

# Rich Events from Lean Budgets

Tighter budgets and continuing perception concerns have many companies toning down their incentive programs. Here's how one planner ditched the extravagance but kept the wow.

*Excerpts from an article written by Alison Hall for Financial & Insurance Meetings, July/August 2010*

**Standard Insurance invites its sales reps and managers—and their guests—from across the country to its Annual Sales Conference.** The 300 attendees have morning business sessions, free afternoons, lots of networking opportunities, and a major awards banquet on the final night of the conference.

In 2008, the event was held at the Montage Resort in Laguna Beach, Calif. For 2010, the company booked the same property. Decidedly not the same, however, was the conference budget. In fact, it was 23 percent less than in 2008.

That left Tawny Herron, corporate meeting and conference manager at the Portland, Ore.–based insurer, with a challenge. “I had to be very careful to try and produce the same or better experience—with a much different budget,” she says. “I didn’t want them to come to this event and think, ‘This is stark.’”

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—Tawny Herron

## A Touch of Elegance

If there’s a running theme to the way Herron made it work, it’s the use of “effective enhancements”—a term of art from Rachel Bishop, sales manager in the Orange County, Calif., office of ACCESS Destination Services, Herron’s DMC partner. Basically it means working with what a hotel or resort has on hand, and strategically adding rental items that boost the elegance level and ambience without making a major budget hit.

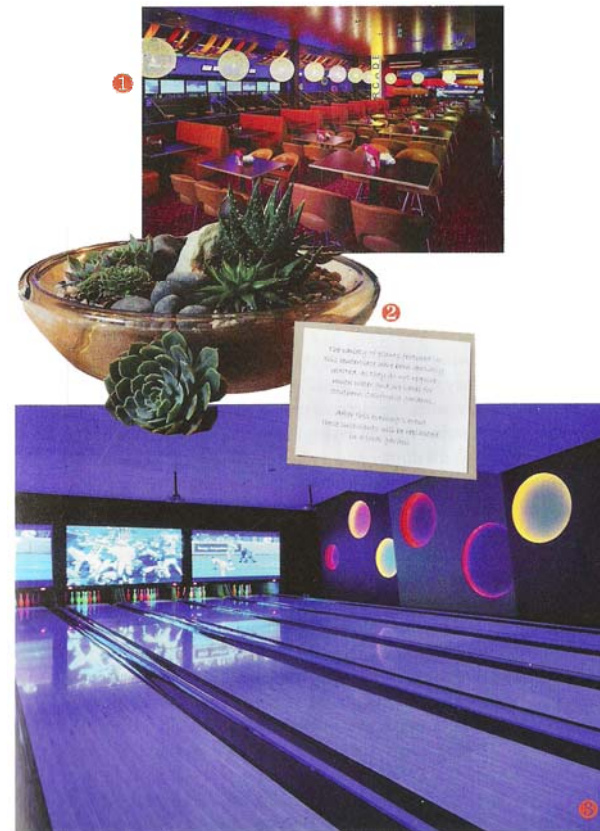
“Tawny and I went back and forth a lot,” Bishop says. “We worked on ideas and played with the entire budget to figure out how best to allocate funds to get the biggest impact. The challenge was how to create the awards banquet she really wanted. The answer was to make the welcome reception more casual and simple.”

Going with an “eco-chic” theme for that opening evening, Herron made choices with rentals to reduce costs but still present a lovely setting. Instead of renting full linens, she used hotel linens and rented bamboo runners as overlays. Instead of renting fancier tables and chairs to accommodate every guest, she rented a few and placed them strategically to create “punch.” Elaborate floral centerpieces were eschewed in favor of arrangements of rocks and succulent plants, accompanied by tent cards explaining that the plants would be donated and replanted at the mission in nearby San Juan Capistrano. “The attendees commented that they appreciated the eco-friendly things—they loved the centerpieces,” Herron says. “It helped with the budget and helped with perception that we were not throwing away floral arrangements.”

She reconsidered her F&B plan for the reception as well. “In 2008, we ordered the resort’s most expensive menu. This year I tried to put out as big a variety but not include the most expensive options. I decided to do reception stations instead of a full buffet dinner because it allowed lots of options for everyone, lots of time to mingle, and it cut my budget,” she notes. “For the passed hors d’oeuvres beforehand, the usual recommendation is three to four pieces per person, and I cut that to one to two pieces per person. No one seemed to notice. It’s really an ambience thing, more of a way to keep people interacting than to feed them.”

## D.I.Y.

Another area where Herron saved money goes back to when she was promoted to her current position at Standard two years ago. “In the past we used a third-party planning company and heavily used DMCs. We would turn the whole program over to them,” she explains. “I changed



Centerpiece Photo: ACCESS Destination Services

- 1. GO RETRO**  
Tawny Herron of Standard Insurance got rave reviews for her off-site dinner at Strike Orange County, an upscale bowling alley. The choice also saved money.
- 2. GO GREEN**  
She also saved money and earned praise when she chose succulents for centerpieces, including tent cards explaining that they would be replanted at a local mission.
- 3. NOT your typical bowling lanes!**  
Her choice of a bowling alley for the awards dinner was a hit. The venue was a great value, and the bowling lanes provided a fun activity for guests.

still use DMCs, but in a more limited way.”

But it’s a way that adds a lot of value. For the 2010 sales conference, for example, the relationship that ACCESS has with its local vendors meant that Bishop was able to cut Herron’s transportation costs.

In fact, because of the hit that resort areas have taken with the down economy and perception troubles, ACCESS has looked at how it can get more options for planner clients. “Corporate clients are asking us how we can support them, and we in turn are going to our vendors,” explains Candace Bisconte, DMCP, partner at ACCESS. “We’ve said, ‘We can bring you more business if you can give us rates based on our overall business.’”

In addition, ACCESS has worked with vendors such as florists to expand their offerings. “We’ve said, ‘We love your quality but we need you to tell us which florals and which containers can be purchased at the best value so we can offer our clients mix-and-match options as a way to keep the overall centerpiece cost down,’” Bisconte explains.

## The Big Night

For the second night of the show, Herron took the initiative to book a bowling alley herself—Strike Orange County. “I booked all the lanes for us, they served a buffet dinner, and we paid a flat fee for everything,” she says. “We had so many positive comments from attendees—that it was

tons of fun and that they liked the casual atmosphere and the fact that they could wear shorts. And it cost 30 percent less than an on-site dinner, even including the transportation costs.”

The savings from the opening reception and the bowling event meant that Herron could put most of her budget into the final night. Even then, she used the hotel’s available décor and enhanced it. “We used the 50/50 rule,” says Bishop, “selecting components we could use from the hotel while bringing in outside elements to give the upscale feeling that guests are used to. They still get the wow.” In fact, Bisconte adds, “The variety often appears as a special element.”

Another money-saving change: “In the past, we had the awards dinner and a separate after-party space, so we had to use two meeting locations within a hotel,” she explains. “This year we used the same room for the after-party that we had used for the awards dinner, but we moved to the foyer/courtyard area, where we had set up two furniture clusters.” The lounge furniture was rented, but the cost was much less than having to set up an entire second space. Herron had music piped in instead of hiring a DJ or dance band. But that’s the way attendees like it nowadays, she explains: “As it gets later in the evening, our guests actually love to provide their iPods to listen to their own dance mixes.”

Going forward, she says, “this is my new budget.” And it has definitely changed the way she looks at potential meeting properties. “Now I always ask about in-house décor options,” she says, “and I consider what space is available for the awards dinner and if it’s large enough to host an after-party, or if it has a connected foyer space we can use without booking an additional ballroom. I also look more closely at the restaurants and event venues around the hotel, since we’ve learned that a fun off-site dinner can save a lot on budget. So if we can save money in those ways, we can afford to focus on top-quality resorts in great locations.”

Herron also knows what she wants when it comes to DMCs. “It’s important to me to find a company that understands flexibility rather than just pushing their image of the event,” she says. “I want to encourage a collaboration. ACCESS was very receptive to that and easy to work with, even as I adjusted my budget on the fly throughout the process!” ■

## 5 ACTIVITIES FOR SMALLER BUDGETS

- 1. Tour the City**  
City tours are regaining popularity due to their low cost, educational value, and because attendees are showing more interest in getting to know their surroundings. Plan a city tour early in the program as a way to introduce guests to the destination.
- 2. Donate Time Instead of Money**  
Community service doesn’t have to mean buying building materials. Find an organization with infrastructure already in place that needs the manpower your group can offer. Rely on your DMC for options, which could be as simple as reading to hospitalized children.
- 3. 60-Second Scramble!**  
ACCESS Destination Services has great success with an event that mimics TV’s “Minute to Win It” game show. With an engaging emcee, contestants compete in 60-second zany competitions like stacking the highest tower of cereal boxes or separating the most bath tissue squares from a roll without ripping them.
- 4. Live It Up Locally**  
Look into street fairs or farmers’ markets, complete with local artisans and music, that might be taking place while your group is in town.
- 5. Go Behind the Scenes**  
Get a new perspective on an area attraction that may not be available to the public. While a minimal additional fee is likely involved, the perceived value is great.

Source: Candace Bisconte, DMCP, Partner, ACCESS Destination Services