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State of the Industry

Hard times are tempered by bright spots in the SMERF meetings market

by Tarah Holland

Many destinations have come to revere the SMERF market as the calm in the unsteady economic storm that has hovered over the meetings market for the past few years.

This market segment's continued ability to weather the recession showed promise and the potential for gains as the economy improved. But with another slowdown in site, not even the resilient SMERF market could go unaffected.

"It's unfortunate that all markets, including the SMERF market, were affected by the most recent economic downturn," said Victoria Isley, Executive Vice President/Chief Operating Officer of Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI).

But don't count the SMERF market out just yet. As the outlook of the economy continues to change, so

does the outlook for meetings, which will soon pick up the pace – though don't expect a speedy turnaround.

"We are hearing from our members about bright spots in the meetings market forecast overall when we look beyond 2012," Isley said. "DMO organizational budgets have stabilized which is a good indicator of a turn-around in general travel, but have not quite returned to their peak in 2008."

For destinations looking to appeal to SMERF market meetings, affordability and variety are two necessities that may help to determine whether some cities can remain steady during the uncertain economic tide.

The SMERF market has been a focus of the Kissimmee Convention and Visitors Bureau since the organization was established more than three decades ago.

"Generally, the SMERF market has remained consistently strong despite recent dips in the economy," said Debby Rivera, Director of Sales and Services for the Kissimmee CVB.

"Groups of all kinds are pleased with the diversity of Kissimmee's accommodations, its centralized location, and they appreciate the number and range of activities available to them (including) thrill rides, natural excursions, historic downtown areas, golf courses, spas, flights of fancy and much more."

In addition, Kissimmee boasts a portfolio of properties and venues that offer SMERF groups options and the ability to be the big fish in a little pond, Rivera said.

"One challenge planners regularly bring up is that they are often not treated equally to other groups and meetings markets," she said. "They say they don't get the same level of services that another planner might. Working with the Kissimmee CVB, though, they do get that same level of service."

This year the Kissimmee CVB expanded its Services Staff and added to its list of assistance offered to

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better serve SMERF market and other meetings clients.

"As an added incentive to book in Kissimmee, we also are launching an initiative where the CVB will provide T-shirts for family reunions booked in a Kissimmee property, and we will be offering up to \$1,000 against the master bill for new meetings that book in a Kissimmee venue before March 2012, and meet by the end of that year," Rivera said.

Just south of Kissimmee, Visit Orlando in February announced an optimistic forecast for its meetings and conventions industry based on positive trending for year-end 2010 and expected business travel increases in 2011.

High value and affordability offered in the city have been of great appeal to a variety of meeting planners and attendees, said Gary Sain, President and CEO of Visit Orlando in a February press release.

Despite the economic downturn, Orlando added new hotels at all price points and new amenities for the meetings industry, including \$4 billion in new infrastructure projects.

The destination also initiated new meeting planner programs and services including adding a full-time destination marketing professional focused on attendance-building initiatives and two dedicated full-service site inspection professionals to assist planners.

This year Orlando welcomed such groups as the National Association of Home Builders, the American Pet Products Association and the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society.

Aside from responding to the change in the economic climate, just like the rest of the travel industry, SMERF market leaders must learn to engage a new generation for the future of the industry.

"There is real value in face-to-face meetings, and we as an industry have to figure out how to deliver that message in an authentic way," Isley said. "New media doesn't mean the death of meetings. If it did why would thousands of bloggers convene in a destination each year for a blogworld conference?"

As time continues to be precious for all involved, being skillful and prepared is paramount in meeting the ever-evolving needs of the SMERF market.

"As marketers and meeting professionals, it's mission critical to figure out how to use all these new tools for better connectivity and conversations in between the meetings, to make the face-to-face time even more valuable," Isley said.

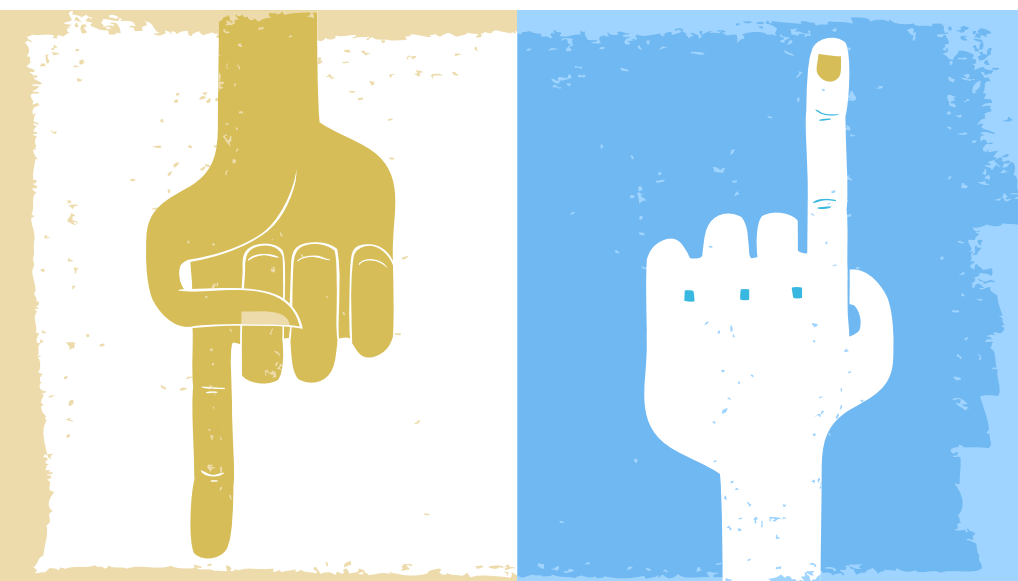
Rivera agrees. When planners come to her destination, they are prepared, knowledgeable and sure of what they want.

"The SMERF planner today is increasingly savvy about what they want and how to get it," she said. "They know the right questions to ask and they look for value added opportunities offered throughout the destination. As a partner working with them to create a successful meeting, we applaud their confidence in their selections and the awareness they bring to the process." ■

Six Money-Saving Tips for Meeting Planning

- 1 **Choose your location wisely.** The more desirable a location, the more money people are likely to be willing to pay for it.
- 2 **Create and manage a budget.** Even a small event can be a complex undertaking with lots of expense items that can quickly get out of hand if you don't have a plan for dealing with them up front.
- 3 **Be flexible.** A great way to save on basic facility costs is to be flexible about the dates for your event.
- 4 **(Almost) Everything is negotiable.** The number of rooms and nights your group will require can be leveraged for discounts.
- 5 **Champagne events on a beer budget.** Food and beverages can make or break a meeting.
- 6 **Star power on a budget.** Big-name speakers can easily break the budget. Negotiating can work or consider getting a corporate sponsor to foot the bill.

Source: Amita Patel, CHSP, Director of Marketing for the Ontario Convention and Visitors Bureau/Ontario Convention Center.



PROFILE: Education Meetings

by Tarah Holland



The Texas Conference for the Advancement of Science Teaching (CAST) is widely regarded as the largest and best regional science teachers meeting in the United States. Their 2010 conference was held in Houston, Texas.

Most education association professionals will tell you – keeping up with the ever-evolving issues that impact students and instructors in and out of the classroom is always top-of-mind to this SMERF market segment.

Not only do these groups raise awareness of those issues, but they also offer education and training opportunities for professionals and encourage networking on regional, state and national levels.

There are associations that support all facets of education, from elementary to collegiate levels, including those whose primary focus is anchored in their given specialty.

Lauren Swetland, CMP is vice president of Hempstead & Associates, an association management company specializing in education associations. The firm recently celebrated 10 years of serving non-profits including the Science Teachers Association of Texas (STAT).

Swetland, a meeting planner and association executive for five years, also is the assistant executive director for STAT. The group boasts nearly 8,000 members, of which 7,200 will attend the association's annual conference set for Dallas, Nov. 17-19.

The association's annual meeting is the only place where science teachers in Texas come together and learn from each other, Swetland said. The meetings

also offers an ideal platform to expose members to the latest classroom techniques, which means selecting a venue that can accommodate the group's space needs is a must.

"We have over 650 breakout sessions, 70 field trips across the city, 80 short courses, and we also hold JAM sessions in large ballrooms for general lecture style classes on teaching techniques, vocabulary and sessions that do not require the hand-on classroom set-up," she said.

But equally important in planning meetings for this market segment is affordability. More often than not, education associations are comprised of members that pay their own way without the benefit of company expense accounts, travel reimbursements or even government discount rates.

"Our members pay for themselves," said Susan White, Manager of the California Business Education Association (CBEA). "When they come, they want to stay in a nice place. We try to make it very affordable for them."

The association, whose members represent secondary and post secondary education, hosts an annual fall conference and a regional conference every 10 years.

Those events will combine for a joint affair, Feb. 16-20, 2012 in Newport Beach, Calif., where the group will host about 200 conference-goers from 10 states and two Canadian territories.

"We are an independent professional association, so we don't get the advantage of government rates," she said. "Negotiations are important when it comes to getting the space.

Swetland agreed. Special discounts offered by destinations also are a plus, she said.

"Our cost is only \$115 for three days of professional development and it is a balancing act to provide quality service and exciting social events within a tight budget," Swetland said.

But negotiations don't stop at room rates and meeting space, said White, who generally works with the hotel chef to provide meals rather than use the hotel menu.

"From the hotel standpoint, most of them are very aware of the needs of non-profit associations, especially in education because they know that teachers don't have a lot of money," she said. "People often go back because they're thinking, 'hey, I could plan a meeting here,' so they get other business as a result of working with us." ■

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