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CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS



Seeing Cities in a New Light

CVBs Work Hard to Dispel Common Misconceptions and Tout Little Known Virtues
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Configured for Success

Why the Conference Center Environment 'Helps Your Attendees Leave Differently Than When They Came'
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The Celebrity Solstice in Tracy Arm Fjord, Alaska.



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KEYNOTE OR ROCK STAR?

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Credit: Dolce Hotels & Resorts

The Q Center, an hour west of Chicago, is one of 10 conference centers in the Dolce Hotels & Resorts portfolio. **PAGE 24**



Credit: Eau Palm Beach

A view of the Tranquility Pool and the Atlantic Ocean from Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa, Palm Beach, Florida. **PAGE 32**



Credit: Nashville CVC

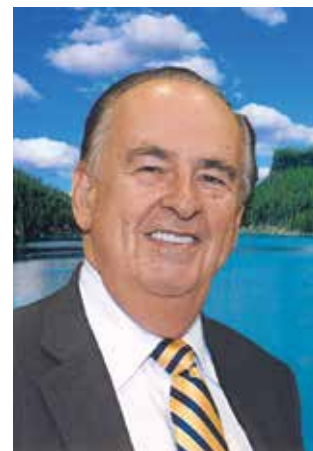
Day or night, live music pours out of the lively establishments on the Honky-Tonk Highway in downtown Nashville. **PAGE 44**

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Publisher's Message

Budgets Are Coming Back

Budgets are coming back. New stories of success emerge every day as more and more meeting professionals are working with budgets that are comparable to pre-recession budgets. What's more, headlines trumpet record-breaking attendance figures for industry events, tourism visitation and more. That's good news all around, especially for those segments of group business that were stuck close to home for meetings and incentives. Even so, value trumps all as planners are still challenged to do more with less.



According to Jo Kling, president of Miami, Florida-based cruise event and ship charter specialists Landry & Kling Inc., cruising's value and the improved economy have spurred an uptick in corporate cruise budgets. In our cover story this month "Meeting at Sea — New Experiences, New Value on Deck," Kling affirms that budgets are back. "There is a regeneration of the classic incentive business the cruise world has always enjoyed so much. That is exciting for planners who are doing what they did on cruises during the days before the economic downturn," says Kling.

Eldon Gale, director of events for Scentsy, a candle warmer and fragrance company, arranges events at sea due to the value, the budget-friendly, all-inclusive pricing and the abundant variety of built-in dining and entertaining options — not to mention the recreational opportunities on shore. Gale once hosted 300 attendees on a seven-night cruise to Alaska aboard a Celebrity Solstice-class vessel. "At the ports, you can do almost anything within a 20- to 30-minute drive — off-road jeep tours, dog sledding, sea planes or walking on glaciers," says Gale who selected Alaska because of its bucket-list appeal.

Cruise meeting trends include longer group cruises says Shari Wallack, president of Buy the Sea, a Plantation, Florida-based, all-inclusive resort brokerage company. "There is a willingness to book seven-night cruises in order to experience more exotic destinations. Years ago, shorter cruises were more in fashion."

Another hot trend is new and exciting restaurants says Wallack. Add improved Wi-Fi, health and wellness components to the mix, and you have what Eldon Gale fittingly describes: "A cruise ship can be a city by itself with everything you need aboard the ship. You can do things you can't do on land, and you still have the land stuff to do when you dock at ports."

To learn why meetings in Music City rock, check out what the new Nashville has in store for you on page 44, and to discover how meeting in sunny Florida motivates and inspires your attendees, check out how the Sunshine State delivers time after time on page 32. After all, these fabulous land destinations also offer incredible value and amazing amenities.

Harvey Grotzky
Publisher

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News & Notes

New Florida Gulf Coast Luxury Resort to Open in 2016

DESTIN, FL — Dunavant Enterprises Inc. has revealed the plan and timeline for the new multiphase Henderson Beach Resort in Destin, Florida. Dunavant has selected Salamander Hotels & Resorts to assist with the development and management of the 171-room anchor hotel of the new Henderson Beach Resort destination. The Henderson, a Salamander Beach & Spa Resort will feature 171 guest rooms with views of the Gulf of Mexico.

“There are tremendous synergies between our three existing Florida resorts and The Henderson, and our experience of developing and operating iconic destination resorts will ensure that this property is properly positioned within the luxury market,” said Sheila C. Johnson, founder and CEO of Salamander Hotels & Resorts. “It has been our pleasure in getting to know the Dunavant team over the past few years, and we look forward to creating a resort hospitality environment befitting of its stunning setting.”

The Henderson will feature 10,000 sf of indoor event space, including a dedicated meeting wing, a 5,400-sf



Rendering of Henderson Beach Resort.

ballroom, a junior ballroom, private boardrooms, and nearly 30,000 sf of outdoor group options, including oceanfront function locations. www.thehenderson.com, www.salamanderhotels.com

Wyndham Hotel Group Acquires Dolce Hotels and Resorts

PARSIPPANY, NJ — Wyndham Hotel Group has acquired Dolce Hotels and Resorts, a portfolio of 24 properties and more than 5,500 guest rooms.

“Dolce is a terrific strategic fit for us,” said Geoff Ballotti, president and CEO, Wyndham Hotel Group. “With over three decades of established brand equity, Dolce is a respected lead-

er in the group space with outstanding destination properties and some of the best meeting product offerings available in the market today. In addition, Dolce has a long, successful history of award-winning innovation in conference planning and management. We look forward to continuing the growth of the Dolce brand and leveraging these Dolce attributes across the Wyndham

global system while enhancing the Dolce owner and guest experience.”

Many of the Dolce properties are certified by the International Association of Conference Centers (IACC). Dolce pioneered the Complete Meetings Package, a concept designed to address all of the elements planners need when arranging meetings. www.wyndhamworldwide.com

IRF Unveils Vision2020

ST. LOUIS, MO — The Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) recently launched its Vision2020 initiative.

The IRF’s Vision2020 is a blueprint for the future, ensuring that the IRF will continue to lead the global incentive and recognition industry with actionable research and education by focusing on unification, universal tools and university alliances.



DANIEL

“In 2010, the IRF charted a new course by broadening its research footprint and expanding educational efforts led by the appointment of Melissa Van Dyke as president,” said Sandra Daniel,

new chair of the IRF 2015 board of trustees. “Now with Vision2020, we are well-positioned to take our unique role in the recognition and rewards industry to the next level.”

The three pillars of IRF’s Vision2020 are:

- **Unification:** To cultivate community and collaboration in the global incentive and recognition industry.
- **Universal Resources:** To amplify the use of IRF research and education in all business disciplines.
- **University Alliances:** To increase the incentive and recognition research both produced and used by academia and business.

The IRF will expand its current infrastructure, partnerships and research network; launch a new website; transition to Coulter Nonprofit Management in July 2015; and accredit IRF education in 2016. www.theirf.org

U.S. Business Travel Spending to Top \$310 Billion in 2015

ALEXANDRIA, VA — U.S. business travel ended 2014 on a high note, with record spending expected to reach \$292.2 billion. The projection for 2015 also remains strong, as lower oil prices are expected to lead to increased consumer spending, boosting economic projects. This strong domestic economic news comes despite an overall weak global economic outlook, with trouble in Europe, Asia and Russia.

Overall, U.S. business travel spending is expected to advance 6.2 percent to \$310.2 billion in 2015, while total person-trip volume is expected to increase 1.7 percent to 490.4 million trips for the year, according to the GBTA BTI Outlook – United States 2014 Q4, a report from the GBTA Foundation, the education and research arm of the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), and sponsored by Visa Inc.

“2014 was a stabilizing year for U.S. business travel, with continuous, sustained growth, despite a plethora of external issues internationally that have weighted down economies in Europe, Russia and Asia,” said Michael W. McCormick, GBTA executive director and COO. “This is a significant and encouraging sign of confidence in the strength of the U.S. economy.”

Group trip volume will likely finish down 2.2 percent year-over-year, stabilizing after extraordinary growth in 2013. Group spend-per-trip, however, is on pace to rise to \$715 in 2014, up from \$660 in 2013. Both volume and spending are expected to rise in 2015 by 1.5 percent and 6.7 percent, respectively.

The GBTA BTI Outlook – United States report is available exclusively to GBTA members. Others may purchase the report by emailing pyachnes@gbtafoundation.org. www.gbta.org, www.gbta.org/foundation

Regent Seven Seas Cruises Introduces Seven Seas Explorer

NEW YORK, NY — Boasting the highest space ratio in the cruise industry, the all-suite, all-balcony Seven Seas Explorer will carry just 750 guests and will be designed to be the most luxurious ship ever built.

“We set a high benchmark for Seven Seas Explorer, not only to build a ship that far surpasses the current standard in luxury cruising, but to design a ship that will be recognized industry-wide as the most luxurious ship ever,” said Jason Montague, Regent Seven Seas Cruises president and COO. “We cannot wait to share this ship with the world when she joins our fleet in the summer of 2016.”

Regent Seven Seas Cruises will introduce a new category of luxury suite exclusively for Seven Seas Explorer. Also, the ship’s primary showplace, the two-tiered, 694-seat Constellation Theater, will pay homage to the glamour of Hollywood’s golden age. In addition, the Observation Lounge brings to life the opulence of the Roaring Twenties, and the Explorer Lounge provides a country club vibe. On one side of the lounge, live musical performances will take place.

The maiden voyage for Seven Seas Explorer will be a 14-night sailing from Monte Carlo to Venice on July 20, 2016. Reservations for Seven Seas Explorer’s inaugural season open February 4, 2015. www.rssc.com/seven-seas-explorer/



Rendering of Regent Seven Seas Explorer

Seattle’s Growth Continues With Luxury Hotel at Southport

SEATTLE, WA — SECO Development Inc. announced plans to design and build the Hotel at Southport, a four-star, 350-room luxury hotel serving the needs of one of America’s fastest growing cities. The 12-story Hotel at Southport is located minutes from the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport serving 34.7 million visitors to Seattle each year.

The Hotel at Southport offers four-star accommodations, business and convention services, and is within minutes of shopping, restaurants, outdoor and water activities. “Luxury hotel accommodations are a matter of location, design, view, access, amenities and market need,” said Michael Christ, owner, SECO Development. The quality of life and lack of state income tax has attracted global leaders in technology, aerospace and luxury retail. Google, Amazon, Boeing, Microsoft, Starbucks, Nintendo and the Seattle Seahawks Training Center are less than 15 minutes from The Hotel at Southport. “Seattle rivals the top U.S. destinations in quality of life, culture and investment opportunities. We expect an unprecedented response from leisure and business travelers to Seattle,” said Christ.

The Hotel at Southport sits on 5.5 acres of the 17.5-acre Southport Project on Lake Washington, and is the third of four phases. The already developed 383-luxury residential units, and 17,581 sf of commercial space is 95 percent occupied. The Hotel at Southport will offer a 40,000-sf conference center, VIP lounge and gourmet restaurant, retail, 20,000 sf of waterfront courtyards and plazas, and four rooftop terraces. An EB-5 partially funded project, the Hotel at Southport is on line for LEED designation in building design and construction by the U.S. Green Building Council. www.secodev.com

New Carnival Vista Will Feature High-Altitude Sky Ride and World's First Imax Theatre at Sea

MIAMI, FL — Carnival Cruise Line recently announced in New York the details of its most innovative ship ever, Carnival Vista, debuting in spring 2016. Designed to connect guests to the ocean with sweeping views and plenty to do both outdoors and in, Carnival Vista will take cruising to new heights and introduce an exciting array of new features including: SkyRide, a suspended, open-air cycling experience; the world's first Imax Theatre on a ship; an expanded water park featuring the colorful Kaleid-O-Slide, the line's first raft-riding water tube slide; Seafood Shack, a New England-inspired eatery; RedFrog Pub, including the line's first onboard brewery and other enhanced dining, bar and entertainment options; as well as new scenic and family-friendly accommodation types. The ship's inaugural Mediterranean itineraries will mark the line's return to Europe.

The largest ship in the fleet, Carnival Vista will measure 133,500 tons, 1,055 feet long and have a guest capacity of 3,936 (based on two per



Carnival Cruise Line executives on hand in New York City to announce the details of Carnival Vista, the line's largest and most innovative ship ever, included: (l to r) Jim Berra, chief marketing officer; Mark Tamis, S.V.P., guest operations; Anne Bramman, CFO; Lynn Torrent, E.V.P., sales and guest services; Ruben Rodriguez, E.V.P., ship operations; and Gus Antorcha, S.V.P., guest commerce.

cabin). The new vessel will debut May 1, 2016, with a 13-day cruise departing from Trieste, Italy — the first European voyage for Carnival in three years. A variety of Mediterranean itineraries will be offered as well as several new destinations such as Crete (Heraklion), and Corfu, Greece;

Valletta, Malta; Palermo, Sicily; Cagliari, Sardinia; and Gibraltar. On October 21, 2016, Carnival Vista will embark on a special 13-day transatlantic crossing and arrive in New York November 3, 2016; then operate a series of voyages from the Big Apple. www.carnival.com/carnivalvista

Discover The Palm Beaches Reports Positive Tourism Trends

PALM BEACH COUNTY, FL — Discover The Palm Beaches recently released the year-end hotel performance dashboard for 2014, revealing positive tourism trends in occupancy, average daily rate (ADR) and revenue per available room (RevPAR) over 2013.

Overall, Palm Beach County experienced a 9.5 percent increase in RevPAR at \$114 compared to \$104 in 2013, resulting in 59 consecutive months of RevPAR growth. The county closed out the year

with an ADR of \$156, which places Palm Beach County third in the state in ADR growth.



PESQUERA

Tourism continues to be the No. 1 industry in the county, with 1,042 hotel rooms in construction and another 1,400 in the planning pipeline.

"By combining our well-timed marketing efforts, our new brand as Discover The Palm Beaches, and a major uptick in the tourism projects in the pipeline, we are confident that tourism will continue to see increases across

the board in the coming years," said Jorge Pesquera, president and CEO of Discover The Palm Beaches. "We look forward to continuing to develop relationships with our partners, and collaborating with other TDC agencies as well as the local community to further promote this area as an ideal destination for visitors, meetings, new residents and businesses."

Discover The Palm Beaches aims to attract 400,000 more visitors totaling approximately 6.6 million visitors in 2015, \$7.5 billion in total economic impact and 6,000 new tourism jobs through 2015. www.palmbeachfl.com



1 Selfies were plentiful at MPI's 2015 European Meetings & Events Conference (EMEC) in Kraków, Poland, which hosted more than 300 registered attendees. The selfie was taken with the Polish Entertainment Dancers after the opening session.

2 Three of the nearly 200 attendees pose at MPI Foundation's Rendezvous fundraiser and networking event at the Hard Rock Café Kraków. EMEC 2016 is set for Copenhagen.

3 Attendees network at Converging Leaders 2015 earlier this year. PCMA attracted a record-setting 4,128 meeting planners and suppliers to Chicago. Converging Leaders 2016 will take place at the Vancouver Convention Centre, January 10–13. 4 Carlie Smith, recipient of the Donald S. Freeman Jr. ESPA Conference Scholarship and Gary Stauffer of the Freeman National Sales Group pose at the Event Service Professionals Association Annual Conference, which was held at the Sheraton Chicago Hotel and Towers in Chicago. 5 Chef Laura Leonetti, Villanova University Hotel & Conference Center, won the Senior Chef category at the International Association of Conference Centres-Americas Copper Skillet competition held at Bonaventure Resort & Spa, a Benchmark Resort, in Fort Lauderdale; Zachary Miller (r), The Inn at Virginia Tech, captured the Junior Chef category. The chefs will compete at the International Copper Skillet Competition during the 34th IACC-Americas Annual Conference at the Bonaventure Resort & Spa, April 14–17. 6 Mark Cooper (l), IACC CEO and Terry Lease, associate dean for academics at Florida International University; and 7 Steve Parker (l), president-elect, MPI South Florida, and Bonaventure Resort & Spa General Manager Chas Reece and his wife at the Copper Skillet competition.



Credits: 1, 2 Robert Szarapka/Photolic; 3 Jacob Slaton Photography; 4 ESPA; 5-7 Ron Stoddard

By Mary MacGregor

Taking Your 'Show' on the Road? 11 Keys to a Successful Multilocation Event

Taking your “show” on the road can be a fantastic way to communicate your message, engage your audience, get real-time feedback, conduct interactive training or put your product right into the hands of your very best prospects. It also can be a time-consuming, logistical nightmare that can drain your budget without generating the results you need.

Making sure your multilocation event or road show meets your objectives requires careful forethought, extensive and highly detailed planning, tremendous flexibility, creative thinking and access to a broad network of subcontractors and suppliers.

If you've never done a multilocation event before, it can be hard to grasp how complex they can be. In almost all cases, your best strategy is to hire an experienced event planning agency to help you. Their first-hand knowledge and extensive network of technology, logistics, transportation, hotel, facility and destination partners will be invaluable.

Whether you decide to take your show on the road yourself or work with an agency, here are 11 insights from BI Worldwide, an industry leader in event planning, to keep in mind to make sure your show goes on!

1. Analyze your objectives to determine if a multilocation road show is the best fit for you. Road shows are a good way to create more face time and close interaction with your audience. They are excellent when you need to do hands-on training or get prospects to test-drive your products. Road shows can give regional management a chance to personalize their local messages. They can mean less travel time/out-of-office time for attendees and offer attendees flexibility to choose dates and locations that meet their schedules.

The engagement benefits are outstanding with smaller audiences, but they come with two critical caveats: time and money. Road shows almost always cost more than a single location, large audience event. And, they often can require substantially more upfront planning time.

If time and budget are extremely tight, a road show is probably not your best choice.

2. Plan MUCH further ahead than you normally would for a single location event. Finding appropriate space at the specific locations you want according to the exact calendar flow

you hope for is easier the further out you plan. The tighter your time lines, the more flexible you'll need to be.

3. Define your event needs before setting the schedule and selecting venues. Outline your event content ASAP as it will determine the types of venues you need, technology required, setup and tear-down time, and travel time between events. It's simply not possible to have hands-on demos of heavy-duty equipment in many hotel parking lots, often due to zoning ordinances. And, no matter what the weather, you can't get two semi-trailer trucks of demonstration equipment from Denver to Baltimore in 16 hours.

4. Evaluate your event sites carefully. Suitability has to take precedence over price. The venues must be able to accommodate your needs and be convenient for your participants to access. While smaller, out-of-the-way locations can be less costly than larger convention centers or full-service hotels, they may not be able to provide the support services you will need to demonstrate product, make and maintain high-speed technology connections, provide suitable food and beverage service, have enough or the right kind of hotel rooms, or give you access to subcontractors for drayage, set construction and tear down and other specialized needs. If participants need to fly to your event, larger airports provide more frequent service and often offer better airfares.

5. Visit calendars before picking the event dates based on your audience profile. Industry trade shows, holidays and school schedules can impact whether participants choose to attend. For example, if your industry traditionally has a major trade show in early October that your desired participants attend, you'll want to avoid scheduling too close to those dates.

6. Communicate clearly, frequently and use a wide range of media. Publish your event calendar or issue invitations as soon as your dates and locations are confirmed. Be clear about registration deadlines and your policies for switching dates or attending locations outside of the participant's region. Use all types of media: print (via USPS), email, social media, text messaging and voice calls. Send reminders and request a response. You want to make sure that you aren't holding spots for people



who won't attend while turning down registration requests from others due to lack of space.

7. Put your brand front and center. Your brand is more than your logo; it's your organization's personality. At every turn, consider ways to infuse each touchpoint with the intangible factors that differentiate your brand (tone, values, beliefs, etc.). When vetting creative partners, make sure that candidates have extensive experience utilizing brand identities to unify all aspects of execution, from graphic and/or scenic design to written copy to interactive elements. By creating an inviting, cohesive, personal experience for your audience, you have an opportunity to clearly and holistically distinguish yourself from the competition in an emotionally compelling way.

8. Make the experience fun and memorable. No doubt, you have a clear objective for putting on a road show, but you also need to view the event through the eyes of your attendees. Give them a reason to stay involved by wrapping your subject matter

into something that will immerse them into your brand AND be enjoyable. Attendees who have fun will most certainly appreciate your efforts, but more important, they will reach a deeper level of engagement! Offering an entertaining experience will come back to you twofold: You'll get immediate results via increased engagement, and your attendees will be eager to attend future events.

9. Make technology your partner. Whenever possible, give participants the ability to download materials onto their phones, tablets and laptops or access the material digitally when they return to their offices. Invite them to participate digitally and share their experience with friends and colleagues via relevant social media platforms. Consider creative ways to incentivize digital engagement through giveaways, recognition and/or competition.

10. Staff up. You will need more staff for a multilocation event. Everything will take longer as you need to set up and tear down at every location. You may need bigger advance teams based on the complexity of your event. You may even need to have “two of everything” so one show can be moving and setting up while another is operating.

11. Evaluate and adapt as you go. Define clear goals and create tools to measure the success of those goals at each and every location. Ongoing feedback gives you the ability to make needed changes before the next location. This keeps you from dealing with the same challenges at every event.

The opportunity to maximize audience engagement is a strong reason to use a multilocation strategy to communicate your message and achieve positive results. Making sure you have the time to plan and having the budget resources to execute well are the keys to your success. Doing it yourself is possible, but working with an experienced event planning agency will likely save you from making costly missteps that can mean the difference between a blockbuster road show and a tedious over-the-road trip to nowhere. **C&IT**

“If you've never done a multilocation event before, it can be hard to grasp how **complex** they can be.”



Mary MacGregor

is Corporate Vice President – Event Solutions for BI WORLDWIDE (BIW), responsible for all operating areas of the BIW Event Solutions Group including purchasing, design, delivery, group air, individual incentive travel, onsite operations, technology, communications and merchandise. She leads a team of more than 175 industry professionals who deliver memorable experiences and measurable results for their customers. www.BIWORLDWIDE.com, info@BIWORLDWIDE.com.

Getting Your Act Together

Receive Rave Reviews Whether You're Going for Broke or Booking on a Budget

By Sara Churchville



Entertaining options: (from top) a world-renowned dance company from Israel; the iLuminate dance troupe; and a Jersey Boys performance at Central Park Boathouse.



Bay Fireworks, which specializes in special effects displays for events, produced this fireworks waterfall backdrop to a high-octane Katy Perry performance for veterans.

Planning the entertainment for a corporate meeting is wonderfully simple: Decide on a well-known performer, pay the performer and wait for the accolades to roll in. Right? Not even close, says Jim Schultze, CMP, director of events for Chicago-based marketing and coaching consultant GKIC-Glazer-Kennedy Insider's Circle.

"Planners and event sponsors often have blinders on when it comes to big names. Everyone wants the name as a draw, but the budget often isn't there for the performer."

Jim Schultze, CMP, Director of Events, GKIC-Glazer-Kennedy Insider's Circle, Chicago, IL



"Planners and event sponsors often have blinders on when it comes to big names," he says. "Everyone wants the name as a draw, but the budget often isn't there for the performer." And it isn't just the performer's fees, though those can be pretty extravagant: Jimmy Buffett, for example, commands \$1 million per performance. With a marquee name, a planner also has to budget at least 50 percent more for production costs such as lighting, and food and beverage riders.

Schultze booked a famous R&B group for a corporate event and remembers, "The food cost for Kool and the Gang — just the food cost — was \$10,000 for their 300-person entourage." Other knotty issues can crop up, too. In just one recent session, "the client's committee suggested as possible performers Queen, Marvin Gaye and one other performer who had died."

Going for Broke

For intrepid planners who do decide to go for a big name, Schultze recommends creating a memorable experience by focusing on and negotiating for crowd interaction. Sometimes the interaction can be spontaneous, as during an event where he booked Huey Lewis and the News.

"Looking down into the crowd, Huey sees an attendee on the phone," Schultze remembers. "When he says he's talking to his wife, Huey asks if she's a fan. Oh, a huge fan! So Huey reaches out and grabs the guy's phone, then tells the wife he's performing right now but she and her husband can come as his guests to the next show and have some signed merchandise. Then he said goodbye, hung up, and told everyone to put their cell-

phones away. 'I'm only making that offer one time,' he laughed. The crowd loved it."

Schultze advises planners to negotiate riders carefully and contract up front exactly how much and what type of interaction to have with attendees, especially VIPs, and to use their own connections to sweeten the pot with more than money. For example, Schultze once secured time on the links for avid golf fan Kenny Loggins in exchange for extra time appearing in photos with attendees.

"Do a big show with a big band one year; next year do an unplugged performance; next year do a comedian, juggle plates or chain saws, a variety show — so people remember your events in terms of the year they happened. Changing it up is a big deal," he says.

Running for Cover

Schultze says he's noticed a trend of moving away from headliners and toward entertainment that is more intimate, cheaper, more unexpected or some combination of the three.

Acts like the Neil Diamond cover band Thunder and Lightning, for example, are "plug and play": Not only do they come minus the overhead and diva drama of a marquee name, but they also tend to "get the place jumping and interact well with the crowd," Schultze says.

He advises planners who are thinking of booking acts on a budget to "develop parameters as opposed to focusing on names — here's the kind of person we want, not we want this person — so you don't have blinders on. It gives you flexibility on availability and price."

Remote Control

Another way to save a bit is to engage entertainers who perform remotely. For

one of Schultze's events, Evan and Jaron, who sing "Crazy for This Girl," performed in an hour-long live webcast from their studio for \$1,000 vs. the \$40,000 plus production plus travel it would have cost had they been onsite.

"No one's saying this out loud, but we need to do something more on a smaller scale," Schultze says. "Entertainment on small stages or in the background. You don't want (attendees) in a seat again; you want them up networking, discussing, sharing, not watching a show for an hour." Variety shows with multiple five-minute segments or setups with multiple small screens instead of one large screen encourage this, he says.

What Have We Not Done Before?

Changing it up is also the goal for Suzan Jenkins, executive administrative assistant, marketing/North America for Virbac, an animal-pharmaceutical maker based in Fort Worth, Texas. When Jenkins stepped into the role of meeting planner last year, she decided to take her company's events in a different direction. "Activities were very dull before that; a dinner murder-mystery theater, nothing anyone would look back on and say 'that was a fun night,'" she says.

Although her group of salespeople is naturally competitive, they're not all sporty, and she wanted something both active and fun that didn't rely on the group sitting around a bar all night, but also wasn't paintball.

Her first at-bat was a teambuilding event for about 100 attendees, held at a new Dallas venue called Topgolf. The space offers a three-level driving range and caters to both low handicappers and first-timers. Jenkins had the event



“People really want to be able to have a good time at a meeting, and that needs humor that is not external to but an outgrowth of the way they do things.”

Jack Fiala, Founder, Corporate Sidekicks, Dayton, OH

catered and hired a disc jockey for the event. It was the highest-rated sales meeting the company has ever had, she notes. “People are still talking about it.” The event offered just the right mix so that “everybody interacted and participated without putting a lot of pressure on any type of skill set, but there was still some kind of teambuilding and camaraderie.”

Especially effective was the chance for low-stakes interaction among people who typically don’t mingle — the salespeople and the corporate officers. Jenkins’ best advice for planners is to leverage their time by letting DMCs and CVBs handle hotel and venue negotiations while the planner focuses on creating a memorable event.

Humor on the Cheap

“It’s rare to get the crowd laughing at big corporate meetings during general sessions,” says Dustin Denis, Toronto-based district sales manager for Hayward Pool Products. “Usually the only laughter comes during an expensive guest speaker or comedian skit.”

Every winter, Denis’ company invites 300 of its best customers to attend an all-inclusive trip to a spot south of the border. When he discovered on a Friday that he would be the presenter the following Monday, he panicked. Holding a group’s attention can be difficult enough in a hotel ballroom, but in a meeting room in Nuevo Vallarta, Mexico, on a 90-degree January afternoon? He had to think fast.

To the rescue: the character “Willie Sellmore,” who performed from a script co-written by Denis and Jack Fiala of Corporate Sidekicks. Willie is no ordinary entertainer. He’s a video person-

ality who somehow seems to know all the right buttons to push with specific attendees. He’s also a puppet. “The opening video was a fantastic icebreaker and made fun of my boss a little, and myself,” Denis remembers. “This led into introducing me during the crowd’s laughter. Perfect!” he says. After Denis’ short, funny presentation, Willie delivered a snarky bit on the company’s top 10 product highlights.

“Customers know we have flaws; nobody and no company is perfect. But addressing your problems, correcting them and presenting it all in a humorous manner is the way to do it,” Denis says. “I was a legend all week at this resort, with dealers inquiring about all the products I actually made fun of. So I got my message across to all the customers about all of our new products (while making fun of some known glitches that are now fixed), all while getting laughs. It just doesn’t get better than that!”

Fiala, an entertainer and the founder

of Corporate Sidekicks in Dayton, Ohio, points out that one of the biggest trends in corporate entertainment of late has been “trimming the budget,” which means doing more — sometimes doing all — in-house. Where once his clients primarily lined up for live experiences that required an investment of time and money, more and more are opting for more cost-effective custom videos. These videos are either stock — with space to insert the company logo and pictures — or more targeted to the specific company dynamic, as at Denis’ and Cummins’ meetings.

What makes these videos so popular with corporate clients (document-handling company Iron Mountain, for example, chose to continue producing monthly updated sales videos inspired by a presentation he did for them, and Fiala has many such repeat clients), is that they are credible and personalized. “People in the audience think, who’s doing that? Is that Joe from marketing?



Muppet-like video personality Willie Sellmore entertained his corporate audience by combining humor with insider knowledge of the company’s issues.



“Maybe because groups are getting younger, experiences that happen in front of your face have become very popular.”

Patrick Sullivan, President, AlliedPRA, New York

They think it’s an inside job,” he says. And in a sense, that’s exactly what it is.

The themes hit home with attendees because Fiala has researched the ins and outs of the company beforehand, talking to managers and salespeople, learning which issues will resonate. He can use Willie or another character to “acknowledge corporate issues of employees or customers or sales teams and helps to defuse the issues. People really want to be able to have a good time at a meeting, and that needs humor that is not external to but an outgrowth of the way they do things.”

Bespoke Events

Michelle Crosby, CMP, CTA, DMCP, national sales manager for destination management company AlliedPRA’s Dallas/Fort Worth office in Grapevine, Texas, finds that what attendees want from destination meetings is an individualized experience — “nothing kitschy or standard,” she says. Attendees want an experience they couldn’t orchestrate on their own. For example, in the DFW region, that means instead of visiting the usual tourist spots such as the JFK memorial, hold a chili cook-off at Southfork Ranch, home of the “Dallas” TV show. Instead of visiting the presidential library or a museum, Crosby suggests holding an event there.

Clients want to “live like a local,” and since Dallas is a big foodie region, culinary events often top the list of local delights. Her clients have, for example, held events featuring local celebrity chefs such as Stephan Pyles and Kent Rathbun. Planners can, depending on the budget, buy out half or even the entire restaurant so the chef can mingle with attendees, sign cookbooks or offer cooking dem-

onstrations. Rathbun has even opened up his home to provide a private “chef’s table” of sorts, grilling by the pool and then eating with a small meeting group.

Service Compris

Sometimes, on the other hand, the ones serving are the attendees themselves: working at a food kitchen, building a new playground for a local school, reading to the elderly, volunteering at a shelter — these are all locally based activities that offer the attendees a chance to feel a real connection to the area, to their team and beyond.

Crosby finds the “market is shifting toward maybe a bit bigger than ‘our team,’” and that means opportunities for teambuilding that sometimes involve actual building, especially since attendees can spend some time in separate outings, then meet later to discuss their respective days.

Because the area has a lot of culinary schools, there are plenty of opportunities to eat well and to help at-risk children start out in the restaurant business. She’s steered planners to work with Trinity Groves, for example, a restaurant incubator program that offers grants to would-be restaurateurs.

Giving Back

Patrick Sullivan, president of AlliedPRA, New York, similarly finds giving back to the community to be a draw for corporate meetings. His clients have worked with Art Start, a collective of artists who offer children living in homeless shelters the space and education to blossom as artists and musicians.

“Maybe because groups are getting younger, experiences that happen in front of your face have become very

popular,” Sullivan says. Seemingly retro entertainment such as illusionists who pull a rabbit out of a hat, acrobats, live wire acts or uniquely weird entertainers such as The Experimentalist — part entertainer, part mind reader — have worked well with groups.

Hiring the cast from iLuminate, a glow-in-the-dark dance troupe made famous from their appearance on “American’s Got Talent,” typically also makes a big impression on attendees.

And in New York, planners also can tap into the talent of the region by hiring Juilliard students to perform, for example, as a jazz or classical ensemble; create a Broadway revue; or form a marching band that spells out the organization’s name.

Planners can use the city’s own vibrancy and even its civil servants in their quest to entertain. Sullivan has organized city tours with entertainment specially planned for the group at each spot — a singer here, a magician there, someone set up at a three-card monte table at a third spot, costumed carolers at a fourth — so the city seems to have sprung up for the day especially to entertain the group.

At one meeting, an event space was set up like a New York City subway, complete with break dancers, subway seats and spray paint cans so attendees could create their own graffiti. For other meetings, actual graffiti artists can “tag” a reception area with a company’s logo. Even local firemen and policemen can be hired to entertain to raise funds for a local charity.

The moral of the story? No matter the form entertainment takes, it’s the level of attendee engagement and the memories made that count. **C&IT**

By Derek Reveron

More and more meeting planners are embracing the idea of conducting meetings and incentives at sea as they become aware of the substantial rewards: incomparable value, an ever-expanding variety and range of amenities and activities, and most of all the often exotic and exceedingly memorable experience.

These attractive advantages are just what the doctor ordered for Eldon Gale's groups. As the director of events for Scentsy, a Meridian, Idaho-based candle warmer and fragrance company, Gale is eagerly gearing up for his next cruise in June — the third in the last 18 months.

Gale is arranging a seven-night Royal Caribbean cruise for 900 salespeople that kicks off from San Juan, Puerto Rico and includes such ports of call as St. John and St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands; Philipsburg, St. Maarten; Antigua; St. Lucia and Barbados.

Gale left no stone unturned in planning the cruise. "I'm going down to San Juan and sail the trip beforehand to experience everything and know what to anticipate," he says. "I've never seen the ports of call. I need to know what to expect when we get there. How long is the walk from the pier into the city? Are there things in the city they shouldn't miss or things they should avoid? I need to know so I can tell attendees and executives so they can have a great experience."

Gale paid the same attention to detail in planning two previous cruises, and he visited ports of call in advance. Last year, he took a group of 1,000 salespeople on a seven-night Royal Caribbean cruise to ports of call in Mexico, Jamaica and Haiti. Gale's group needs certain types of meeting spaces, and the ship's theater was ideal for one event. "We met there for a few hours for recognition awards," says Gale. "The space worked fine. Royal Caribbean makes it a point to have meeting space."

Previously, Gale took 300 salespeople on a seven-night cruise to Alaska aboard a Celebrity Solstice-class vessel. The ship sailed from Seattle and stopped in Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway and Victoria, British Columbia. "At the ports, you can do almost anything within a 20- to 30-minute drive — off-road jeep tours, dog sledding, sea planes or walking on glaciers," says Gale. "We gave them cruise credits to use any way they wanted."

Why Alaska? "It was on a lot of our people's bucket list," says Gale. "Cruising is a good way to see Alaska because it's so big. The group loved it. But Alaska's weather is tricky. You have to be educated about what you are getting into and prepared for any weather scenario."

Meetings at Sea

New Experiences, New Value on Deck

Norwegian's first-ever ropes course has more than 40 different elements, including a zip track and the Plank, a platform that extends 8 feet over the side of the ship.

Credit: NCL

The Value Proposition

Gale is among droves of meeting pros who are regularly rotating cruises into their incentive travel program mix. Why? The incredible value is a major factor.

The value of cruising is boosted by all-inclusive programs that often cost comparatively less than land-based programs.

“The value proposition is a major thing,” says Jo Kling, president of Miami, Florida-based cruise event and ship charter specialists Landry & Kling Inc.

“There are up to six brands in the cruise industry that are all-inclusive. You don’t have all of the miscellaneous after-bills that show up with a hotel. It’s much more manageable.”

Most all-inclusive packages include meals, meeting space and venues, cabins, activities, AV equipment, shows and entertainment as well as taxes and tips.

According to Kling, cruising’s value and the improved economy have sparked an upturn in corporate cruise budgets. “The budgets are back,” says Kling. “There is a regeneration of the classic incentive business the cruise world has always enjoyed so much. That is exciting for

planners who are doing what they did on cruises during the days before the economic downturn.”

Cruise incentives and meetings typically have a lower per-guest cost than land-based events. According to cruise industry experts, cruises save

was close to \$9,500 per person. Our cruise to Alaska was \$5,700 per person, and Mexico was \$4,700.”

Young cites several reasons why cruising is such a boon for planners and attendees. “They are easier and less time-consuming for planners to run. You



“I need to know what to expect when we get there. How long is the walk from the pier into the city? I need to know so I can tell attendees and executives so they can have a great experience.”

Eldon Gale, Director of Events
Scentsy, Meridian, Idaho

20 percent to 30 percent on a package of meals, entertainment, meeting space, presentation equipment and sleeping rooms. In addition, cruise contracts typically contain less restrictive cancellation fees and attrition clauses.

Daniel J. Young, CMP, the director of event planning and recognition for Minneapolis-based Thrivent Financial, raves about the lower per-person cost of cruising. “The average per person cost for our Mediterranean cruise for 270 people was \$6,500 per person for everything including airfare,” he says. “The next year we had a land program in Ireland that

don’t deal with a lot of food and beverage or meeting issues. We don’t book separate excursions at each destination with DMCs. That would be overwhelming. We wouldn’t cruise every year because people want to see other locations. But we add the cruise option about every three years.”

Full-charter Options

Young started rotating cruises as an incentive reward in 2008. “It was the Mediterranean cruise on the 125-cabin Silversea’s Silver Cloud,” he says. “It was seven nights, a full-charter buyout. It

Pointers for First-timers

Planning a cruise meeting is especially challenging for planners who have never done it. “A lot of planners don’t fully appreciate the differences and subtleties involved in planning a cruise,” says Eldon Gale, director of events for Scentsy, a Meridian, Idaho-based candle warmer and fragrance company. “You can’t go into a cruise thinking it’s going to be similar to a land program. If you are stuck into making it like a land experience, you will be disappointed.”

Here are some tips from experienced planners and cruise experts.

Consider working with a cruise broker. “Planning a cruise meeting is more complicated than its land-based counterpart because there are so many cruise lines, packages, sizes and types of ships and itineraries,” says Gale. “It’s helpful to work through cruise brokers because they do it day-in and day-out. One of the challenges is that cruise ships are regimented and programmed about what they do. It can be frustrating to get them to bend as you are accustomed to doing with land programs. Brokers are helpful because they know all the ship inventories and can suggest who to work with based on your goals. They can tell you what all-inclusive includes.”

Determine the size and types of function space needed and consider ships that meet the meeting’s requirements. Keep in mind that ships have smaller meeting rooms, conference spaces and other venues, Wallack advises. Inquire about the flexibility and types of setups available in venues and dining facilities.

Match the size and type of ship with the group. Ships range in size from vessels that accommodate a few hundred people to those that can hold thousands. Budget and the type of group will determine the type of ship, length of the cruise, destinations and whether it’s best to buy out all or part of a vessel.

Mind the details. For example, the quality of cruise ship food can vary. Cabin sizes, even luxury quarters, run the gamut depending on the cruise line and the ship’s age. The lengths of time ships spend at sea between stops and how long they spend in port can differ. Ask questions about such details.

— DR



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Credit: Royal Caribbean International

The spacious conference center on one of the Oasis class ships of Royal Caribbean International. The Oceania Riviera, a luxury cruise ship for 1,250 guests, is known for its impressive cooking school, which doubles as a great teambuilding program for groups.

was the first incentive we ever did that scored a perfect five out of five in attendee satisfaction. They found absolutely nothing to complain about. From that point on, we decided to do more cruising.”

In 2011, Young set up a seven-night, full-charter cruise to Alaska aboard the Regent Seven Seas. The cruise scored

“It was the first incentive we ever did that scored a perfect five out of five in attendee satisfaction. From that point on, we decided to do more cruising.”

Daniel J. Young, CMP, Director of Event Planning and Recognition, Thrivent Financial, Minneapolis, MN



a satisfaction score of 4.86 out of 5.0 among the 250 attendees.

Earlier this year, Young arranged a seven-night Scandinavian cruise aboard Silversea’s Silver Cloud, which included ports of call in Sweden, Denmark and Germany. “We used the ship as a floating hotel, staying two nights in a port” says Young. “A lot of planners go to a different port every day. They think it’s the best way to get the best bang for the buck. But I don’t think it’s the best use of time because you can’t experience the location.”

Young also is considering another full-charter cruise to the Greek Islands in 2018.

Another benefit of booking a full-ship charter is the freedom to tailor the events to match the company’s meeting objective. For example, Norwegian Cruise Line allows a company to incor-

porate its brand and logo into every aspect of the ship, from banners on the side of the vessel to ice sculptures, napkins and menus. Planners can customize itineraries as well as activities, parties and entertainment.

And at Carnival Cruise Line, for instance, planners can use the

Carnival Corporate University to tailor teambuilding, communication and leadership programs.

Cruise Trends

Groups also are taking longer cruises, says Shari Wallack, president of Buy the Sea, a Plantation, Florida-based, all-inclusive resort brokerage company. “There is a willingness to book seven-night cruises in order to experience more exotic destinations. Years ago, shorter cruises were more in fashion,” she says. “Sparing time away from the office is always more of an issue than the budget. A land program in Europe tends to be more expensive than its cruise counterpart.”

River cruising has come a

Carnival Cruise Line Senior V.P. Mark Tamis previews SkyRide, a pedal-powered, open-air aerial attraction set to debut on the new Carnival Vista in 2016.



Credit: Oceania Cruise Lines

long way, too. “The hottest charter at the moment is the river cruise,” says Wallack. “Years ago, no one understood the river cruise industry. Now there is a big market for it. The only downside is that you can’t put more than about 180–200 people on a river cruise ship.

The ships are small — but luxurious. They are like boutique hotels that happen to move.”

“A big trend is more restaurants,” says Wallack. “They are coming up with alternatives to the regular dining experiences.” Carnival’s recently christened Regal Princess features several dining options including

Chef’s Table Lumiere, a private dining experience that surrounds guests in a curtain of light. Royal Caribbean’s Voyager of the Seas, which recently received an \$80 million makeover, features three new restaurants — Izumi Japa-



Credit: Carnival Cruise Line/Ray Stubblebine

nese Cuisine, Giovanni’s Table, an Italian trattoria and Chops Grille, a steak house.

The Carnival Legend, which recently set sail following a multimillion-dollar makeover, offers Bonsai Sushi and Redfrog Pub.

The ship also features Hasbro, The Game Show and Waterworks Aqua Park.

Health and wellness programs are trending for land meetings, and cruise meetings are no exception. Celebrity partnered with Canyon Ranch, a leading spa and wellness brand, and now offers Canyon Ranch Spaclub at Sea facilities on 10 Celebrity ships. The Canyon Ranch facilities feature spa, wellness, beauty salon and fitness facilities. Treatments and services are tailored to guest preferences. Group classes and private consultations also are available.

Improved Internet access and other technology are also trending. Carnival recently introduced what the company hails as the cruise industry’s first-of-its-kind hybrid wireless network called WiFi@Sea. The enhanced high-speed service was launched during the last quarter of 2014 for ships sailing in the Caribbean and will eventually be available on all of Carnival’s ships in 2015 and 2016.

WiFi@Sea will integrate a unique combination of strategically located land-based antennas installed along cruise routes, Wi-Fi from a port connection and advanced satellites, forming an innovative network that is a first in the cruise industry on this scale. The “smart hybrid” network is designed to provide passengers and crew with faster and more stable Internet access throughout their voyage.

Regent Seven Seas has completed a multimillion-dollar upgrade to Internet systems on every ship. The cruise line also introduced unlimited complimentary Internet access for all guests sailing after January 1, 2015 for guests booked in Master, Grand, Seven Seas, Horizon, Mariner, Navigator and Voyager suites.

MSC Cruises has launched a new, interactive mobile app, which allows trav-



“There are up to six brands in the cruise industry that are all-inclusive. You don’t have all of the miscellaneous after-bills that show up with a hotel. It’s much more manageable.”

Jo Kling, President Landry & Kling Inc., Miami, FL

elers to easily explore the fleet’s 12 ultramodern ships and the multiple destinations visited around the world.

The free MSC Cruises app is packed with easy-to-use functions, tips and information, from finding the perfect itinerary and shore excursions to 360-degree virtual ship tours in which users can view actual staterooms, restaurants, lounges, pool decks, the theater and spa.

More Meeting Space, Entertainment, Activities

Large and small cruise ships are catering to groups with meeting space. Royal Caribbean has at least 22 ships with conference centers. The cruise line’s Quantum of the Seas features the



Ten Celebrity Cruise ships now feature CanyonRanch Spaclub at Sea facilities. (R) Meeting up with fellow attendees on a Celebrity Cruise is easy at Café al Bacio.

Royal Theater, a state-of-the-art, flexible venue that accommodates 1,300 people.

There also is a greater variety of entertainment and activities. Royal Caribbean’s Quantum class ships feature the Two70° entertainment venue. By day, guests can relax and enjoy the breathtaking 270-degree views and by night, the space evolves into an exciting entertainment venue that fuses technology with entertainment using robotic video arms, dramatic digital projection, and high-flying aerialists and performers. The ship’s North Star activ-

ity elevates guests 300 feet above the ocean, and the Sea-Plex entertainment venue features bumper cars, roller skating and more. Royal Caribbean’s Voyager of the Seas features the FlowRider surf simulator and a 3-D cinema.

Crystal Cruises offers Magic Castle, a magic show for small groups. Celebrity Cruises has partnered with 54 Below, a Broadway cabaret, to bring in New York theater performers.

New Ships

Celebrity Cruises, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary, recently signed a letter of intent to build two new ships under Project Edge. The two vessels will offer small-ship itineraries with large ship amenities. The first Project Edge



ship is scheduled for delivery in fall 2018, with the second arriving in 2020.

Royal Caribbean International is building its third Quantum class smart ship, Ovation of the Seas, which will be delivered in fall 2016. Royal Caribbean also introduced two Radiance-class ships — Rhapsody of the Seas and Splendour of the Seas — earlier this year.

Regent Seven Seas Cruises will debut the 750-guest Seven Seas Explorer in summer 2016. The ship will feature one of the highest staff-to-guest ratios in the cruise industry. Regent also re-

cently completed a multimillion-dollar upgrade of the all-suite, all-balcony ship Seven Seas Mariner.

Carnival recently christened two new ships — Regal Princess and Costa Diadema. In addition, Carnival's P&O Cruises UK and Aida brands will each launch a new ship in 2015.

Carnival plans to add an additional seven ships between 2015 and 2017.

The small ship cruise line Seabourn recently unveiled the names of its two new ships — Seabourn Encore and Seabourn Ovation. The first will launch in late 2016 and the second in spring 2018.

Seabourn Encore and Seabourn Ovation will maintain the line's high ratio of space per guest, enabling highly personalized service by close to one staff member for each guest on board. With the addition of the two new ships, Seabourn will have the youngest and most modern ultra-luxury fleet in the industry.

Seabourn Encore and Seabourn

Ovation will be configured with one additional deck, newly expanded public areas, and modern design elements and innovations consistent with Seabourn's reputation for understated elegance. The new 40,350-GRT vessels are expected to carry 604

social hub of the ship with a club-like ambience.

Final Thoughts

What's not to like about rotating cruises among incentives? All-inclusive pricing makes budgeting and planning



"There is a willingness to book seven-night cruises in order to experience more exotic destinations. Years ago, shorter cruises were more in fashion."

Shari Wallack, President
Buy the Sea, Plantation, FL

guests each, based on double occupancy, and every suite will feature a private veranda.

Hospitality design icon Adam D. Tihany has signed on to design both Seabourn Encore and Seabourn Ovation in their entirety. He will design all indoor and outdoor guest areas, including the multiple dining venues, The Spa at Seabourn, showrooms, casino and lounges, outdoor deck areas, and the popular Seabourn Square, the

simple and less time-consuming. There is a range of ships — from large luxurious cruise ships to smaller deluxe vessels — that meet the needs of groups of all sizes. Planners can select from 3- to 10-day cruises as well as full-ship charters.

Gale described it best: "A cruise ship can be a city by itself with everything you need aboard the ship. You can do things you can't do on land, and you still have the land stuff to do when you dock at ports." **C&IT**

Top Trends to Look for in 2015

Cruising has never been more popular, say the experts at CruiseCompete. In fact, there are 35 new ocean ships and 21 new river ships scheduled to debut by 2018.

- 1. Cruising as a company perk.** Company-paid cruise vacations will become a way to entice, and keep, a company's best employees, by showing appreciation for someone's work while rejuvenating them to peak performance.
- 2. GPS tracking of children.** Parents who want to keep close tabs on their children will have the option this year to equip them with handy new wristband GPS units.
- 3. All-inclusive options continue to increase at a rapid pace,** in particular for the luxury and ultra-luxury sector. CruiseCompete just keeps adding included amenities to the comprehensive chart detailing what is included on cruises. In fact, cruise lines have said they use this chart frequently to see what their competition is adding to the cruise experience. See the included amenities here: allthingscruise.com/all-inclusive.
- 4. Ultimate luxury and adventure.** Cruise lines keep coming up with more over-the-top experiences — onboard and ashore. Also, more private areas are being built into ships, so that VIPs can book areas with dedicated pool, dining room, concierge and other amenities.
- 5. Past favorites become new again.** The all-important baby boomer demographic will flourish as the cruise lines bring back favorites from the past. Companies such as Princess Cruises will continue to be a favorite for baby boomers seeking comfort from familiar experiences like the "Love Boat."
- 6. Enhanced technology and personalization.** Technology will become even more advanced in areas such as bars and restaurants, and ships will have in-room tablets to book future cruises. Luxury cruise lines also will keep an automated record of passengers' preferences and build mini bar/personal hygiene baskets to their liking.
- 7. Focus on the family and multigenerational travel.** Family suites will offer on-demand nannies for the duration of a cruise. The lines also will design programs that appeal to multigenerational groups, where children, parents and grandparents all play a part.

— DR

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- **Bars & Lounges** — Pull up a stool on The Waterfront and find your favorite vintage at The Cellars - A Michael Mondavi Family Wine Bar or order one of more than 50 different bottled beers at the District Brew House and it's happy hour every hour at the 5 O'Clock Somewhere Bar.
- **The Best Variety of Entertainment on Water** — Every night will be music to your ears with the entertaining options on board Norwegian Escape including the smash hit musical *After Midnight*, live music throughout the ship and laugh out loud at Headliners Comedy Club.
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Configured for Success

Why the Conference Center Environment 'Helps Your Attendees Leave Differently Than When They Came'

By Karen Brost

As senior manager of catering and conference services for the Boston-based law firm Goodwin Proctor LLP, Gia Casale plans many kinds of events. But when the agenda calls for a strong focus on taking care of business, she finds that conference centers are the best fit for her.

"A conference center is geared more specifically toward business meet-

ings," she explains. "The AV is in the room. Everything that you may need for that meeting room is set and ready to go. The snacks, the beverages, tend to be outside the meeting rooms. You're sharing that area with other companies, whereas when we go to a hotel, we are ordering for our group only, so it tends to be a higher cost. I think you get a better value at a conference center." She

adds that not having to contract with an outside company for AV services, as she typically would have to do at a hotel, is another cost-saving advantage of using conference centers.

One conference center Casale has used many times is the Stoweflake Mountain Resort & Spa in Stowe, Vermont. The 120-room property, which is set on more than 60 acres, includes

a 22,000-sf IACC-certified conference center that contains 15 meeting rooms. The resort also offers many recreational amenities such as a 50,000-sf spa, skiing in the winter, and hiking, biking and golf in the summer.

IACC (the International Association of Conference Centres) is a global professional association that represents small- to medium-sized venues that focus on meetings, training courses and conferences. The organization has 400 members in 21 countries, and each member conference center agrees to adhere to a set of standards designed to create an exceptional meeting experience. These standards cover elements such as soundproofing, technology, ergonomic seating, lighting, unobstructed interior views and continuous refreshment service.

Companies that use IACC-certified conference centers also receive a 24-hour hold on their meeting space, so they can leave their materials, displays and other items in the room overnight. This saves the time and effort involved in re-staging the room in the morning because it had been used for another event the night before.

Modified Meeting Packages

Conference centers also make the budgeting process easier by offering a package price that includes accommodations, meeting space, AV services, three meals a day and continuous breaks. This all-inclusive package is typically known as a CMP (Complete Meeting Package), but a survey completed in late 2013 by PHG Research, a division of Pompan Hospitality Global Inc., found that many customers now prefer to opt for an MMP (Modified Meeting Package) so they can customize the package to meet their needs.

When the survey was released, Neil Pompan, president and CEO of Pompan Hospitality Global, who previously served as North American president and global president for IACC, explained, "The data supports our belief that the market is moving away from the CMP

in favor of the MMP, or a DMP (Day Meeting Package) with or without guest rooms. In our opinion, this shift is in no way an indictment of the conference center concept. Many meeting planners still seek the ease of crafting a total meeting experience based on the expertise found among conference center sales and service personnel. But at the same time, planners are looking for more flexibility in how they purchase this experience, given their organization's perception of



Neil Pompan, CMP
President and CEO
Pompan Hospitality
Global
Easton, PA

"Conference centers get it. ...They provide an environment that enables you to have a better outcome."

need, and of value. Therefore, flexibility in how packages are offered is critical for facilities that want to thrive."

When asked where the market stands today, Pompan responded, "The pendulum is not swinging back. If anything, if I were to redo this survey this year, I would speculate that we're going to find very similar findings or maybe even findings that are even more supportive of what we found last time.

"We call it a CMP or we call it a DMP, but to me that's not what they're buying," he continues. "They're really buying a meeting experience. They're buying the ability to have a better outcome. At the end of the day, people want good outcomes."

Casale says that she generally modifies the basic CMP, for example, to add a better wine or to incorporate different types of hors d'oeuvres that aren't included in the basic package. "A lot of times I'll mix and match. I want this

from this package, but I want that from that package."

Service Trumps All

She adds that Stoweflake has been very accommodating in meeting her special requests. "I wanted everything Vermont," notes Casale. "I wanted Ben & Jerry's ice cream, I wanted Cabot cheeses, and they not only met my requests but were very, very accommodating to our budget.

"They're very good at working with you," she continues. "I feel like it's a family-owned business and their goal is to make sure that your meeting is really a success and that your networking events are successful. The shuttle comes to take them to the mountain, and they help you with all of the ancillary things that you need to get done (like) the child care. Sometimes you call these hotels or these conference centers and they don't have that piece set up, so you're calling a DMC or you're begging the hotel to call you about golf. It's all done there (at Stoweflake). They're taking care of you. It's full service."

She stressed just how important that is. "Service, no matter how much you spend, is something you can't buy," she explains. She adds that if someone asks her for a recommendation for a good property to use, she's more likely to recommend one that offers great service over one that may be the most beautiful. "Service trumps everything," she notes.

She also praised the Mt. Washington Conference Center located near Baltimore. The IACC-certified conference center offers 48 guest rooms and 10,500 sf of meeting space. "They have phenomenal service," Casale notes. "They really care about the guests and the guest experience."

Q Stands for Quality

Susan O'Dea, executive assistant to the president and CEO of Chicago Tube & Iron, has used another IACC-certified conference center, the Q Center, for the past five years for her company's annual sales meeting that draws anywhere from 100-130 attendees. Located in St. Charles, Illinois, about an hour west of



The amphitheater at the IACC-certified Q Center in St. Charles, Illinois.



Credits: Stoweflake Mountain Resort & Spa

The Stoweflake Mountain Resort & Spa in Stowe, Vermont, features a 22,000-sf IACC-certified conference center, resort amenities and a labyrinth herb garden.

Chicago, Q Center is set on 95 acres and offers 1,042 guest rooms and 150,000 sf of meeting and event space. The property also offers Q Print graphic design and printing services, and Q Creative event production services.

“They’re wonderful,” O’Dea notes. “I love their technology. These are the pros. Their technology is very current where some hotels, if they don’t have a conference center attached to them, their technology is a little limited, at least in my opinion. The technology and the support for technology is top shelf at the Q. Another real plus is they have a wonderful dining facility. We still have a private dinner on Saturday night and an awards ceremony, and the food is phenomenal.” She also lauded the regular conference meals at the Q Center. “Their chef is just wonderful, so that’s another important thing.”

She adds that another advantage of using the Q Center is that her attendees are more comfortable there, since many of them come from more rural areas and aren’t comfortable in big cities. “The other plus is we can afford an individual room for every person. There was a time when we shared rooms.”

O’Dea also modifies the standard

CMP package but adds, “it’s not modified very much. Or they make it easy enough to make it seem like it’s not out of the ordinary. They are willing to do whatever we ask them.”

Like Casale, O’Dea places a big emphasis on service. “It has to do with the clientele that you work with at these places, and there is no one better than Kimberley (Mercado) at the Q. I’ve been doing this a long time. She is really good at her job.”

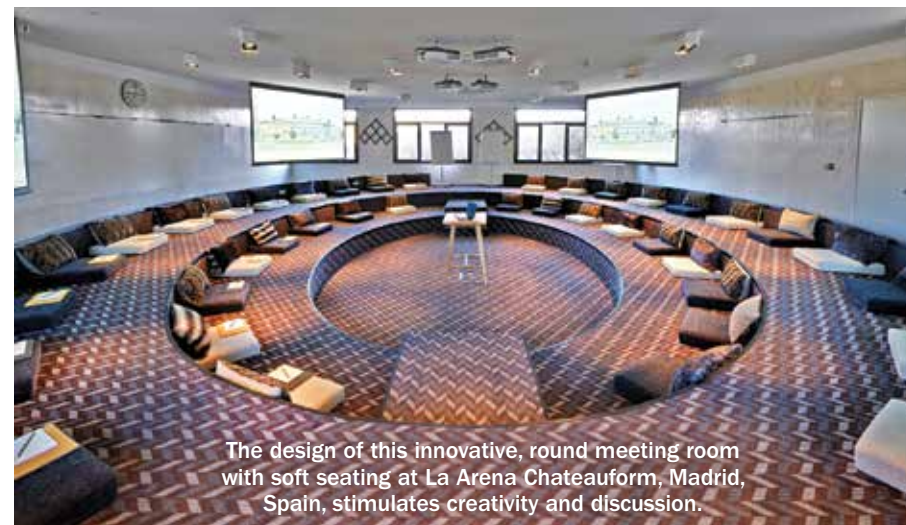
The Dolce Difference

Q Center is one of 10 conference centers included in the Dolce Hotels & Resorts portfolio. Others are located in Connecticut, Georgia, New York and Texas in the U.S., as well as in Germany, Belgium and Ontario, Canada.

Dolce also offers flexibility in its meeting packages through its program called CMP 3.0. Under this program, planners can choose The CMP Traditional, which includes accommodations, three meals per day, continuous breaks at Nourishment Hubs, fast wireless Internet, use of a business center and a dedicated meeting concierge, among other services. The CMP Select package includes the same services with two meals per day, and planners can upgrade any package to include Signature Events such as a chef’s table, teambuilding activity or golf.

Day by Day

The PHG survey also found that day meeting packages (DMPs) are popular.



The design of this innovative, round meeting room with soft seating at La Arena Chateau in Madrid, Spain, stimulates creativity and discussion.

Credit: IACC

One-third of the properties responding to the survey reported that day packages represent 40 percent or more of their business. However, DMPs are not only used for single-day events. Some clients find a greater value in purchasing a DMP with a separate guest room rate.

“From a competitor’s standpoint, I’m seeing more and more hotels offering day meeting packages,” Pompan notes. “They not only include the food and beverage, but more and more I’m seeing them include basic audio-visual and other related meeting support, for example, the meeting room. That’s a very powerful thing. One of the biggest things that meeting planners hate to pay for after high-speed Internet is meeting room rental. (The hotel might offer) lunch, break service, a meeting room, a projector and a couple of flip charts. That’s a very watered down version of what IACC does, but to the large majority of meeting planners, that’s what they want. It’s a big step up for the hotels and very appealing to the majority of customers.”

Sustainability Best Practices

In an effort to encourage best practices in sustainability at its member conference centers, IACC has developed a Code of Sustainability that includes 60 tenets in areas such as education and awareness, waste management, recycling, reuse, water conservation, energy management, air quality, and food and beverage. Based on their level of participation in these tenets, IACC-certified conference centers can achieve status as

an IACC GreenStar facility at the Silver, Gold or Platinum Levels.

More Conference Center Options

IACC continues to add more conference centers to its membership base, and most recently, the organization welcomed its first member in Ukraine, the UBI Conference Hall in Hlevakha, as well as additional conference centers in the UK, Sweden, Scotland and Australia. In the U.S., some of IACC’s newest members include the Kingsgate Marriott Conference Center in Cincinnati; the Eagle Ridge Resort and Spa in Mount Prospect, Illinois; the Laureates Conference Center at Franklin Institute in Philadelphia; and the Water’s Edge Events Center in Belcamp, Maryland.

In 2014, Benchmark Hospitality International announced the introduction of Benchmark Conference Centers. The company now uses this designation to classify properties that are purpose-built and offer personally tailored service, locally sourced and customized cuisine, and four-diamond lodging to provide what the company describes as “the most productive, rewarding and authentic meeting experience in the industry.” All of these properties conform to IACC standards, although IACC membership is not a prerequisite.

There are currently 12 Benchmark Conference Centers in the U.S.: Bonaventure Resort & Spa in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; Chaminade Resort & Spa in Santa Cruz, California; Cheyenne Mountain Resort in Colorado Springs, Colorado; Downtown Conference Center in New York City; Eaglewood Resort & Spa in Chicago; Edith Macy Hotel & Conference Center in Briar Cliff Manor, New York; Hotel Contessa in San Antonio; Scottsdale Resort and Conference Center in Scottsdale, Arizona; Stonewall Resort in Roanoke, West Virginia; The Chattanooga Hotel in Chattanooga, Tennessee; The Heldrich in New Brunswick, New Jersey; and the Inn at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Two additional Benchmark Certified Conference Centers are located in Tokyo.



Cheyenne Mountain Resort boasts a certified Benchmark Conference Center, which meets a rigorous set of criteria and conforms to the IACC’s requirements.

Setting the Stage for Success

Pompan explains why it’s so important to create the right environment for a meeting. “It’s the difference between service and hospitality,” he notes. “Service is delivering a technical thing. Hospitality is making people feel good about it while you’re doing it. Meetings are the same way. Most hotels can pro-

“When you think about it, what’s the purpose of a meeting?” he continues. “A lot of times they’ll say ‘we’re doing training or having a board meeting or going over strategy or we’re rolling out a new product.’ But really, the purpose of the meeting is not any of that, even though that’s what you’ll be doing in the meeting. The purpose is to change

the behavior of the people attending the meeting. (When they leave) most people are going to be smarter, they’re going to be more knowledgeable, they’re going to be more productive, and because of that, your organization is going to be more successful. So therein lies the deep subtlety that, in my opinion, confer-

ence centers understand better than other meeting providers. They understand that they need to provide an environment that will help your attendees leave differently than when they came.”

He offered an interesting analogy. “It’s the difference between going to Macy’s to buy a suit or going to a tailor who only sells suits. Where are you going to get a better suit? Most people don’t care. They just say, ‘I just need a new suit,’ but there are people who do care.

“Conference centers get it,” Pompan sums up, “and they need to continually punctuate that point of differentiation. They provide an environment that enables you to have a better outcome.”

C&IT

“A lot of times I’ll mix and match. I want this from this package, but I want that from that package.”

vide the service of providing a meeting to a customer very well, but conference centers are in the meeting hospitality business as opposed to the meeting service business, if I can draw that distinction. The customer is buying an environment that supports the need for them to change the behaviors of the people who are attending. If they are successful in changing their behavior, they will have a better outcome.

Gia Casale
Senior Manager
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Goodwin Proctor LLP
Boston, MA



Seeing Cities in a New Light

CVBs Work Hard to Dispel Common Misconceptions and Tout Little Known Virtues

By Patrick Simms



The direct sales company Thirty-One Gifts held its National Conference for 6,000 consultants last July in Denver, using the Colorado Convention Center (shown) and the Pepsi Arena (inset).

Promoting a city effectively is in part an educational effort: convention and visitors bureaus seek to correct any misconceptions about their destination and raise awareness of its lesser-known virtues. It is of course a boon to the local tourism and meetings industry when the town receives positive attention in the national media, but simply being noticed will not create a full appreciation of what the city has to offer.

Rediscovering Nashville

Nashville, for example, has been increasingly in the news in recent years with Music City Center opening in May 2013 and the Country Music Hall of Fame completing a \$100 million, 210,000-sf expansion last year. The press that resulted, not to mention ABC's "Nashville" series, which debuted in 2012, made the city "like a new discovery to a lot of folks. It's been a great spotlight for us," says Butch Spyridon, president and CEO of the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp.

Yet a deeper knowledge of the city's culture among the general populace, including some meeting planners, can still be achieved, Spyridon feels. "Everybody is aware of Nashville as the home of country music. It's been a big benefit for us, but at the same time it's kept a lot of people from understanding the depth and breadth of the city, the dining scene, the diversity of music and the overall quality of the destination," he explains. "And that seems to be going through a transformation as well, where on one hand people have a broader understanding of how big country music is, and even better for us a broader understanding of the overall music scene in Nashville, which includes gospel, rock (and other elements of) Americana." (Also see "The New Nashville" on page 44.)



It's not all honky-tonk and country music in Nashville, which offers a number of elegant special event spaces such as Andrew Jackson's Hermitage (left) and The Parthenon.



Skies are clearer these days in Los Angeles, and the roads will be, too, after the L.A. Metro completes its expansion in the next few years.

Beyond a diverse music scene, Nashville boasts historical sites that the CVC often brings to planners' attention, including Andrew Jackson's Hermitage, currently celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans, and The Parthenon at Centennial Park, built in 1897. "So we have the home of a president and an exact replica of the Parthenon in Athens, both of which are incredible event venues," says Spyridon. And it takes a little work to raise awareness of such features among corporate meeting planners, who naturally view the city mainly as a great place for country music-themed programs.

Clearing the Air in L.A.

On the West Coast, the Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board (LATCB) has similar work to do in raising awareness of the new Broad Museum, opening downtown this fall. When planners

think of Los Angeles, they tend to focus on offsite possibilities such as the L.A. Live entertainment district and Universal Studios Hollywood. Museums may not come to mind, but the Broad Museum could change that, insofar as it will house "the largest collection of contemporary art in the U.S.," notes Darren Green, senior vice president of sales with the LATCB. "Customers are wowed about it when they visit: 'I never expected that L.A. would offer that.'"

In terms of misconceptions, some planners may harbor a view of the country's second-most populous city as highly congested and polluted. But Los Angeles' transportation will be eased with the expansion of the city's metro rail in the next couple of years, Green notes, and "you'll be able to take the subway all the way out to Santa Monica from the convention center. Eventually you'll be able to take the metro from downtown all the way to the airport."

The L.A. Metro is one of the city's underappreciated aspects, Green feels, but the TCB has made strides in that regard. "We had a customer advisory board meeting back in October and held it at Universal Studios. We put all of the customers on the metro and took the subway downtown. It was an incredible experience. The L.A. Metro is new, so it's very clean, with no graffiti and very safe



Partnering for Planners

Some cities have turned out to be quite marketable in pairs or groups, a recent example being Synchronicities. A coast-to-coast, three-city partnership comprised of the Baltimore, San Antonio and Anaheim CVBs, Synchronicities is based on sharing knowledge about meetings that will be held in all three destinations (typically in different years), in order to streamline service to planners.

A precursor to Synchronicities is the partnership of Visit Pittsburgh, Visit Milwaukee and Travel Portland. Established in 2004, the partnership is also based on knowledge-sharing, and planners have a financial incentive to book the trio (for example, planners who book two or three cities receive \$1 per room night from each contracted city for each year).

On the international front, BestCities, the first convention bureau alliance, currently comprises Berlin, Cape Town, Chicago, Copenhagen, Dubai, Edinburgh, Houston, Melbourne, Singapore and Vancouver. BestCities has established a certification program — with standards certified by Lloyd's Register Quality Assurance (LRQA) — to ensure a consistent level of convention bureau service excellence from all partner cities, including the meeting program data exchange that is the hallmark of these partnerships.

San Antonio's convention center is set along the banks of River Walk.

Credit: Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center



The Baltimore skyline and Inner Harbor.

Credit: Baltimore CVB

Given their long-term booking of rotating installments of the same meeting, it is association groups that typically take advantage of CVB partnerships. But that doesn't mean a corporate group can't benefit from CVBs working together to service their program, as was the case when Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania-based Meetings Info planned a "town and country" incentive program for a garage door distributor and manufacturer.

The event will bring about 150 couples to Sonoma County, California, with side trips to San Francisco.

Sandy Rim, CMP, owner of Meetings Info, partnered for the first time with both San Francisco Travel and the Sonoma County Tourism. "It appears that they work very nicely together: Everybody seems to be online with sharing information," says Rim. "The tie between the two cities is just wonderful for us. Sonoma is so quaint and relaxing, with the beautiful town square that they have and all the little shops and restaurants. And you combine that with the nightlife and fun of San Francisco. So it's an ideal situation." — PS



The Anaheim Convention Center and Grand Plaza

Credit: Anaheim Convention Center

with a lot of security. Customers said they never knew L.A. had such a state-of-the-art transportation system." The city's cleaner air is also something to appreciate. "I lived in L.A. about 10 years ago before I came back, and there was an issue with smog at that time," he recalls. "Now it's practically nonexistent, and it's a testament to our environmental initiatives."

Sunbathing in Denver

Denver faces a more benign misconception, but one that still may impede some planners from considering it. "One of the biggest misconceptions about Denver is that we're cold or under snow year-round," says Rachel Benedick, vice president of convention sales and services, Visit Denver. "We actually have very mild winters. While the mountains get the majority of the snow in winter, Denver can be sunny and warm. Our golf courses and outdoor cafés remain open all year." Visit Denver seeks to get that message across "through our trade and consumer marketing campaigns showing Denver's brilliant blue skies, outdoor activities — such as year-round bicycling on our 850 miles of bike trails — or dining in outdoor cafés and on rooftop bars. And we invite planners to come to Denver at any time of the year. It's more often we have a beautiful, sunny 'bluebird' day than a cloudy day."

Michelle Harris, director of events with Columbus, Ohio-based Thirty-One Gifts, a direct sales company, planned a successful National Conference for about 6,000 of the company's consultants in Denver last July. Gatherings for all the participants were held at the Pepsi Arena, while training programs, awards ceremonies and more were held at the Colorado Convention Center where they could break out the groups. Beginning with her site visit, the experience "enlightened" Harris on the metropolis' smooth transportation logistics. "It's so easy to get around and walkable," she remarks. "And we went into it thinking that the location of the Pepsi Arena seven to nine blocks away



Michelle Harris, Director of Events
Thirty-One Gifts, Columbus, OH

from the convention center and most of the hotels was really going to impact what we did with traffic. Quite honestly, it never became a problem at all."

A Studied Approach to Fam trips

"We do consumer research every year,

and in our study, we found that people think of Denver as very friendly, diverse, young and active," says Benedick. Accordingly, Visit Denver affords planners opportunities do something active on site inspections and fam trips, as opposed to just viewing meeting spaces and speaking with hoteliers. "We have plenty of urban adventures, such as biking around the city using Denver B-cycle (our citywide bike-sharing program), grabbing a beer at one of the more than 30 breweries in Denver, or even taking in a baseball game and a sunset at Coors Field," she adds.

The LATCB is investing more in the fam trips, notes Green, but at the same time tailoring the programs to what

planners will tend to want to do in the city with their groups. "Many planners who do incentive programs or themed events want to do a red carpet event similar to one of our award shows," he says. "So we give customers some creative ideas on how to put that L.A. spin on their program when they host it here.

Denver is "so easy to get around and walkable. And we went into it thinking that the location of the Pepsi Arena... was really going to impact what we did with traffic. Quite honestly, it never became a problem at all."

We'll try to do fam trips around the Grammys, the American Music Awards, the Emmy Awards and People's Choice Awards. We have access to the shows and venues with our partnerships here at the LATCB, so we can select customers to come have that red carpet experience. Many will want to use those venues for their conferences."

The Nashville CVC has been taking a more targeted approach to familiarization, says Spyridon. "If a planner is interested in coming we try to customize (the experience). If it's one or two people at a time, that's fine. We find we would rather talk specifically to someone who has interest. If we can spend quality time with quality prospects, our closing rate is significantly higher."

The same effort to customize carries over to the destination marketing for the meeting itself. In providing marketing assistance, "we really try to listen and see what the needs are and come up with customized solutions," says Spyridon. "It might be social media, designing a Web page, creating logos, etc." And again, the emphasis is on moving away from generic country music themes. "If planners engage us, I'd say we have had a great deal of success in broadening that. If they do it in a vacuum, they tend to gravitate toward the easy, stereotypical approach," he observes. "There are ways to use the music theme that are not as (predictable). For example, you might use lyrical words that tie into the brand,

playing on words like 'harmony,' when you talk about bringing your attendees in harmony, and getting them in tune. Instead of boots and a banjo, how about a keyboard or a woodwind instrument? These are ways to leverage (the music theme) but also broaden it."

Planning Tools

CVBs also can be part of the planning process by equipping planners and attendees with tools that help them navigate the city. Visit Denver has recently launched an interactive Denver Destination Planning Guide iPad app that allows planners to quickly and conveniently find everything from hotel maps and service provider listings to unique venues and itineraries in Denver and throughout Colorado, Benedick points out.

The CVB also has developed a "Come Early, Stay Late" program designed for pre- and post-meeting visits. "The program allows delegates to quickly and easily find great deals in world-class resorts within a two-hour drive of Denver," she says.

According to Harris, the CVB "provided us links to things to do around the city that we included in our communications to our consultants as well as placed on our internal website. We also had a campaign with hashtag #Share31, where we tried to give back to the city. So we did things like 31 free coffees: We would give coupons that they could take to the local coffee shop so people in Denver realized that we were there."

Future Client Satisfaction

As much as CVBs do for corporate clients before and during each event, they also can help to ensure that future meetings are successful by soliciting client feedback on their meeting venue projects. For example, while Los Angeles works to get a major expansion and modernization plan approved for its convention center, the LATCB is seeking feedback from both association and corporate planners on what kinds of features they would like to see in the new and improved facility. "We want to make sure we're investing in the right areas that will attract the groups we want to bring to L.A.," Green says. "We've drafted what we call a white paper asking questions about the ideal amount of meeting space, breakout space, connectivity, the flexibility of the space and so on."

Similarly, Visit Denver has completed a yearlong study of the Colorado Convention Center, "which offered recommendations on what we need to do to keep the building relevant to changes in the meeting industry," Benedick says. An updated convention center will help the city fulfill what the CVB sees as a "potential huge growth in attendance in fields such as medical, bioscience, energy and technology/engineering," she adds. These kinds of studies can certainly have a destination-marketing angle: They position the city as one that takes a proactive approach to planner satisfaction. — C&IT

Destination

Year after year, decade after decade, Florida ranks as one of the most prized meeting destinations in the U.S., especially during the winter. The Sunshine State offers a vast array of options, with a list of singular and unique individual destinations that offer something for every taste, from fashionable Palm Beach and fabled Amelia Island, to the world-renowned beaches of Sandestin, the sprawling metropolitan chic of Tampa/St. Petersburg, and the international appeal of red-hot Miami.

Amelia Island

When Houston-based commercial real estate firm

Transwestern was looking for an upscale East Coast destination for its 225-attendee annual executive leadership meeting, which had been held on the West Coast for several years, Kim Croley, executive vice president, national marketing and communications, chose Amelia Island, near Jacksonville in the northeast corridor of the Sunshine State.

As her hotel for the April event, Croley selected the 1,350-acre, 404-room Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort, which features a long list of recreational amenities including a spa, tennis courts and three Audubon International Certified Sanctuary golf courses.

“I have literally seen every major hotel in Florida that is big enough for us, from Miami to Jacksonville,” Croley says. “But for a number of reasons, we have very specific criteria when we’re looking at sites. Our decisions depend on a lot of different factors. For example, we like to have a good golf course onsite. We like to have a fairly good sized spa. We also take up a lot of ballroom space. And we like to have a plethora of recreational activities onsite. So when you take all of those things into account, our options are actually pretty limited.”

Recreational activities are very important to this particular meeting because “we have an entire afternoon of recreation,” Croley says. “And we typically offer five or six options that people can choose from, whether that’s playing in our golf tournament, or a spa experience, fishing or kayaking. All 225 of our attendees choose

something to be a part of. And when you’re a group that large, you have to have a diverse list of things you can do on-property.”

The recreational component of the company’s most important meeting is an element of Transwestern’s corporate culture, Croley says, and the leadership meeting is considered critical to their overall success. “And we always bill it as including relaxation, networking and recognition,” Croley says.

Popular activities at Omni, in addition to the golf course, included a Segway tour of the vast resort. “The resort is large, so they give you a training lesson on the Segway and then they take you on a guided tour of the grounds of the property,” Croley says.

Another highlight was saltwater kayaking through the adjacent marshland.

The Sunshine State Delivers

How Meeting in Sunny Florida Motivates and Inspires

By John Buchanan

Cooling off in the Atlantic Ocean at Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa.

Credit: Eau Palm Beach

Golf was a big hit. The company staged a shotgun tournament for about 95 people on the afternoon of the second day, during the same time other attendees enjoyed different recreational activities.

Other highlights of the meeting included an opening night reception that transitioned into an awards banquet.

The reception included heavy hors d'oeuvres with an open bar that featured high-end wines. "This particular group is a bunch of foodies and wine connoisseurs," Croley says, "so excellent food and wine are very important to them. They want the best of the best."

The sit-down dinner that followed was held in the hotel's newest ballroom, completed as part of an extensive renovation when Omni took control of the property. Awards were given out to top-producing brokers, as well as a property manager of the year.

Croley also has high praise for the Omni Amelia Island's 80,000 sf of meeting space. "The new conference center space they built is just phenomenal," she says.

She also applauded the hotel's F&B service. "It was one of the highlights of Omni Amelia Island for us," she says. "I would give it a five out of five."

Sandestin

The resort community of Sandestin — located on Florida's northwest coast along the Gulf of Mexico and hailed for some

"We like to have a good golf course onsite. We like to have a fairly good sized spa. We also take up a lot of ballroom space. And we like to have a plethora of recreational activities onsite."

Kim Croley
Executive V.P., National Marketing and Communications
Transwestern, Houston, TX



of the best beaches in the world — is revered among meeting planners who use it.

Jeff Williams, buyer for Gadsden, Alabama-based Dairyman's Supply, a distributor of building materials in the Southeast, has been hosting one or two meetings every year

for the last eight years at the AAA Four Diamond, 602-room Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, which features 32,000 sf of recently renovated meeting space.

Williams plans meetings that each draw about 140 vendors and customers. The serious business element of the meetings takes place in a single four-hour session that includes exhibits in two ballrooms of products and supplies from 10–15 vendors represented by Dairyman's Supply.

The rest of the four-day, three-night event, held last year in April and August, is intended for leisure and networking.

Given that purpose, Hilton Sandestin is an ideal venue, Williams says. "The area there is great. The beaches are great. And the Hilton Sandestin has just about unlimited entertainment including dining, tennis, golf. Once you arrive, you never really have to leave the property. Everything you could want is right there."

In particular, the first and last days of the meeting are dedicated to recreation and relaxation.

Most attendees bring spouses, and many couples bring children. Dairyman's

Supply is a family-friendly company and that corporate culture extends to its meetings.

"On those first and last days, we really want people to get out and enjoy themselves and take advantage of what's there," Williams says. "We don't want to make them be in meetings all day. Then the first night, we have a nice dinner with our vendors and customers."

One reason why Williams and his attendees like Hilton Sandestin so much is that it offers a number of excellent dining options onsite: the AAA Four Diamond Seagar's Prime Steaks & Seafood, Hadashi Sushi Bar and Barefoot's Beachside Bar & Restaurant.

"The restaurants are wonderful," Williams says. And because there are multiple options, for a group his size that means a dine-around can be done on-property.

"The F&B service there is just great," Williams says. "The whole package, in terms of what they offer, is just seamless and excellent. And that includes their catering and their meeting space."

Popular activities for attendees, and especially wives, include shopping at the nearby Silver Sands Premium Outlets mall, which features a roster of top fashion designers.

Despite the perennial popularity of the famous outlet mall, however, it is the beaches that are the star of the show. "The beaches there, to me, are the most beautiful beaches in Florida," Williams says. "And the beach amenities at the

Hilton Sandestin, like their beach restaurant and bar, are right there. And they have nice cabanas."

Dairyman's Supply also provides daily activities for children. Nearby offsite venues such as Grayton Beach and Baytown Wharf, which offer dining and entertainment, are also popular with many attendees, particularly on opening night, when small groups of vendors and customers get together.

A big part of Williams' long-running success with Hilton Sandestin, Williams says, is John Lovett, his on-property event planner for the past five years. "He has done an outstanding job every year, for us and for Hilton. The service we get is one of the main reasons we keep going back."

Tampa/St. Petersburg

Located on the central west coast of Florida on the Gulf of Mexico, the Tampa/St. Petersburg metropolis is yet another of the state's highly prized but not so well known meeting destinations.

St. Petersburg, located about 20 minutes from Tampa, features excellent beaches and a laidback ambience.

Kim Paszek, executive assistant to the president at TW Metals Inc. in Exton, Pennsylvania, chose the Tampa area — and St. Petersburg in particular — for the company's four-day, three-night, 125-attendee global sales meeting last January. Attendees included senior executives and outside account managers from the U.S., as well as international



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attendees from China, United Kingdom, France, Poland, India and Brazil.

Paszek submitted RFPs to several Florida destinations, and the primary reasons for the selection of Tampa/St. Petersburg were value proposition and airlift, she says. "It was convenient for all of our attendees to get to Tampa, even those coming in from around the world."

For her hotel, Paszek chose the AAA Four Diamond, 277-room Loews Don CeSar Hotel St. Pete Beach, which features 22,000 sf of newly renovated meeting space and 16,000 sf of premium outdoor event space, as well as Spa Oceana, and 24-hour fitness and business centers. Its flagship restaurant, Maritana Grille, was voted one of the top 10 seafood restaurants in the U.S. by *Gayote Guide*.

The decision to choose the hotel was instantaneous when she went on a site visit, Paszek says.

"As soon as I walked in the door, I knew it was the right property for the meeting. I knew it was the one I wanted. I have a great relationship with the Loews brand because they really are a relationship-based brand. But I didn't know about the Loews Don CeSar. I had called my Loews rep and I said I wasn't finding what I wanted in Florida, so she put me in touch with the property. And that was it. Once I saw the property, we were all set."

During her meeting, Paszek received exemplary service. "For me as a planner — and I stressed this to them beforehand — if something is not working, I want to know that before my people know that," she says. "And they were very, very good at our room setups, because they knew they were going to be difficult, based on what we needed and wanted. But I was able to go in and talk about it and get things resolved before anyone was even on the floor. The level of communication with the service staff was just outstanding."

She also gives strong reviews to Loews Don CeSar's F&B service. "We do full, hot breakfast buffets, lunch and dinner onsite," she says. "And everything was very smooth and on

time. The setups were also great. They do a beautiful presentation with food and beverage. And they do everything a little differently with each meal just to step up the experience. And again, the service was right on point for every meal."

A highlight of the meeting was an opening night reception in a ballroom located on the first floor. "It's a totally unique room," Paszek says. "It's just spectacular. Our attendees loved it." And the flow of the room, she adds, was important because networking is vitally important to this meeting.

Attendees also gave the destination and hotel rave reviews in Paszek's post-meeting survey. "Everyone was very positive," she says. "They loved the area and they loved the property."

Palm Beach County

Last year, when West Caldwell, New Jersey-based Ricoh Americas Corporation was looking for a new destination for its annual three-day leadership meeting, which draws 175 at-

"As soon as I walked in the door, I knew it (Loews Don CeSar) was the right property for the meeting. I have a great relationship with the Loews brand because they really are a relationship-based brand."

Kim Paszek
Executive Assistant to the President
TW Metals Inc., Exton, PA



tendees from the company's chairman down to its top executives, Dayle Russell, senior manager, corporate events, opted for Palm Beach County.

Russell and her management were drawn to Palm Beach County because it's a classic upscale Florida beach destination. "People recognize (the Palm Beaches) as a nice destination for a meeting," Russell says. "It's also a great location for a meeting at that time of year."

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Voted Top 10 Resorts in Florida





Credit: Streamsong Resort

Magnificent views of Streamsong in Central Florida from the resort's modern, sophisticated guest room.

time on the golf course as part of the meeting, Russell selected the AAA Four Diamond PGA National Resort & Spa in Palm Beach Gardens. The resort features 39,000 sf of conference space and five golf courses including The Champion course, home to the PGA Tour's annual Honda Classic.

The meeting kicked off with a round of golf, followed that evening with a buffet dinner at the outdoor Honda Pavilion venue. "The Honda Pavilion is a beautiful venue," Russell said. "And the food was excellent. I can't count all the people who came up to me and said, 'That was a wonderful dinner.' It was just a great way to get people mingling and talking with each other. It got the meeting off to a great start to a pretty intense business meeting."

The next day consisted of intensive meeting sessions.

"Then that night, we did a dine-around," Russell says. "And there are a number of great restaurants close to the hotel. The hotel also has some wonderful restaurants, but when you're sitting in a meeting all day, it's nice to get out and experience some other places."

Russell used Boca Raton-based destination management company Ancomp to select Café Chardonnay, Carmine's LaTrattoria, III Forks, Seasons 52, Spoto's Oyster Bar, and Vic and Angelo's as her area restaurants — and gave them all rave reviews.

She and her attendees also gave high marks to PGA National, which has completed a four-year, \$100 million renovation.

"People loved PGA National," Russell says. "The feedback I got from the leadership team was that we should absolutely consider coming back next year for the leadership. And we're actually going back for a different meeting in October."

Attendees were impressed by how smoothly the meeting went, Russell says. "And that means everything from the food and beverage to the setup and use of the meeting space. The service level was

wonderful. And it wasn't just the banquet staff that gave us great service. It was everybody, from the bell staff to house-keeping and shipping."

She also singles out her sales manager, Robin Prakash, for praise. "I've been planning meetings for a long time," she says. "And in all the years I've been doing this, he was one of the best sales managers I have ever dealt with. And he's part of the reason we're going back. I just can't say enough about PGA. For me as a planner and for all of our attendees, you just go in there and you feel very comfortable. Everyone is very nice and the service level is just wonderful. And based on all that, it's definitely a property that is now on our radar as one of our favorites for our meetings."

Miami

Laurie Mayson, customer relations and communications specialist at Birmingham, Alabama-based Integrated Medical Systems (IMS), a medical instrument and repair company, plans a series of eight seminars held throughout the year for 35–40 decision-makers from hospitals.

By definition, the meeting requires a high-end resort property. And each year, all eight of the meetings take place at the same hotel, from January through November.

For the past several years, IMS had used a property in Fort Lauderdale.

This year, however, Mayson moved them to the 408-room Turnberry Isle Miami, a member of Marriott's Autograph Collection. Turnberry Isle features more than 40,000 sf of meeting space, including a 12,080-sf Grand Ballroom. The Magnolia Courtyard is a 4,000-sf Mediterranean-style outdoor terrace that overlooks the famous 18th hole on Turnberry's Raymond Floyd-designed golf course. The resort property also features a Bourbon Steak restaurant from celebrity chef Michael Mina and a Cascata Grill, which serves sophisticated Mediterranean fare.

Mayson and the other members of IMS' site selection team visited Turnberry Isle last year. "We were immediately sold on the property and the staff," she says.

A key factor in the decision was Turnberry's range of meeting facilities and related amenities.



Credit: Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel

A grande deluxe guest room at the newly renovated Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel.



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“We were looking for a resort-type venue,” Mayson says. “And one of the key selling points for us is that there are so many things to do on the property.”

Rest and relaxation for attendees is a key component of the meeting. “These are hospital employees that are in high-stress jobs,” Mayson says. “All they do is work, work, work. So this meeting is sort of their vacation. And Turnberry Isle is a place where in their free time they can play golf, or go to a great fitness center, or take a shuttle to Aventura Mall across the street.” The hotel offers free shuttle service to the world-famous Aventura Mall every 30 minutes. Turnberry also offers free shuttle service to their private beach club on the ocean, about 10 minutes away.

“The other selling point for us was the property itself,” Mayson says. “It’s just beautiful.” They also liked the fact that it is located away from the mayhem of South Beach and bustling downtown Miami. “You just forget about all of that while you’re there,” Mayson says. “It is a very quiet, peaceful and relaxing resort with spacious, inviting and comfortable hotel rooms. It feels like home away from home. The meeting room accommodations, the professional staff and the friendly hospitality are the reasons we continue to return to the Turnberry.” Mayson also singled out Turnberry for its well-known standard of service. “They go out of their way to make sure we are happy,” she says. “They follow up really well with their customer surveys asking me how things went. And I always give them good reviews.”

New & Noteworthy

Central Florida’s **Streamsong Resort**, home to two golf courses, has announced plans to build a third course —



Kayaking at Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, Florida.

Streamsong Black. Set to open in autumn 2017, the course will be designed by Gil Hanse, architect of The Olympic Golf Course in Rio de Janeiro and co-designer of Castle Stuart Golf Links in Scotland, among others.

“You just forget about all of that while you’re (at Turnberry). It is a very quiet, peaceful and relaxing resort with spacious, inviting and comfortable hotel rooms. It feels like home away from home.”

Laurie Mayson
Customer Relations and Communications Specialist
Integrated Medical Systems International Inc., Birmingham, AL



Streamsong Black will be built directly southeast of the two existing courses, Streamsong Red and Streamsong Blue — designed by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw and Renaissance Golf Design (Tom Doak), respectively. With the addition of Streamsong Black, the resort will become the only location in the world where guests can enjoy three distinct courses designed by these four legendary architects.

The resort plans to add a second practice facility, clubhouse and restaurant to serve guests playing Streamsong Black.

In addition to world-class golf, Streamsong features a 216-room Lodge, with three casual and fine dining restaurants, conference and event facilities, a spa and infinity pool.

New events, attractions, meeting venues and hotel renovations in **Jacksonville** include renovations at the Crowne Plaza Jacksonville Riverfront, which will become a DoubleTree Hilton by August 2015; an 88-room TownPlace Suites by Marriott will be located next to a Hampton Inn & Suites; a Courtyard by Marriott is set to open late 2016 in downtown Jacksonville; and renovations have been completed on the new DoubleTree Hilton at the Jacksonville International Airport.

New meeting venues and renovations: The new Jessie Ball DuPont Center (formerly the Haydon Burns Library) in downtown Jacksonville is expected to open in June 2015 as a nonprofit hub. After a \$21

million renovation, the building will house a conference center, a lecture hall, 12 meeting rooms, reception spaces, a catering kitchen and more, including plans for a green roof garden that will be available for special events.

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George Aguel, president and CEO of **Visit Orlando** reports that they “expect that last year’s record demand for hotel rooms and near record occupancy of almost 74 percent pushed TDT (tourist development tax) for the full calendar year over \$200 million for the first time in Orlando history. We haven’t seen this level of occupancy since 1996, when the Cowboys beat the Steelers in Super Bowl XXX.” Convention business is coming back strong. In 2014, Visit Orlando booked more than \$2 billion in future conventions.



The inviting oceanfront terrace with warming firepit at Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa in Palm Beach, Florida.

Credit: Eau Palm Beach

Hyatt Regency Orlando boasts new offerings including a new seafood-focused restaurant, spa treatments catering to the business traveler, and a new kosher kitchen offering specialized menus for meetings and conventions.

The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel, located in Orlando between Epcot and Disney’s Hollywood Studios, is in the midst of the largest makeover in its history. The hotel launched a multiphase, multiyear, \$125 million redesign project that will transform every guest room in the 758-room Swan Hotel and the 1,509-room Dolphin Hotel. The entire rooms project is scheduled for completion by the end of 2017. The transformation will occur without disruption of service as the majority of guest rooms will be



Credit: Sundial Beach Resort

Sundial Beach Resort on Sanibel and Captiva Islands recently renovated meeting facilities.

available throughout the process. The hotel’s public spaces, restaurants, meeting rooms, shops, pools and recreational areas will not be impacted and remain fully operational throughout the renovation.

The Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo announced plans to begin construction on new meeting and function space, which is scheduled to open early February 2016. This new meeting space will feature a state-of-the-art 5,500-sf ballroom; five breakout rooms, all with natural light; a 3,000-sf interactive cooking school; and wraparound outdoor decks with breathtaking views of the marina. Total meeting fa-

cilities will then measure just under 30,000 sf of flexible indoor and outdoor space.

The focal point of the new complex will be the interactive cooking school, which will give groups an opportunity to add a new twist to their meeting agenda. Attendees will don chefs’ hats and coats and join in on the fun of learn-

ing how to cook a fresh Florida lobster or what “Farm to Table” really means.

Palm Beach’s luxurious **Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa** recently partnered with Jonathan Adler to completely redesign all 309 guest rooms, which feature new exclusive furnishings designed by Adler.

Inspired by its namesake spa, Eau Palm Beach Resort and Spa is situated on a private beach along the Atlantic coast. The 42,000-sf Eau Spa was just awarded five stars by *Forbes Travel Guide*, and is one of fewer than 50 spas around the world to earn the prestigious five-star rating. With more than 30,000 sf of meeting and event space, the resort accommodates groups from 10 to 1,000 and offers a wide variety of indoor and outdoor venues for private events.

The re-designed **Sundial Beach Resort**, recently named the “Best Full-Service Resort” on Sanibel and Captiva Islands invested more than \$6 million in refreshed amenities. The resort features the new Resort Centre, which is the largest meeting venue on Sanibel Island. Boasting 12,000 sf of flexible space, the center accommodates up to 300 guests and features unique outdoor event space with water views. Newly renovated meeting facilities include nine separate event rooms all with expansive gulf views, a full business center and AV capabilities. Wireless Internet is available throughout all meeting rooms.

Sundial Beach Resort’s three brand new restaurants each offer their own unique culinary style and menus. Waterview provides ample space with floor-to-ceiling windows offering unbeatable views, and the Sea Breeze Café has a spacious bar, live music and an outside terrace.

Scheduled to open in spring 2016, **The Henderson**, a beachfront resort hotel in Destin, Florida, will be managed by Sheila C. Johnson’s Salamander Hotels & Resorts.

The 171 guest rooms and suites will include stylish furnishings, yet remain authentic to the local cultural surroundings. Larger than typical luxury resort guest rooms, they will feature custom furnishings, luxurious bedding, elegant bathrooms, and balconies or terraces.

The Henderson will feature 10,000 sf of indoor event space, including a dedicated meeting wing, a 5,400-sf ballroom, a junior ballroom, private boardrooms and nearly 30,000 sf of outdoor group options, including oceanfront function locations.

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The New Nashville

By Derek Reveron

Why Music City Meetings Rock

As a meeting destination, Nashville is hotter than a country music star with a chart-topping hit. The city's fast-growing meeting, convention and hotel space is attracting record numbers of meetings and conventions, including many corporate groups that had never before considered Nashville.

Such companies include Experian, a global information services company. Experian will hold its first-ever meeting in Nashville in April at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center, which offers 600,000 sf of meeting space. Experian's three-day North American sales conference is expected to attract 750 attendees.

Pleasant Surprise

Experian began to consider Nashville at the suggestion of the company's former CEO. "About five years ago, he asked us about meeting in Nashville," says Laurie Touchberry, CMP, Experian's director of corporate events. "The suggestion really surprised

us, but we looked into it. We were pleasantly surprised to find that Nashville has so much more to offer than we thought as far as properties and meeting space. We liked that downtown was close and that it's a walkable city. And I didn't realize what a great place for food it is. We are excited. This is a whole new type of destination for us."

Touchberry sought a property that could meet Experian's considerable technology needs. "Most of our salespeople will have at least two devices," she says. "We do real-time online polling during our presentations and 50 to 60 breakouts. We have to make sure people can tweet about sessions and share information online with others who couldn't make it to the meeting."

Experian also needed ample bandwidth for its meeting app. "The app has been pretty popular the last few years," says Touchberry. "It offers lots of information about the meeting and breakout agenda so people can make their personalized agendas. We give them information about speakers and a map of the venue because it is huge. There's attendee contact information so they can network before, during and after the event. We can also push out communications to attendees by email or text."

Touchberry discussed her technology needs during her site visit. "We asked them specifically about the bandwidth and told them what our usage has been in the past," she says. "They assured us they have enough bandwidth and gave us examples of how they met the technology needs of other corporations."

The Experian meeting also will take advantage of Nashville's musical heritage. "We will have a networking dinner at the Grand Ole Opry, where we will have some type of musical en-



The Grand Ole Opry can accommodate up to 4,400 people in the auditorium and more than 200 for dinners or receptions on stage.

Credit: Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp.



The live music scene in the Broadway Historic District, a.k.a. "Honky Tonk Highway," offers more than just country.

Credit: Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp.



Credit: Courtney Davidson/Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum



Credit: Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp.

The Hall of Fame Rotunda is just one of several stunning indoor and outdoor event spaces available for group rental at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, which is connected to the Omni Nashville Hotel.

tainment,” says Touchberry. “After that, many people will hit the places downtown.”

Record Numbers

Corporations meeting in Nashville for the first time are helping the city set records. The number of hotel rooms sold and the amount of hotel tax collected increased 48 consecutive months through 2014, according to the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp. (NCVC). In October 2014, Nashville set an all-time monthly record for hotel room bookings. In addition, Nashville’s year-over-year hotel demand in November 2014 was the fastest growing in the nation, according to Smith Travel Research.

Nashville’s brand is broader than just country music. (See related story on page 28.) The city now has a dual reputation — music city and top meeting destination. “We have made ourselves into a very planner user-friendly city,” says Carol Norfleet, CMP, DMCP, executive vice president and COO of Destination Nashville, a local DMC. “The Gaylord, one of the largest conven-

tainable practices, including maintaining a green roof with a 200-kilowatt solar panel.

Music City Center is a prime reason why Nashville booked meetings at a record pace in 2014, according to Butch Spyridon, president and CEO of Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp., who expects to set more records in 2015. “This will probably be the fifth year in a row of record sales,” he says. “We will probably show at the end of the year that we hosted four of the largest conventions in the history of the city. We are very competitive, and we are winning more than we lose against our competitors. The MCC has enough space to attract 75–80 percent of the convention business nationwide. We feel like that’s the sweet spot.”

Nashville is especially hot in the corporate meetings sector. Norfleet says the reasons are innumerable. “We are within a day’s drive of 60 percent of the U.S. population,” she says. “We are a Southwest Airlines hub. The meeting space within hotels and the convention center is fabulous. There is a lot to do. And there are many great venues.”

Norfleet notes that the downtown music venues are popular among corporate groups. “Our biggest showcase downtown is the Wild Horse Saloon, which is three stories,” she says. “It showcases country music and other types of bands. It has the biggest dance floor in town, and there is a lot of square footage for large groups. The honky-tonks, which are everywhere you turn, keep live music going almost 24 hours a day.”

In addition, Nashville offers posh private event venues. For example, Aerial, located on Broadway, hosts up to 250 people in a stylish space with a glass-enclosed rooftop and 2,000-sf patio.

Nashville’s many recording studios also are popular venues for events, receptions and teambuilding events. “We rent the studios for groups for an afternoon or evening,” says Norfleet. “Many times, as a teambuilding exercise, we bring in songwriters to write a song with attendees and they record it on the spot.”

In addition, the food scene has exploded over the last few years, Norfleet says. “There was a time when if it wasn’t a food chain or a basic restaurant, it wasn’t here,” she says. “Now we have everything from ethnic cuisine to fine dining. Celebrity chefs are starting to discover us. I keep a running list of restau-

rants I need to try. There are about 20 on the list. Most opened in the last year or will open soon.” Many of the restaurants are located within a few miles of the MCC, she adds.

Maximizing the City’s Offerings

Beachbody Inc., a Santa Monica, California-based direct sales company that markets fitness, weight loss and home-exercise DVDs, plans to take full advantage of most of Nashville’s venues. Beachbody will hold a three-day meeting for more than 20,000 distributors in Nashville this July.

The company is planning four parties for its top four tiers of distributors. “We are using the Country Music Hall of Fame for our top group,” says Kelli Gilbert, Beachbody V.P., global events and recognition. “We don’t know who the country music entertainer will be yet. We are closing part of downtown near Sixth Street for another party, and The Wild Horse Saloon for another.” For the fourth party, Gilbert will be shutting down Second Street or Lower Broadway downtown, the heart of the live music scene known as Honky Tonk Highway. The newly expanded Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum is connected on several levels to the Omni Nashville Hotel and is across the street from the Music City Center.

Beachbody’s meeting functions will take place in Nashville’s most prominent meeting and convention sites: The MCC will host opening and closing sessions; distributor recognition events will take place at LP Field, a football stadium; and Bridgestone Arena will be the site of the general session.

There was a time when Nashville couldn’t provide meeting space and hotel rooms for 20,000 attendees. Not anymore. “We are contracted with about 43 hotels,” says Gilbert. “We are creating a shuttle service for guests. We have over 1,000 rooms at the Gaylord Opryland, and we are creating a separate shuttle system there for those people.”

The NCVC played a crucial role in helping Beachbody with the numerous details involved in planning such a large and complex meeting. “They have been instrumental in every decision we have made, including the vendors we selected, closing down parts of downtown, and the hotel package. They have been like a partner or extension of us. It’s the first time we have experienced that,” says Gilbert. And, she adds, “We feel like everything we are getting has been the best possible value for us.”

Beachbody selected Nashville after meeting in Las Vegas for three consecutive years at the MGM Grand Hotel & Casino. “We had great experiences there but we just wanted to try something different in another part of the country,”



“This will probably be the fifth year in a row of record sales. ... We are very competitive.”

Butch Spyridon, President and CEO
Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp.

says Gilbert. “Nashville has gotten such a good reputation, and it’s something on people’s bucket lists. It is so different from Las Vegas, but that’s what is good about it.”

Gilbert and her staff leaned toward meeting in Nashville during their site visit. “When we saw Nashville, we thought it would be one-stop shopping for us,” says Gilbert. “They had the space and availability. It’s well-positioned in the U.S. for our distributors all over the country. And we liked how much they wanted us to be there.”

The only thing that limits Nashville from attracting even more and larger meetings is sleeping room supply. The demand for rooms exceeds the supply, says Spyridon. “The biggest obstacle for us in terms of getting more business is having enough room blocks,” he says.

More rooms are on the way. Plans call for building two new hotels: **The Westin Nashville Hotel** and a **JW Marriott** —

“We were pleasantly surprised to find that Nashville has so much more to offer than we thought.”

Laurie Touchberry, CMP, Director of
Corporate Events, Experian, Costa Mesa, CA



tion and meeting hotel properties under one roof in the nation outside of Las Vegas, gave us the resort market. The Music City Center (MCC) gave us a downtown urban convention center property. So we have the best of both worlds for meetings — downtown urban and a resort in one city.”

The face of Nashville’s new reputation is the Music City Center. The city’s new 2.1-million-sf, state-of-the-art convention center features a 350,000-sf exhibit hall, 60 meeting rooms and the 57,500-sf Grand Ballroom. In addition, the MCC holds LEED Gold Certification and engages in environmentally sus-







HOTELS GET RENOVATIONS. HILTONS GET MAKEOVERS.

Hilton Nashville Downtown, a AAA Four-Diamond hotel nestled in the heart of “Music City”, emerges from a multi-million dollar re-invention. The only all-suites full service luxury hotel in downtown Nashville unveils chic and modern upgrades to all 330 guest suites, atrium lobby, grand ballroom, meeting rooms and a landmark executive lounge. Trattoria Il Mulino will open the latest addition in Spring 2015.

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Credit: Hilton Nashville Downtown

The rooftop Ryman Terrace is just one of the distinctive event spaces available at the Hilton Nashville Downtown, which offers a total of 17,800 sf of meeting space.

across from the MCC. The 35-story JW Marriott hotel will be the tallest building in Nashville and will offer 500 to 600 sleeping rooms. The JW Marriott is expected to open by the end of 2017.

Developers broke ground on the 454-room Westin Nashville in mid-January. The Westin Nashville will feature two restaurants, as well as a rooftop pool and bar. Construction of the hotel is expected to be completed by the end of 2016. In addition, plans are underway to break ground on the **Virgin Nashville Hotel** this spring, which will bring another 240 guest rooms to Nashville in fall 2016.

The 800-room **Omni Nashville Hotel** connects to the Country Music Hall of Fame and sits across from MCC. The property offers 80,000 sf of meeting space. Both the hotel and the MCC opened in September 2013.

The 340-room **Loews Vanderbilt Hotel** has undergone renovations that include a redesigned lobby, refreshed corridors, and new public and guest bathrooms. The project also added a new Mason's Southern brasserie-style restaurant and Mason Bar, which features live music, a nine-screen media wall and a Mason jar chandelier. The property offers 24,000 sf of meeting space.

The Hilton Nashville Downtown — the city's only all-suites, full-service luxury downtown hotel — has completed a new lobby and renovated all 330 suites as part of a \$32 million renovation. The hotel also improved its 17,800 sf of flexible meeting space, including the grand ballroom. In addition, the hotel has a new executive lounge complete with a grand fireplace. The AAA Four Diamond property has transformed its grand atrium lobby into a lively social space with a Nashville-inspired design that includes warm woods, polished marble and sleek metals.

The lobby features a new grand circular entrance and marble floor with modern rugs and elegant but comfortable furniture that invites guests to relax and network. The renovation

also transformed the Parkview Café & Lounge and MarketStreet restaurant. The entire renovation project will be complete when the Hilton Nashville introduces a Trattoria II Mulino Italian restaurant this spring.

The hotel also features The Palm Steak House, a fine-dining venue with a reputation for attracting musicians including Harry Connick Jr., Lady Antebellum and Little Richard. The Sports Grille is currently being converted to an upscale Italian restaurant.

Located across the street from the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Hilton Nashville offers Wi-Fi throughout the hotel and features onsite car rental service.

The Renaissance Nashville Hotel has completed the final phase of a \$12 million renovation that included its 700

guest rooms, meetings rooms and grand ballroom. The project increased the fitness center's space by 50 percent. Renovations also included a new lobby, guest floor corridors and the addition of a Starbucks. The 673-room property offers more than 31,000 sf of meeting space.

The 28-story **Sheraton Nashville Downtown Hotel** is un-



Credit: Starwood Hotels & Resorts

Nashville, a Southwest airlines hub, is "within a day's drive of 60 percent of the U.S. population," says Destination Nashville.

dergoing a \$25 million makeover. The renovation includes all 482 guest rooms; a brand new lobby featuring a floating wooden staircase; a 25-story glass chandelier; and custom seating areas. The property has 25,000 sf of meeting space.

The Sheraton Music City Hotel, which offers a resort-like setting, has refreshed its fitness center. Complimentary airport transportation is available. The 410-room property offers 33,000 sf of meeting space.

Any planner who still views Nashville as simply a great place for country music doesn't know the destination. "There is not enough time to do everything you want to do in Nashville," says Norfleet. "The hardest decision is what to leave out." **C&IT**

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Suzanne Taylor was named regional director of sales and marketing for four Heritage Hotels & Resorts properties in Santa Fe, New Mexico: the Eldorado Hotel & Spa, Hotel Chimayo de Santa Fe, Hotel St. Francis and the Lodge at Santa Fe. She most recently served as the director of sales and marketing for the Hilton Santa Fe Historic Plaza.

Aaron Missner was named as regional director of accounts for Wynn Las Vegas and Encore Las Vegas, responsible for the Northeast region. He formerly served as account director in the Northeast territory for the Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board.

Jon Chocklett was named as vice president of sales and business development for The Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC. He was director of sales and marketing for The Mandarin Oriental in Washington, DC.

The Hilton Chicago/Oak Brook Hills Resort & Conference Center in Oak Brook, Illinois, has appointed **Nathan Karsten** as director of sales and marketing. He formerly served as director of sales and marketing for the Millennium Knickerbocker Hotel Chicago.

Francis W. Purvey was named director of sales and marketing for

Sonesta Fort Lauderdale in Florida. He most recently served as director of sales and marketing for The Shores Resort & Spa in Daytona Beach Shores, Florida.

One Ocean Resort & Spa in Atlantic Beach, Florida, has promoted **Jeanne Bothwell** to associate director of sales. She most recently served as group sales manager at the resort.

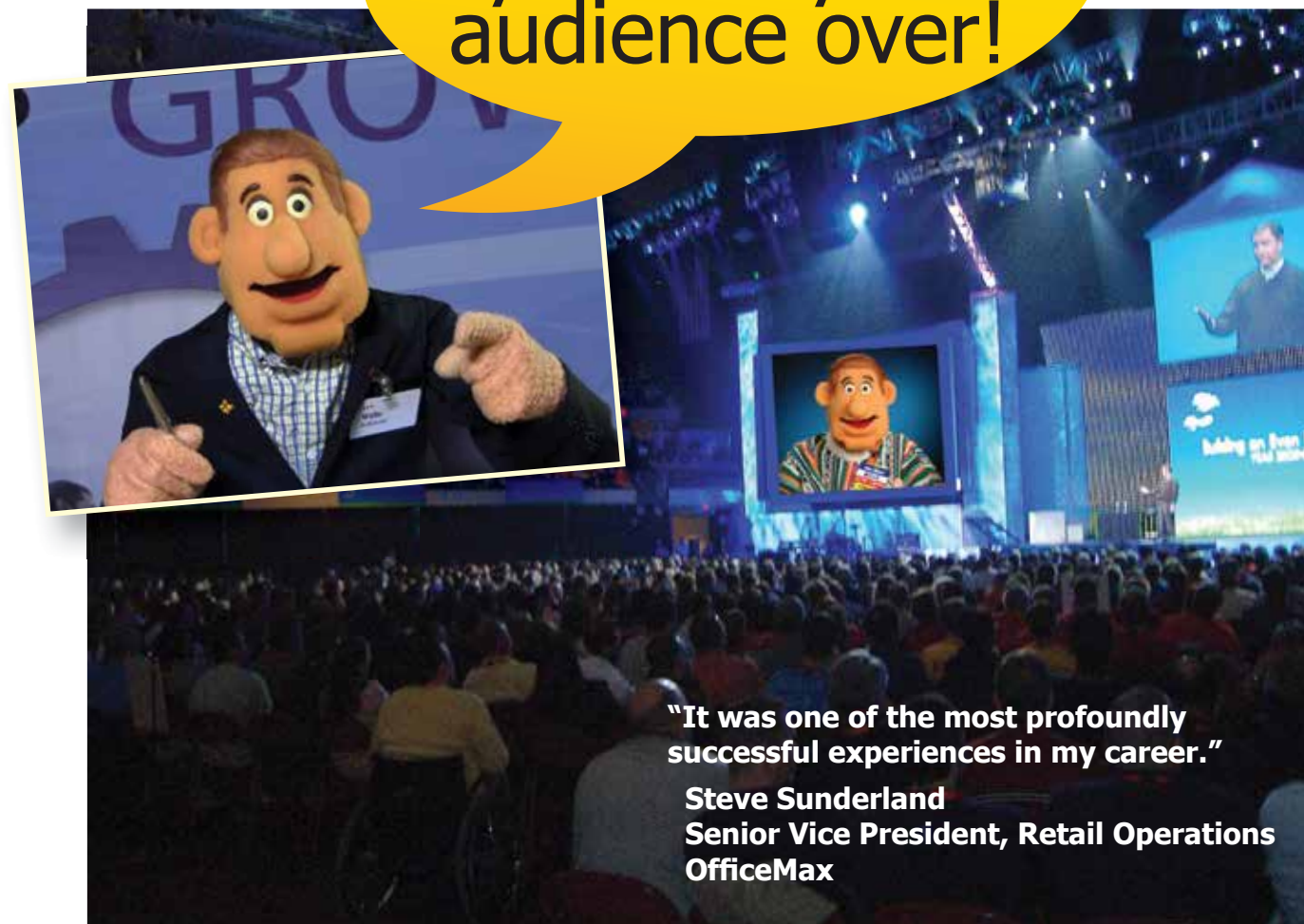
Julie Branstrom was named director of sales and marketing for Gateway Canyons Resort & Spa, Gateway, Colorado. She was executive director of sales and travel agencies at Devil's Thumb Ranch Resort & Spa, Tabernash, Colorado. *C&IT*

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