

ARIZONA

BUSINESS

Magazine

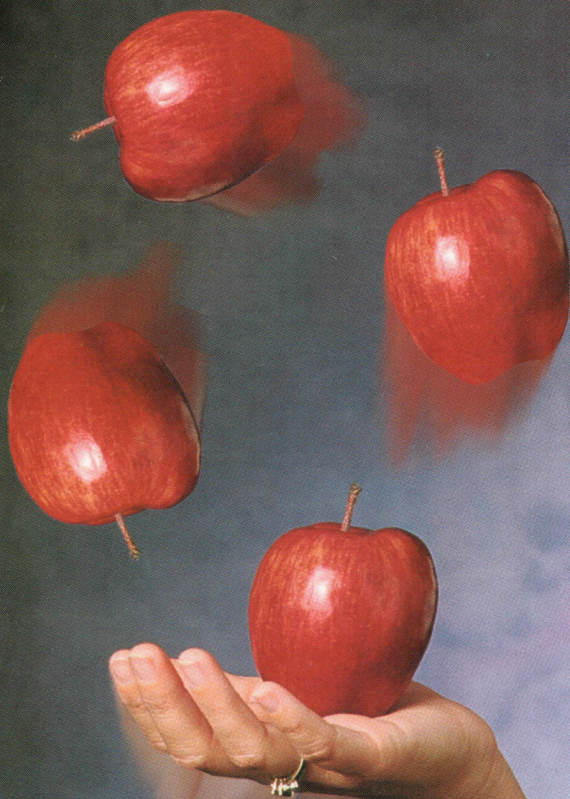
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Leveling the Playing Ground

State leaders juggle the
issues of quality education

Plus

Hot Litigation: The top
cases in business



Lisa Graham Keegan,
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education in Arizona.

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Discover Arizona

Pinpointing the perfect meeting site

by Cynthia Scanlon

illustration by Gregg Myers



With beautiful weather, five star hotels, restaurants that cater to the most discerning palettes and retail shops that sell everything from the unique to the exquisite, meeting planners around the state have taken a personal mission to see that local businesses and associations are educated about all the positive aspects of holding company meetings in Arizona, as opposed to taking their money and people out of state.

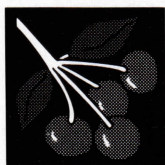
“This state has so much to offer,” says Christina Mortel, president of Mortel Meeting and Event Planning, Inc., a meeting planning company that specializes in corporate meetings, special events and public relations. “It’s a great location.”

Michelle Poisson Smith, executive administrator for meetings and travel at Best Western International Inc., agrees. “Because we have so many hotels here, we have a lot of hidden secrets that people don’t know about,” she says.

Meeting planners see to it that those secrets are disseminated throughout the state and the world. From the smallest sales meeting to the largest executive event, Arizona has a hotel property that can accommodate almost any requirement.

But before a business or association starts booking convention space, Mortel says company executives must first determine what the objectives of the meeting are going to be. This is crucial, she says, to the success of any meeting no matter how large or small. ►

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"Meeting space will determine the type of meeting you have," she says. "You have to know what the objectives of the meeting are because that drives all the other decisions you make." For instance, will the meeting be about product promotion, sales training, total quality management policies or team building? "They must know what they are trying to accomplish," she says.

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Laura Scheller, director of sales for Radisson Phoenix Airport Hotel/Southbank, agrees that all successful meetings must begin with planning the objectives. "You have to understand what exactly you are trying to get accomplished," she says. "If it's going to be a short training meeting and you need to maximize time, then you're going to look at an airport property where you can get people in, get the meeting done and get them out."

But, she says, if it's an intense meeting where attendees need to be kept on the premises for the duration, then a destination location may be more appropriate. "If you want to provide lots of activities for people to do, then you want to look at a property that's convenient to shops and restaurants," she says.

Many resorts around the state also cater to those executives who want to combine business with pleasure. These resorts combine activities, sightseeing programs and special activities for spouses to participate in while the meeting is taking place.

"As an example, the Phoenician is more geared toward executives who want to get away," says Mortel. She points out

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that executive attendees might want to take a look at an upper scale retreat as a way of encompassing hard work with the pleasurable amenities on the property. "The bigger, high ticket properties offer those kinds of things," she says.

According to Smith, taking spouses into consideration is becoming more important as greater numbers of business travelers bring their loved ones along. "It's a chance to make a family vacation out of a business meeting, especially if it is a destination that can cater to a family," she says. But Smith adds, "I don't think people know that Phoenix can be a family meeting place."

In addition to outlining meeting objectives, Mortel also stresses that a company must know what they intend to spend on room fees, meals and the cost of training materials. Once these things are put into place, then finding the correct property is integral to holding a meeting that is worthwhile and enjoyable.

"More often than not you are bringing people in from some other location, so

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they are going to be disoriented," says Scheller. "We've all traveled on business, and we've had good business trips and bad. If you can get people to the hotel easily, quickly and comfortably and service them, they are probably going to have a good experience."

As part of this positive experience, Scheller includes the responsiveness of the hotel staff to last minute changes. "There are all kinds of what may appear as small details," she says. "But they can make it a nightmare if things go wrong. If you change the lunch and it didn't get communicated, and there's no lunch

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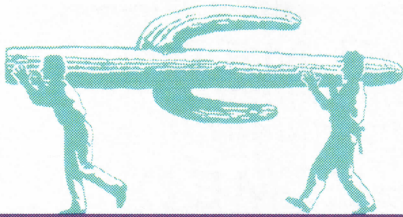
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ready, you're going to have an unhappy crowd."

She adds, "It's our responsibility to create the best and most conducive atmosphere for an organization to have a successful event. We need to do everything on our part to make that happen. Forgetting the speaker's wakeup call can mess up a conference pretty quick. It's not the major things, although you run into major things that can happen. More often than not, it's the little things that truly make it a success."

Well trained staff that know procedures and can keep things like lunch on track are critical to many meeting agendas. Seasoned meeting planners know how to make sure these needs are met. "A meeting planner normally goes out and does a site inspection, and from that inspection they do a selection," says Mortel. "They can identify what property will be the most flexible or accommodating."

Scheller points out that a mismatch between attendees and hotel can not only create a bad experience for those attending the meeting, it can also directly impact the state economically. "You want to make sure as a city that you secure the business, and that the meeting planner is placing her meeting at the appropriate property setting," she says. "There are meetings that will not do in a hotel property. They are resort only meetings. If a meeting planner tries to watch the budget and goes to a hotel instead ... she can create a problem with her attendees being unhappy. That leaves them with a substandard experience of what they've been used to."

The size of hotel or resort can directly impact the success of a meeting as well and should be taken into account from the start. "If you are having a small meeting, going to a big property is not what you want," says Mortel. "If you want more attention, you'll want to go to a smaller property, so you can be better catered to. It's easy to feel like you're not very important if you are a small group only bringing in a \$10,000 or \$20,000 piece of business to a large property."

Smith agrees. "If you're not in the right type of facility, that could hurt you," she says. "If you want to do a strictly corporate meeting without fun and games, going to a resort with a lot of activities will have a negative impact. If you're going to have a lot of spouses, you're going to need a lot of activities. Going to a corporate hotel downtown may not be the best choice."

But companies wanting to fly people

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in for a quick, down and dirty sales meeting that may last no more than a day or two would probably be best off with a meeting place close to the airport where hotels are usually plentiful. Restaurants and shopping are also usually close by without having to contend with large crowds and tricky transportation problems.

"If they are having an executive board meeting, they may go to a resort," says Mortel. "If attendees want to relax, those resorts have a lot of amenities." While those amenities will cost meeting participants a little more, sometimes it is a perfect place to relax and unwind after many days of meetings. It is important to keep in mind that meetings held at resorts should allow sufficient time for attendees to participate in all the activities the resort has to offer. Otherwise it's like being shown into a candy store, but told not to touch or eat anything.

Conference centers are also popular and are almost always geared exclusively to meetings. To this end, they are usually decorated with comfortable tables and chairs, and have sufficient outlets for telephones, computers, overhead projectors and microphones. In many cases, these centers provide their own staff to assist conference attendees throughout their meeting stay.

In the cost-conscious '90s, Mortel says more and more meetings are beginning to go regional as opposed to national in scope. Rather than having conference attendees fly all over the country, many

associations and businesses are holding meetings in their own town, the next town over, or, in some cases, in a location that is driving distance away.

Scheller agrees that the regional trend is occurring. "Not only is it going to keep your costs down, but you can make a better decision because of familiarity with what is available in terms of the location, amenities and services that are going to best meet your needs," she says. "You're going to be able to truly understand what choices you've got out there."

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Companies booking meetings out of state, she contends, will have to be dependent upon a third party or rely on brochures sent through the mail. And, she adds that keeping a meeting local almost guarantees increased attendance.

Many companies in Phoenix are beginning to realize that they can take their meeting out of the city without having to leave the state and still get the kind of quality and

service they are looking for. Tucson is fast becoming a center where Phoenix executives can hold successful meetings while enjoying the beauty and amenities Arizona has to offer.

"The city is laid out so that you can be at almost any kind of destination or activity within 45 minutes," says Kay Dorman, sales manager for the Tucson Marriott University Park. The Biosphere II, 30 miles outside of Tucson, is just one area she draws attention to.

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What's more, she says, Tucson is very supportive of business travelers, whether they be in-state or out-of-state. "It's a beautiful city. We are surrounded by mountains and have excellent weather for any kind of outdoor activities," she says. These include jeep tours, horseback riding, western cookouts and outdoor dances.

Dorman also notes the need for the state's business community to be more aware of the amount of dollars that can be poured back into Arizona's coffers by holding their meetings in state. Services or businesses such as rental cars, shuttle services, restaurants and shops are all impacted by the meeting dollar. "Large meetings and conventions are extremely important to a city," she says. "Especially in Arizona. We are dependent on the tourism industry."

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Meeting planners find themselves booking all kinds of meetings on a large and small scale. Some are regular corporate board meetings, but others require some real thought and finesse to make them a success.

While the bulk of Scheller's clientele is corporate, she has also booked bands and the media into properties for the Fiesta Bowl. Most recently, she booked the Dallas Cowboys corporation during the Super Bowl. "We didn't have the team, but the corporation," she says. "And being on the winning end, they were a good time."

In October, the Radisson will help house the International Chiefs of Police conference, where police departments from all over the world will be attending. She says one of the biggest meetings/events Phoenix hosts annually is

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"People don't realize that NASCAR is almost as big as the Super Bowl for us," she says. "It brings in well over 100,000 people. It's kind of an understated event, but every year we sell out."

Mortel was recently involved in one of the more interesting meetings she has ever had to plan for in the state of Arizona: the Atherton family reunion. This reunion was held for three days at the Pointe Hilton Resort at Squaw Peak in Phoenix after the family won \$75,000 from Family Circle Magazine and Corningware to hold a family reunion.

Bob and Chris Atherton have been married for 25 years and have adopted 12 children. The reunion will have more than 200 people in attendance, including doctors, nurses and medical technicians who have assisted some of the children with their medical problems.

"I've been doing all the logistical planning and organizing," says Mortel. "It's a great event to be part of because they are special needs children who have had relationships with doctors here locally, especially with St. Joseph's Hospital."

According to Meeting Professionals International (MPI), a Dallas-based trade association of meeting planners, 1996 will be the strongest year yet in the meeting and convention industry. According

to data, 73 percent of companies surveyed expected to hold more meetings this year than last, and 28 percent of associations are expected to do the same.

Computerized multimedia, video-conferencing and special effects techniques are expected to be more widely used to give meetings a new and exciting element, according to MPI.

Scheller says the consumer is becoming much more sophisticated and educated about meeting sites and the technology they expect to be available at those sites. Meeting planners and hotels alike must keep abreast of the new technology. "There's a real need to stay with technology," she says, "and hotels have to stay paced."

Holding a meeting in a conference room isn't what it used to be. With Arizona's breathtaking landscapes, state-of-the-art technology,

award-winning hotels and restaurants, and shops too numerous to mention, sitting down to a meeting has never been more exciting or more fun. And the future only promises more.

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Cynthia Scanlon is a Tempe-based free-lance writer and a regular contributor to Arizona Business Magazine.

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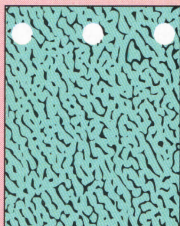
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