, and works really well, particularly when you have a situation where people are leaving a general session, going to breakouts, coming back to the general session and going to meals."

Helping to partner groups with Miami's fine golf and spa properties is the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau. The organization is a great resource for planners who want to take advantage of the latest developments in the luxury resort market, such as the expanded and reflagged **Turnberry Isle Miami**. The resort is adding the 323-room Orchid Tower and renovating its lobby and other facilities, becoming a JW Marriott upon completion. Turnberry Isle offers the 40,000-sf Conference Center and Magnolia Courtyard, two



The Forbes Five Star Eau Spa's rainforest retreat at Eau Palm Beach.

18-hole championship golf courses and the three-story full service spa, âme Spa & Wellness Collective.

A bit farther north, **The Diplomat Beach Resort** in Hollywood, a Curio Collection by Hilton has completed a \$100 million transformation that renovated the property's 1,000 rooms and suites, and introduced 10 new dining concepts. The Diplomat is one of South Florida's premier meeting hotels, with 209,000 sf of function space including a 50,000-sf Great Hall, 20,000-sf Grand Ballroom and 39 breakout rooms. During free time, attendees can repair to the full-service luxury spa overlooking the ocean or the infinity pool accented by two waterfalls.

Another masterful spa can be found at **Eau Palm Beach**, located on seven acres of oceanfront in Manalapan. One of only eight Forbes Five Star resorts in the state, the property houses the award-winning, 42,000-sf Eau Spa, whose features include The Self-Centered Garden, private villas, Eau Zone Relaxation Lounge and 19 treatment rooms.

But the property itself is a transporting experience, according to Eric Czerlonka, principal and creative director, Czerlonka Productions. "The water is right there when you're outside and it almost has a cruise ship feel," he says. "And when you walk into the Eau your senses just go crazy, the aroma in the air, the décor, the arrival process...that is what drove it home for us." Czerlonka

staged an incentive for an insurance client at the 309-room resort that included intriguing offsite events at the Flagler Museum in Palm Beach and the International Polo Club Palm Beach. "It's a VIP event, so we take into consideration every moment of their experience, and going to the Polo Club and the Flagler checks those boxes," he relates. "We had the entire Flagler, so we did cocktails and receptions in the main gallery and then they allowed tours to happen throughout the rooms. Then we moved them into the pavilion for dinner, which is just the most magnificent space that houses Henry Flagler's train car."

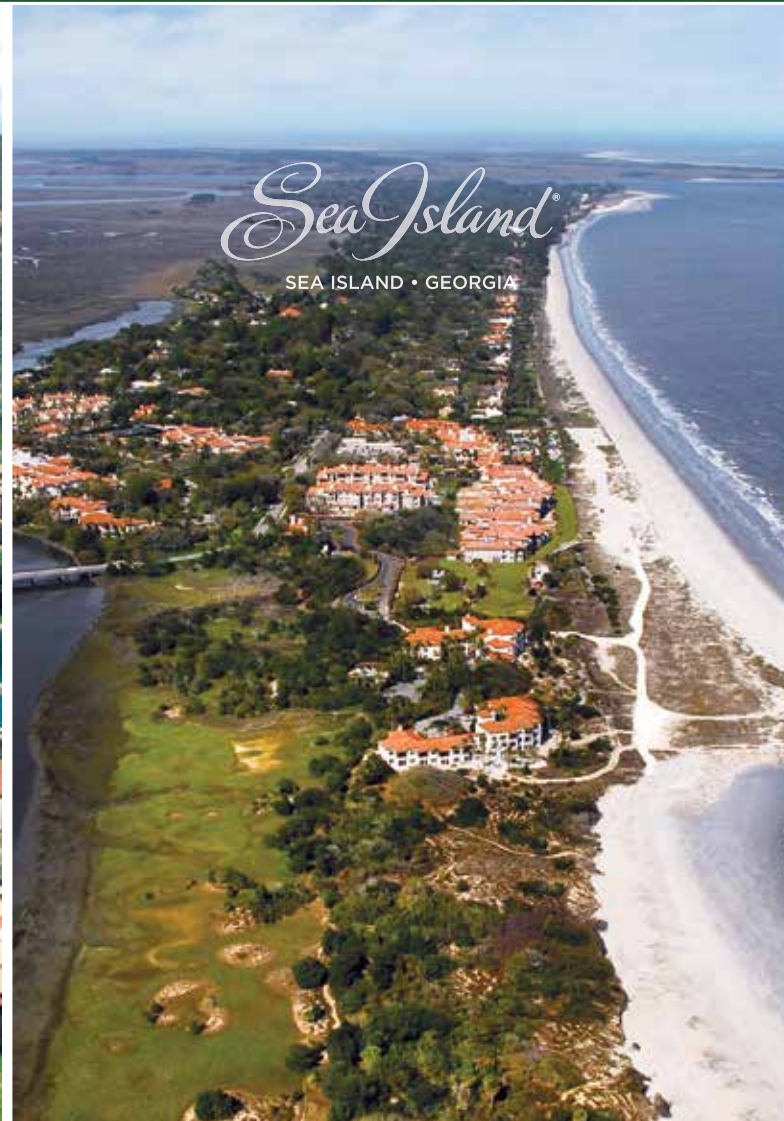
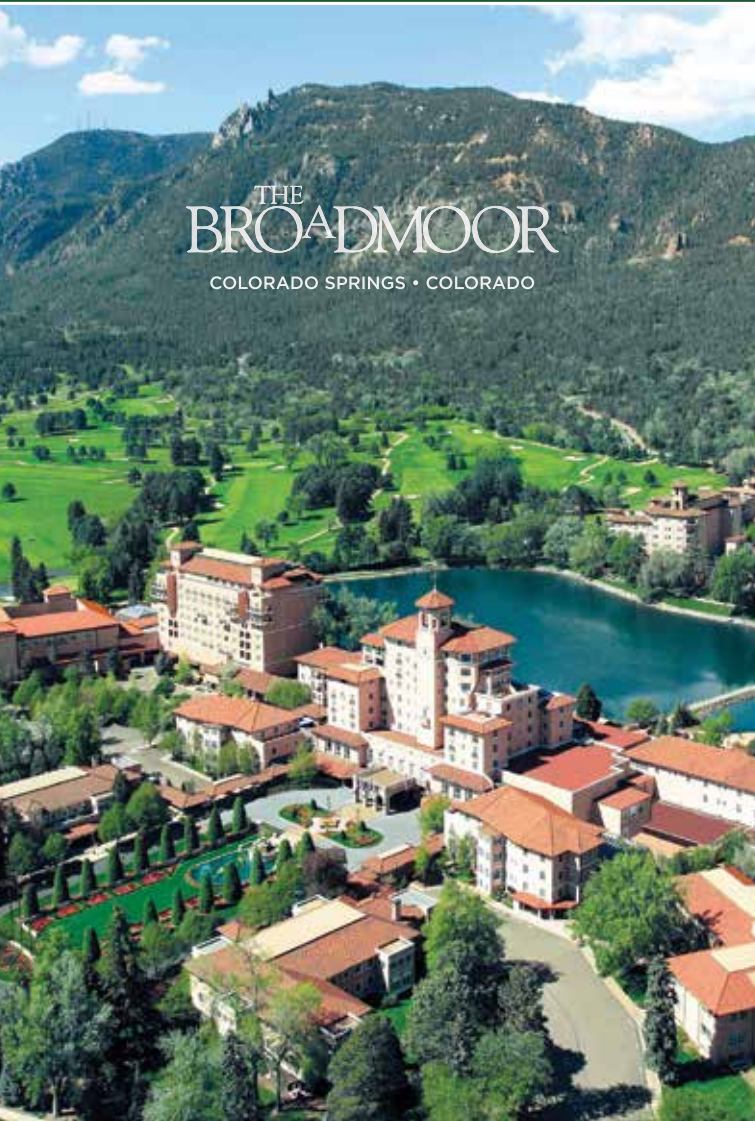
Czerlonka also commends the Eau Palm Beach's fitness center, which met the wellness objectives of the 200-attendee group. "Our group is big on health and wellness; the company drives that through on the corporate level and they like to carry that through on the incentives as well for their agents. (The Eau) has many different types of classes through the fitness center. We found it really easy to offer new and unusual activities that people could try from a fitness standpoint."

And despite being an incentive, the program included a daily general session that was accommodated by the resort's 30,000 sf of function space, which includes a 9,680-sf ballroom divisible into three salons.

Another beachside property renowned for both its golf and spa offerings is the **Sandestin Golf and Beach**

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Accommodations— Choice

Our 390 rooms and suites ensure we have a room type to meet your needs from The Cloister, nestled between the Black Banks River and the Atlantic Ocean to The Lodge, surrounded by two of our golf courses to The Inn, our select-service property. Or for those seeking outdoor adventure, we offer Broadfield, our 5,800-acre sporting club.



The new Streamsong Black course at Streamsong Resort in Central Florida.

Credit: Streamsong Resort

Resort, located in Miramar Beach on Northwest Florida's Gulf Coast. Robert Trent Jones Jr., Rees Jones and Tom Jackson all have contributed to the Sandestin golf experience, comprised of four courses: Raven Golf Club, Baytowne Golf Club, The Links Golf Club and the exclusive Burnt Pine Club. The resort has recently renovated its 15,000-sf Linkside Conference Center, part of the property's 65,000 sf of meeting space.

The guest room experience has received an upgrade at **Rosen Shingle Creek**, one of Orlando's finest golf resorts. Rosen Hotels & Resorts has installed Sonifi Solutions' world-class in-room entertainment at the 1,501-room Rosen Shingle Creek, as well as the 1,334-room Rosen Centre Hotel and the 800-room Rosen Plaza Hotel. The service includes interactive TV solutions and free-to-guest, over-the-top streaming via Staycast. The service also provides a group messaging system that will allow meeting and event planners to send mass messages, photos and video to their entire room block.

The AAA Four Diamond Rosen Shingle Creek houses 524,000 sf of flexible function space, which includes one of the nation's largest column-free ballrooms at 95,000 sf. The property is also well-stocked in golf and spa options: the Shingle Creek Golf Club features the Brad Brewer Golf Academy and an 18-hole, par-72 championship golf course newly redesigned by Arnold Palmer Design Company. The 13,000-sf

Spa at Shingle Creek includes nine treatment rooms and a state-of-the-art fitness center.

In Ponte Vedra Beach, the **Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa** is home to TPC Sawgrass, a PGA Tour Experience, including the 18-hole Dye's Valley Course and 18-hole Stadium Course. The recently renovated Sawgrass Spa is surrounded by 15 acres of lagoons and lush landscaping. The 493-room Sawgrass Marriott offers 61,000 sf of total meeting space across 26 meeting rooms.

A surprisingly different Florida experience awaits in Central Florida at **Streamsong Resort**, where three golf courses feature a rolling, dune-like landscape unlike any other golf experience in the Sunshine State. The property's third course, Streamsong Black, debuted just last year along with a new clubhouse and restaurant. Designed by Gil Hanse, the course was named the Best New Course of 2017 by *Golf Magazine* — the latest of several honors that Streamsong's golf courses have received since the property opened about five years ago. With the addition of Streamsong Black, the resort is the only location in the world where guests can enjoy three distinct courses designed by four legendary architects, including Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw of Coore & Crenshaw and Tom Doak of Renaissance Golf Design.

Streamsong Resort features 228 guest rooms, 25,000 sf of indoor and 40,000 sf of outdoor meeting and event

space, five dining options, conference and event facilities, the grotto-style AcquaPietra Spa and infinity pool, as well as bass fishing, sporting clays, nature trails and tennis.

Arizona

Among the crown jewels of Arizona's resort industry is the **Arizona Biltmore**, a Waldorf Astoria Resort, located in Phoenix. Currently celebrating its 150th anniversary, the Biltmore is a staple of Arizona golf with the 50-year-old Adobe course and its rolling fairways. The 740-room property is also home to the award-winning 22,000-sf Spa Biltmore, as well as 100,000 sf of indoor meeting space. The Biltmore recently completed a renovation of its original main building, marking the latest phase in more than \$35 million resort-wide enhancements to the Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired design.

Equally renowned is **The Phoenician** in nearby Scottsdale. The 585-room AAA Five Diamond luxury resort is complemented by a 60-room, Forbes Five Star, AAA Five Diamond boutique hotel, The Canyon Suites. Meeting space is an ample 109,000 sf. On the recreational side, The Phoenician recently introduced the Athletic Club, which includes both tennis and fitness centers, and a new, three-story facility for the spa. The resort has also embarked on a 10-month redesign of the golf course, which will be reconfigured from 27 to 18 holes.

Among Scottsdale's highly rated golf resorts is the **Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort & Spa**, home to 27 holes of championship golf. The Gainey Ranch Golf Club includes three distinct, nine-hole courses: The Lakes, featuring varied terrain in a garden-like setting and a variety of water features; The Dunes, set along dramatic terrain reminiscent of Scottish courses; and Arroyo, featuring a meandering desert wash that provides a natural hazard throughout the nine. Other property highlights include a 2.5-acre waterpark and the Spa Avania, featuring 19-treatment rooms, a French-Celtic mineral pool, relaxing lotus pond and trellis-covered outdoor relaxation areas. The 493-room Hyatt Regency of

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The Sonoran Desert landscape gives The Boulders Resort & Spa a spectacular backdrop for golf and spa programs.



Credits: The Boulders Resort & Spa

fers more than 70,000 sf of indoor and outdoor function space.

Fresh off a property-wide, Old West-inspired renovation that ended last year, **The Boulders Resort & Spa** in Scottsdale is known for its Sonoran Desert ambience. As such, it can be an ideal getaway for an insurance company sales training program. Insurance Agency Marketing Services Inc. has hosted both small trainings (15-20 producers) and a larger meeting for about 150 representatives at The Boulders. The partnership with the property has lasted seven years, and one of the reasons is the fine golf available onsite.

"Insurance producers love golf, and The Boulders' having two different courses is great for us," says Lisa L. Heuring, vice president of internal operations. "We do try to have at least two afternoons of golf, and so it's kind of nice to get those two different on-site golf outings. We usually have our small groups in the Boulder View Room, which is by the golf course. So the producers come dressed for golf, get a grab-and-go lunch box and they can just head right out on the golf course. It makes the transition very easy from meeting to golf."

The Boulders recently introduced "Dine & Dash," a personalized meeting program that takes place on the fairways. Attendees embark on a "discovery hunt" on a golf cart that leads them to various scenic spots to enjoy a variety of tasty appetizers and entrées. At sunset, desserts and after-dinner drinks are served on the 19th green with live

entertainment ranging from a jazz band to celebrity musicians. Another engaging special event is the Evening Spa Party, where groups buy out the 33,000-sf Boulders Spa and partake of hors d'oeuvres, a variety of treatments, yoga, dance classes and more.

The Boulders' renovation added a new outdoor deck at the spa's Organic Garden. The project also debuted the 5,500-sf Latilla Ballroom and refurbished Main Lodge, Clubhouse and the 160 casitas, adding Native American motifs. "The casitas are newly renovated, and they're a great quality of rooms for a great group rate," remarks Heuring. "They have a gentleman that will pick you up from any of the casitas within minutes of when you call."

En route to the meeting space, attendees can appreciate The Boulders, which is "spread across the Sonoran Desert foothills. It's a captivating location," Heuring says. "And the majority of our producers had never been down in that area before. You see the wildlife, bobcats, quail, roadrunners — things you wouldn't see normally."

Colorado

Captivating surroundings also can be found at **The Broadmoor**, at the gateway to the Colorado Rocky Mountains in Colorado Springs. The iconic resort lets groups immerse themselves in that atmosphere with its Wilderness Experience properties of The Ranch at Emerald Valley, Cloud Camp and Fishing Camp. The 784-room resort campus includes 185,000 sf of function space,

three golf courses, a Forbes Five Star spa and fitness center, among many other upscale amenities.

At press time, the five-star resort was in the middle of a soon-to-be-completed refresh of Broadmoor Main and the golf facility. The main building's lobby is being expanded to include a seating area and a fireplace. The Golf Club is introducing a new dining concept: the former Golf Club Dining Room is being reimagined as The Grille, with a classic bar and panoramic views of the mountains. The project is part of The Broadmoor's ongoing Centennial Celebration.

According to Susan Rouke, senior event planner with a major insurance company, "Nothing compares to The Broadmoor for making attendees feel special. The resort and destination itself has that feeling the moment you step foot on the property." She adds that "Every staff member says 'hello' or 'good morning' as you stroll the grounds, making you always feel welcome and like The Broadmoor is your second home during your stay."

Rouke describes two onsite special events at The Broadmoor held as part of her company's recent meetings: "We utilized Play (at The Broadmoor) and (Restaurant) 1858 for our Leadership Dinners. Play was the perfect setting for a casual dinner with the opportunity for our group to bowl, (shoot) pool and play games while enjoying an amazing buffet spread from the Play menu. The slider station was a huge hit! (Restaurant) 1858 is an amazing venue located at Seven Falls. Broadmoor shuttled us



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The iconic Broadmoor Resort in Colorado Springs features two award-winning golf courses and a five-star spa.



Credits: The Broadmoor

up the mountain to this location nestled in the canyon with amazing views and a real feel of an offsite dinner location with The Broadmoor level of service. The dinner was served family-style from the 1858 menu and was superb."

Texas

Home to two award-winning 18-hole golf courses, **La Cantera Resort & Spa** in San Antonio beckons groups to 550 acres of Texas Hill Country. Its Resort Course has been a PGA Tour stop for 15 years, and The Palmer Course, designed by the legendary Arnold Palmer, is one of the state's highest-rated courses. The AAA Four Diamond property offers 498 guest rooms and more than 115,000 sf of indoor and outdoor function space, including the 17,000-sf San Antonio Grand Ballroom, divisible

into nine individual meeting rooms. After sessions, attendees can experience the new Loma de Vida Spa & Wellness, situated on one of the highest points in San Antonio.

Georgia

The only resort in the United States to host a G8 Summit, the **Sea Island Resort** is also a great choice for insurance and financial groups looking for a Southeastern golf and spa experience combined with splendid meeting facilities. The property is comprised of the 265-room Cloister, 85-room Inn and the AAA Five Diamond, Forbes Five Star Lodge, with 43 guest rooms. There are also 130 cottages on Sea Island available for rent. The Cloister houses more than 40,000 sf of function space overlooking the Georgia coastline, including 7,800-sf

and 5,000-sf ballrooms. Golf aficionados will appreciate the Sea Island Golf Performance Center, which offers an indoor video studio, 300 yards of teeing area, target greens, short-game areas and an exclusive club-fitting service. Sea Island Golf Club includes three 18-hole championship courses: Seaside (par 70), Plantation (par 72) and Retreat (par 72). And the resort's spa offering is truly world class: The Forbes Five Star Spa at Sea Island spans 65,000 sf and includes a 5,000-sf strength and cardio studio, indoor lap pool and three squash courts.

Last fall Sea Island announced plans for a \$25 million enhancement program at The Lodge at Sea Island, which will include six new cottages, a new state-of-the-art Golf Performance Center, an oceanfront pool and pool house, and a new putting course. These new additions are expected to debut in November 2018 in time for the RSM Classic, an official PGA Tour event held annually at Sea Island Golf Club. Additionally, in December 2018, Sea Island's Plantation Course will undergo a full renovation under the direction of Love Golf Design, reopening in October 2019.

The popularity of golf and spa resorts is perennial, and the fact that so many are clustered in the warmer climes of Florida and Arizona may ultimately work to the planner's advantage. Competition for group business naturally increases in those locations, paving the way for planners to get a "fair shot" at negotiating a favorable contract with their chosen resort. **I&FMM**



The Golf Performance Center at Sea Island Resort in Georgia. Sea Island offers three championship golf courses and a five-star spa.

Credit: Sea Island Resort



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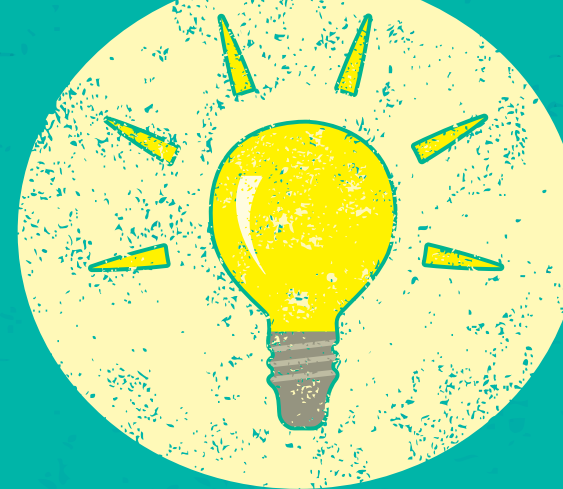
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Meeting Planners' Biggest Challenges

As Meeting Complexity Rises, So Does the Pressure to Think Outside the Box

By Cynthia Dial



"At Intuit, we understand that the value proposition for attending an event must be significantly greater than the in-office time attendees sacrifice."

Rachel Klar, CMP, Events Marketing and Sponsorship Manager
Intuit Canada, Mississauga, Ontario

Klar, CMP. As events marketing and sponsorship manager for Intuit Canada — one of the world's leading providers of financial solutions for individuals and small businesses — she explains that given the pace of technological change, keeping up with the latest event technologies and emerging trends can be a constant challenge and a source of disruption in the industry. Additionally, the incorporation of these developments creates such tasks as engaging multigenerational attendees, competing for audience's time and attention and achieving higher expectations with lower budgets.

How does a planner engage multigenerational attendees, especially at the same event? According to Klar, it requires insight into each audience in terms of their psychographics and demographics. She cites specifics: "For events hosted by Intuit, our audience mix ranges from baby boomers to millennials. Given this diversity, our content includes desktop product fundamentals, cloud migration basics and advanced cloud strategies." Klar adds that understanding their audience mix allows Intuit to tailor content based on attendees' wants and needs. "We deliberately collect user information during registration for

Meeting Planners' Top Challenges

Of meeting planners' biggest challenges, there seem to be a variety of culprits. Different for all but difficult for many, here's an assortment of some of those tasks that might prevent a pro from getting a full night's sleep.

- Airline cost, airlift and increased travel difficulties.
- Amplifying attendance.
- Assembling online and offline communities.
- Budgeting.
- Building a professional, informative event website.
- Competition for the audience's time and attention.
- Constant changes and demands.
- Customer service expectations by attendees.
- Data (capturing, storing and using it effectively).
- Destination meetings versus virtual meetings.
- Engaging multigenerational attendees.
- Event safety and security.
- Event technology.
- Higher (sometimes unrealistic) expectations and lower budgets.
- Hotel issues (attrition, contract negotiation, F&B costs, housing poachers, merger/acquisition effects, room block pirating, room rates, seller's market and Wi-Fi).
- Increasing attendee satisfaction.
- Maximizing ROI, justifying decisions.
- Misperception of the role of meeting and event planners.
- Regulations and restrictions.

Imagine these scenarios: Signing up to leave one's home and family to protect the country at any personal cost. Rushing into a burning building when others rush out. Accepting the responsibility of hundreds of passengers, while operating a multi-ton aircraft amid ever-increasing security concerns. Protecting and serving citizens, often making split-second life and death decisions.

Do you see a pattern here? Stress. High stress. And lots of it.

These are job descriptions for enlisted military personnel, firefighters, airline pilots and police officers and represent America's first, second, third and fourth highest stress professions, according to a 2017 CareerCast report — compiled after analyzing 200 careers and ranking them by 11 stress factors

(including such criteria as deadlines, public scrutiny, physical demands and competition).

Any guess as to the number five spot? Of little surprise to anyone even mildly versed in the meetings arena, this less-than-coveted ranking is that of event coordinator.

Welcome to the world of today's meeting planner. Here's a peek into the inside scoop from the perspective of professionals, who share their challenges and their tips. So, pour a cup of coffee, keep reading and keep in mind — you're not alone.

High Expectations

"Now more than ever, event planners are expected to 'wow' audiences in order to leave a lasting impression," says Rachel

Event Planner or Event Strategist?

When it comes to some careers, misconceptions may be many. But when the career is that of a meeting or event planner, the road to reality can be outright surprising. While back-in-the-day thinking (and for some, current-day rational) may have confused the profession with that of party planner — thinking it's a simple matter of planning a good party and enjoying the perks — events for which pros must be well versed have multiplied exponentially in recent years. These days,

skills required are those necessary to manage a menagerie of events — from conferences and conventions, trade shows and expos to meeting and networking events, not to mention in-house corporate events, fundraisers and galas, classes and workshops and social gatherings. Bottom line: Today's event specialist is expected to be a jack of all trades.

Question: Is today's meeting specialist an event planner or an event strategist?

With the role of the meeting

planner evolving on a yearly basis, Cheryl Schreiner, regional vice president, HelmsBriscoe, considers herself more of a strategist. She explains: "I bring to the table information so that our clients can make educated decisions. They need to know so much more than just rates and dates. It is my responsibility to dig and give this information to them."

Rachel Klar, events marketing and sponsorship manager with Intuit Canada, explains that the planning process requires a coordinated strategy to achieve

the key business objectives and metrics that justify the time and expense of hosting an event. Additional details: Strategy determines all aspects of an event — food and beverage, event technology, venue, speaker selection, etc. "The event-planning landscape has evolved and dramatically changed in the past few years. From my perspective, the term 'event planner' has become outdated — I believe the term 'event strategist' provides a more accurate description of the role," concludes Intuit's event strategist.

this purpose, which allows the right content to be delivered to the right audience."

Another challenge for today's meeting planner is competition for an audience's time and attention in the age of live and on-demand webinars, virtual events and other platforms affecting the ability to bring together audiences for face-to-face meetings and events. "The decision to allocate two or three days to attend an in-person event is an opportunity cost decision," says the event specialist. "At Intuit, we understand that the value proposition for attending an event must be significantly greater than the in-office time attendees sacrifice. One way we address this issue is to offer continuing professional development credits for both our online webinars and in-person events." According to Klar, however, helping clients maintain their professional accreditations is only one example of the company's commitment to deliver value to its consumers.

Intuit's software development team strives to increase the speed and accuracy of their products to improve the customer experience. "One component of our event strategy is to provide training on these new features and services. Attendees recognize that going to Intuit events can help them become more efficient over the long term and enable their future growth." Based on its post-conference surveys, this company that specializes in business and financial management concludes that attendees view their events as worthwhile time investments.

"The challenge of delivering 'more with less' is a pervasive challenge within the event planning industry," says Klar. As

business leaders continue to seek higher attendance levels and engagement rates, this often translates to the addition of experiential activities to increase engagement and impressions beyond the walls of a given event. She adds, "Event planners constantly ask themselves, 'How can I use my budget more effectively?'" Her answer is three-fold: "Strengthen relationships with top-tier suppliers, reduce costs by signing contracts that span multiple events and focus on budget management." Klar cites one professional discipline she routinely practices. "I review budgets on a weekly basis."

Stress Management

Intuit's event planner also shares her personal approach to her anxiety-laced position. "Every career has moments of high stress and high pressure, whether it's self-induced or derived from expectations set forth by management or colleagues." She elaborates that event planning is an extremely rewarding career in seeing your hard work come to life and enjoyed by others, but of course, it does come with its strains. "Having the guidance and support of a mentor has helped me learn how to manage those professional pressures — especially during the first phase of my career. I now try to approach professional development as a lifelong endeavor and find support in my network of peers, industry experts and friends. Activities such as rock climbing, kickboxing and other fitness classes also provide me with outlets for tension — enabling me to compartmentalize my work and enjoy my life to its fullest."

Ongoing Challenges

Laura Hernandez, CMP, director, meetings and events with Kaiser Permanente, reiterates the relevance and reality of today's budget demands in relation to the meeting planner. "The biggest challenge we are facing is that our budgets have actually not grown much since the 2008 crash. During that time, hotels were giving out everything but the kitchen sink, and our clients became accustomed to receiving wonderful pricing at fabulous locations." Expounding, she says that now that the hotel industry's financial tide has turned and the meetings industry is generating more events, the result is greater competition.

Addressing the new norm: "Our continuing challenge is to educate clients that planning must start early," says the Kaiser Permanente meetings specialist. Citing specifics, she refers to a variety of scenarios requiring a new mindset, circa 2018. A lack of early planning may result in a preferred property being fully booked on a planner's desired dates. Another current-day reality is that since prices have substantially increased over the past two years, budgets must increase too if the goal is to take groups to their properties of choice.

From the perspective of Cheryl Schreiner, CMM, CMP, regional vice president, HelmsBriscoe — one of the world's premier hotel site selection companies — her top three challenges involve "the best." She gives insight into her role's typical trials: "Finding the best rates for our clients, finding the best space for our clients' needs and getting the best concessions for our clients."

Being in a sellers' market with space and rates at a premium, of prime worth to the planner is HelmsBriscoe's ability to uncover the best values. "Being a pulse in the meeting industry, we can find the value, the promotions, the new builds and the cancelled space. These are challenges, but they are obstacles we pride ourselves in overcoming through solutions."

Security Solutions

With respect to hotels, one of today's greater hurdles is hotel security in the event of an active threat. What is the hotel plan and how does the meeting planner share that information with attendees? HelmsBriscoe's suggestion is to address the security question during the RFP process. "We ask the hotel to inform every meeting's attendees of the predetermined protocol detailing what to do, where to go and what is the plan should a

How Hotel Mergers And Acquisitions Impact The Planner

Granted, the talk of hotel issues in the meeting planning world is typically viewed through an "it's a seller's market" lens, yet many changes facing planning pros stem from hotel mergers and acquisition activity — both good and bad. Therefore, as knowledge is indeed power, check out the below list. Ranging from challenging contract negotiations to the sometimes loss of group program points, here are the top 10 impacts resulting from mergers and acquisitions, according to the American Express "2018 Global Meetings and Events Forecast."

1. More challenging contract negotiations, 63 percent.
2. Changes in contractual terms and conditions, 61 percent.
3. Change in key contacts, 39 percent.
4. Increased investment in hotel renovations, 29 percent.
5. Easier to establish a global preferred hotel program, 24 percent.
6. Reflagging of local properties, 21 percent.
7. Slower RFP response rates, 21 percent.
8. Increased investment in meetings technology, 16 percent.
9. Lower commission rates, 14 percent.
10. Erosion of group program points, 12 percent.

(Source: American Express Meetings & Events Global Surveys, North America, August 2017)

Attention Planners: Here's Where Hotels Will Negotiate

When working in a seller's market, a feather in the successful planner's hat is the ability to bargain. So, follow the advice of Nora Roberts' quote: "If you don't ask, the answer is always no," and attempt to negotiate — everything.

According to the American Express "2018 Global Meetings and Events Forecast," the following survey of hoteliers gives odds on the top 10 areas where negotiations are most likely to succeed.

1. Hotel room rates, 89 percent.
2. Free or upgraded amenities, 85 percent.
3. Free or discounted Wi-Fi, 78 percent.
4. Food/beverage upgrades or discounts, 76 percent.
5. Complimentary meetings space, 68 percent.
6. Attrition clauses, 67 percent.
7. Cancellation penalties, 67 percent.
8. Discounted audio-visual, 57 percent.
9. Service charges, 33 percent.
10. Resort fees, 29 percent.

(Source: American Express Meetings & Events Key Supplier Surveys, August 2017)

security threat occur. It is our responsibility to ask the questions and make certain the hotel has a strategy," says Schreiner.

From a seller's market to security to expected solutions, Schreiner gives a glimpse into her foray with stress. "It is a challenge and you must thrive in this type of environment to be successful. I've found that being organized and being able to anticipate ahead of the game are the best solutions in dealing with pressure." She underscores that communication with both clients and colleagues is key, and adds the directive to surround yourself with the best people.

Meetings Forecast

The State of the "Meetings Industry" Union is defined by a variety of facts, and according to the American Express "2018 Global Meetings and Events Forecast," its course remains steady. Here are the stats: While a meeting's length remains relatively the same (in contrast to 2017's interest in shorter meetings due to the tightening of budgets), the expectation for the new year is a small increase up to 1.8 percent in the number of attendees. More than one-fifth (23 percent) of 2018's planned meetings activity will be conferences and trade shows. The focus on attendees, which emerged in 2017, remains this year's emphasis. And though small, there is a projected 1 percent increase in 2018 meeting budgets, as the operative word regarding the checkbook is "constraint."

Summation of the American Express forecast: "Whether it is hotel rates, air rates or the expense of a unique venue, cost per attendee will continue to rise as clients demand a meaningful, quality attendee experience. Respondents point to the increasing complexity of meeting planning and implementation, such as sourcing a non-traditional venue or incorporating a technological innovation to enhance the meeting experience. New demands to deliver on complex meeting plans require that meeting planners think outside the box and think strategically." As such, this is the world of today's meeting planner. **I&FMM**

"It is a challenge and you must thrive in this type of environment to be successful. ...Being able to anticipate ahead of the game (is) the best...in dealing with pressure."



Cheryl Schreiner, CMM, CMP, Regional Vice President
HelmsBriscoe, Jacksonville, Florida



The wide-format collection of screens creates a dynamic experience with Robert Herjavec, from TV's "Shark Tank," at the in.Sight 2017 conference.

Credit: PeopleNet

New Meeting Tech Optimizes ROI

Technology Tips and Trends for Measuring, Assessing and Utilizing Data

By Mark Rowh

Changing technology affects almost every facet of our professional as well as our personal lives, and it's no different in the meetings game. While coping with tech change presents challenges, there's no doubt that continuing advances hold tremendous promise for meeting planners.

"Technology can be a powerful tool for measuring and demonstrating ROI, for securing more budget and for ensuring attendees have a great event experience," says Andrea Sommer, founder and CEO of Hiver, a London-based event technology firm. But she cautions against adopting technology just because competitors are doing it. "Technology should be considered holistically, aligned to and in support of the overall objectives of the event."

"First, get an in-depth, hands-on demo and build your own mock event to see if it's easy to use and will accomplish what you want."

ments," she says. "As a conference and meeting planner, working to stay consistently updated on what's new and trending to integrate it into your conferences and meetings is a challenge in and of itself."

Another challenge, according to Wolf, comes in the demographics of audiences. She notes that different audiences will have varying levels of technical savvy



Harris Schanhaut, CME, Senior Project Manager
Acelity, San Antonio, TX

Before the decision has been made to use a given technology, planners should exercise due diligence in evaluating its potential, says Harris Schanhaut, CME, an independent meeting planner with experience in a variety of areas including financial services. This includes ensuring others have had good experiences with it and that the technology will integrate into existing systems.

"It must also meet any applicable security requirements and most importantly, be at a cost point that will benefit the event without blowing the budget," he says.

Ongoing Challenges

With every new event, it seems, planners are faced with at least one of two scenarios. Either a problem with existing technology brings some type of challenge, or someone (whether a vendor, team member or client) is touting the benefits of the next big thing in tech. It's enough to make one's head spin.

Simply staying ahead of the technology curve can be trying, says Sydney Wolf, senior event sales manager at metroConnections, a meeting services firm based in Minneapolis.

"Technology is ever-changing with a mix of capabilities and new develop-

and know-how when it comes to new technology. That applies whether you're talking smartphones, wearables, virtual reality or other technology.

For some planners, this might mean working against resistance to the "new" factor in a conference setting, such as moving away from the printed workbook to a fully integrated mobile app.

"This can often be an adjustment for audience members that are comfortable with the old school pen and paper," she says. "Not only that, but some attendees may not know how to use the technology at all. You're having to educate on the technology's application in your conference setting, and you very well could be educating an attendee on the technology for the very first time."

A reality faced by all event planners is the constant evolution of the industry's technology needs and the need to keep up with it, says Shane Edmonds, chief technology officer for etouches, an event management software company based in Norwalk, Connecticut.

"From internal management to attendees and sponsors, there's also a lot of pressure to make every stakeholder happy and to make the right technology investments with so many new tools and trends to monitor," he says. "While jumping on the latest and greatest

industry trends can be a great way to increase event success and ROI, planners need to have a solid foundation of tools to guarantee the most positive outcomes." He adds that by having the event essentials covered, planners will have everything they need to successfully take their technology to

the next level, whether it's as conventional as implementing session tracking devices or as complex as building virtual or artificial reality experiences.

"It's easy to get caught up in technological innovation, but event technology is only as good as its application," Edmonds says. "Instead of keep-

ing pace with this tech evolution for the sake of it, event planners need to ensure every tool has a clear purpose and fits cleanly within the event attendee life cycle."

Edmonds reports that his company's software has been used successfully by Allianz Australia, which delivers personal, commercial and corporate insurance products and services to more than 3 million policyholders. Prior to its adoption, event planning was not centralized and distribution methods consisted of planners using emails with a PowerPoint slide or PDF invitation or various third-party tools. That meant brand guidelines were not being followed and there was no company-wide view of events. With use of the software, event registration has now been simplified, and staff employ the related marketing tool to send personalized invitations to delegates. The system also supports email reminders and updates as well as a post-event survey.

"Technology is best when it offers a holistic solution," says Thomas Allen, senior product manager for conference room technology provider EMS Software. "Relying on multiple planning systems can expose your operations to costly errors." He notes this can be especially problematic in executing complex meetings that involve multiple contributors, from food and



Virtual reality demo at the World Travel Market Latin America 2018 in Sao Paolo, Brazil.

beverage providers to AV technicians to custodial crews. Accordingly, the technology chosen to manage the entire meeting life cycle must allow every stakeholder to communicate with planners and with each other.

"When changes occur — as they always do — automated notifications and approvals can streamline the entire process, alerting anyone involved in those particular logistics," he says.

Promising Options

Just what developments offer the most potential? As hardware and software providers continue to innovate, the range of possibilities seems limitless. Event apps, as well as mobile technology itself, offer meeting attendees real-time info on everything from wayfinding to notes for presentations. Presentation technology provides increasingly effective visual and

audio information for both in-person audiences and those connected across great distances. Online surveys allow opportunities for feedback.

At the same time, emerging advancements in virtual reality not only give planners advance views of destinations and facilities, but provide new options for supporting engaging presentations. And who knows where developments in areas such as voice-activated tech and artificial intelligence will lead? To top it off, the growing power of analytics means planners will have unprecedented levels of data for evaluating every aspect of the meeting planning process. In these and other arenas, both planners and those they serve have much from which to choose.

Among the most basic yet impactful approaches is the use of an event management system or platform through which planners can create a full-featured event website. Schanhaut notes that among other functions, emails can be sent to help encourage registrations and secure payments.

"This helps you track their progress as well as order the right quantity and types of meals, badges, lanyards, conference bags and other giveaway items," he says. "The site can also be used after the event to send out surveys that will aid in the planning of future events."

At the same time, RFID badges can be used to keep track of traffic in real time or alert exhibitors that a key prospect or customer is in the area.

On-location audio-visual technologies such as digital displays and flight boards, as well as informational kiosks with interactive floor maps and wayfinding, are easy to implement and provide welcome assistance to attendees, according to Allen. Planners and hosts can readily provide up-to-date info to attendees by deploying mobile tablet or smartphone apps. Allen notes that platforms such as those provided by EMS Software do all this through direct integrations with third-party digital signage partners and interfaces for internet-connected mobile devices and touchscreen kiosks.

Technology that bridges distances

offers similar advantages. While connecting audiences in different locations is no longer new, ways to make this happen continue to become more effective while supporting features planners find helpful.

"Leveraging online virtual meeting technology helps facilitate product education events in front of large groups that are spread across multiple locations," says Jason Walker, managing partner of Smart Harbor, a provider of technology solutions for insurance agencies based in Columbus, Ohio. These technologies offer registration that can be embedded on websites, social media and email. In addition, they typically integrate with multiple calendars that enable the creation of automated invitations and reminders leading up to a presentation. Online virtual meetings technologies also allow for the simulation of "hands on" interaction through screen and video sharing, polling, chat and operator-assisted telecom.

The latest tech also supports interactions both before and after the meeting, according to Walker. "When helping to create a well-rounded experience for your participants, the promotion and marketing of events and also the follow-up communication are just as important as the actual meeting itself," he says. Pre-and post-event technology solutions such as marketing automation, content management and customer relationship management (CRM) systems facilitate the promotion and tracking of event respondents across multiple digital platforms simultaneously.

In addition, Walker points out that many advantages provided by high-tech solutions come into play after a meeting has concluded. "After creating exposure and holding the meetings, data mining is imperative," he says. He notes that post-meeting analytics platforms provide meeting hosts with full visibility into who did or did not attend their meeting, along with info gathered during registration that

facilitates segmentation of the audience for marketing communications and compliance reporting.

"Throughout the process, you have gathered data points associated with each participant's habits and behaviors, which you can use to understand their interests and develop personalized messaging and events in the future."



Sydney Wolf, Senior Event Sales Manager
metroConnections, Minneapolis, MN

Wolf believes the most powerful tool a meeting planner can have is data. "It allows you to generate buy-in from your decision-makers, provide projections for strategic growth and justify spending," she says. "The more data you have at hand, the better." Technology that allows you to capture this data about your attendees is critical, she adds. This might range from a robust online registration system, to on-demand mobile badge printing with real-time reporting, to session scanning via QR codes or RFID chips.



Any data you can generate to study the patterns and behaviors of attendees can prove valuable.

Making sure tech tools are useful, but not the main focus, is an important consideration, says Jessica Williams, former co-facilitator for WiSTEM (Women in STEM — Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, a Chicago-based program that supports entrepreneurship for women). "In our

"More and more, set design is...integrating wide-format screens...to present a dynamic experience that immerses the attendees in a branded experience."

case, we want to use technology to facilitate more connections between people and make those connections meaningful," she says. "We don't want people to rely so much on the technology but instead to use it as a tool for connection and conversation."

She recalls a networking event where one objective was to avoid grouping the same women together in successive meetings. To that end, planners used smart badges to match female entrepreneurs with board members who might be able to pro-

vide tips in areas such as fundraising and client acquisition. "It gave them something to immediately connect on as the badges informed them about the things they had in common," Williams says. "This practice leads to more meaningful connections that will continue long after the event is over."

Wolf says her firm has seen the use of video development and editing raise the bar at many large-scale meetings. Within a general session space, her team has put video to work to create an immersive experience. "More and more, set design is moving away from a hard set and instead integrating wide-format screens or a collection of screens that work together to present a dynamic experience that immerses the attendees in a branded experience," she says. "Opening videos with executives shown in remote locations that lead to the executives walking out on stage create a fun 'wow' moment."

Careful Strategy

In making choices as well as using any given technology, a strategic approach is a must. "Technology is not always cheap," Wolf says. "The costs can add up very quickly as you're working to design and implement various solutions. Be strategic in your spending." For example, she advises against paying for a mobile app just to check it off your list so that you have it. "Be

ners should determine if the same solution can be used at future events, Schanhaut advises. That way the cost can be spread over the life cycle of the technology rather than affecting just one event's budget.

"It's easy to have a salesperson say their event management system is easy to use," he says. "First get an in-depth, hands-on demo and build your own mock event to



Jason Walker, Managing Partner
Smart Harbor, Columbus, OH

"You have...data points associated with each participant...which you can use to understand their interests and develop personalized messaging and events in the future."

see if it's easy to use and will accomplish what you want."

Allen cautions against deploying unfamiliar technologies without testing as well as settling for "safer" tech that doesn't meet the needs and expectations of attendees. "In today's conference and event spaces, technology should be wide-ranging, embracing web, mobile and kiosks, so that attendees can choose to access event information in the way they are most comfortable," he says. Most importantly, each access point must provide a simple interface for the attendees and reference the same source of data so that all informa-



Jessica Williams, Former Co-facilitator
WiSTEM (Women in STEM), Chicago, IL

"We want to use technology to facilitate more connections between people and make those connections meaningful."

extremely intentional about the use of your technology," she says. "Take full advantage of all the benefits and capabilities of the tools that you are putting to work."

In considering the purchase of technology for a specific event, plan-

tion is always up-to-date, regardless of how it is accessed.

According to Edmonds, the best use of technology also includes taking full advantage of features designed to evaluate meeting success.

"Event planners today have the un-

precedented ability to see how their events are performing in real-time and if their attendees are engaged at the event," he says. He suggests that planners consider the advantages of knowing which session topics and speakers are attracting the most attention, which campaigns are delivering the highest onsite conversions and who are the most influential participants based on their networking data. Similarly, it can be advantageous to know

what attendees visited competitors' booths, understanding the areas of the show floor drawing the most (or least) traffic, and knowing shared characteristics of the most-engaged attendees.

"It's important for planners to clearly define and dial into an event's objectives," Edmonds says. "Using technology without understanding the objectives does not deliver clear value." Depending on how success is defined, planners can capture the right data and look at ROI on terms that are meaningful for the organization. He

notes that some of the most common metrics for event performance include attendance, revenue, attendee engagement, registrations, brand awareness, qualified leads created, up-sell and cross-sell opportunities created, and pipeline opportunities created, influenced or closed because of the event.

"When measuring performance, event planners should look beyond data points for attendance and revenue," Edmonds says. "Metrics surrounding demand generation and pipeline acceleration are also crucial, especially now when event technology is creating innovative new ways to measure ROI."

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Island Allure

MassMutual Greater Philadelphia attendees at the Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino.

Caribbean and Bahamas Update

By Christine Loomis

We think of the Caribbean as a single, relatively contained destination, yet it's an incredibly diverse and expansive destination comprised of some 32 countries and more than 7,000 individual islands spread across more than 1 million square miles. The majority of islands have coasts on the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea.

The vastness of the region should offer perspective for those who hold any preconceptions of devastation from hurricanes Maria and Irma last fall. According to The Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association, the reality is that 70 percent of Caribbean destinations were unaffected by the storms, and of the islands that were affected, 50 percent of CHTA-member hotels are open. Though islands that sustained damage are in various stages of recovery, much progress has been made in the

six months since the hurricanes struck. (For the latest travel and hotel updates, visit the Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association's Travel Update website caribbeantravelupdate.com.)

While a wide range of cultures have influenced the islands of the Caribbean, the most predominant are French, English, Spanish, Dutch and, of course, various indigenous populations that were on these islands long before Western cultures sailed in.

The Bahamas are not in the Caribbean at all but in the western Atlantic Ocean. Still, they are often a port of call on Caribbean cruises and we associate them with the more tropical Caribbean Sea than the sometimes-chilly Atlantic. Only 30 to 40 of the 700 Bahamas islands, atolls and cays are inhabited, but that still gives groups a multitude of places to meet.

Wherever groups land, there will be

rich culture, history, tantalizing cuisine, music and traditions to experience, to say nothing of meeting space and plentiful offsite opportunities. Every island is truly one of a kind, but what they all have in common are inviting turquoise waters and sweet beaches — always a draw for winter-weary workers.

Here's an update on some of the most popular destinations.

Aruba

Aruba, which suffered no physical damage from Maria or Irma, lies far to the south, one of the closest islands to Venezuela. Aruba is an independent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and its Dutch heritage is front and center. It was the island of choice for Harris S. Fishman, CLU, ChFC, president and CEO of MassMutual Greater Philadelphia, who planned a company trip there last year with 30 attendees.

One of the island's attributes, notes Fishman, is that it offers direct flights from Philadelphia. Additionally, he says, "It's a great island with great food and weather." In fact, it's south of the traditional Caribbean hurricane belt, making it a safe bet for groups even later in the year when hurricanes may form in the region.

Fishman believes visitors are warmly welcomed on Aruba. "Everyone is extremely friendly and willing to do anything to make guests happy," he says.

The MassMutual Greater Philadelphia group was based at Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino, set on the northwest end of the island along Palm Beach. The two-mile-long beach offers excellent swimming and snorkeling as well as water sports concessions. Location is one of the reasons Fishman likes this Marriott, but he's a repeat visitor who also appreciates the resort's "excellent facilities and great service."

He says the "hotel staff and event planners were great to work with and very accommodating."

In addition to using resort facilities, the group dined offsite at Madame Janette near Eagle Beach, listed among Aruba's top restaurants, which Fishman calls "excellent."

Fishman can't think of any challenges that came up while organizing or executing the meeting in February. His suggestion for planners is to consider Aruba for a meeting because it is "a great island with predictable weather and friendly people."

Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico's road back from the 2017 hurricane season has been a long one, but today, tourist areas are welcoming meeting groups.

"Puerto Rico is open for business and ready to receive groups and conventions," says Alma Pedrosa, CDME, acting president and CEO of Meet Puerto Rico. "Most of our hotels and tourist attractions are available to welcome group delegates, as our international airport and port, as well as other attrac-

tions, have been operating normally for a few months."

Pedrosa notes that some hotels are still undergoing renovation, and will eventually open with something new to offer visitors, but emphasizes that major conventions are already returning. The first of 2018 was the Caribbean Hotel & Tourism Association Marketplace at the end of January. She also reports that the destination welcomed the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) in March. "And we are proud to report that many of our clients have rebooked their business for 2018 and beyond," she says.

"We feel proud of our people, our offerings and our determination. Puerto Rico continues to position itself as an ideal destination for meetings and conventions, offering the Caribbean's larg-



The Wyndham Grand Rio Mar Puerto Rico Golf & Beach Resort reopened in March.

est and most technologically advanced convention center, a wide variety of hotels for all types of budgets and groups, together with a sophisticated business meeting destination.

"Puerto Rico has always been one of the most desirable meetings and conventions destinations," she says, "and we look forward to the future with enthusiasm. We are moving into a new phase with astounding opportunities for our clients and we are thrilled to have them come and rediscover Puerto Rico!"

Meet Puerto Rico reports that 87 percent, 130 out of 148 endorsed hotels, are open and operating. The Wyndham Grand Rio Mar Puerto Rico Golf & Beach Resort reopened on March 1, 2018 following a multimillion-dollar renovation and refresh. Also among the open hotels are San Juan Marri-

ott Resort & Stellaris Casino, Sheraton Puerto Rico Hotel & Casino, AC Hotel by Marriott San Juan Condado and La Concha Hotel, a Renaissance Resort. Upcoming openings include: El San Juan Hotel, which is renovating guest rooms, villas, pools, public spaces and landscaping, will reopen October 1; Melia Coco Beach, November 1; St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort, October 29; and Caribe Hilton, January 2019. Still closed as of press time with no confirmed opening dates yet are The Ritz-Carlton, San Juan Hotel, Spa & Casino and El Conquistador Resort/Las Casitas Resort. While the Condado Plaza Hilton is undergoing a comprehensive renovation, some services and amenities are currently available.

San Juan's Luis Muñoz Marín International airport is receiving more than 100 flights per day from all the major airlines. Most attractions, ground transportation, golf courses, casinos and restaurants (1,885 of them to date) are open.

Visit www.meetpuertorico.com/nav/media for the latest updates.

Among the major hotels open for business is the InterContinental San Juan. Nell Nicholas, senior director, global sales, with HelmsBriscoe, can attest to how well the hotel worked out for her

a few years ago when she brought a global financial consulting group for a meeting that drew approximately 300 attendees. The resort features a beachfront location and excellent spa among other things, and the island is ideal for what the group wanted.

"Puerto Rico is a perfect island for this group," Nicholas says. "There are several daily flights from cities all over the United States, especially from the Northeast. This is a two-night program only, so quick flights from the Northeast are really important. In addition, lots of restaurants with varying price points, as well as gaming, are also important to this group, and Puerto Rico has both."

Moreover, Nicholas adds, "Puerto Rico offers hotels in every price range and a wide range of categories. From eco-lodges to five-star luxury resorts

**Aruba is
"a great
island
with
predictable
weather
and friendly
people."**



Harris S. Fishman CLU, ChFC
President and CEO
MassMutual Greater Philadelphia
Bala Cynwyd, PA

to convention properties, Puerto Rico has it all."

In terms of the hotel, Nicholas says, "The InterContinental offered a newly renovated property and the perfect size for our program needs. The location near great shopping, restaurants and nightlife was a big bonus."

She also notes that the resort met the group's needs for meeting space, which was a critical component for this annual winter event. "The size of the meeting space was important to us. As our group grew, the hotel accommodated our needs with ease. And the newly renovated meeting and function space does not require a lot of décor, which makes this property a great bang for your buck," she says.

Although the hotel is in a busy part of San Juan, Nicholas cautions planners not to be misled by the location. "The amenities, staff and overall vibe will give your guests the impression they have been to a fabulous 'far away' resort," she says. "The pool deck, for example, offered a great cocktail reception space, and we felt the exclusivity of the property, especially around the firepit, pool deck and indoor/outdoor bar."

One potential downside, Nicholas notes, is that some prefunction space, particularly that off the main ballroom, is a little dark. "I believe that is a perception from the ceiling height. Be sure to ask the ceiling height in all the meeting

spaces you require," she suggests. One other thing to know in advance: taxi fares can be expensive, even for relatively short rides.

"Even though there are several lovely properties near the airport, the taxi rides to/from the airport are very expensive for the distance you travel. It might be worth your while to arrange group transfers. Even the shortest cab ride will cost more than you expect."

Of course, one of Puerto Rico's biggest draws is the fact that it's a tropical island with Latin culture and history so you get the experience of traveling to a foreign port, yet it's a territory of the United States so no passports are required. That's a huge plus in terms of getting on and off the island with ease.

U.S. Virgin Islands

The U.S. Virgin Islands were among the hardest hit by the Category 5 Irma and Maria hurricanes last fall. Beverly Nicholson-Doty, commissioner of tourism for the U.S. Virgin Islands, said in a recent statement, "While there is

for months, and several carriers have recently increased flight service from key cities to meet the growing demand.

- Cruise ship ports of call to St. Thomas have returned to pre-hurricane levels, with nearly 50 ships arriving in January alone.
- 98 percent of power is restored across the Territory.
- All beaches and most activities and attractions have opened, with restaurants and attractions reopening each week.
- National Park sites, including the world-renowned Virgin Islands National Park on St. John, have reopened.
- 40 percent of hotels in the Territory are operational, however many of the larger group-friendly hotels will not open until late this year or even next year. On St. John and St. Thomas, a significant portion of the hotel inventory remains closed for renovation.

Among the USVI properties that are closed include Frenchman's Reef & Morning Star Marriott Beach Resort in St. Thomas, which hopes to reopen December 2018; The Ritz-Carlton, St. Thomas, with an expected reopen date of January 2019; The Westin St. John Resort & Villas will remain closed at least through January 2019; Caneel Bay on St. John will be closed for the entire 2018 season and there's no current reopen date; and as of press time, the Renaissance St. Croix Carambola Beach Resort & Spa on St. Croix was still closed.

On the good news front in St. Thomas: Emerald Beach Resort reopened in November; and Marriott's Frenchman's Cove reopened in February. On St. Croix, The Buccaneer welcomed guests back November 1.

Visit www.usviupdate.com for the latest updates on the islands' recovery; and visit <http://bit.ly/2gOExZw> for hotel updates.

Planners will find that the three main U.S. Virgin Islands offer a different

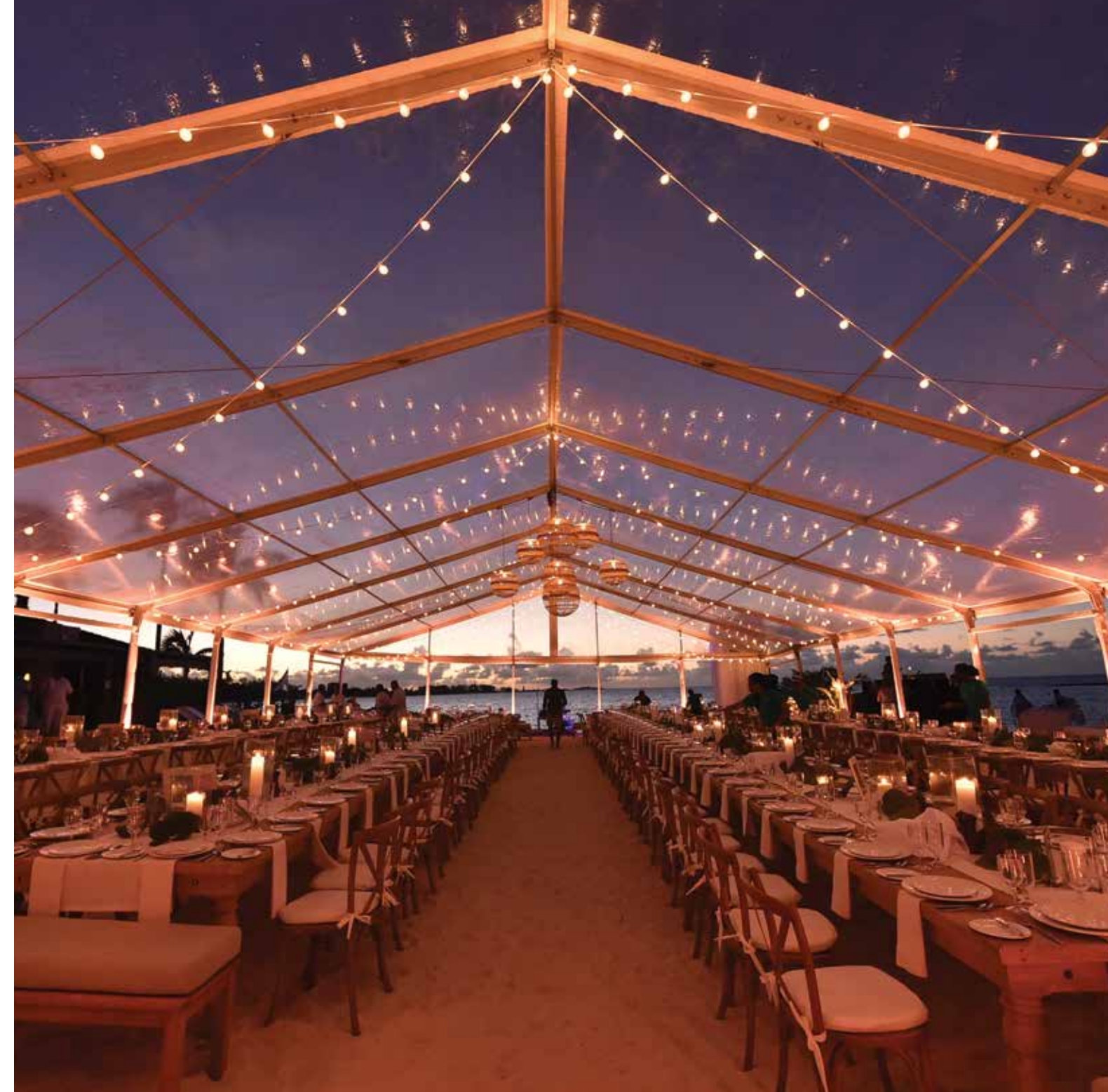
The Grand Hyatt Baha Mar and The Royal Blue Golf Club in The Bahamas.



Credit: Baha Mar

more work to do before we return to a full state of normalcy, we are greatly encouraged by the progress we have made to date. ... We believe visitors will be amazed to see how well the destination is bouncing back, and we invite travelers to visit the USVI this season for a memorable Caribbean vacation experience — even while we continue to recover and build back stronger and better than ever." Nicholson-Doty cited the following progress in the recovery efforts:

- Airports on St. Croix and St. Thomas have been operational



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kind of cultural experience. St. Croix, the largest of the three at 84 square miles, is one of the few Caribbean islands completely surrounded by the Caribbean Sea, and it's home to Cruzan and Captain Morgan rum distilleries. Almost two thirds of St. John, the smallest island at just over 19 square miles, is national park land. Virgin Islands National Park includes many acres of land as well as submerged areas with underwater signage and snorkel trails. St. Thomas, at 31 square miles, is home to many of the USVI's most well known resorts as well as to Charlotte Amalie, the capital of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Red Hospitality & Leisure provides resort, eco-tourism and destination services on St. Thomas. Chris Batchelor, president of the company, and his staff have worked with many insurance and financial groups over the years and they know the island of St. Thomas well.

“Our area is known for calm waters, sugar-sand beaches and some of the best activities in the Caribbean,” Batchelor says. “From boat excursions to five-star dining and turnkey meeting and teambuilding events and activities, we can deliver a wide assortment of programming to fit any group’s needs. For North American guests who don’t hold passports, the U.S. Virgin Islands present a unique and easy-to-get-to tropical paradise.”

In addition to no passports needed,

the USVI, by virtue of being part of the United States, is an ideal destination for other reasons. “As a U.S. territory, the U.S. Virgin Islands are easy to do business with. And airlift is available from every major domestic carrier,” Batchelor notes.

The Bahamas

Paradise Island and New Providence Island escaped damage from 2017’s hurricanes. The good news is that there are still deals to be had in part because of the perception that the entire region was affected, and in part because Baha Mar resort is new, having finally opened with two of its three hotels after long construction and legal delays.

The expansive Baha Mar resort’s first phase debuted last spring with the opening of the Grand Hyatt Baha Mar, The Baha Mar Convention, Art and Entertainment Center and The Royal Blue Golf Club, featuring the only Jack Nicklaus-designed course in The Bahamas. The SLS Baha Mar opened last November and Rosewood Baha Mar is slated to open this summer. Rosewood Baha Mar



The stingray experience at Atlantis Paradise Island Bahamas.

Credit: Atlantis Paradise Island

will feature 185 oceanview rooms and suites, five beachfront villas, four signature dining spaces, an exclusive Rum Room and eight meeting and event spaces, including a 4,950-sf ballroom. The Library Lounge will serve Bahamian-style afternoon tea and unique tea cocktails. Designed in an elegant British Colonial style, the resort is expected to “epitomize Bahamian refinement and sophistication.”

Grand Hyatt Baha Mar’s two towers house 1,800 guest rooms and 230 suites featuring views of the beach, golf course, resort pools and fountain

shows. Grand Hyatt Baha Mar manages The Baha Mar Convention, Art and Entertainment Center, the destination’s 200,000-sf indoor and outdoor convention facility, and connects directly to Baha Mar Casino, the largest casino in the Caribbean. Twenty various bars and restaurants will open in the Grand Hyatt under the leadership of executive chef Brent Martin.

On Paradise Island, Atlantis, continues to evolve, refresh and reinvent itself. The resort suffered no significant damage during the 2017 hurricane season. The Coral, one of the resort’s five distinct properties, was reopened in 2017 after a \$20 million transformation. Resort-wide, Atlantis has put a renewed focus on programs that connect guests to Bahamian culture — such as the weekly Junkanoo Bahamian Fest & Feast and Art Walk in the new Marina Village that showcases the work of local artists and designers. Atlantis also announced the opening of five new outposts of popular Bahamian restaurants featuring fresh ingredients from local farmers and fishermen.

The resort offers more than 500,000 sf of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space including the Atlantis Conference Center, with two ballrooms at 50,000 sf and 25,000 sf.

In December, Atlantis announced a new program that elevates the already ultra-luxury offered at The Cove, another of the Atlantis properties. It includes guests’ arrival via sumptuous, private wheeled or seaplane flights from Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach and the Miami Seaplane Base. No traipsing through crowded airports. This service includes private departure lounges and private SUV pickup in the Bahamas, followed by VIP check-in service at The Cove, all perfect for incentive programs.

Finally, the resort has a menu of new experiences at Dolphin Cay, including paddleboarding, kayaking, and snorkeling — often in the company of the resort’s resident bottlenose dolphins. More programs are in the works, some appropriate for small groups. **I&FMM**

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With an average of 320 days of sunshine a year, more than 950 flights arriving daily at McCarran International Airport, and more than 150,000 hotel rooms on offer — most of them dedicated to the meeting and convention market — it's not hard to understand the appeal of Las Vegas as one of the world's top meeting destinations.

By David Swanson

Meeting planners can look beyond the big numbers — and the neon and glitter — to gain a real appreciation for why Vegas works.

Research released by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA) found that meeting attendance increased an average of 9 percent when shows rotated into Las Vegas. Attendance decreased 4 percent when shows rotated out of the city. Further, the LVCVA's research found that attendees actually spend more time on the show floor in Las Vegas — 11.3 hours versus an average of 8.6 hours in other cities.

For its biennial conference, a top provider of cloud-based software for the global insurance industry needed

a site that could host more than 200 education sessions with a variety of tracks, and be able to accommodate 3,400 attendees.

"Our event requires a significant amount of space," explained the company's meeting planner, the senior manager of travel and meeting services. "So, facility size is critical. Outside of using a convention center, our options are limited."

MGM Solution

Solution: the 5,000-room MGM Grand Hotel & Casino. The MGM Grand

provided the company the venue to house its entire room block, conference function space and evening events under one roof.

"This also meant there was no need for us to go offsite for extracurricular activities," says the planner. "The MGM Grand offers such a great variety of dining and entertainment options onsite, so it was more than enough to keep our attendees satisfied in-house."

An appealing feature the hotel has introduced, utilized by guests both in their rooms and in common areas, is Stay Well Meetings. Designed to pro-

mote more productive events, Stay Well incorporates the use of state-of-the-art air purification systems, aromatherapy, biophilia, circadian lighting and healthful menu options approved by leading nutritionists at Cleveland Clinic Wellness.

The MGM Grand has 602,000 sf of flexible meeting space, including a Grand Ballroom spreading 61,575 sf. But the hotel is set to grow, with an additional 250,000-sf conference center space coming online later this year. The new space will connect to the existing conference center on all three levels, and features two large ballrooms, measuring 49,000 sf

and 32,000 sf, along with smaller ballrooms and outdoor event areas. In all, the hotel will have more than 850,000 sf of meeting options.

As Las Vegas' largest hotel, the MGM Grand can be a huge property to navigate as it is.

"Be prepared," the meeting planner cautioned. "Attendees will not enjoy the walk from the guest rooms to the conference center. It can be daunting, but once you are at the convention center, the stackable space is very convenient. Just don't forget anything in your room so you have to go back."



Stay Well meeting rooms at MGM Grand are specially designed with health in mind.



Credit: MGM Resorts International

"We also experienced some internet challenges. It's important to ensure that all specifications and requirements are fully addressed with the hotel's IT team in advance, so there are no surprises.

"But don't be afraid to push back when the situation warrants," she added. "I found that they were flexible when they could be, but you have to ask, 'is this negotiable?' If you have historical data to support your ask, be sure to share this information."

In the main, the planner was very happy with the results of her big event, and with the feedback she received from her team. "The sales, catering and event staff at the MGM are outstanding. They are willing to go the extra mile for their customers, and they're focused, not only on the event at hand, but on the relationship as well."

Another big project MGM Resorts International is putting the finishing touches on is its \$450 million transformation of Monte Carlo Resort and Casino into Park MGM. A key feature will be the Madison Meeting Center, a 10,000-sf conference center that can be customized for groups from 10 to 50 people. Ten flexible rooms accommodate varying layouts designed for uniquely tailored events, including classroom-style training, product seminars and workshops. The facility features

two self-service lounges, ergonomic, movable furniture with integrated power and built-in AV equipment, confidence monitors and rolling whiteboards.

"The staff of Caesars Palace stands out for me — at this point some of them are like family. The hospitality is extraordinary, and something you don't come across everywhere."

Linda Hyde
Executive Director
American Association of
Private Lenders
Kansas City, MO

Park MGM won't be limited to smaller groups — the hotel has an additional 67,000 sf of traditional conference space available.

MGM Resorts International's Aria Resort & Casino has opened an additional 200,000 sf of flexible meeting space across four stories for a new total of 500,000 sf. The approximately \$170 million expansion is highlighted by stunning indoor/open-air verandas with retractable windows and dramatic views of The Park and T-Mobile Arena.

Carved out of the expansive addition is the discreetly marked Cypress

Executive Lounge, a Las Vegas first. The 3,000-sf space features a fully stocked pantry, three private suites for personal workspaces and one-on-one meetings, a conference room with flexible furniture setups for up to 30 and a beautiful study for toasting to a successful event.

Also within the 200,000-sf expansion are ballrooms with built-in stages, versatile indoor-outdoor breakout rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows and ample prefunction spaces. The top floor is one of Las Vegas' most distinctive meeting venues: a vast ballroom with two impressive open-air verandas that can accommodate receptions for up to 2,000 attendees.

More Big Happenings

More renovations and big plans for new offerings on and off The Strip are making news.

Located immediately behind (east) of Linq, a groundbreaking for Caesars Forum is set for the second quarter of 2018. The \$375 million project will build a LEED Silver-certified conference center featuring 300,000 sf of flexible meeting space, including two 108,000-sf ballrooms. A 100,000-sf outdoor plaza will connect directly to the Linq Promenade, and to the Las Vegas Monorail. Caesars Forum is set to open in 2020.

Meanwhile, in February, Caesar's-managed Harrah's Las Vegas, one of the oldest names in gaming, announced completion of a \$140 million refurbishment, including 1,622 modern, refreshed guest rooms and suites in the resort's Valley Tower. The upgrades



Park MGM will soon debut with a special venue for small meetings.

Credit: MGM Resorts International



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started with renovations to the 672 rooms in the South Tower, and the casino floor and lobby bar also has received a makeover. The hotel offers more than 24,000 sf of meeting space — ideal for small- and medium-sized groups — and guests coming from their rooms need not traverse the casino to access the meeting facilities. Harrah's is located just a few minutes on foot from the Linq Promenade and High Roller observation wheel, providing easy access to round-the-clock dining and entertainment.

Last month Virgin Group founder Sir Richard Branson announced a deal to take over the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Las Vegas and rebrand the property as Virgin Hotels Las Vegas by the end of 2019, following a renovation that will cost "hundreds of millions" of dollars. The hotel's 1,504 guest rooms and common areas will receive a facelift, but no word yet on what will happen to the Hard Rock's existing 110,000 sf of meeting and convention space.

The blue-tinted Fontainebleau tower, opposite Circus Circus, has remained unfinished since the recession hit Las Vegas, but a decade later the 60-story high-rise is finally receiving a lease on life. New York developer Witkoff Group and Marriott International announced plans for The Drew Las Vegas, using the Fontainebleau structure, which will in-



Caesars Forum, slated to open in 2020, will offer 300,000 sf of meeting space.

Credit: Caesars Entertainment

clude almost 4,000 hotel rooms along with more than 500,000 sf of convention and meeting space. The Drew will be Marriott's first Edition brand hotel in Las Vegas and will also include the Strip's first JW Marriott.



Virgin Group founder Sir Richard Branson announced a deal to take over the Hard Rock Hotel.

Credit: Virgin Hotels

completed in 2021; the Chinese-owned Resorts World project, slated to open in 2020; Wynn West, a 2,000- to 3,000-room project penciled for the land opposite the current Wynn hotels; and \$1.5 billion Paradise Park, a 47-story hotel tower now underway behind Wynn-Encore.

Wynn began construction on Paradise Park in January 2018. The 1,500-room hotel tower and convention center will be built alongside a 38-acre lagoon, ringed by a mile-long boardwalk and white-sand beach. The development is replacing the golf course behind the Wynn Las Vegas and Encore. Design integrated with recreation is, as always, paramount for Wynn — there are plans for a nightly Carnivale parade of floats on the hourglass-shaped lagoon. Wynn is also doing its part to add more renewable energy resources in Nevada — powering Paradise Park entirely by energy from a dedicated solar array built outside of Fallon, Nevada.

The Cashman Center, an exhibition space near downtown Las Vegas, was shuttered at the end of 2017. However, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reports that plans are afoot to build another expo center downtown — this time, next door to the existing World Market Center, the large building immediately next to the I-15 freeway, heading north into downtown. The expo center will spread 350,000 sf and represents the largest construction project undertaken downtown for several years.

Other projects planned for the north end of the Strip include an \$860 million expansion of the Las Vegas Convention Center (taking over the former Riviera land) that will add 1.4 million sf to the current convention center facility when



The LVCVA recently unveiled the Las Vegas Convention Center expansion design.

Credit: LVCVA

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The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe offers the lakefront Lake Club (above) for small events.

Credits: The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe

Lake Tahoe Gem

While Las Vegas is the drawing card for insurance and financial groups looking to set a meeting in a city with all the bells and whistles, small and medium-sized groups should also consider looking 400 miles north, to Reno and nearby Lake Tahoe. Sure, you'll trade a desert backdrop for one defined by the Sierra Nevada mountain range, but costs often can be less, and there are still gaming tables for those who want them.

Such was the case for IAT Insurance Group, which held its annual underwriting meeting for the second time at The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe in June, 2017.

"What better place to meet than Tahoe?" asks Jenny Banks, IAT's marketing coordinator. "And we were able to utilize everything right there. There's the Old Greenwood and Grey's Crossing golf courses, bike riding and horseback riding. We offered a historic tour of Truckee, there was wine tasting, and a lot of us used the gondola to North Star. We took in everything — it snowed, it rained, it shined."

Banks said that The Ritz-Carlton corporate culture closely aligns with that of IAT's, helping to produce a very successful meeting, one designed to share current guidelines for underwriters.

"Our values at IAT Insurance Group include honesty, integrity, to think like an owner, to treat people with dignity and respect. They have the same values, so it was so easy to deal with everyone. We had great engagement by the resort staff, and it was a wonderful time that our guests had." And The Ritz-Carlton's relative isolation worked to IAT's advantage, explained Banks. "You don't want to have any competitors around in the area."

The resort offers 153 guest rooms, plus various suites and residential units, and all with fireplaces and contemporary mountain décor. Meeting facilities include a 6,600-sf ballroom plus the 3,002-sf Pines Ballroom for smaller events, along with breakout and boardroom-style facilities, and outdoor meeting areas. Additional options are found at the Lake Club, a separate lakefront building with multilevel dining and gathering areas, plus storage facilities with kayaks, stand-up paddleboards, and other recreational equipment.

"The resort was everything we needed," Banks added. "When you work out the details you usually have obstacles come up to get through. But they were very easy to work with, from every aspect. Blanche Tabe was a huge part of that success. She made everything flawless and easy to deal with."

"Go in with your dreams and The Ritz-Carlton will do their best to create a successful event."

— DS

And at the other end of town, South Point Hotel, Casino and Spa has launched a \$40 million renovation of guest rooms in all three hotel towers. The three-year project will remodel one tower each year, with the first phase — Tower One — scheduled to be completed by September 2018. South Point has 75,000 sf of convention space, along with 80,000 sf of column-free exhibit area.

The 390-room M Resort Spa Casino, located in nearby Henderson offers more than 92,000 sf of meeting space, including a pavilion, grand ballroom and multiple reception areas. Both natural lighting and views of the Las Vegas skyline complement the function space. Alternative gathering venues throughout the resort include Lux, the expan-



The Havana Room at Tropicana Las Vegas.

Credit: Tropicana Las Vegas

sive 16th floor function space; Hostile Grape wine cellar; and the M Pool, which includes outdoor event terraces.

Top-quality F&B is a major focus of the resort, which houses nearly 30,000 sf of kitchen space and culinary work ar-

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Elegant apartment living room at Encore Las Vegas overlooks The Strip.

Credit: Wynn Las Vegas

eas. Most of the M Resort's restaurants feature outdoor dining on terraces that overlook the 100,000-sf pool and events piazza, as well as the Las Vegas Strip.

By Las Vegas standards, the 1,470-room Tropicana Las Vegas — A DoubleTree by Hilton hotel, is a bit smaller than some of the other hotels and resorts in the city, which may help small groups avoid feeling lost among the large convention-sized groups that populate the larger casino resorts. After a recent expansion, the hotel now features 100,000 sf of indoor space that connects to the Club Tower and includes 38 break-out rooms, the Trinidad Pavilion and the private Havana Room. Upscale events find a home in the Tropicana Theater or the Havana Room, which opens out to the Sky Beach Club pool area. Last summer, the Tropicana Las Vegas opened Robert Irvine's Public House, which features upscale and reimagined comfort food in a casual atmosphere, with its specialty being the Fork & Knife Burger.

Big Space, Small Group, No Problem

Although Caesars Palace is one of The Strip's largest hotels, with 3,792 guest rooms, the sheer girth of the sprawling property was not an issue for Linda Hyde, executive director of the American Association of Private Lenders.

"We are a smaller group," explains Hyde, who notes that her November 2017 conference drew almost 500 attendees. "But we need a lot of space for our sessions and exhibit hall, and Caesars

Palace had no issue accommodating that for us when others would not."

The group has brought its annual conference to Las Vegas for eight years running, and attendance has increased each year. Hyde says that last year's event saw a 24 percent boost. "This is the highest amount of attendees we have ever had at one of our events."

"We keep going back year after year.



DayDream Pool cabana at M Resort Spa Casino.

Credit: M Resort Spa Casino

The staff of Caesars Palace stands out for me — at this point some of them are like family. The hospitality is extraordinary, and something you don't come across everywhere. After four years of hosting the event I look at many of the hotel staff as friends, making the partnership very easy to maintain. The hotel's service is impeccable — not to say we have

not run into hiccups, but they are always resolved in a timely manner."

In addition to adding new dining venues like the fast-casual Pronto by Giada (De Laurentiis) and high-concept Gordon Ramsey Hell's Kitchen, Caesars Palace has benefited from an ongoing renovation and upgrade of the property, especially in the guest rooms. The recent renovation of the 1,181-room Palace Tower topped \$100 million; the Indigo Tower is currently receiving its make-over and the Forum Tower upgrades are scheduled for completion in 2019.

"The rooms are beautiful after renovation, although I thought they were very nice before," says Hyde. "We had many guests comment on the change in rooms, how impressed they are with the upgrades and decorations."

Hyde also was impressed by a reception that her team organized at the Omnia Nightclub Terrace. "The views, staff and overall service was a great kickoff to the event. Many of our guests were very impressed and asked that we host there again next year.

"Caesars is always accommodating to any request my guests or I throw their way. My sales contact, Emily, and the catering manager that handles the planning of my show, Heather, are two that stand out to me. They are great to work with, especially during the stressful few weeks up to the show, staying very organized."

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BERZOFSKY

David Berzofsky was appointed director of sales for Teneo Hospitality Group, Midwest. With more than 25 years of hospitality sales experience, he most recently was global account executive for The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company/Marriott International.



CONNOLLY

Elise Gertenbach was promoted to director of group sales for Hotel Contessa in San Antonio, Texas. She most recently served as national account director for the hotel.

Renaissance Baltimore Harborplace Hotel has announced **Jennifer Lewis** as director of sales and marketing. She most recently worked as the director of sales and marketing for the Kimpton Hotel Monaco Baltimore.

The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort in Orlando, Florida, has named **Jennifer Barrett** as senior sales executive responsible for corporate and association business for the Midwest, West Coast and mid-Atlantic markets. She most recently served as conference sales manager at the Hilton Orlando.



GERTENBACH

Denielle Godwin was named director of sales and marketing for Snow King Hotel, a Benchmark Resorts & Hotels property in Jackson, Wyoming. She most recently was regional director of sales for TMI Hospitality.

Hawks Cay Resort in the Florida Keys has promoted **Michael Connolly** to director of national accounts, responsible for the New England, Midwest and West Coast markets. He most recently served as senior conference services manager at the resort, which is already accepting bookings for groups starting September 1, 2018.

Mark Goodwin was promoted to director of sales, catering and conference services for The Sea Pines Resort in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. He most recently served as director of group sales.

JW Marriott Nashville has named **Silvia San Martin** as director of sales and marketing. She most recently was director of sales at the Omni Nashville Hotel.

The Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club in Naples, Florida, has named **David Tyler** as director of sales and marketing. He was director of



BARRETT

sales and business development at Rumbling Bald Resort at Lake Lure in Asheville, North Carolina.

Benchmark, a global hospitality company has appointed **Eric Gavin** as senior vice president sales and marketing. He returns to Benchmark following serving as chief marketing officer for Salamander Hotels & Resorts.

Tory Enriquez was named director of sales and marketing for Texas A&M Hotel and Conference Center in College Station, Texas, expected to open this fall. Enriquez was area director of sales and marketing for Howard Hughes Hospitality properties in The Woodlands, Texas.



GOODWIN

Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort & Spa, located just outside Austin, Texas, has announced **Erin Patin** as its new director of sales and marketing. She joins the property from Hyatt Regency Maui Resort & Spa where she served as director of group sales. **I&FMM**



GODWIN

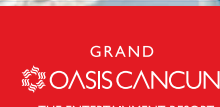


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