Making the Most of Your Florida Meeting

In the faceless world of e-mails and faxes, creating opportunities for handshakes and face-to-face interaction can refresh and energize your business, clients and employees. Trade shows, board meetings, incentive trips, conferences and conventions offer great ways to reconnect.

"We live in the age of immediacy, and the Internet is an extremely powerful tool for sharing information," says Al Campbell, president and CEO of the Florida Society of Association Executives (FSAE). "But doing business is often about more than sharing information. It's about building relationships, and most of us still need face-to-face interaction to build those lasting relationships."

Suzanne Fletcher, National Business Travel Association (NBTA) president and CEO, says that travel is a significant portion of the budget at most companies, because decision-makers understand that travel represents an investment in the company's future.

"There are great online options for training and professional development, but not all education can successfully be completed using a computer," Fletcher says.

Florida's unmatched variety of entertainment and recreational options greatly enhances the meeting experience. With its year-round pleasant climate, pristine beaches and diverse selection of hotels and conference centers, Florida is the perfect destination for your next meeting.

Almost 4,000 properties statewide with more than 377,000 rooms offer a host of potential locations, according to Smith Travel Research. To find the perfect location for your next business event, check the listings from FLORIDA TREND hospitality advertisers beginning on page 9, or go online to www.FloridaTrend.com and click "Travel Guide."

Make It Memorable

Florida's natural beauty and numerous attractions guarantee a memorable experience for your employees, but it is also important to transform the meeting itself into an experience.

"Everyone has meetings every day, and 99.9% of them are not memorable," Campbell says. "Starbucks has built their brand by making the act of purchasing an ordinary cup of coffee an experience rather than just coffee."

Rebekah C. Kuczwanski, president and CEO of K Management, a Tallahassee-based event planning firm, notes that many business events are becoming more elaborate than before.

"Trends have moved from restaurant parties to conference centers that have more audio visual technology capabilities, nicer room settings, lighting options, and the ability to provide on-site housing for travelers," she says. "Larger events are focusing on more extravagant food presentation rather than sit-down dinners."

More businesses are using themed events to stand apart from the crowd. In addition, planners are also ensuring the settings are as comfortable as possible.

"Events have become as much about socializing and networking as they are about entertainment," Kuczwanski says. "With quieter music and a more laid-back environment moving away from formal sit-down type dinners, attendees have an opportunity to relax and

Florida offers a variety of award-winning meeting locations complete with all the must-have amenities you need to get down to business.

talk freely."

Finally, companies are hosting more education and networking opportunities at their events in an effort to make them memorable.

"Businesses are focusing less on how many booths and vendors they have and more on providing education about companies and product demonstrations," Kuczwanski says. "The smaller venues provide vendors with more one-on-one networking opportunities, and attendees feel they received value for the cost of attending."

Tips for Planning

Event planning can be easier if you know the rules of the game.

Barbara Ann Cox, president and CEO of the Florida Academy for Management Executives and president of Meeting Makers Inc., says that it is important to have someone who is familiar with event planning take the lead in talking to vendors.

K Management's Kuczwanski agrees. "Knowing the proper terminology enables you to eliminate surprises, such as hidden fees, and understand the expectations of vendors, like requirements, fees, policies and deadlines," she says. "There is definitely a 'lingo' associated with event planning, and it is important to have someone who can navigate through the nuances and requirements for different types of venues."

Cox says one of the biggest mistakes business professional make is not knowing whom to ask and what to ask in negotiating with hotel and conference center personnel.

Kuczwanski finds that three other common mistakes business professionals make are having unrealistic expectations, not properly discussing details with vendors and not seeking feedback.

One of the most important things any business can do is follow up with its guests.

"Even the best events can be improved upon," Kuczwanski says. "Find out the likes and dislikes to ensure the next event is an even bigger success."

Cox recommends that companies interview potential event planners as if they were hiring a staff person.

"The independent planner is an extension of the hiring company and should exhibit the same principles and work ethics," she says. "Ask for portfolio and examples of their work. Check references. Call colleagues for their input."

Staying Tech Savvy

If your meeting will require high-tech audiovisual presentations, creative multimedia design and specialized lighting, you'll be happy to know that many venues are becoming more technologically advanced, providing more options and on-site audiovisual professionals.

"We all need to be connected," says Campbell of the FSAE. "Increasingly, people are considering it their right to be connected to the Internet, not just a luxury."

Technology also plays a role in utilizing time and cost-saving methods such as online event registration, event websites and online tools to help event guests meet exhibitors and other attendees.

"Seventy percent of respondents to a recent NBTA survey indicated their companies are using online booking tools, and nearly a quarter plan to implement

online booking in the future," Suzanne Fletcher, association president and CEO says.

In today's mobile, multi-tasking workforce, anything that helps save time also saves money.

"With the use of technology, these items provide travelers and those attending functions access to stay in touch with their office and cover their workload while away from their offices and homes," K Management's Kuczwanski says. "Venues offering these amenities are becoming more desirable."

Fletcher agrees that being productive while on the road is incredibly important to companies.

"Hotels have responded to the demand by rolling out high-speed Internet access, both in-room and in public areas of hotels," she says. "Now, some hotels are taking the next step and making their Internet access free of charge. Going forward, it will be interesting to watch how the cost of Internet access plays in to negotiations."

The Most Bang for Your Buck

Kuczwanski says that companies are investing more money in events every year, but also finding ways to make every penny count.

One trend is to host smaller events more often to gain better results.

"The smaller environment provides for a more productive atmosphere with more focused groups and key players attending," Kuczwanski says. "Because they require smaller budgets, more emphasis is placed on the goals, and businesses can afford more events per year."

Kuczwanski also notes that more businesses are using strategic partners and hosting collaborative events to make the most of their budgets.

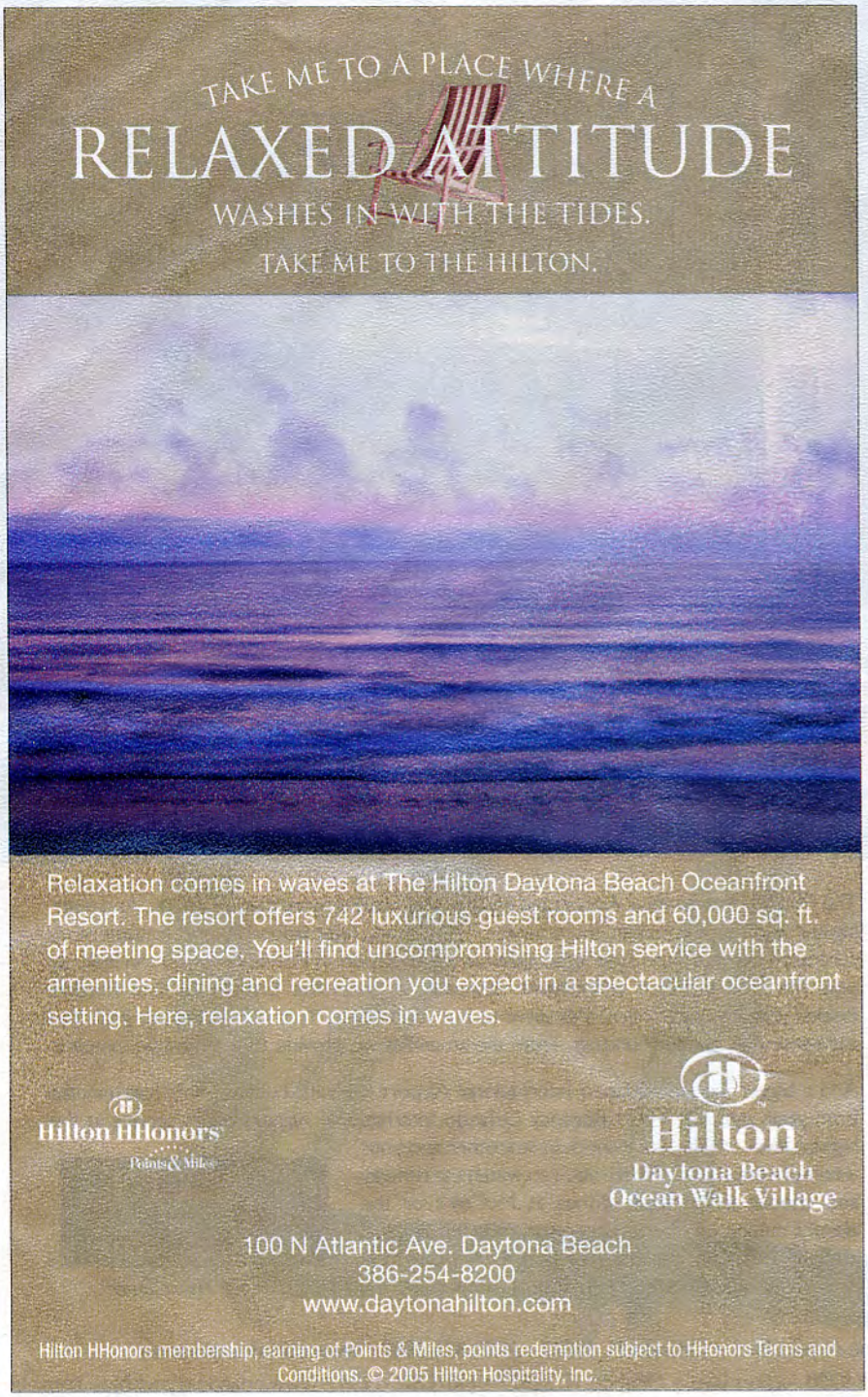
"Sharing events with company partners or hosting co-events provides a way for many businesses to share customers and share the cost of the event, even allowing for events to generate revenue," she explains.

Finally, providing simpler menus allows businesses to utilize more of their budget for presentations, decorations and entertainment, making for more memorable events.

Whether your next business meeting is an executive retreat, conference, trade show or incentive trip, Florida offers plenty of potential locations that guarantee you will get the service and attention you deserve. It's the perfect location to regroup and refresh in 2006.

— Ashley Cisneros

Cover Your Event

In early 2005, Visit Florida, the state's official source for travel planning, introduced an innovative insurance program: Cover Your Event Insurance (CYE). This free supplemental insurance covers costs related to rebooking a meeting that was displaced due to a named hurricane. The Cover Your Event insurance assures meeting planners that Florida's meetings industry will do what it takes to make meetings successful.

Go to www.VISITFlorida.com or contact cye@VISITFLORIDA.org for details.