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Spring/Summer 2023

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Dear Readers,

If we've learned anything from the past three years, it's that nothing is more effective for networking, relationship building, collaboration and engagement than an in-person, interactive event. And when one has been deprived of these connections, events become more effective than ever. Excitedly, demand is surging, and for the first time in many years, I just attended a sold-out conference!

What are the elements that make an event successful and sought-after? Location, value, innovative content, and the opportunity to meet others for insightful and thought-provoking discussion and idea sharing. The ability to cultivate all of these elements and bundle them into a budget-friendly package is no small feat. But luckily, we are here to assist!

In this issue of Midwest Meetings, we focus on the fun of summer and the opportunities the Midwest offers groups to enjoy our beautiful weather and long, sunshine-filled days. Beer gardens are great places to bring a group together for a casual outing or evening of networking to either kick off or wind down a multi-day conference. Cold brews, fun food and the warmth of summer make for an inviting atmosphere. Check out the beer gardens noted in Featured Spaces on page 12. Then there's golf! When there are countless golf outings, making yours stand out can be tough. In this issue, we highlight some of the Midwest's favorite courses hosting professional championship events this year. Who wouldn't want to play where the pros do? Let's talk AI. ChatGPT? Undoubtedly you've heard of this new technology poised to impact every corner of our lives. On page 29, author Amanda Wegner offers some insight into how best to utilize it and where you may find it most helpful.

Have a story idea or willing to share some insight gleaned from a recent convention or meeting? Have a news release? We love to hear from our readers. Please reach out at bpeck@ntmediagroup.com.

Enjoy!

Becky Peck
Editor



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RADISSON BLU INSTALLS CUTTING-EDGE TECHNOLOGY

Radisson Blu Mall of America, part of Choice Hotels International, has completed the installation of a carbon-capture technology unit, making it the first hotel in the world to use this innovative system that captures greenhouse gas emissions from heating equipment. The installation is part of a program by CenterPoint Energy, Minnesota's largest natural gas utility, to explore the potential of new, cleaner energy technologies.

Radisson Blu Mall of America expects to reduce its energy bill because the CarbinX unit recycles heat, increasing efficiency in the water heating system to achieve both energy and cost savings.

"We are thrilled to be leading the way to the future of hospitality stewardship," says Alberto Abreu, general manager of Radisson Blu Mall of America. "We at Radisson Blu Mall of America and Choice Hotels International are committed to being part of the climate change solution, and we are proud to be a leader in the industry as the first hotel in the world to install a CarbinX unit."

VISIT QUAD CITIES ANNOUNCES NEWLY BRANDED SPORTS COMMISSION

Visit Quad Cities, the region's official destination management and marketing organization (DMMO), has reorganized and reimagined Quad Cities Sports Commission into the Sports QC Powered By Visit Quad Cities.

Sports QC Powered By Visit Quad Cities will continue leading the region's sports tourism and overall strategy for sports in the region. Sports QC remains a private, 501(c)(3) non-profit

organization and division of Visit Quad Cities that operates as the official sports commission by attracting, hosting, creating, and facilitating sporting events, tourism and opportunities for the region. Initially formed in 1995, the Quad Cities Sports Commission was created to attract, host, and support the region's amateur and professional sports events. It was the first official sports commission in Illinois.

"Sports tourism is vital to our future positioning as a dynamic region on the move," says Dave Herrell, president and CEO, Visit Quad Cities. "We have not slowed down our sales and marketing efforts of this important vertical even through the pandemic, but it is time to reinvigorate and put some increased intentionality with this direction."

MEET MINNEAPOLIS LAUNCHES NEW CAMPAIGN

Launched in late March, Meet Minneapolis is inviting travelers to "See What All the Fuss Is About" through its new tourism campaign. In partnership with Minneapolis-based agency Periscope, the DMO is setting out to address misperceptions head on with a tourism campaign to reclaim the city's narrative through "See What All the Fuss Is About." Meet Minneapolis says



negative perceptions have overshadowed the abundance of positive experiences visitors can enjoy, so the campaign will directly address those misnomers.

The new campaign is designed to tell the city's story to people who used to travel to Minneapolis often — as well as those who are new to the destination — by highlighting the remarkable things that the city has to offer.

"People are talking about Minneapolis. Some of them have it wrong, but they are talking," says Melvin Tennant, president and CEO of Meet Minneapolis. "This campaign will invite those people to re-experience Minneapolis by authentically telling the city's story as a place that has evolved over the past several years and continues to be a buzzing hub of culture, cuisine and natural beauty. We're excited to welcome new and returning visitors to come see what all the fuss is about in Minneapolis."



KALAHARI RESORTS ANNOUNCES EXPANSION

Kalahari Resorts has announced another expansion to its Wisconsin Dells property. The family-owned and operated resort, with four locations nationwide, has begun construction of a new building consisting of 237 guest rooms that will be connected by skywalk to the main lodge.

The 237-room addition will require an investment of upwards of \$50 million and is expected to open by Memorial Day weekend 2024. All 237 of the new rooms will feature a standard double queen bed offering with contemporary decor and modern amenities.

"We have been encouraged and pleased with the consistent positive economic trajectory we have seen across the Wisconsin Dells region as a whole," continues Nelson. "This expansion is a solution that directly keeps more business in the Dells area."

Kalahari also owns properties in Sandusky, Ohio; Round Rock, Texas; and Pocono Manor, Penn.



VISIT INDY TURNS 100

This year marks the centennial celebration of Visit Indy. Founded in 1923 as part of the Indy Chamber — with a budget of \$1,000 and bearing the name “Indianapolis Convention & Publicity Committee” — the organization quickly grew. By 1925, Indianapolis became one of the country’s top five cities for conventions and yearly delegates, among cities that included Chicago, New York, Philadelphia and Kansas City. The organization transitioned to a nonprofit in 1936 and became known as the Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Bureau. In 1972, the convention center opened, with a number of other milestones following: Pan Am Games, White River State Park, the world’s largest children’s museum, two NBA arenas, two NFL stadiums, relocation of the NCAA, a world-class airport, a Super Bowl, 1,000-room headquarter hotel and five convention center expansions. In the next five years, Indy has \$1.9 billion in new tourism-related infrastructure coming online that includes:

- The Indiana Convention Center’s sixth expansion and a 50,000-square-foot ballroom connecting to the 800-room Signia Hilton, opening in early 2026.
- An expansion to the Cultural Trail providing additional connectivity for the downtown core area.
- Gainbridge Fieldhouse debuts the Bicentennial Unity Plaza, a seasonal ice-skating rink, community basketball court, art installations and more.
- One of the largest river redevelopment projects in the country, the White River.
- The Stadium District will add a 20-acre Eleven Park, a neighborhood village that includes a 20,000-seat multipurpose soccer stadium.

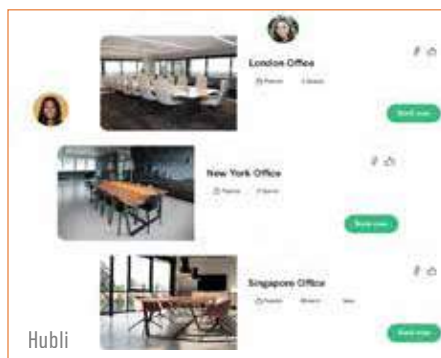
HUBLI ADDS NEW TOOL

Event booking platform Hubli has launched a service for booking internal meeting space called Office Connect. The tool allows users to list their internal meeting space in Hubli’s platform alongside external space in hotels and other

venues. With this new product launch, the platform will now allow organizations to significantly streamline how their teams meet and work in their offices, with the associated benefit of providing further cost savings and fully automating what was once a very manual process.

According to the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) 2023 Forecast, 20% of business travel is now centered around the internal meetings segment, with industry reports estimating over 30% taking place in offices with the remainder in external venues.

Hubli Office Connect allows organizations to plug their internal office spaces into the Hubli ecosystem, as a new booking module alongside its group lodging reservations engine and external venues platform providing booking capabilities to over 200,000 spaces around the world. As companies continue to adapt how they use their office footprint, Office Connect will provide maximum flexibility for global teams to find the most productive environment to meet in, using an all-in-one, easy-to-use interface.



HYATT RELEASES NEW GUIDE

Hyatt Hotels Corp. has launched Together by Hyatt’s new Event Experience Guides, which are designed to provide all information a meeting planner needs in one place. Planners will now have an interactive, online platform with resources such as menus, sustainability practices, well-being experience options, event spaces, guest room details and more.

The new guides offer property-specific planning resources available in U.S. properties that include:

- Real-time information available 24/7, streamlining the communication between property teams and meeting planners by ensuring all resources can be found in one place.
- A dynamic user interface that showcases information a planner needs to execute a successful meeting and event, such as venue photography, capacity charts, detailed floor plans of event spaces and exclusive preferred vendor options.
- Curated food and beverage menus unique to each location, with Hyatt’s “Food. Thoughtfully Sourced. Carefully Served.” philosophy, which includes local and responsible sourcing, plant-forward choices, seasonal flavors and balanced portions.
- “Sustainability fact sheets” customized by hotel, highlighting how they are addressing climate change and water conservation, waste and circularity as well as responsible sourcing.
- Access to well-being specialists through videos available for meetings and events, letting attendees prioritize their well-being as part of their event experience
- Time-saving event success guidelines and technology resources that include the hotel resource guide, providing answers to planner’s most frequently asked questions.

MCC ACHIEVES GOLD

The Minneapolis Convention Center (MCC) has attained Gold Level certification for the Events Industry Council (EIC) Sustainable Event Standards, which are specific for environmental and social responsibility within the events industry. Created by the EIC Sustainability Committee in partnership with industry professionals and leading sustainability practitioners, the requirements provide event planners and suppliers with prescriptive actions for producing and delivering sustainable events.

“This is great news for the Minneapolis Convention Center and all of us working to make Minneapolis the sustainable destination choice for meeting and event planners,” says Jeff Johnson, MCC executive director. “Achieving this not only recognizes our industry-leading sustainability efforts, but also provides a roadmap for measuring and improving our sustainable event programs on an ongoing basis,” he adds. *M*

The Relationship Builder

Emily Bannwarth sets the space for new connections

BY AMANDA N. WEGNER

Like many others in the field, Emily Bannwarth, CMP, “fell” into the meetings and events industry. “I had no idea that this world even existed in undergrad,” says Bannwarth. Her first glance was in a job with her university’s career services center, where she helped her manager put on etiquette events and career fairs for students. “I was in awe of her [manager’s] attention to detail, which really fit my personality. She gave me her attention to detail, and I learned a lot from her,” recalls Bannwarth.

As she completed her marketing degree, Bannwarth knew she wasn’t interested in the jobs offered at the business school’s career fairs. But she was interested in what her sister-in-law was doing for an association management company, and Bannwarth got her foot in the door by assisting with a conference. “It was so much fun, and it solidified that this was what I wanted to do. I got a job at that [company], and that’s where my career took off.”



After a few years in the field, Bannwarth wanted to extend her knowledge and pursued her master’s degree at the University of Houston’s Conrad N. Hilton College of Global Hospitality Leadership.

“When I first started, people said, ‘Oh, so you’re going to be a party planner.’ People don’t realize that hospitality and tourism is one of the top — if not **the** top — industries for any city, state, country,” says Bannwarth. “Everyone is meeting, everyone is exploring new places — there’s just so much in this space. It’s so expansive, and I’m blown away at what I’ve been able to do and the places I’ve been able to work.”

After spending another decade in the association management industry, Bannwarth moved into a new role as a marketing events specialist for Shook, Hardy & Bacon, LLP, a Kansas City, Missouri-based law firm. In this role, she helps the firm and its partners connect with clients to build and nurture its book of business and serve the industry by hosting educational events.

“It’s interesting work, and I get to flex my marketing wings while working in tandem with the business development department to build brand awareness and support for our partner’s and firm’s goals,” says

Bannwarth. “It’s more of a relationship-building space, and I help set that space for them.”

While her role wasn’t an upward move, it was an important lateral move that provides new experience and exposure.

“It put me on a different ladder and into a realm with new things, and it’s allowing me to build and nurture new connections,” says Bannwarth. “That is why I am a huge proponent of being part of an association or volunteering outside your professional career. It opens your eyes and ears. It can also help you take risks and try something new,” she explains.

Bannwarth is active in the Kansas City chapter of Meeting Professionals International (MPI); she is the director of monthly programs and the incoming president, a role she will step into next year. As the industry continues to recover, interest and participation in the organization have grown, says Bannwarth.

“There are two things no one can take away from you: Your education and your experience,” says Bannwarth. “It’s important to constantly learn and be engaged in the industry. It makes you more marketable, more well-rounded. And it’s such a relationship-based industry that building those relationships and knowing what’s going on helps me be better at my job and to better serve my firm.”

As the meetings and events landscape continues to evolve, Bannwarth encourages her fellow planning professionals to bring diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) into the picture.

“As a planner and a person, we need to take a look at the other side,” says Bannwarth. “We get very focused on the clients we are serving, what the current task at hand is, and we keep in that lane. But we always need to look around and try to be intentional with embracing inclusivity and making a difference for our attendees.”

To that end, education and seeking out relevant DEI resources is imperative, according to Bannwarth. And as trusted advisors to clients and stakeholders, she says planners should be prepared to advise and advocate on how to address and incorporate best practices.

“The question to ask is, ‘How can we be inclusive in this situation or with this event?’” says Bannwarth. “As a planner, you need to be educated on that. It’s our job to be that resource and provide that lens for our clients. It’s part of the value we can offer.” *M*

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Beer Gardens

Great summer spaces for conversation, networking and cold beverages

BY KRISTINE HANSEN

Think of it as a picnic with beer. Or outdoor dining in a park.

Have you thought about organizing a small group within your company or organization, or on your client's behalf, for after-hours fun at a beer garden? These gardens in urban settings — but always with a fair amount of green space — typically start the season around Memorial Day (although some pour beers as early as April), staying open through late October. They also remain open until dark, which makes them an ideal post-workday or post-meeting event.

Even for those who opt for non-alcoholic drinks, the focus at a beer garden isn't solely on suds. Sodas and kombucha are popular alternatives at beer gardens, with the latter often brewed on site or by a local brewer. Food menus ensure everyone is fed.

Here are five beer gardens around the Midwest with special offerings for groups, including reserving a dedicated seated area (beer gardens usually offer first-come-first-serve seating, not conducive for a large group) and facilitating packages (making the process of ordering food a breeze). Some can even fold in a tour of their operation, adding an educational component to the outing.

SOUTH SHORE TERRACE KITCHEN & BEER GARDEN MILWAUKEE, WIS.

Beer lovers can taste their way around not only Wisconsin but the world, because the tap list is that extensive. The food caters to vegetarian and gluten-free diets while also representing signature Wisconsin eats such as Friday fish fry, cheese curds, and Klement's bratwurst and Polish sausage (the company's plant is located in the neighborhood). In addition to booking picnic tables for your group that are perched above Lake Michigan on an expanse of lawn in South Shore Park, South Shore Terrace's indoor space is available for private rental on Mondays all day, as well as Tuesday through Friday prior to 4 p.m. Reservations can include catered food from the beer garden's menu. As a popular weddings and meetings site and frequent location for local-government meetings, the historic brick South Shore Park Pavilion can hold up to 210 people. It's available for rentals daily, except for Wednesday, between 10 a.m. and midnight, and includes access to the kitchenette. Street parking is free.



SHEFFIELD'S BEER & GARDEN CHICAGO, ILL.

Tucked into the Lake View neighborhood, 6 miles north of the Loop, this beer garden also pours wine and mixes cocktails, which is ideal for a group with varying drink preferences. Groups between 20 and 200 people can be accommodated. Hanging flower baskets and an exposed brick wall cultivate a cozy vibe, and a small stage can host live music or a presentation. Beers at the outside bar range from local brewers (Goose Island Beer Company, Spiteful Brewing and Maplewood Brewing Company) to imports (Hirter Privat Pils from Germany). Food can also be tailored for your group's needs. On the bar's menu is everything from salad to barbecue platters, as well as shareable bites like fried pickle chips, fried green tomato sliders and Furious Irish nachos (all the Mexican-style fixings plus Jack Daniels barbecue sauce and choice of meat). Being in Chicago, parking can be a challenge, but if your group is coming from a nearby site, public transportation is easily accessible.

HOP LOT BREWING CO. SUTTONS BAY, MICH.

This unique beer garden is open year-round and is tucked away in a forest grove, offering an option for groups meeting in the winter. Igloos for small groups of about a half-dozen people help shelter from the cold as do crackling fires. The opportunity to work with the brewery to plan a private, group event is limited, but thankfully, there are options for small groups. The garden is adjacent to the microbrewery, and you'll find a variety of beers on tap — from an IPA that's a collaboration with the Leo Creek Preserve (donating 50 cents from every pint) to a hearty American Stout — as well as ciders and wines carrying the Hop Lot Brewing Co. name. If your



New Holland Brewing Co.

group wants to tack on a soft-adventure activity, this beer garden is reachable from the TART Trail, a network of multi-use trails in Grand Traverse and Leelanau counties. Tacos, burgers (including an Impossible burger), sandwiches and shareable appetizers (such as smoked wings and beer-battered fries) are on the food menu. There is plenty of parking near the beer garden.

NEW HOLLAND BREWING CO., BRIDGE STREET BEER GARDEN GRAND RAPIDS, MICH.

This Michigan brewery may have large distribution but its Bridge Street Beer Garden, with a retractable roof and radiant overhead heating system, feels small and intimate. It can hold as few as 20 people and there are additional options inside, which include a full restaurant buyout or five additional spaces and lounges on site. By working with the brewery's banquets and catering team, food can also be part of your event. On the menu are elevated eats like eight pizzas (such as a vegan option and another topped with chicken and waffle bites), hearty entrees such as house-smoked kielbasa and mushroom risotto (both source ingredients from local farms and food purveyors), and salads and sandwiches appealing to vegetarians. Parking can be challenging and so it's recommended to carpool or hire a group shuttle.



Ball Band Biergarten

BALL BAND BIERGARTEN MISHAWAKA, IND.

Operated by the city of Mishawaka, this beer garden along the St. Joseph River is in northern Indiana, 82 miles northwest of Fort Wayne and near South Bend. It opened during the summer of 2020 and operates at night with lights strung overhead, and during the day, with umbrellas and pergolas keeping out the sun.

A rental can include not only the beer garden but also access to Beutter Park Lawn & Stage for an additional fee. As this is a public 10-acre park, the atmosphere isn't entirely private. Parking is available in the park. If your group is

small enough, you might consider not reserving the garden and instead showing up on any given day, especially when live music or other events are happening, further enriching your group's participation.

The beer garden is not operated by a brewery or restaurant, so beer and food partners change seasonally. This year it's Sun King Brewery, based in Mishawaka, providing both beer and food (brats, hot dogs, walking tacos and nachos). *M*

Kristine Hansen is a freelance writer from the Milwaukee area who covers food, drink, travel, art and design.

Finding Common Ground

Suppliers and planners share tips on how to work better together

BY JAY GUBRUD AND CHRIS WAGNER



The relationship between suppliers and meeting planners is a critical component of successful events. Both parties rely on the other to bring their expertise and resources to the table to create memorable experiences for attendees.

Below, we share tips from each side of the relationship on how to build a better rapport based on collaboration, effective communication strategies, negotiating tactics and trust for long-term partnerships.

FROM THE SUPPLIER:

- 01.** Read the RFP for accuracy and clarity before sending it out.
- 02.** Have a clear vision and expectations of the event, which should be based on past history, budget and theme identified in the RFP.
- 03.** Know the real budget with which you are working.
- 04.** Be reasonable with the amount of comped service or items included in the RFP and prioritize those most important to you.
- 05.** Be realistic with what the budget will afford and have some flexibility, especially with dates.
- 06.** Be prepared to share key details of your event such as guest room needs, function space requirements and special event outings during the RFP process. This will improve the supplier's ability to provide you with a proposal that maximizes the flow and continuity of your event.

- 07.** When available, provide a minimum of two years of history to include guest room pickup, food and beverage guarantees, and other important factors.
- 08.** When communicating the budget, allow the convention service or catering manager to creatively manage the budget. They can often be creative and recommend where to spend your budget to get the most impact.
- 09.** Communicate in a timely manner, especially during the RFP process.
- 10.** Negotiate fairly. Like you, we have hard costs, budgets and revenue targets to hit as well. We are used to some give and take, but may not always be able to provide everything you want.
- 11.** Know your purpose, concept and goal. Is the event intimate, informal, formal? What does a successful event look like to you? Is it a celebration or corporate meeting, or is it more centered around activities?
- 12.** Provide honest information about competition and don't fabricate competition if there is none.
- 13.** Share information about obstacles encountered at previous events so they can be avoided in the future.
- 14.** Keep the decision-making process as timely as possible, understanding that inventory placed on hold by the supplier cannot be sold to other potential clients and sales could be lost if the space is not contracted with your event.
- 15.** Let the supplier know why you aren't awarding them your business, so they can properly address any issues.



Janesville Woman's Club



The Venue ©Full Spectrum Photography

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Rock County Historical Society Carriage Barn ©Full Spectrum Photography

- 16.** Understand the needs and expectations of attendees. What's the breakdown of men and women? Will they be bringing their families? This will affect everything from accommodations to food.
- 17.** Ask your supplier to share creative ideas from other groups similar to yours.
- 18.** Give your supplier the freedom to contribute to the design and success of your event.
- 19.** Take time for a site visit. It will be worth it! (And don't be afraid to do a second one unannounced to see operations when the team is not planning for you to be there.)
- 20.** Read and understand the contract/agreement.
- 21.** Make eye contact, it shows respect.
- 22.** Be loyal to your past suppliers, assuming you were happy, and association members.
- 23.** Use the speakers bureau for centralized communication.
- 24.** Trust us. It's in our best interests to keep you happy and help you produce a successful event.
- 25.** Clarify which specific requirements of the RFP are mandatory and which ones are flexible. For example, "items 1-6 are mandatory and if you can't fulfill, then it is best not to bid"
- 26.** Use definitive terms about when you will be getting back to a supplier (i.e., Tuesday morning or 2 p.m. on Friday).
- 27.** Be respectful of our time demands when requesting information. We're happy to help you on urgent matters, but if something is not needed urgently, please be honest about the timing when making the request.
- 28.** Identify key stakeholders and VIPs that will be attending your event so we can share that with our staff.
- 29.** For speakers, provide detailed information about your needs to the speaker bureau. If there is Q&A at the end of their presentation, make sure they are aware. If you are doing a prize drawing and they are picking the winner, communicate this in advance.
- 30.** If you are happy with our service, please refer us to your professional network.

FROM THE PLANNER:

- 01.** Don't bid on an RFP if you cannot deliver on the specifications.
- 02.** If the dates aren't available, be upfront and let us know. Same goes for guest rooms.
- 03.** When the dates aren't available, but you still want our business, offer alternative dates with a great value package and we may reconsider.
- 04.** Be creative with the budget presented. Draw upon ideas you have used with other clients.
- 05.** Help us stay within budget.
- 06.** Bundle all costs into one room rate. Don't include additional, mandatory fees like a "resort fee."
- 07.** Host events so the planner can experience your property.
- 08.** Respond quickly to RFPs.
- 09.** Submit your best offer first.
- 10.** Don't reply to RFPs with boilerplate proposals. Make sure to address each of the items outlined in the RFP.
- 11.** Organize proposals to match order of items outlined in RFP so we don't have to cut and paste proposals to more easily compare against the RFP.
- 12.** Put key components of the proposal at the front and the lesser important details at the end.
- 13.** If you have questions, ask!
- 14.** If you cannot take our business, explain why.
- 15.** Keep contract terms simple; identify specific areas that are important or have caused misunderstandings in the past.
- 16.** Assign a dedicated person to us for questions or communication that is required on site.
- 17.** If something goes wrong, communicate it to us so we aren't surprised later on.
- 18.** Be aware of popular events taking place during our event, like the Indianapolis 500 or NCAA Tournament, which may impact guest behavior.
- 19.** Include the conference services person on communication early on; make the hand-off seamless.
- 20.** Realize that there may be reasons you do not understand driving some of our requests. For example, if we ask to have four seats per table, we understand that the table may fit more, but it could be due to the nature of the activity or discussion taking place.
- 21.** Make the arrival pleasant, as it sets the mood and expectations for the rest of the event.
- 22.** Communicate with detail and be specific.
- 23.** Ask about billing preferences in advance.
- 24.** Include the salesperson in the process even after the sale.

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25. Make sure your salesperson is on property for at least the first day of our event.
26. Have the salesperson check in with me each day of the event to make sure everything is on track.
27. Don't be upset if the decision-maker passes you on to a logistics or meeting planner during the planning process.
28. Get to know your customer. Send appropriate amenities that your client and VIPs appreciate. Be sure to communicate internally with your operations team so everyone is on board.
29. Be flexible with room set up. Have an extra table or chairs in the room to accommodate late arrivals and groups that want to spread out.
30. Expect the unexpected; be courteous and proactive to address operational issues that can arise during the event.
31. Keep in mind that the success of the event impacts the planner's career and possibly compensation.
32. Planners just want their event to go smoothly and easily.
33. If I'm an off-site planner, please give me feedback regarding the team on site. If the facilitator is rude, I would like to be aware of this.
34. Put your contact information in your signature with all email communication. Include your last name too.
35. Provide us with a list of local emergency services or contacts, such as: doctors, dentists, drugstores, etc.
36. Staff the front desk appropriately, especially during peak hours.
37. Have breaks set up on time.
38. Service restrooms before breaks.
39. Show you value our group by becoming familiar with the details of our event.
- [We once had an event manager supply Kleenex throughout the room after seeing that the agenda included a session on emotion.]
40. Equip all of your staff with the knowledge and power to assist guests.
41. Be sensitive to cultural issues.
42. When working with international groups, have client-facing staff learn a few phrases in the language of the guests.
43. Planners have different preferences for followup after the event. Find out how we prefer to share feedback, i.e., email, phone, etc.

For over 20 years, Jay Gubrud has worked with meetings and events organizations, including over two dozen MPI Chapters from Boston to Seattle, SGMP Chapters from Michigan to Florida, PCMA, HelmsBriscoe and many more. Contact Jay at jaygubrud.com.

Chris Wagner has over 20 years of hospitality experience in both sales and marketing, and hotel operations, with a focus on retaining and building client relationships. You can reach Chris at wagner.chris54@gmail.com. 



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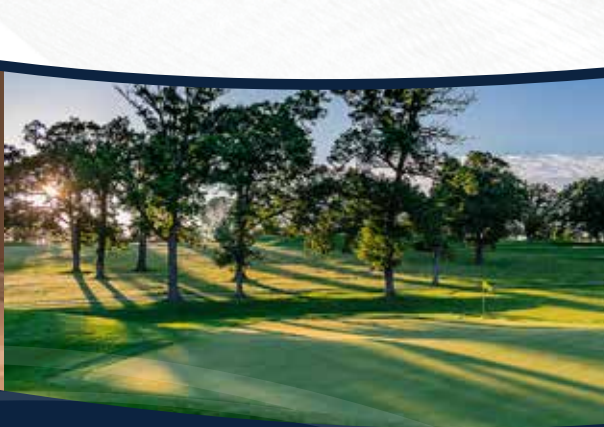


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class Spa Kalahari & Salon. They can also visit the fitness studios and explore different entertainment options. Varied dining options include the newly renovated Double Cut Steak House at Kalahari Resorts & Conventions in Wisconsin Dells or the new Sortino's Italian Kitchen, a Kalahari tradition now at Sandusky. Plus, admission to America's Largest Indoor Waterparks is always included with overnight stays!

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Best of the Best

*Championship courses that
will wow your guests*

BY GREG GERBER

Golf outings are outstanding networking opportunities and make for lots of challenging fun. Having the opportunity to play a championship-caliber course is a highlight for many who enjoy the sport. Here are six Midwest courses hosting PGA or USGA tournaments in the coming year to consider for your next group event.





TPC Twin Cities

It's a special experience for people to play on the same course professionals do, says Todd Hajduk, general manager and director of golf at TPC Deere Run in Moline, Ill. Few sports offer the ability for fans to employ the same strategies in navigating out of sticky situations or to try a completely different approach to see if they could beat a pro's performance.

"People like playing a round of golf at TPC Deere Run because they can literally walk in the footsteps of the pros," he explains. "Golfers enjoy attempting the same winning shots from the same locations professional golfers did when competing in a televised tournament."

It's a unique twist on fantasy sports because golfers themselves can earn bragging rights by utilizing the same equipment on the same course under similar conditions.

New technology is making it even easier for amateur golfers to feel like professionals, says Danny Rainbow, director of golf at SentryWorld in Stevens Point, Wis. Courses used by the pros often have software available to allow amateurs to enjoy live leaderboards where data is displayed directly on golf carts used by players. The same information appears on monitors at the clubhouse and patios.

"Players love it because they can see leaderboards update every time a score is entered," says Rainbow.

"Golfers really like to see how they are doing against the field during play as well as how their scores compare to specific friends and associates."

Here is a rundown of six Midwest courses hosting professional events in 2023.

TPC DEERE RUN

Built on the site of a former Arabian horse farm overlooking the tree-lined Rock River, there is a lot of history at the TPC Deere Run course, which is only a few miles from John Deere headquarters in Moline, Ill. In fact, each hole has a name reflecting the property's heritage and surrounding land.

The public golf course was built in the late 1990s and has hosted the John Deere Classic every year it has been open. The 2023 event takes place July 6-9. What makes TPC Deere Run unique is there are no homes built along the course — a rarity today.

The course features a full practice area with natural grass and artificial turf. That's important because players tee off on turf and enjoy play on grass.

The clubhouse can host events for as many as 144 players with enough carts to accommodate 76 pairs. The course has partnered with several nearby hotels to create stay-and-play packages.

"Many people think we are a semi-private course, but that's not true. Anyone can come here and play on a PGA course for less than \$100," says Hajduk, who notes companies and organizations as far away as Chicago have planned outings. "Our small community's course is one of the best kept secrets in golf."

TPC TWIN CITIES

Its innovative design and reverence for nature make TPC Twin Cities an outstanding championship golf course, says Chris Weinhold, general manager and director of golf. (The course hosts the 3M Open July 24-30.)

Located 20 miles north of downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul, Golf Digest has listed the 7,468-yard, par-72 course as one of the Top 20 golf courses in Minnesota multiple times. Arnold Palmer designed the course to blend seamlessly with the natural rolling terrain of a former sod farm.

"Collaborating with Tom Lehman, a PGA Tour player, consultant and Minnesota native, Palmer sculpted a

serene masterpiece,” says Weinhold. “It features bentgrass tees, fairways and greens, as well as native prairie grasses, picturesque wetlands and 27 bodies of water, all framed by stately stands of mature oak, spruce and pine trees.”

Groundskeepers maintain multiple tees on each hole to enable golfers of all skill levels to enjoy a challenging round. Complementing the golf course is a 27,000-square-foot, double-ended and double-tiered practice facility, which includes more than 12,000 square feet of putting greens plus bunker and short-game practice areas.

TPC Twin Cities hosts dozens of golf outings every year ranging from 8 to 200 people. Depending upon weather, pre- and post-event activities can be set up in the clubhouse or patio. Full corporate or charity golf events take place Mondays for a minimum of 100 players. Smaller groups of 12 to 24 players can be accommodated during the week when sponsored by a club member.

“Our staff will take care of every detail from beginning to end, which allows you to focus on hosting your clients and guests,” explains Weinhold.

SENTRYWORLD

Located in Stevens Point, Wis., SentryWorld is one of the premier golf courses in the state, says Rainbow. The course was developed by Sentry Insurance as part of a sports complex. Meeting planners enjoy flexibility in setting up a fully-inclusive experiences at the award-winning course featuring a 64-room boutique hotel and banquet facilities.

SentryWorld will host the U.S. Senior Open at the 200-acre course June 27 through July 2. The course was closed for two years during the pandemic, so staff took advantage of the downtime to redesign the experience to make it worthy of hosting the world’s most elite, seasoned golfers.

Every hole features three things all golfers enjoy about a course — playability, versatility and stunning

beauty, according to Rainbow. Another unique aspect of the parkland course is that, because it is all-inclusive, players can enjoy unlimited sandwiches, snacks and beverages at two concessions buildings visited four times during a round of play.

While golfers are familiar with water hazards, few have contended with anything like SentryWorld’s “Flower Hole,” where a sea of multi-colored flowers envelop the putting green on the 16th hole.

Stretching more than 7,300 yards, the course will challenge golfers to use every club in their bag, says Rainbow.

And a new watering system allows groundskeepers the ability to make greens as fast or firm as they’d like, to keep play challenging.

MUIRFIELD VILLAGE GOLF CLUB

Muirfield Village Golf Club is a private course in Dublin, Ohio, that will host the Memorial Tournament May 29-June 4. Golf professionals help raise money for local charities while honoring the contributions and memories of people who distinguished themselves in golf.

Designed by Jack Nicklaus in 1972, the 7,221-yard course is situated on 220 acres, which includes an 11-acre driving range. There are 71 bunkers scattered around the course, and 11 holes have water hazards.

Changes made to the course nearly a dozen years ago lengthened several holes, added more bunkers and rerouted a stream. In 2020, every green was modified, bunkers enlarged and made deeper.

OLYMPIA FIELDS COUNTRY CLUB

Two courses offer unique golfing opportunities at Olympia Fields Country Club south of Chicago, just 10 miles from the Indiana border.

The 7,353-yard North Course has hosted several PGA events and U.S. Opens. The BMW Championship takes place there Aug. 17-20.



TPC Deere Run



TPC Twin Cities

Butterfield Creek winds its way through the property to provide a water hazard on seven holes — twice on holes 12 and 14 on the North Course.

The 7,114-yard South Course is made challenging by several elevation changes, hundreds of oak trees, as well as the creek. The landmark English Tudor clubhouse can host private events.

Because this is a private club, groups must have a member sponsor and there is limited availability.

FIRESTONE COUNTRY CLUB

With 54 holes of golf, Firestone Country Club in Akron, Ohio, is sure to challenge golfers of all skill levels.

The South Course, which has hosted 86 professional tournaments, is home to the Kaulig Companies Championship July 13-16. That is one of five major championships on the Senior PGA Tour. It features narrow, tree-lined fairways which make reaching greens challenging enough. But, just try to sink a putt on the constantly sloping greens. Arnold

Palmer nicknamed the 667-yard 16th hole “The Monster,” and the par 5 has been challenging golfers ever since.

The North Course features thick trees and water on half of its holes. It's not as challenging as the South Course, yet requires proper risk assessment and precision in selecting shots to avoid penalties. It hosts the American Golf Classic and World Series of Golf.

The Firestone Fazio Course is the newest addition. Featuring angled tee boxes and fewer trees, but challenging slopes, this course hosts the Ohio Senior Open.

Whether planning conferences, trade shows or team-building events, Firestone Country Club has several halls and banquet rooms available. The staff can also help with decor, food and entertainment as well as planning corporate golf outings or tournaments. *M*

Greg Gerber is a freelance writer who splits his time between Arizona and Wisconsin.

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The Future is Here

Artificial intelligence can help planners ease the work of planning and executing top-notch events

BY AMANDA WEGNER

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly changing how we live and work, including the work of professionals in the meetings and events industry. With new tools and apps flooding the market, tech-savvy meeting planners would be wise to consider how they can utilize AI to automate tasks, improve efficiency and personalize the attendee experience.

AI can make planners' jobs easier by automating scheduling, registration and logistics tasks; this frees up the time of planners to focus on the strategic aspects of their events to create great experiences for their stakeholders and attendees. It can also help planners improve their efficiency and optimize operations. For instance, AI can identify potential problems, such as scheduling conflicts and predict event demand.

Another hallmark of AI is its ability to personalize experiences. Through learning and predictive analytics, AI can be used to make recommendations based on attendees' interests and provide real-time updates. In addition, individuals with auditory, dexterity or other physical challenges can leverage AI for notetaking, and AI provides non-native speakers with real-time translation.

AI also benefits the bottom line. By streamlining the efficiency of planning and operations, identifying opportunities for improvement, and enhancing attendees' experience (which drives sales, increases mentions and engagement, and encourages future attendance), utilizing AI can increase revenue and reduce costs for planners and stakeholders alike.

GETTING STARTED WITH AI

Curious about how to start incorporating AI into your next meeting or event? Here are some recommendations, including suggested apps to consider.

The planning of meetings and events is a robust process that includes many routine tasks that can take time away from important duties like negotiating with speakers, venue walkthroughs and working directly with stakeholders to create the best experience possible for attendees. To make lighter work of routine tasks and streamline your planning efficiency, consider bringing a tool

like ChatGPT by OpenAI into your toolkit.

ChatGPT is just one of several chatbots available to ease your administrative — and creative — burden; others include Bard by Google, Jasper Chat and more. While these tools have additional but limited capabilities, such as data analysis, and, in some instances, can be integrated with other tools, they are best for handling information-based tasks and brainstorming.

"I find that creating outlines of what will be necessary for the day can be made easier by getting one of these programs to create a checklist for you," says Caroline Reidy, managing director of The HR Suite, of how she uses ChatGPT. "Even if you don't use what the AI creates as the final draft, using it as a jumping-off point can help free up so much time."

A pro tip for using a chatbot for administrative tasks is to form well-structured queries. And it's important to emphasize that chatbots can give you a great starting point, but the responses they return still demand a human touch. In addition, these tools have a margin of error and can't account for event specifics or your knowledge and experience.

NOTETAKING AND TRANSCRIPTION.

To help meeting attendees get the most out of each keynote, table talk and presentation, consider utilizing tools for notetaking and transcription.

Otter.ai is a well-known tool for meeting transcription and automatic meeting note generation. Otter excels at identifying speakers, displaying live transcription and creating an AI outline for longer meetings. Another option is Colibri, a simple, clutter-free tool for recording meetings, displaying real-time transcription and generating notes. Colibri keeps a searchable library of all your meetings, making it easy to find relevant information. Others to consider are Supernormal and Beulr, and many of these options integrate with productivity tools like Google Meet, Zoom and Teams.

AI tools for these tasks can help make events more inclusive as they benefit those who are differently abled and non-native speakers.

FACIAL RECOGNITION.

Meeting planners are successfully using facial recognition technology to check attendees in quickly and efficiently. It also serves a dual purpose in that it can enhance event security. Especially when combined with natural language processing, facial recognition can identify potential threats and prevent security breaches.

One option is Amazon Rekognition, which can be used for check-ins, security screenings and identifying attendees. Zenus is a company that uses AI-driven facial recognition to provide attendee tracking, but its solutions can also utilize AI facial recognition technology to measure live attendee engagement and analyze demographic groups at meetings and events.

PERSONALIZATION.

While tools like ChatGPT and Bard by Google utilize the open Internet to respond to questions, another class of chatbots can be trained to respond based on a customized learning model to help answer attendee questions, provide information, and help with tasks such as registration and scheduling. They can also be used as a "digital concierge," capable of making tailored content, and

“Even if you don't use what the AI creates as the final draft, using it as a jumping-off point can help free up so much time.”

— Caroline Reidy,
The HR Suite

3 Ways ChatGPT Benefits Planners

ChatGPT is a type of chatbot, powered by AI that uses natural language processing (NLP) and the open Internet to respond to your text-based queries. (It's important to note that there are programmable chatbots as well.) Here are a few ways meeting planners can utilize a tool like ChatGPT:

1.

Create a planning list: Type a query such as “generate a planning list for a corporate retreat” and the tool will create a list you can use as a starting point.

2.

Brainstorm titles for a speaker's presentation: Ask the chatbot to “make a list of potential titles for a presentation about improving employee engagement.” The chatbot will then return options to help get the creative juices flowing.

3.

Blog posts: Need to generate quick blog posts to provide additional value for your event? Start your query with instructions regarding length and format, such as “write a 400-word blog post on ...” and then add the topics for which you need blog content, such as “the importance of employee engagement,” “current trends in employee engagement” and “how to increase employee engagement.” Use these as a launch point, then add in quotes from your speakers and details about your event.

AI is not fail-safe and requires human oversight. Meeting planners who utilize AI in their planning efforts and their meetings and events would be wise to **maintain a watchful eye and be ready to make adjustments** — or wholesale changes — as needed to ensure a top-notch experience.

session and networking suggestions. For instance, models can be developed to personalize the attendee experience by recommending sessions and speakers, creating personalized recommendations for food and drinks, and providing real-time updates on events and activities.

One of the best-known AI chatbots is IBM's Watson assistant, which can be integrated into websites and event apps to provide 24/7 assistance and answer frequently asked questions. If you are using event management software, check with your provider to see if they offer a chatbot option.

Chatbots aren't limited to websites and apps; texting-based chatbots are also available. The benefit of using text is that it doesn't require a separate app and utilizes a familiar interface. And what's more is that texts have an exceptionally high open rate — 98%. 42Chat is an example of one such text-based chatbot tool. This AI chatbot can answer user questions in three seconds or less, with a 95% success rate, according to the company.

Flynn Zaiger, CEO of Online Optimism, notes that keeping tabs on your chatbots and the user experience is very important.

“Be sure to monitor it to see what text messages have led to frustration and provide additional answers to [users], improve their effectiveness over time and save money and effort,” Zaiger explains.

While you can piece together AI options for a meeting event, many event platforms come with AI baked in. All-in-one event platforms such as Swapcard, Hopin, Brella and Bizzabo include robust options to help planners easily organize and execute events while offering personalization tools. For instance, most platforms mentioned include matchmaking and digital networking, which connects visitors with appropriate exhibitors or other attendees using machine learning algorithms. These platforms also provide the option to create branded event apps and include AI-powered analytics to measure attendee engagement and feedback, which helps identify areas for future improvement and enhancement.

NOT WITHOUT CHALLENGES

While AI-powered tools are a boon for meeting planners and the industry, it also comes with challenges that meeting professionals must consider carefully.

One such challenge is data privacy; AI systems often collect data about attendees, which raises concerns about data privacy. While many individuals have strong concerns about data privacy, it's crucial to overlay this concern with existing data protection laws. For example, if you are organizing a global event or an event with multinational participants, the European Union has a stringent privacy protection law in GDPR; Canada also has a data protection law. In the United States, data protection is very lax, and there

is no federal law, but several states have recently enacted (or will soon enact) laws to protect their citizens. Certain industries also have data protection regulations in place that planners must consider.

Another challenge of AI is bias. Because these systems utilize learning, they can exhibit biases stemming from their programming and data sources, which can lead to unfair, inaccurate or discriminatory outcomes. While bias can come into play with personalization and AI-generated responses from chatbots, facial recognition and predictive analytics algorithms are also areas of concern.

Similarly, AI is not fail-safe and requires human oversight. Meeting planners who utilize AI in their planning efforts and their meetings and events would be wise to maintain a watchful eye and be ready to make adjustments — or wholesale changes — as needed to ensure a top-notch experience.

Whether online, hybrid or in-person, there is a lot of opportunity in the meetings and events space to capitalize on AI. It has the potential to revolutionize the way meeting professionals plan and execute events, and it is likely to play an increasingly important role for years to come. *M*

Amanda N. Wegner is a freelance writer based in Madison, Wis.



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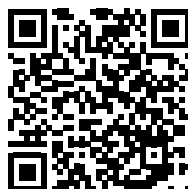


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Win Big

With these six tips that deliver a successful strategy for your next sports event.

BY RONNIE WENDT

Organizing a regional, national or even international sports event is no small feat. It requires meticulous planning, attention to detail and a deep understanding of the needs and expectations of participants and spectators alike.

Whether you are a veteran planner or a first-timer, there are a few things to keep in mind as you plan athletic events. Focusing on the essentials will ensure a team event scores big with fans and players.



1.

Location, Location, Location

The first thing event planners must consider is location.

Here, site tours matter. Visiting a venue before booking ensures you pick one that is easily accessible with ample parking, and room for teams and fans, and all their needs.

“Sports directors need to see the venue to know for certain if it’s going to work for their event — every venue is unique,” says Matt Ten Haken, director of sports marketing for the Fox Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau in northeast Wisconsin.

He explains planners have a choice of venues across the Midwest, and in the cities they choose. For instance, Fox Cities has venues across the region for soccer, baseball, softball, basketball, volleyball and hockey.

Its premier facilities include the Community First Champion Center, offering eight hardwood basketball courts, 13 volleyball courts and two ice rinks with seating; the Neuroscience Group Field, home of the Timber Rattlers, a minor league baseball team, which opens its field to outdoor youth sporting events; the Fox Cities Exhibition Center; and the Scheels USA Youth Sports Complex.

Each of these locations might work well, but which one gets selected depends on the sport and the group’s unique needs, according to Ten Haken.

“Every event planner wants something special for their event — they want to stand out,” he says. “The initial conversations about

the facility’s specifications and community itself typically leads to a site tour so they can confirm that what they’ve been told is real and what’s in it for their events.”

The UW Health Sports Factory is lauded as a premier sports facility in Rockford, Ill. It offers eight basketball courts that can transition into 16 volleyball courts or 12 pickleball courts. The facility’s been used for everything from basketball tournaments to rugby, volleyball and cheer competitions.

Even with this flexibility, Danielle Potter, superintendent of operations for the Rockford Parks District, underscores the need for a site tour. “Walkthroughs are so important,” she says, explaining they help plan everything from where to put the player registration table to coach and referee accommodations to pedestrian flow within the building.

Kansas City has long been recognized as one of the top 10 cities for sports. The metro area offers award-winning professional sports stadiums, including premier soccer facilities, baseball and softball fields, basketball stadiums and modern, functional arenas. But even with this impressive lineup, Nathan Hermiston, senior vice president of convention sales and services for Visit KC, recommends a site visit before booking a sports event. A visit to the area and its facilities “makes sure the process starts out on the right foot,” he says. “Event planners have choices on where to go. We want to make sure teams have a good experience in the city and with the tournament, which makes it more likely they will return to in the future.”

2.

Pay Attention to Parking

When families travel to attend a tournament, pre-event jitters

abound. The last thing they need is to be thinking about parking, says Potter.

“I don’t care where you go, parking is always a challenge,” she says, noting the UW Health Sports Factory solves parking woes with two parking lots offering 400 stalls and a partnership to use a parking lot across the street for overflow vehicles.

With parking considerations, Ten Haken recommends asking the following questions:

- Is there ample parking for the event?
- Are the parking stalls paved?
- Are the parking lots well lit?
- Will road construction be an issue?

“We make sure we have ample parking and provide clear directions to all participants to eliminate parking concerns,” he says.

Potter stresses the need for ample signage. “Whenever one of our lots gets full, we put out a sign and direct them to where they can park,” she says. “We also explain our parking system in a FAQ we give to event directors, so they know the layout of the facility and the parking available.”

3.

Plan Early

Sporting events picked up in popularity as the nation emerged from its pandemic

cocoon. As that happened,

planners began to schedule events earlier, according to Hermiston. Where it was once OK to plan just six months out, he stresses it's now necessary to do so at least a year out.

"If you're looking to host a tournament in Kansas City, you're probably going to want to think about that at least 15 months out," he says. "A lot of times our availability will be limited if you don't do that, even with our large quantity and variety of venues."

Marketing an event also must start earlier, adds Ten Haken. "In order to have a great event, you need great competition," he explains. "Often, I see planners promote events a little too late. The best event directors are thinking about their dates for next year, right after their event is done, and start promoting those events at least nine months in advance. This affords an opportunity for as many teams and athletes to participate as possible."

He adds that early planning also gives planners time to secure hotel rooms and possibly sponsor support. Many CVBs, he adds, will distribute event posters and promote events on social media, local radio and TV.

4. Watch for Cost Savings
Many CVBs will help defray costs for returning event customers and large tournaments. But it depends on event size and commitment.

"How many tournaments are you going to offer? Will you be coming back year after year? Is your event very large? How many hotel rooms will you need?" asks Potter. "If repeat business and many people are possible, we might offer a discount through the CVB or even a sponsorship or marketing dollars to promote the event."

We understand the economics and how the tourism dollars will impact our communities. That far outweighs the discount."

Potter cautions discounts are typically not available through sports venues but through CVBs or sports commissions. She explains an event venue's job is to gain business, keep it and grow it. The CVB's job is to attract tourism to the community. In Rockford, the CVB may provide welcome baskets and marketing dollars, and connect groups with discounts for restaurants and after-hours entertainment. She says. "We want everyone to feel like they are valued and important."

Getting sponsorships and discounts is possible when event planners really know their group, according to Potter. She explains this includes knowing how many people are coming and where they are coming from. This information helps CVBs determine economic impact and value-added support.

Fox Cities matches each event planner with a sports marketing manager who works with them to plan out accommodations, media and vendor assistance. "We offer this at no charge and have access to grant dollars that can support big events that deliver a significant economic impact," Ten Haken says.

Financial support is always driven by size and scale, adds Hermiston. "How many teams are coming in? Is this a national, regional or local tournament? While we love local tournaments, that impacts the multiplier effect of hotels and restaurants," he says. "If we know there will be 20 teams coming from out of town, that changes the dynamic and we can do more to underwrite some expenses or providing some discounts."

Visit KC also partners with hospitality groups and hotels that may offer sponsorships or discounts too. "Chicken N Pickle,

for example, does an amazing job of marketing to tournaments," he says. "They are such a group and family-friendly restaurant, and they do an amazing job of outreach and customizing offers and sponsorships to groups. Through these kinds of partnerships, there are many things we can do to connect event organizers with financial sponsorships and discounts."

5. Contract Costs
Not every venue offers the same contract, so it's important to pay attention to contract costs, Potter explains.

UW Health Sports Factory has a set cost per hour based on the number of courts a group requires. But another venue may charge a rental fee for athletic courts, a fee to use locker rooms or meeting rooms, and fees for cleaning.

"We embed our costs into our upfront fees," she says. "But not everyone does that. This helps planners know all of their costs upfront, so there are no surprises later."

UW Health Sports Factory has created a FAQ to ensure everyone knows what's included and expected. The FAQ includes info on facility layout, parking, restaurants and concessions, a code of conduct and insurance requirements.

"Every vendor has to carry insurance to hold a tournament at our facility," she says. "We have a FAQ that explains all of this, so nothing is unexpected."

6. Know Your Event
Events succeed when planners know exactly what they need, adds Hermiston. Knowing the size



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“Visiting a venue before booking ensures you pick one that is easily accessible with ample parking, and room for teams and fans, and all their needs.”

of the group and where they are coming from helps the community deliver the best experience possible, Hermiston explains.

“We work with hotels and hospitality partners to make sure they know what’s going on and are best positioned to meet an event’s needs,” Hermiston says.

He explains every tournament has a unique schedule. Sometimes they have morning and evening sessions, sometimes games go all day and end at dinner time. “We make sure that gets communicated to our hotel and restaurant partners so they can

make sure tournament attendees are taken care of,” he says. “They need to know if they must open up early or stay late and be prepared to handle the numbers of people expected. A hotel, for example, might need to be prepared for early and late check-ins, and have their complimentary breakfast start earlier than usual.”

A solid estimate for lodging also helps limit worries for travelers, who need to find a place to stay nearby, Ten Haken adds.

Fox Cities has over 3,600 hotel rooms at a variety of different price points. Like most CVBs,

Fox Cities CVB works with event planners to help them reserve room blocks and compile booking information for visiting teams and families. “There is no charge for this,” he says.

The number of those expected in attendance at actual games also matters, says Potter, who explains the UW Health Sports Factory has a restaurant and concessions on site. “We need to be prepared for that and have the capacity to accommodate them,” she says. “We also work with them to provide a way-finding map of restaurants in the area because not everyone is going to eat at our facility.”

Organizing a sporting event requires careful planning, attention to detail and a deep understanding of the needs and expectations for all involved. Thinking about these key elements can help you plan a successful and memorable tournament that is a winner for all. *M*

Ronnie Wendt is a freelance writer based in northern Wisconsin.



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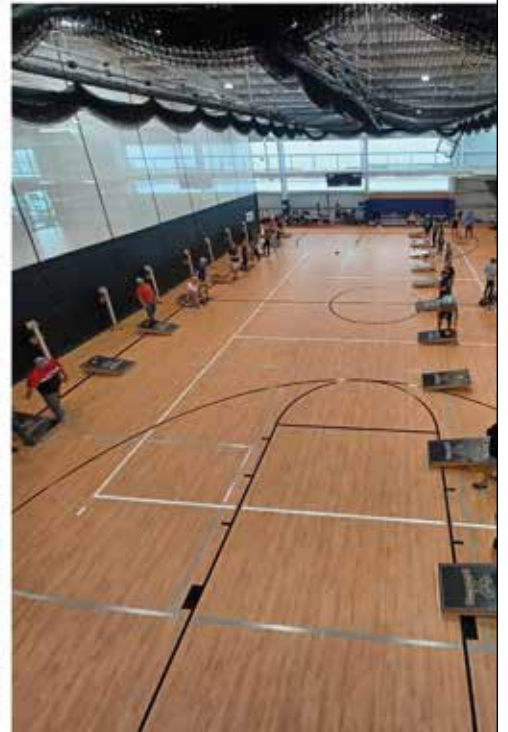
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A photograph of a group of eight young women standing in a line against a brick wall. They are all smiling and posing for a photo. They are wearing a variety of styles, including a tan jacket, a black dress, a white top, a floral crop top, a black jacket, a colorful patterned shirt, a plaid dress, and a green dress. The text "VISIT Effingham IL • USA A MIDWESTERN GETAWAY" is overlaid on the top left, and "enjoy illinois" is overlaid on the bottom right.

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Champions for Change

Experience Columbus launches program to create more diverse, equitable and inclusive spaces in the hospitality and tourism sectors

BY MAURA KELLER

Black, indigenous and persons of color (BIPOC) employees and leaders are vastly underrepresented in the travel and hospitality industry. In an effort to create more leadership pathways for people of color, Experience Columbus and the Greater Columbus Sports Commission, in collaboration with Tourism Diversity Matters, an industry resource for diversity expertise, launched the Diversity Apprenticeship Program (DAP).





Experience Columbus President and CEO Brian Ross was first inspired to bring the program to Ohio's capital city after discussing it with Mike Gamble, founder of Tourism Diversity Matters and co-founder of SearchWide Global, a full-service executive search firm.

"Our team then collaborated with the city of Columbus, the Columbus Foundation and Franklin County to secure funding for a two-year period," says Shannon Jones, Ph.D., director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility Programming at Experience Columbus. "I was brought on by Experience Columbus at this time to oversee the venture. The program officially launched in August 2021."

OVERALL FOCUS

The Diversity Apprenticeship Program provides paid, hands-on, on-the-job experience for people who identify as BIPOC to work across multiple departments (i.e., guest services, event planning, marketing, sales, finance, etc.) in travel industry organizations. Upon successfully completing 600 working hours, over a period of six months, the apprentice(s) are offered a full-time, manager-level position or higher, at one of the participating partner locations.

The DAP is a way that Columbus is committing to actionable change to increase diversity in the hospitality industry. "Residents and visitors alike can and should expect hospitality workers to reflect themselves," Jones says.

The apprentices in the program are assigned to at least one host organization and work across its multiple cross-functional departments (i.e., marketing, administration,

guest services, sales, finance, event planning) for 600 hours during the six-month apprenticeship cycle.

As Jones further explains, the apprentices are assigned a host site as it relates to tourism, hospitality, events, venue or sports career paths that align with their professional career goals. Some tracks include time at multiple organizations, while the majority are with one organization for the full six months. The 15 host organizations include:

- Cameron Mitchell Restaurants
- Center of Science and Industry (COSI)
- Columbus Blue Jackets
- Columbus Regional Airport Authority
- Concord Hospitality Enterprises
- Experience Columbus
- Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens
- Greater Columbus Convention Center
- Greater Columbus Sports Commission
- Hilton Columbus – Downtown
- Hilton Columbus – Easton
- Hyatt Regency
- Levy Restaurants
- National Veterans Memorial and Museum
- Sonesta Columbus Downtown

"Applicants must be 18 years of age, have a high school diploma or GED, submit a background check and self-identify as BIPOC," Jones says. "Interviews are held with advancing candidates after the application window closes. The Diversity Apprenticeship Program is held at least twice a year, with the exception of the inaugural class and Experience Columbus is currently in the process of selecting its fourth cohort."

EMBRACING CHALLENGES

As with any new program, the DAP has faced its fair share of challenges during the program's establishment and ongoing implementation.

"The Diversity Apprenticeship Program launched at a time when the hospitality and tourism industry was still in the throes of the coronavirus pandemic. Visitors, from both meetings and conventions as well as leisure, were slow to return," Jones says.

While the DAP's participating host organizations faced their own setbacks, the DAP began at a pivotal moment in industry history.

"On the other side of the COVID-19 recovery, a more equitable and resilient tourism environment has emerged," Jones says. "Companies became intentional about who they were hiring as they worked to recover from employment losses."

Another challenge of note, the program apprentices, unlike interns, often have no background in the industry.

Jones works closely with the program's host sites to plan out a curriculum-style approach that allows for a smooth onboarding process.

"I also meet with apprentices weekly, and communicate with host sites regularly, to ensure seamless operations," Jones says. "Apprentices are given opportunities outside of their work settings to get involved in local industry events, such as Experience Columbus' Annual Meeting, the Ohio Hotel & Lodging Association's Annual Conference and more."

FIRST-HAND PERSPECTIVES

So far, 18 apprentices have completed the DAP, including the third cohort with seven apprentices who graduated from the program on April 26.

Prior to joining the Diversity Apprenticeship Program with Experience Columbus, former apprentice Alicia Norman, who now works as an event specialist at Experience Columbus, earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Pittsburgh and her master's in Public Administration from Villanova University. She then returned to Columbus, Ohio, and began working in the financial services sector. Although hospitality is new to her, she has always had a passion for event planning and was excited to learn and grow in a new industry.

"As most of the world reflected on change during the COVID-19 pandemic, I, too, did some serious introspection about what I wanted my personal and professional life to look like," Norman says. "While at home as a remote employee in the financial services industry, I decided my position was no longer a fit for my career aspirations. I was inspired to seek new mentorship, learn new skills and make an immediate impact in my community. That's when I came across Experience Columbus."

As a Black woman, Norman says that she immediately understood the importance of an operation like the Diversity Apprenticeship Program, even though it was only in its inception, and she was unfamiliar with the hospitality and tourism sector.

"I could see myself in the role of event coordinator, and I could see myself reflected in the company after

interviewing with Shannon Jones," Norman says. "It has been tremendously rewarding to observe people of color become better represented in the tourism space, in real time. The connections, both through mentorship and networking, that apprentices can make in Greater Columbus are invaluable."

People beyond Ohio are even starting to notice the impact this is having. While at a conference with the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals (NCBMP), other attendees and DEIA experts would tell Norman how they were blown away by Columbus' convention and visitors bureau (CVB).

"Experience Columbus' Diversity Apprenticeship Program has laid the foundation for my professional career, and I am confident that my peers have had similar experiences with their own host organization sites," Norman says.

“I’ve cheered on Columbus sports teams all my life, but I never imagined myself beyond the sidelines. It wasn’t until joining the Diversity Apprenticeship Program that I truly saw a professional future for myself in athletics.”

—Atheer Shalash



Atheer Shalash is among the most recent group of graduates to complete the program and now works full time as a ticket sales consultant for the Columbus Blue Jackets. She is a Columbus native as well as a second-generation Palestinian immigrant with a passion for working in the community. Atheer has been involved in her community for years, where she has served as a client relations coordinator at a local food pantry, as well as participated in student organizations highlighting social justice and human rights causes throughout her college career.

Before joining the Diversity Apprenticeship Program, she also worked as a social media and marketing manager at The Ohio State University (OSU). Shalash received a bachelor's degree in Public Affairs, Leadership and Management from OSU in May 2022.

"I've cheered on Columbus sports teams all my life, but I never imagined myself beyond the sidelines. It wasn't until joining the Diversity Apprenticeship Program that I truly saw a professional future for myself in athletics," Shalash says. "There are a few reasons for this."

One, Shalash pursued a public affairs degree at OSU before graduating in the spring of 2022. Two, her previous work experience had been completely unrelated. And

three, sports are strongly dominated by white men. As a visible, Muslim woman of color, Shalash says she had not seen herself represented in that space before.

“That is one of the many amazing qualities in DAP: It presents opportunities that you would never know are possible. I was fearful of the unknown before becoming an apprentice,” Shalash says. “I questioned if I could be successful in sales without any prior knowledge, and I wondered if my team would accept someone who looks like me. I couldn’t have been more warmly welcomed to the Columbus Blue Jackets team.”

Now, Shalash loves how it feels to make a sale.

“I’ll never forget my first sale. After giving a tour, I sold a family one of our best season ticket passes. My whole team celebrated this milestone with me over lunch,” Shalash says.

During Shalash’s apprenticeship, she’s gained hands-on experience, explored multiple departments and learned from professionals who have decades of wisdom to share.

“I look forward to graduating in April and taking on more responsibilities within the organization,” Shalash says. “I hope other professions can take inspiration from what the hospitality and tourism industry is doing in Columbus. I would love to see every workplace better reflect the world around us.” *M*

“On the other side of the COVID-19 recovery, a more equitable and resilient tourism environment has emerged... Companies became intentional about who they were hiring as they worked to recover from employment losses.”

—Shannon Jones, Ph.D.,
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Maura Keller is a freelancer writer from the Twin Cities who writes for a number of meetings and convention publications across the country.



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With its picturesque cityscapes to its awe-inspiring landscapes, from the expansive plains of Nebraska to the valleys and rivers of Minnesota, the Midwest offers ample locales for unique meeting options. Teeming with historic sites, quaint towns and mighty metropolis experiences, the Midwest appeals to many planners because of its unique venues, distinct Midwest charm and natural beauty. And thanks to the cultural offerings throughout cities such as Dubuque, Omaha, St. Cloud and Manhattan, the Midwest truly has something for everyone.

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IOWA



Iowa offers a wealth of unique experiences for people across generations, who share a wide variety of interests.

As Iowa's capital city, Des Moines is home to several large corporations and organizations, which means that the city boasts some of the region's best big-city attractions. From world-class festivals and performing arts opportunities to exceptional sporting events and award-winning cuisine, Des Moines has become an important agricultural and entertainment center.

Sharing the same majestic river as many cities, Dubuque offers a glimpse into the glorious history of the Mississippi River — while still offering a small-town feel. In fact, the great state of Iowa offers many opportunities for meeting attendees to work some and play some. They can take a ride on one of the riverboats lining the shore of Dubuque's historic downtown, or stroll along the avenues of shops and art museums — many of which are housed in buildings that are more than 100 years old. The city's main attraction is the riverfront National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium, which profiles the Mighty Mississippi's environs and ecosystem.

In addition, many locales within Iowa offer unique agritourism experiences as well as urban adventures. One sought-after locale within Iowa is the Amana Colonies. Comprised of seven unique villages, the quaint Amana Colonies offers heritage museums, festivals, shopping, wineries and handcrafted goods.

Other, more urban options in Iowa include Cedar Rapids, which is home to the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, as well as the Carl and Mary Koehler History Center, which explores the region's history.

For sports aficionados, Iowa City serves as a great place to enjoy some Big 10 events at the University of Iowa campus. And a few miles east of Iowa City is the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, which features the fully restored home of President Hoover. *M*

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KANSAS



When you think of Kansas, what comes to mind? Rolling wheat fields? Definitely. Images of Dorothy and the Yellow Brick Road? Absolutely. Miles and miles of corn and wheat fields? Of course. But Kansas is so much more than that and offers many eclectic and memorable experiences for visitors.

Considered to be a busy center for oil-refining and aircraft manufacturing, Wichita is also home to the renowned Cowtown Museum, which features the city's original jail. For those looking to explore the various Native American tribes that dotted the region for centuries, the Mid-American All-Indian Center houses 19th-century displays of several tribal lifestyles, including a reconstructed village.

The college town of Lawrence is filled with restaurants, hip bars and galleries aplenty, and many of the most popular spots for visitors can be found near the Kansas University campus. Here, visitors will find the Spencer Museum of Art and the University of Kansas Natural History Museum, where fossils, artifacts and the stuffed horse Comanche can be viewed.

As the state capital, Topeka is close to Lawrence and features the opulent Kansas State Capitol, which is reminiscent of an Italian Renaissance palace in the heart of the Great Plains.

And while Topeka may offer plenty of opulence, Dodge City is the quintessential epicenter of "cowboy country" with Stetsons and cowboy hats at every turn. As a frontier town, Dodge City was home to traders, trappers, hunters, cowboys and explorers, who enjoyed gambling, drinking and lawlessness. The Boot Hill Museum captures the core elements of Dodge City's history and artifacts from the old West, and also offers periodic mock gunfights and Wild West-style variety shows to enjoy.

For presidential fans, the sleepy rural town of Abilene, just west of Topeka, houses the Eisenhower Presidential Library & Museum. Celebrating the life of President Eisenhower, the museum includes Ike's childhood home, museum and library. *M*





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A large audience is seated in a convention hall, facing a stage. On the stage, a man in a suit is speaking at a podium. Behind him is a large screen displaying the Kansas Farm Bureau logo and the text "KANSAS FARM BUREAU The Voice of Agriculture". Below the logo, the words "Advocacy", "Education", and "Service" are visible. The audience is diverse in age and is looking towards the stage.

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Although Minnesota has long been equated to being predominantly an agricultural state, it also has evolved to become a premier travel destination. From Minnesota's gorgeous North Shore to the urban landscape of the Twin Cities to the rugged wilderness of the Boundary Waters, the state offers visitors ample opportunities to explore carefully maintained state parks, forests and trails, as well as the cityscapes of the state's urban centers.

The Twin Cities include Minneapolis and St. Paul, and are teeming with cultural attractions, including the much-celebrated Walker Art Center, Mill City Museum, Mall of America and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts — all of which can be found in Minneapolis. Across the river in St. Paul, visitors can explore the monumental Minnesota State Capitol, as well as the Minnesota History Center, which is a treasure trove of interactive exhibits that chronicles the state's history.

Away from the large urban areas, Minnesota's smaller gems feature a variety of river towns hugging the Mississippi River, including Winona and Wabasha. In the historic river town of Stillwater, visitors can explore the beautiful St. Croix River, peruse charming antique stores and enjoy a variety of cafes and bistros that call the riverfront home.

The northern portion of Minnesota boasts such gems as Duluth, which is Minnesota's third largest city. Visitors can explore the massive Duluth harbor, including the Great Lakes Aquarium, an "all freshwater" aquarium with interactive exhibits. In addition, Duluth is the starting point for the stunning North Shore, where Lake Superior and all its glory can be explored and enjoyed by all.

Home to the renowned Mayo Clinic, Rochester is also a wonderful option for meetings in Minnesota. The city is filled with an array of venues, as well as entertainment and cultural experiences for attendees long after the meetings and events have adjourned. *M*

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NEBRASKA



Dotted with small towns and bigger cities, Nebraska is an ideal spot for today's gatherings. In fact, Nebraska isn't what you might think it is; it's even better. Teeming with Wild West vibes, urban chic and expansive agriculture, Nebraska has it all.

In the heart of the Great Plains, Lincoln is both the state capital and Nebraska's second-largest city. Home to the iconic University of Nebraska, Lincoln features many art and cultural attractions, museums, and eateries — all of which offer a variety of venue options for events. The Nebraska History Museum is a “must see” thanks to its displays focusing on Native American tribal life and the overall history of the state.

Omaha boasts a delightful Old Market warehouse district where visitors can explore the city's historic roots, while enjoying charming shops and delightful eateries lining the area's cobblestone streets. One of Omaha's crown jewels is the pink, marble, Joslyn Art Museum, which happens to be a Smithsonian affiliate. In addition to being a treasure trove of Western art, the art museum also features 19th- and 20th-century European and American art. The museum is undergoing an impressive renovation and expansion process and is expected to reopen in 2024.

Luckily, the Durham Museum in Omaha, housed in the old Union Pacific Railroad station, is open to visitors who can explore the many galleries showcasing Omaha's impressive history. For those seeking a connection to their Oregon Trail game obsession in the 1980s, western Nebraska offers many opportunities to get up close and personal with some Oregon Trail landmarks, including the Chimney Rock National Historic Site and the Scotts Bluff National Monument. *M*

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The NIC Conference Center is housed in a historic building, providing a unique full-service conference center, featuring a 400-seat auditorium with state-of-the-art studio and visual capabilities. Additional meeting space includes a 400-seat banquet room, eight breakout rooms and other collaborative spaces.

Just minutes west of Lincoln, Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center sits amidst an 850-acre tallgrass prairie and amplifies nature's natural beauty in one of North America's most distinct and picturesque settings. Available year-round for meetings, weddings and other social gatherings, their visitor center features a full kitchen, seating for up to 100 people and plenty of parking.

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SOUTH DAKOTA



While the “Dakotas” refer to both South and North Dakota, the southern partner of this dynamic duo, South Dakota, is becoming a much sought-after destination. Vast blue skies, endless prairies and majestic rivers comprise South Dakota’s environs, but cities such as Pierre, Wall and Deadwood also offer cultural experiences all their own. Of course, South Dakota has long been celebrated for its stunning Black Hills, which lead visitors to explore the striking monuments of Mount Rushmore National Memorial. The enormous heads of the celebrated presidents, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln, have been enthralling visitors since their completion in 1941. Nearby, the Crazy Horse Memorial celebrates the great Sioux warrior.

In the heart of the Black Hills lies Custer State Park. Meadows rich in elk, deer, antelope and buffalo greet visitors who can also dine at the rustic Blue Bell Lodge or explore Wind Cave National Park, which features the world’s longest limestone caverns. The Black Hills are also home to the Black Hills’ Mammoth Site, which displays an array of Columbian Mammoth fossils.

And although Pierre is one of the smallest state capitals in the U.S., it offers a wealth of activities to surprise and delight meeting attendees. The South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center is teeming with historical displays exploring the history of South Dakota’s Sioux tribes. Mitchell, South Dakota, is also a great play for visitors to explore the state’s celebrated Corn Palace, which is the city’s main claim to fame. *M*





Goss Opera House

Meet in Watertown

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Goss Opera House



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