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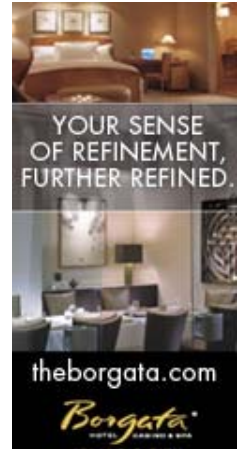


On The Cover - May/June 2007



Atlanta Arrangements Inc. coordinated this spectacular 1,850-guest, final night event, which marked the first time that a seated dinner of that size was held in Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park.

Photo by Pissari Photography, Event by Atlanta Arrangements, Inc.



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Themed Events

Add Excitement To Meetings And Incentives

By Diana Rowe

"The planner's curse is when one meeting blends into the other and nothing in particular stands out," said Linna Morgan, manager of meetings and events for Phoenix, AZ-based AIG Financial Advisors, a financial services broker-dealer. "Incorporating theme and décor really adds a distinctive personality to a meeting."

Creativity, ingenuity, innovation, experience and sometimes even luck shape the success of any event, especially themed events. Planners have a daunting task ahead of them when both their superiors and attendees demand that this year's event not only be perfect but outshine last year's. So how can planners launch an unforgettable themed event?

Location As Theme

Morgan recently planned AIG's annual National Education Conference at The Manchester Grand Hyatt, San Diego, CA. Morgan's creative process usually begins by selecting a destination that offers elements that will feed into her overall theme. "San Diego is a beautiful destination with perfect weather. My attendees loved the location of the resort, right on the bay and close to downtown and the Gas Lamp District. It was a logical step to incorporate San Diego and its attractions into my themed events," she noted.

The 1,625-room Manchester Grand Hyatt features 125,000 square feet of function and 25,000 square feet of prefunction space, including San Diego's two largest ballrooms. Amenities include a lap pool and pool deck with hot tubs, fire pit and sundeck, full-service spa, tennis courts, full-service marina, nearby 18-hole Del Mar National Golf Club and 80 miles of beaches within minutes of the property. Area attractions include Seaport Village, the San Diego Zoo, SeaWorld and cruising on San Diego Bay.



“Theme and décor increase the excitement of a meeting. A theme also acts as site identification... delineating one meeting from another.”

Linna Morgan
Manager, Meetings and Events
AIG Financial Advisors
San Diego, CA

Morgan noted that she didn't have to sacrifice meeting space for amenities and activities as the Manchester Grand Hyatt offered all three. With the help of ACCESS Destination Services, Morgan blended the three to emphasize the theme. “Theme and décor increase the excitement of a meeting,” said Morgan. “A theme also acts as site identification for the participants, delineating one meeting from another. For our welcome reception, we used a nautical theme — playing off the close proximity of the marina.”

Seaport Village, a New England-style village and the Manchester Grand Hyatt's next-door neighbor, provided the theme for AIG's Sponsor Fair, a welcome reception and exhibition held in the hotel's Douglas Pavilion. With little room for décor, the theme capitalized on the nautical village scheme within the décor components of the Sponsor Fair while bringing in the bright, primary colors through colorful ceiling flags and vibrant table treatments.

Morgan said, “My job is to wow my attendees and stay in budget. Partnering with my DMC ensures both. For example, ACCESS suggested we re-use centerpieces by selecting components that needed minimal or no refreshing. At our Sponsor Fair, the table treatments featured bright yellow sunflowers in terracotta pots as centerpieces. The sunflowers don't need a lot of refreshing, so we used them in each of the following meals, carrying the sunny San Diego theme throughout the event, a direct savings in my décor budget.”



Dining in Disney's DinoLand U.S.A. goes way beyond brontosaurus burgers. The Animal Kingdom theme park offers attendees buffet dinner and dessert stations as well as “streetmosphere” entertainment and dinosaur-themed attractions.

Photo courtesy of Walt Disney World Resort

“The final evening is when we send everyone home with great memories of the meeting and the fun,” said Morgan. “Unfortunately, we had another group move

their registration booths into our entrance area, which would have negatively impacted the grand entrance to the function. Our DMC suggested a better way to make the entrance work and be more visually appealing, and they were flexible and worked fast to make sure everything came together for our final themed night. Again incorporating the destination, we chose ZooRama, since San Diego is home to the famous San Diego Zoo.”

Live Interaction

A wildlife organization arranged for live animal interaction at the event, which included a baby lynx. ZooRama also featured the Dragon Knights — magical, fantasy-like stilt-walkers and puppets, such as mythical creatures constructed from metals and brightly colored feathers and fabrics. While not zoo creatures, the characters contributed to the event as official greeters and charmed the guests.

The best way to insure a successful themed meeting, according to Morgan, is to enlist the aid of a local destination management company. “They know what works, what won’t, and what will look great. The DMC is really willing to go the extra distance to make the function fabulous, when a planner respects their talent and knowledge,” advised Morgan.

Trisha Valdivia, business development manager for the destination management company ACCESS Destination Services, San Diego, CA, has, over the years, partnered with several insurance and financial companies, including AIG, to effectively integrate a theme into their meetings.

Valdivia encourages planners to share their full vision of the event with their DMC, because not all planners are looking for “indigenous to the area” themes. For example, while discussing a project with Bonnie Sherer-Herrera, CMP, vice president and director of corporate meetings and events for Royal Alliance & AIG Advisor Group, New York, NY, Valdivia learned that her client wasn’t looking for a San Diego-influenced theme: “Instead she pictured capitalizing on the ‘Royal’ in the

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Trisha Valdivia
Business Development Manager
ACCESS Destination Services, San Diego
San Diego, CA

program’s name, Royal Court. We created a dramatic Renaissance theme evening at the Four Seasons Resort Aviara, North San Diego, with velvet and bunted fabrics and authentic period musical instruments,” Valdivia explained.

Creative License

“For another upcoming program for Royal

Alliance,” continued Valdivia, “Sherer-Herrera pictured a USO-inspired event with patriotic décor, show and dance music from the era and look-alikes from the time period. This vision drove the venue selection rather than developing the theme after the venues were selected.”

Valdivia encourages planners to freely use creative license. “If you try to replicate a theme too closely, you might miss out on opportunities that would enhance excitement levels and/or functionality of the event. For instance, psychics are not just for New Age themes. With creative costume changes, psychics can be incorporated into any type of theme, especially in California or Arizona. Another example is casino games. Even if not a sports bar or gaming theme, like psychics, casino games are a welcome addition to any theme. A Western hoedown can feature cowboy dealers, a futuristic theme might include aliens spinning the wheel, or a Roaring ’20s with gangster gaming.”

You’re Not In Kansas Anymore

Incentive programs pose greater challenges, according to Brian Bartlow, sales operations manager for the Northbrook, IL, Allstate Insurance Company. “Not only do we have to take people to new and exciting places, but we have to make sure the destination motivates them to earn their way. Then I have to carry that sense of place throughout the meeting, from the pre-event hype to onsite activities. A themed event that focuses on the destination should hit all five senses, because I want my attendees to know they are not in Kansas anymore.”

Bartlow described several such experiences: “Even though I took the incentive

winner to Stockholm five years ago, those attendees still talk about eating reindeer! We had our gala dinner in the Blue Hall where the Nobel Peace Prize dinners are held, and used similar china and the same menu from the previous Nobel year with an Abba tribute band as entertainment,” he said.

In Singapore, Bartlow transformed an amusement park into a private historical and cultural experience for his group by upscaling the venue. Bartlow has staged events in castles in Prague and all over the globe because unique locales offer his attendees experiences that they normally wouldn't have.

Recently Bartlow brought 1,100 producers to a business meeting in Scottsdale. At the recommendation of PGI, a local DMC, Bartlow selected Pioneer Living History Village, one of Arizona's most authentic Old West towns, as the site for their welcome reception.

Located just 30 minutes north of downtown Scottsdale, the Pioneer Living History Village sits on more than 90 acres with authentic buildings and historically accurate reproductions of an 1800s town. The town features an opera house, blacksmith shop, sheriff's office and jail, complete ranch complex, and costumed interpreters such as cowboys, lawmen and lovely Victorian ladies.

Bartlow explained, “I wanted them to appreciate Scottsdale as more than just golfing and shopping. This Old West village allowed us to divide the entertainment into interactive glimpses into the cultures of Scottsdale: Mexican, Native American and cowboy. Attendees were free to walk from one 'locale' to another. The Mexican region served Mexican cuisine and displayed their crafts while attendees were serenaded by mariachi bands. We had hoop dancers in the Native American part, and we actually hosted a live rodeo representing the cowboy history. Our goal was to immerse the agents in these cultures, and appreciate the uniqueness of each one.”

“We tell our attendees that we want them to leave with an unforgettable experience tied to the destination,” said Bartlow. “We want them to say ‘I will never miss another one of these trips.’ That's when I know I've incorporated a successful themed event.”



Start spreading the news — attendees will feel like they are “on location” on the recreated streets of New York in Universal Studios Florida. The Big Apple-themed venue can accommodate up to 2,000 attendees for a standing reception or buffet, and up to 800 for a seated dinner.

Photo courtesy of Universal Orlando Resort

Native American Theme

Ken Pickle, manager of incentives and conferences for Seattle, WA-based Safeco Insurance Company, also takes advantage of the local culture to create a theme for his meetings and incentives. Last year, the Safeco Conference of Champions was held in New Mexico at the Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort and Spa. Pickle capitalized on the property's prime Southwest location between Albuquerque and Santa Fe and its Native American roots to create an incredibly successful incentive

trip for 325 agents and their guests. Located on 500 acres of protected land owned by the Native American Pueblo of Santa Ana, the 350-room Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort and Spa is surrounded by the spectacular Sandia Mountains and the Bosque, the native cottonwood forest indigenous to the Rio Grande.

With more than 70,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space, the resort is brimming with themes. Planners can incorporate traditional bread baking, authentic cuisines, song and dance, art and architecture, and indigenous spa treatments into the program, or offer them as optional activities for attendees.

Pickle kicked off his event with a poolside welcome — a New Mexico reception and buffet. But it wasn't a typical cocktail setting. "We presented two 30-minute segments of entertainment combining the two cultures: Native American and Western," said Pickle. "First up, the Pueblo dancers entranced our attendees, followed by a Native American playing flute background music. Later in the evening, a country-and-western band played for an hour. A perfect low-key evening with the added bonus of a wonderful sunset off the Sandia Mountains, painted with various hues of red and pink, and a chance to see the star-filled sky once the sun set."

Keeping to the Southwestern theme, Pickle selected an evening at El Pinto Restaurant. Recognized by many as offering the best patio dining in the state, this offsite restaurant serves truly authentic New Mexican cuisine based on traditional family recipes.

"This restaurant houses an incredible amount of personality," added Pickle. "When the attendees stepped off the coach, their first greeting was the spicy smell of roasted chiles. Fresh guacamole dip was waiting for them when they took their seats, and guitar musicians strolled through the hacienda restaurant, which was alive with vibrant colors. While we were at the restaurant, the hotel delivered gift boxes with El Pinto red and green sauce with a personalized Safeco logo."

"Tribal Elegance" was selected by Pickle as the theme for the final night "President's Banquet," which was carried out by HospiTotally, the onsite DMC that provided a dramatic cultural setting with pueblo facades and various tribal components. "We wouldn't do a Hawaii theme in New Mexico, but we didn't want all three evenings to look the same. Following a one-hour reception in the foyer, our attendees moved to the ballroom to enjoy a sit-down dinner featuring an upscale Native American theme."

“We aspire to exceed expectations by offering an increasingly impressive themed meeting and to keep our attendees wondering how we're going to top this event next year.”



Ken Pickle
Manager Incentives and Conferences
Safeco Insurance Company
Seattle, WA

The name of the entertainer is a secret until the night before, at which time a newsletter announcing the special guest is delivered to all attendees. "Since we didn't have a guest speaker this year," said Pickle, "I was able to move my budget around and surprise the attendees with exceptional entertainment — Kenny Loggins. A couple of years ago we surprised our attendees by opening the ballroom walls to reveal an ice rink."

Pickles suggested that planners listen to the hotel's and DMC's recommendations for creative ideas. "Sometimes, like at the Hyatt Tamaya, it's the DMC that does a signature event well. For example, a program in Banff a few years ago featured a fire and ice theme. A proposal by that DMC resulted in an encased centerpiece with flowers in balls of ice placed on frozen blocks. Throughout the evening as a Cirque du Soleil act performed, spotlights highlighted the centerpieces revealing the melting ice and petals slowly folding out of the ice, revealing real flowers.

"Theme plays an important role in all our events," said Pickle. "Special settings and unique décor offer attendees an opportunity to relax, network and most of all, have fun. Seriously take into consideration recommendations made by your destination partners: the hotel, venues, DMC and convention visitors bureau. Then you as a planner take what you know about your group and what you've done in the past. We aspire to exceed expectations by offering an increasingly impressive themed meeting and to keep our attendees wondering how we're going to top this event next year." **I&FMM**