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CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS



Michael A. Massari, Caesars Entertainment's senior vice president of national meetings and events, pictured in Atlantic City at Harrah's Atlantic City — home to the new Waterfront Conference Center.

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An aerial view of The Broadmoor Cloud Camp in Colorado Springs.

Small Meetings & Executive Retreats 'It's About Finding the Right Fit'

According to this year's Annual Meetings Market Survey conducted by the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA), the number of small meetings is on the rise. Survey respondents reported that in 2015 they held an average of 34 meetings with fewer than 50 attendees, compared to 29 meetings in 2014.

Overall, 28 percent of respondents held more small meetings in 2015 than 2014, and 26 percent expect to plan more small meetings this year, compared to 24 percent in 2014.

From lead time to demonstrating meeting value, the following meeting pros and experts show how planning small meetings and executive retreats can be accomplished successfully.

Lead Time

Small meetings growth occurs as planners continue to face challenges in planning them. One of the biggest challenges is lead time, says Christine Shimasaki, CMP, CDME, managing director

of Destination Marketing Association International's (DMAI) EmpowerMINT. "Typically small meetings are planned in a shorter lead time, and this causes challenges with finding availability and paying higher rates, especially in this strong seller's market," says Shimasaki. "On the other hand, if your dates fall over a time when a hotel has availability, you can take advantage of negotiating in a position of strength."

Cori Dossett, CMP, CEM, president of Dallas, Texas-based Conferences Designed, was able to negotiate a favorable package for a company's 40-attendee board meeting last year in New Orleans because of its meeting pattern. "Because this is a small group that meets right after Thanksgiving and only during the week days, I feel we are able to get good rates," says Dossett.

Dossett also was favorably impressed with upgrades and amenities. "We negotiated upgraded meeting room Wi-Fi as part of our AV package," she says. "They sent a few extra VIP amenities that I did not request. The hotel also went above

and beyond in special ordering, at their suggestion, a few wines for dinner that our group and several VIPs really liked.

By Derek Reveron

The hotel worked with me on the detail of specific furniture, band and bar placement as well as table setup in the space to make the room work for our group."

Many planners complain that hotels respond slowly to small-business RFPs or not at all. However, Dossett didn't find that to be the case with the 300-room Windsor Court Hotel. "We selected this property partly because of the attentiveness throughout the RFP process and the meeting space," says Dossett.

"This particular hotel has high-level space with nice views that could be used for small (10 people) breakouts and the full board (35 people)," adds Dossett. "The space itself was nicely appointed. In addition, the hotel had various space options for lovely dinners. We utilized a trio of rooms including the library and formal boardroom that were elegant and delightful."

Attendees also were pleased with the venue. “The group loved the property and would certainly go back there should a need arise,” says Dossett. “

Dossett says she plans successful small meetings by using a healthy lead time whenever possible. “Through experience in working with small groups, I have gotten better rates six to nine months out with hotels looking to fill a hole in their meeting space and room blocks,” says Dossett. “I have had hotels say six months out that they will not consider a meeting if it is not their ideal rooms-to-meeting space ratio, or does not exactly fit the hole they have.”

Cast a Wide Net

Small meeting experts say to cast a wide net and consider properties of all sizes among downtown and suburban hotels, conference centers, airport properties and resorts. That’s a strategy employed by Eric Hrubant, president of New York-based Cire Travel, a division of Tzell Travel Group, who plans dozens of small meetings a year.

Hrubant held a three-day meeting for a New York-based software company at Club Med Sandpiper Bay in Port St. Lucie, Florida, located about 45 minutes north of the Palm Beach International Airport. The meeting included 109 employees from across the United States and Canada.

The meeting was planned on short notice. “I booked it 10 weeks in advance and most of the work on it was done only four to six weeks in advance,” says Hrubant. “Even then, it’s important to know your clients and match the overall culture of the company with the perfect destination and hotel. My clients did not want a destination that involved...passports, and they liked the idea of an all-inclusive resort so they could control spending. I checked various ski destinations and spa properties but Club Med Sandpiper was the perfect choice.”

Hrubant says that Club Med offered several services he seeks to meet the needs of small meetings. “Club Med offers a meeting package that includes meeting space and private dinners,”

says Hrubant. “They went above and beyond with the meeting space. They helped plan outdoor restaurant reservations with indoor backup in the event of inclement weather. Club Med also helped plan the first-night reception in an outdoor space with cocktails and dinner. Even the ground transportation company that Club Med contracted was professional and always proactive. I got compliments from attendees all during the meeting.”

Like Dossett, Hrubant also was able to gain some concessions — something that is typically difficult to do for small meetings, says Shimasaki.

Finding the Right Fit

Shimasaki offers the following tips for gaining small-meeting concessions: “In order to gain concessions, it is necessary to keep your meeting space in line with the hotel’s guest rooms to meeting space ratio,” says Shimasaki. “Limiting the amount of breakout space you need and using the main meeting room for meals can help you avoid additional costs and perhaps even get concessions. Also, giving the hotel an opportunity to bid on a larger meeting at the same time they consider your small program can have advantages.”

Conventional wisdom among some planners is that it’s a little easier to

fits on top of a larger meeting at a big property can in fact be very desirable.”

There is another key factor to consider when considering large and small properties: “Do you like to be a big fish in a small pond and receive lots of attention and high levels of service?” says Shimasaki. “Or do you want to be a little fish in a big pond and not receive the same level of attention, but take advantage of a greater number of services and amenities a larger property can provide? There is no set answer here, but there is a sweet spot for each meeting and property. The key is finding it. To do so, be very specific with your objectives and needs, and let the hotel respond with its best options.”

Dossett has a slightly different take. “Being the small fish in a big pond no matter how elegant the hotel, can make a small group feel lost,” she says. “Unless it would fit your group’s dynamic, and it is acceptable to get a fantastic rate when you are filling a gap in a larger property, I would steer a small corporate group to a smaller property. Smaller does not have to mean fewer amenities. Many times, it is the opposite.”

Demonstrate Meeting Value

It’s easier to plan small meetings when clients value them and budget accordingly. But some stakeholders don’t



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**CORI DOSSETT, CMP, CEM, President
Conferences Designed, Dallas, TX**

find the right property for small meetings at smaller properties because they value the business more. “Not necessarily,” says Shimasaki. “It’s about finding the right fit. A small meeting that

value small and large meetings equally. In these cases, Shimasaki advises planners to gather as much information as possible to demonstrate the value of the meeting and include it in the RFP.

A Unique Retreat in the Clouds

Alisa Metcalf, executive assistant at APEX, DaVita HealthCare Partners, in Denver, Colorado, wowed Senior Vice President Maggie Anderson by staging a successful meeting in the clouds. And we don't mean a virtual meeting in the *cloud* but an actual leadership team retreat at The Cloud Camp at The Broadmoor, which sits atop Cheyenne Mountain — 3,000 feet above The Broadmoor.

Anderson, who fell in love with The Broadmoor at her first visit early in 2015, intuitively knew it would be the ideal venue for their 18-person team retreat set for that October. Metcalf got to work and arranged an incredible event for her boss. "The Cloud Camp at The Broadmoor was unlike anything we have ever done as a team. We had the entire lodge to ourselves, and it was beautiful."

Metcalf was very impressed with The Broadmoor's staff and level of service. "The Broadmoor staff is one of the most responsive and competent in the hospitality business. It's tough to beat their level of customer service," she says. "The staff was available for any and all requests, and they were so friendly and accommodating."

The retreat consisted of a good mix of activities and

content, says Metcalf, who again applauded the conference team at The Broadmoor, who "were so helpful in the planning stages of the meeting. They knew all the right questions and really anticipated all of our needs." For example, "It looked like it was going to rain, so they quickly moved our group yoga activity indoors, and it was perfect."

Metcalf adds, "They just really know their space and what will work and what will not. They are very good at what they do." In addition, "all of the equipment worked beautifully, and they delivered on all that they said they could do for us."

The quality of the food and the overall ambience greatly enhanced the attendee experience, according to Metcalf. Dinner was a real treat and very popular. She describes dinner in the main lodge as a "beautiful table with a very rustic feel, but still very luxurious, and the food was fantastic every night."

The location of The Cloud Camp, on top of Cheyenne Mountain, is roughly a 45-minute drive up a private road to the very secluded site. Metcalf says, "All of the rooms were so unique, and it was just such a special place."

"The more you know, the more you can show," she says.

Start by keeping a good history on guest room pickup and overall spend in F&B, audio-visual, restaurant, bar and meeting space expenditures just like planners of big meetings do. "It is easy to ask the hotel to provide this kind of accounting for any size group," says Shimasaki. "Just make sure to ask in advance of your meeting for a detailed accounting at the end." Also include a list of CEOs, directors and other VIPs in attendance because they influence the decision-making about other meetings.

Flexibility about meetings dates is a must for obtaining the best small business deals. Educating meeting stakeholders about the hotel market can increase the likelihood of meeting flexibility. "Perhaps the biggest lever that a planner could exercise is to educate and prepare their internal customer (the boss or meeting owner) about the realities of the seller's market today and get agreement on flexibility before communicating with hotels, and convince them that flexibility will allow the planner to save the company money," says Shimasaki.

Planners who know how to nego-

tiate with properties usually can get some concessions.

Good Advice

Experts and planners recommend the following advice for getting the best deal in today's seller's market.

Be flexible. It's a seller's market. Don't be a hardliner when it comes to meeting dates, meeting space and budget items such as food and beverage. Being flexible is especially important when a small meeting uses meeting space that the hotel feels is disproportionately larger than the meeting size.

Be selective. Choose concession requests carefully. "What concession requests fall into your must-have and want-to-have categories?" says Dossett. "Really look at your program and see what is important to the end user and what makes the most sense to your bottom line. This is true for any size meeting, but adding small things becomes extremely important to smaller corporate meetings."

Consider alternative spaces. Be willing to use alternative meeting spaces such as dining areas and outdoor patios. Re-schedule off-property meals to on-

property venues to increase the hotel's revenue and get more negotiating clout. Also use general session rooms for meals.

Consider alternative properties.

Many small boutique hotels welcome small meetings. Museums and commercial properties also offer deals for small meetings.

Use CVBs. "The key is to find hotels that need your business, and it can be helpful to get an overview of destination availability from a CVB sales professional," says DMAI's Shimasaki. "They can quickly help you ascertain which hotels have availability and can meet your needs and provide rates within your budget. Using them to help you filter the destination's offerings can save you a lot of time and frustration."

Use a national hotel representative representing a chain. This increases the volume of business over time with one hotelier, thus increasing buying power for meetings over time

Have the longest lead time possible. The longer the lead time, the easier it is to get space, even with small meetings. At least six months is recommended. According to the PCMA survey, the average booking window for small meetings



Credit: Associated Luxury Hotels International

The Broadmoor's Wilderness Experience includes The Broadmoor's Cloud Camp, the Ranch at Emerald Valley (shown here), Broadmoor Fishing Camp and Seven Falls.

In addition to enjoying the staff's morning sunrise and flag-raising event, the attendees were treated to a slew of activities such as mule rides, guided hikes, yoga, horse-shoes, archery and walks around the grounds.

Metcalfe says the team would "absolutely" return to Cloud Camp at The Broadmoor in a heartbeat. "Our team really loved it. They thought it was really special and were very grateful for the experience," she relates.

Metcalfe also says her group met their company objective:

"After two nights up there, the team walked away refreshed and rejuvenated."

The Broadmoor's Cloud Camp, part of the resort's Wilderness Experience portfolio, is located approximately seven miles from The Broadmoor.

Cloud Camp offers 360-degree views of Colorado Springs and the surrounding valley. Inspired by the historic timber and stone lodges of the American West, Cloud Camp is anchored by an 8,000-sf main lodge featuring hand-hewn beams and stone fireplaces, as well as a wraparound deck. Cloud Camp can sleep small groups of up to 56 guests total among 12 one- and two-bedroom guest cabins, as well as seven accommodations in the lodge, and an adjacent suite.

A unique two-story Fire Tower suite features a living room and bedroom, each with 360-degree views. Each cabin features a private porch, beautifully appointed furnishings and modern amenities along with spectacular views of Pikes Peak, Colorado's Front Range and the plains.

Cloud Camp guests enjoy activities such as hiking, mule rides, archery, arts and crafts, and Cloud Camp's signature nightly Cooking Club. Other activities include massage services, jeep tours, river rafting, hot air balloon rides and ranch roundup excursions.

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is 10 months (although many lead times are actually shorter), compared to nine months in the 2014 survey. The average lead time for large meetings is 2.3 years.

New & Noteworthy

Planners traditionally have noted that some properties modulate the effort they put into accommodating booking dates, space and other small-meeting preferences because they represent low payoff. However, more hotels are tailoring sales and marketing approaches to attract small meetings.

Here are some examples:

Meetings Simplified by **Hilton Hotels and Resorts** offers bundled pricing that reduces the time to book meetings for 25 sleeping rooms or fewer with up to 50 attendees. Planners choose the options and Hilton replies quickly with a quote.

The meeting package includes:

- Meeting room.
- Basic meeting Wi-Fi.
- Flip chart and markers.
- All day nonalcoholic beverage service.
- Per person pricing.

Additional options:

- Breakfast, lunch and dinner options.

- Healthful and fun break options to enhance energy levels.
- LCD projector and screen or monitor.

Marriott has its **QuickGroup** tool, which streamlines online bookings for groups with 10–25 guest rooms and meeting space for up to 50 people. If a planner needs 10–25 sleeping rooms (and/or event space for up to 50 guests), Marriott has a streamlined booking process and boasts easy-to-use digital tools to help manage the group's stay, while letting individuals choose their own rooms.

Kimpton hotels offers **Kimpton Instant Meetings**, known as K.I.M., which allows planners to book meetings online:

- Reserving 5–45 days out
- Blocking 6–25 guests rooms
- Booking meetings for 6–50 guests
- Staying up to seven days

As a special incentive from Kimpton, if planners book a group or meeting online using K.I.M., they'll earn an American Express Gift Card worth 5 percent of their total booked revenue. Go to www.kimptonhotels.com for dates and information.

Associated Luxury Hotels Inter-

national offers the **U-200 Gems Collection** luxury brand segment, a group of 19 AAA Four- and Five-Diamond quality hotels and resorts with fewer than 200 rooms.

Specializing in exclusive gatherings, these hotels are prized for their privacy, security, service and amenities. The properties allow smaller meetings to be a main focus of the property without competing with much larger groups. This segment of "Under 200" rooms ensures that your group receives personal attention.

Nowadays, more CVBs have sales staff that specialize in small meetings. **Visit Indy**, for example, has a meeting express manager who oversees meetings with peak room nights of 10–75.

There are more sources of information and options than ever for small meetings. However, when considering options, it's worth keeping in mind one of Dossett's prime guiding principles: "I have learned that you have to think on a smaller scale, but be more intimate and more interactive," she says. "Small groups are special, and deserve to be treated that way, so they do not feel like their piece of business is minimal or not important." **C&IT**