

White Paper

# Innovative Solutions for Challenging Times

Meeting professionals converged on Atlanta for MeetDifferent to further the industry's collaborative approach to conquering the economic downturn.

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## **Executive Summary**

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To those who attended MPI's *MeetDifferent 2009*, it was no surprise that the current economic downturn presents unique challenges for the meetings industry.

With public pressure on corporations to avoid even the appearance of unnecessary spending, meetings are increasingly being cancelled or scaled down. This "lean meetings" trend has been named the "AIG effect," referring to the public outcry after the insurance giant spent \$440,000 of its government bailout money on a luxury resort weekend for employees. To avoid similar media and public attention, companies are paring down expenses and choosing less visible, more cost-effective options where possible. Luxuries are no longer viewed as desirable.

The economy is expected to recover, but slowly. The second quarter of 2009 will begin the transition to better times, but some predict that growth will not compensate for losses until spring 2010.

To weather the economic storm, the meetings industry is finding creative, innovative solutions to "MeetDifferent."

Although the economic downturn's effects have been far-reaching, many groups are still actively holding meetings. By targeting these groups and gearing meetings to reflect the economic situation, meeting professionals can use the economic downturn to their advantage.

As the meeting industry faces today's economic challenges, technology can be used to improve the meeting planning process, better serve customers and drive down cost. Meeting professionals are exploring the potential of holding meetings in virtual worlds, either entirely or in tandem with a real-world meeting. Technologies such as Web registration software and online planning tools are helping meeting planners do more with less.

Increased collaborations will help meeting professionals remain profitable in the declining economy. Tough economic times call for closer collaboration between all partners in the meeting industry, and a proactive approach to cost savings. Partnering with competitors can result in shared business and generate stronger bids.

Marketing in a tough economy requires a shift toward innovative, low-cost measures. Many professionals are creating marketing plans that use the Internet to increase their visibility despite a shrinking marketing budget. Companies are using blogs, online articles and photo-sharing sites to increase their Web presence and to encourage participants to attend meetings.

Creative problem solving and a positive mindset are essential in the face of current economic challenges. Meeting professionals are using a positive attitude as a foundation on which to build innovative solutions—and are making those innovative solutions easier to find.

Cost savings, value, flexibility and innovation are critical to the continuing success of the meetings industry. At MeetDifferent 2009, participants shared ideas and solutions to remain viable. This kind of dynamic collaboration will enable the meeting industry to surmount the current challenge and emerge stronger than ever.

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## *MeetDifferent 2009*

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### *Different talk*

### *Different technology*

### *Different partners*

### *Different marketing*

### *Different value*

The meetings industry is feeling the effects of the slowing economy. "Occupancy rates are down, we have the 'AIG effect' on cancellations, and many government projects are going unfunded," said **Betsy Bondurant**, president of Bondurant Consulting. "We even have the U.S. Senate looking at how money is spent on meetings."

The current economic crisis can be traced to several interrelated causes, some of which will resolve more quickly than others. **Dr. William Conerly**, principal of Conerly Consulting LLC, predicted that although the current housing surfeit will continue, the tight credit environment will improve shortly and consumers will soon return to a more conservative version of their former spending habits.

Although unemployment is at 10 percent in some regions, 47 million Americans currently work in industries that employ more people than in the previous year. Dr. Conerly predicted the first two quarters of 2009 will be the recession's low point, with the second quarter acting as a transition to better times. However, growth will not compensate for the losses until spring 2010.

**Michael Beardsley**, CEO of Inn Fluent, agreed with this assessment. Some analysts predict real gross domestic product (GDP) will be down 1.6 percent in the first quarter of 2009, and corporate profits may decline by 9.2 percent in the same time period.

"We usually hit the ground, bounce twice and then start coming up again." Beardsley predicted real GDP would escalate 2.4 percent in the first quarter of 2010, and corporate profits would rise as much as 6.1 percent.

Cost savings, value, flexibility and innovation are critical to the meeting industry's success in 2009. "The best lesson I can share with you is this: Don't bet against the American economy," Dr. Conerly said. "The American people are resilient and strong, the American economy is resilient and strong and the American nation is resilient and strong."

## Different Talk

*Who is planning meetings?*

*What topics are being generated by the economic situation?*

*What does success look like now?*

Although the economic downturn's effects have been far-reaching, groups are still holding meetings. Meeting professionals can use the economic downturn to their advantage by targeting these groups and gearing meetings to reflect the economic situation.

*Who is planning meetings?*

**Chris Meyer**, vice president of Convention Sales with the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, said the meetings industry's downturn is complicated by the bandwagon effect, providing companies with excuses to cut back on programs. He noted an attitude shift away from terms like "vacation," "resort" and "luxury."

Meeting professionals should focus on attracting business from industries that are still active and dynamic. Panelists said they expect to see growth or continued strength in the pharmaceutical industry, the legal field, biofuels and construction companies benefiting from infrastructure spending. In addition, Asian countries, collection agencies, government agencies, the fast food industry, technology companies and environmental consultants continue to book meetings.

*What topics are being generated by the economic situation?*

Dr. Conerly said the current crisis in the American economy has its roots in three interrelated problems: an overabundance of housing, a credit crunch and flagging consumer confidence. Meeting professionals may find it advantageous to gear conference discussions to topics relevant to the downturn, including housing issues, credit accessibility and energizing sales representatives.

Lower interest rates have been one response to the housing surplus, but this may be helping the owned market at the expense of the rental market. Dr. Conerly predicted the housing surfeit will continue. While a population growth of as little as 1 percent per year should eventually solve the problem, this solution is not imminent.

The decrease in available credit has been particularly debilitating for businesses, as their borrowing represents the largest share of the credit market. Borrowing can be especially difficult for small cities, counties and rural districts, which often lack their own credit ratings. These governments might once have sought third-party guarantees, but such guarantees have been devalued with the demise of the major insurer, American International Group Inc. (AIG).

Consumer surveys show marked pessimism, and retail sales figures are in negative territory. Even those whose jobs are not threatened are cutting back on discretionary spending. However, the decrease in spending may actually be good news for the economy, Dr. Conerly said. Those cutting back are saving, spending less than they earn and paying down credit. In a few months, they will have extra funds. Strong econometric relationships indicate that people who have more money spend more.

### *What does success look like now?*

Understanding a meeting's objective is critical to its success.

"If I really understand the objective of the meeting," one participant said, "I can relate that back to my venue or hotel so that maybe we can make the meeting more productive." Meeting professionals can deliver better results by attending to onsite objectives in addition to logistics, and by clearly communicating to all vendors what success looks like for an event. Each meeting's costs can be tailored to the objective, allowing cost savings for routine meetings and greater investment in major events.

### **What's next?**

The economies of emerging and developing countries like China and India have been less affected by the downturn than that of the United States. **Janet Moore**, a global rainmaking strategist with Moore International Inc., encouraged participants to grow their businesses globally.

Businesses should research the international economic situation and search for new opportunities abroad. Targeting international clients involves analyzing and becoming familiar with the prospective business location's corporate and national culture. International conferences can provide a venue to learn more about a prospective client's culture and to begin building relationships.

Businesses looking to expand globally should be aware that values such as meeting protocols, communication styles, gender expectations and concepts of time are culturally determined. These differences must be identified and respected to keep businesses attractive to international clients.

### **Resources**

- [www.hotelnewsnow.com](http://www.hotelnewsnow.com)
- [www.hotelbusiness.com](http://www.hotelbusiness.com)
- [www.mimegasite.com](http://www.mimegasite.com)
- [www.mpiweb.org](http://www.mpiweb.org)

- [www.iaee.com](http://www.iaee.com)
- [www.tia.org](http://www.tia.org)
- [www.acte.org](http://www.acte.org)

## Different Technology

*How can technology make meetings more cost-effective?*

*How can technology broaden a meeting's appeal?*

*How can technology enhance a meeting's delivery?*

As the meeting industry faces today's economic challenges, technology can be used to improve the meeting planning process, improve customer service and decrease costs. **Mitchell Beer**, president and CEO of The Conference Publishers Inc., said meeting professionals are asking, "Is this meeting something that must be face to face or can it be virtual and still achieve my goal?"

*How can technology make meetings more cost-effective?*

In the current economic situation, meeting professionals are turning to technology to deliver meetings for less. **Corbin Ball**, president of Corbin Ball Associates, cited the following cost-saving technological trends.

- Web-based meeting management (for example, Web-based registration)
- Web 2.0 and social media
- An increase in wireless / mobile products for the meeting industry
- Transformation of the industry through voluntary standards (for example, the Accepted Practices Exchange - APEX)

Virtual worlds can provide an innovative technological solution. "Virtual worlds are advantageous for meeting planners because they are cheap, green and effective," said **Nick Wilson**, CEO of Clever Zebra. Virtual worlds can be more engaging than conference calls or videoconferences and, depending on the platform used, a headset may be the only specialized equipment needed. IBM, Risk and Insurance Management Society (RIMS) and Sun Microsystems Inc. have all used virtual worlds in different ways to expand their meetings' reach.

IBM used their existing assets to create a meeting in the virtual world and eliminate travel costs for participants. In these meetings, IBM engaged participants by offering unique experiences such as hang gliding and other activities that could never be held at a physical conference.

To enable more participants to benefit from its annual conference, RIMS used Active Worlds, a simple platform in which avatars interact with each other in realistic conference settings such as keynote addresses, breakout sessions and interactive exhibit floors.

Sun Microsystems, Inc. created the Project Wonderland platform to run a virtual-world conference parallel to their real-world one. Keynote addresses were streamed into the virtual world where avatars watched the proceedings. Conference content was geared specifically to online participants.

### *How can technology broaden a meeting's appeal?*

A conference participant expressed the opinion that the younger generation is more dependent on technology and can benefit from the face-to-face conference experience. However, incorporating technology into a conference can broaden such a conference's appeal for that younger generation.

"There are huge generational differences in the use of technology," a participant said. "Younger participants need access to the latest technology while older attendees do not need to feel pressured into trying technology that might feel intimidating to them."

Technology can be incorporated into a meeting by placing tables with power connections for laptop users at strategic places within the meeting hall so that younger attendees can use them without distracting other participants. As well, common areas can be created where attendees can watch sessions on screens, work on their computers, read and meet with others.

### *How can technology enhance a meeting's delivery?*

Creating community is a vital component of the meeting process, and technology can be used to augment this facet of face-to-face meetings. Meeting professionals can use social networking sites like Twitter to foster a sense of community among attendees.

"Twitter is about a continual peripheral awareness. It creates a background area where you can hear people's conversations," said **Jordan Schwartz**, CEO of Pathable Inc. Meeting professionals can use Twitter to create buzz about an event and to listen and respond to participant feedback.

Pathable is an example of a social networking site specifically designed for the meeting industry. For a fee, Pathable enables attendees to create individual profiles, network with other participants, develop individualized agendas and access conference materials on their iPhones and BlackBerrys. Ning is a free site that can be developed to perform similar functions. Zvents and Eventful are event sites that allow users to search for events by date, location or presenter.

Projection or visualization, in which some of the conference is displayed on a wall or screen, is another technology planners can use to increase connectedness among participants. Images

could include Twitter tweets, Flickr pictures and visual representations of people connecting at the conference.

Webinars and podcasts are excellent ways to give the public a sample of upcoming events and provide free education. These sites allow brief clips of presenters to be posted online to build pre-conference buzz, to showcase expertise or to meet a client's information needs.

Hand-held and mobile devices are enabling meeting planners to offer participants innovative ways to connect at events. For example, Spotme is a mobile system that stores registration photos of participants along with their bios. Participants use the device to identify who is near them, to find specific attendees and to find groups of participants with interests similar to their own. It can be used to send invitations and personalized agendas and to download contacts and leads at the end of the meeting. Technologies like these are having a significant impact on the meetings industry, Ball said.

### **What's next?**

Participants agreed technology is important to the meeting planning industry's future.

Wilson suggested virtual worlds could replace events that are suffering due to budget cuts, and could be leveraged to promote real-world events. A series of virtual world seminars could be used to promote an upcoming real-world event, get people buzzing about future events and boost attendance.

In response to participants' questions, Wilson said virtual world meetings are not a replacement for WebEx Web conferencing or face-to-face meetings, but a supplement or extension of them.

### **Resources**

- [pathable.com](http://pathable.com)
- [twitter.com](http://twitter.com)
- [research.sun.com/spotlight/2008/2008-08-19\\_project\\_wonderland.html](http://research.sun.com/spotlight/2008/2008-08-19_project_wonderland.html)
- [www.etches.com](http://www.etches.com)
- [www.passkey.com](http://www.passkey.com)
- [www.zvents.com](http://www.zvents.com)
- [eventful.com](http://eventful.com)
- [www.owpm.com](http://www.owpm.com)
- [www.expocad.com](http://www.expocad.com)
- [www.spotme.com](http://www.spotme.com)

- [www.telestream.net/wire-cast/overview.htm](http://www.telestream.net/wire-cast/overview.htm)
- [www.freeshoutbox.net](http://www.freeshoutbox.net)

## Different Partners

*How can meeting professionals build trust?*

*What happens when meetings have to be cancelled?*

*How can collaborations save money?*

Meeting professionals must leverage each other's strengths to remain profitable in a declining economy. Tough economic times call for closer collaboration between meeting planners and suppliers and a proactive approach to cost savings.

"This is something we do anyway, but with the economy it's much more important," said Bondurant. Partnering with competitors can result in shared business and generate stronger bids.

*How can meeting professionals build trust?*

Trust is critical for positive relationships, and relates to full disclosure by all involved parties. Site selection companies have an obligation to disclose the commissions they receive from hotels, according to participants at an Unconference session on third-party vendors.

Planners should be candid when discussing attrition with hotels. "Partnership is about trust and open communications," said **Michael Dominguez**, vice president of global sales with Loews Hotels. "We know the situation, and we have to be able to work together."

*What happens when meetings have to be cancelled?*

The meetings industry is experiencing "the AIG effect" — cancellations are occurring more frequently in an atmosphere of heightened concern about meeting expenses. Every contract should include a cancellation clause that has been clearly and openly negotiated with all parties.

Cancellations can strain relationships among clients, planners and suppliers; to avoid severing relationships, negotiations need to involve give and take. For instance, allowing a hotel to relinquish some original concessions can help it to cut costs.

When contracts must be renegotiated, legal representatives may have to get involved. Some hotels have asked that events be rebooked immediately or have imposed cancellation fees. Some hotels are flexible about re-signing contracts, and others are reluctant to do so without a new contract guaranteeing the event will happen within a certain number of months.

Dominguez urged planners to address cancellation and attrition issues openly. "The more advance notice you give us, the more we can work with you."

If a meeting does have to be cancelled, planners can still deliver value to their employers and customers by finding creative ways to offset the damages. For one recent cancellation, Home Depot successfully paid \$20,000 in cancellation fees in gift cards, said **Lori Wise**, manager of the company's Events Management department. The hotel was thrilled, because its renovation budget had just been frozen.

### *How can collaborations save money?*

**Bill Voegeli**, president of Association Insights, said it is important that industry professionals work together to survive difficult times.

"I like to see collaboration," a corporate client said. "I want to feel I'm working with a team."

Partnerships can engender creative ways to save money. For instance, hotels may be able to credit a corporation's master account to compensate for a higher room rate. Preserving the higher rate helps the hotel retain its Smith Travel rating, while crediting the master account may keep the corporation from cancelling the event. Working with food service suppliers can help to identify lower-cost menu options. Collaborations can result in less expensive table dressings and highlight ways to reuse resources.

Hotels are not looking for extra revenue in the current economy, said Dominguez. Their priority is to pay their mortgages and keep the doors open, and they are happy to pass on any cost savings that planners can help them achieve. Labor is a hotel's top expense. Partnerships between planners and hotels can help to identify ways to streamline onsite requirements. Using alternative, underused spaces and avoiding labor-intensive options like outdoor meals can provide cost savings.

Wise advised planners to focus on the aspects of a meeting that bring them the most value. "Don't just nickel and dime your vendors," she said. "If you don't ask you don't get, but you don't want to abuse the situation. You have to do it in a way where you know it's a win-win partnership."

### **What's next?**

In the current economic environment, one way to measure success is to share strategies and business lessons with peers. "Collective knowledge is a good thing, especially with the problems we currently face," said **Jonathan Howe**, president and senior partner at Howe & Hutton Ltd. "Others have been there and survived, and sometimes that knowledge is all we need to move forward."

## Different Marketing

*In the current economic climate, how can meeting professionals persuade their clients to hold meetings?*

*What are the most cost-effective ways to advertise?*

*How can meeting professionals move forward despite the economy?*

**Rod Abraham**, a consultant with R. E. Abraham Consultancy, said developing a business marketing plan is essential to success, particularly during the current economic climate. The plan must be focused, realistic and written. Meeting professionals should use and re-evaluate their marketing plans regularly.

Knowing one's target audience is the most important part of marketing. It is crucial to know how to obtain up-to-date information about prospective clients. Once the requisite information has been gathered, the marketing plan should be specifically targeted to them.

*In the current economic climate, how can meeting professionals persuade their clients to hold meetings?*

Planners can bring high value to their organizations when they experiment with new ways of designing and delivering their meetings. Professionals may need to demonstrate the dollars saved by effective meeting management. Given that some organizations are resistant to change, innovative ideas may not be quickly adopted; planners may need to identify the point in an organization's structure where good ideas are blocked.

Wise urged planners to make a strong case for the return on investment (ROI) generated by their meetings, rather than waiting for decision makers to question the value or the optics of a particular program.

"When you go to them, you're ahead of the curve," she said. "Be proactive with great answers."

*What are the most cost-effective ways to advertise?*

"These times require a shift in marketing theory from outbound marketing to inbound marketing," said **Cris Canning**, head instigator of Hospitality Ink. Outbound marketing includes telemarketing, trade shows, direct marketing, e-mail blasts and advertising in print and on the airways. Inbound marketing is significantly more cost-effective, and includes blogs and ezines.

Both blogs and ezines increase the amount of a company's presence on the Web. Maintaining multiple blogs will raise a company's visibility on the Internet, as search engine rankings are based on the amount of fresh content on the Net, and blogs create fresh content every time they

are updated. Microblogs such as Twitter can enable companies to elicit real-time community responses, and monitoring microblogs can allow companies to address complaints immediately.

Ezines are useful tools for creating constant contact with a target audience and are a type of e-mail marketing. Social networking sites like Facebook are another way to raise a company's Web presence and improve e-mail marketing, allowing companies to create fan groups and disseminate messages to those groups. Companies can also purchase URLs that lead directly to their social network pages.

Photo sharing on Flickr and video sharing on YouTube provide additional inexpensive marketing options. Schwartz said potential attendees may look at images to get a feel for a conference and see what it was like in past years, to help them decide which conferences to attend.

Other online marketing methods include participating in question-and-answer forums such as Yahoo! Answers, Google Groups and LinkedIn's Q&A and Group Discussions features.

"Your signature line can be a great marketing tool," said Canning. By writing short articles and submitting them to as many places as possible, participants can increase their Web visibility. A signature line can tell interested readers where to look for more information. News aggregator sites such as Digg collect information in many different ways, including most-often-searched articles and those voted as favorites by users.

StumbleUpon and Delicious are social bookmarking sites that allow users to collect and forward bookmarks of interest. Canning said she collects sites that interest her clients. "It makes you valuable to your clients and saves them time."

Online press rooms can be created on companies' Web sites to provide writers with access to information about the business at their convenience. The press rooms should be easy to find and access and include photos, biographical sketches and the latest information about the company.

Although the proliferation of social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook has provided meeting professionals with new opportunities, they also present new obligations, said lawyer **Perry Binder** of Perry Binder LLC.

"A lot of us are using technology without thinking about the legal implications, both for individuals and for the places where we work." He acknowledged that blogs are valuable marketing tools, but they can create privacy issues and a reputation risk. Companies need to draft and implement a blog policy and update their employee handbooks so that employees are clear about a company's expectations.

A commitment to monitoring the Internet daily is one of the most important things a company can do, Binder said. Google has an application that searches the Net for a company name and sends an alert via e-mail if it comes up. Whatever companies ultimately decide regarding policies about gripe sites, blogs and other forms of social networking, it is vital that they make an initial determination as to how they want to guard their brand.

### *How can meeting professionals move forward despite the economy?*

Significant budget cuts are changing the way corporate meeting professionals do their jobs. **David Holzer**, director of Meetings & Events Industry Development with American Express, said lower budgets result in increased workloads for industry professionals: "We must find new efficiencies and learn how to get more done with fewer resources."

Dr. Conerly recommended that participants create a contingency plan for the period of economic recovery. "Figure out your own vulnerability to the changes. Figure out an early warning system specific to your industry, that will let you know when things are starting to change. And ask yourself what you are going to want to do when circumstances change."

Knowing those answers will allow business owners to manage in a way that maintains their flexibility. In addition, planners should be willing to tackle big meetings with less lead time—flexibility makes sense at this time in the industry.

### **What's next?**

Despite economic anxiety, there is no better time to start a business, Abraham said. The economic downturn can provide the momentum to jump on the entrepreneurial bandwagon.

Meeting professionals should evaluate possible business formats and consider the pros and cons of becoming a sole proprietorship, partnership, limited liability corporation (LLC) or private corporation.

"Meeting planners should know themselves and effectively leverage their strengths as business owners," Abraham said. If meeting planners have weaknesses in certain business management areas, they should hire the best advisors to do the job. A team of competent advisors, including experts and coaches, can help to meet the ongoing challenges of owning a small business.

Contract management is an important legal issue for the self-employed. Howe said it is important to use an attorney for contract negotiation, especially if the contract language is archaic or unclear. A solid contract should include the "what, where, when, who, why and how" of each event. It should clearly stipulate the planner's responsibilities; the client's responsibilities; agency issues; compensation; fees, including cancellation fees; and commissions. Risk management clauses should be incorporated into all business contracts, including the issues of indemnification and insurance for both the business owner and client.

Every contract should stipulate expenses, terms of the agreement, third party vendors and a cancellation policy for both the event and the actual agreement.

Cash flow squeezes are common difficulties for small businesses, even when the economy is robust. To handle cash flow issues in the current economy, Abraham said some business owners are asking clients for more money up front. Some businesses are asking for progress payments from clients, although it is important to avoid becoming a banker in the cash flow management process.

**Denice Young**, a speaker, trainer, and consultant with Young Consulting Group, encouraged participants to create multiple income streams and ask questions to identify new business opportunities.

Howe encouraged participants to “know thyself” to succeed.

“As your business grows, a new dynamic occurs. You have responsibilities to clients, to employees and to yourself. The complexity of running the business increases.”

### Resources

- [www.feedblitz.com](http://www.feedblitz.com)
- [technorati.com](http://technorati.com)
- [twitter.com](http://twitter.com)
- [www.google.com/alerts](http://www.google.com/alerts)
- [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)
- [www.stumbleupon.com](http://www.stumbleupon.com)
- [digg.com](http://digg.com)
- [delicious.com](http://delicious.com)

### Different Value

*How are clients measuring value now?*

*How can meeting professionals deliver higher value?*

Creative problem solving and a positive mindset are essential when facing the challenges posed by the current economy, Young said. “Your success, your value, is determined by the value you bring to the marketplace. What works will work in any economy.”

### *How are clients measuring value now?*

Voegeli said the values of customer service and quality are especially important during tough economic times.

“Value in these times means cost value, but when someone says ‘customer service matters to me,’ that means they value excellent customer service above all else.”

Value may be measured by the potential for greater ROI. The current economic downturn poses challenges for measuring ROI, and has created a need for creative strategies in this area.

Communicating objectives ahead of time is critical and can enable measurable outcomes to be identified in advance. Following up with the client after the meeting to identify whether their needs were adequately met is not only critical for ensuring ROI, but is also important for good customer service.

The ability to negotiate extras such as free transportation and complimentary meals may help attendees realize a greater ROI and foster a greater demand for competitive bids. However, previous offerings such as open bars, gifts, formal sit-down dinners and entertainment will face increased scrutiny.

Corporate budget costs and associated high travel costs are resulting in lower conference attendance. Holzer said the trend is towards fewer meetings with larger attendance to reduce travel costs.

Canning said it is important to provide customer benefits. Customers want convenience—someone who can save them time or effort, reduce their costs, give them peace of mind, entertain them, and provide something that appeals to their ego or self-identity.

“Understand that people buy what they want based on emotion, not logic. They will decide to attend your meeting if you create an emotional want,” Canning said.

### *How can meeting professionals deliver higher value?*

**Vince LaRuffa**, vice president, resort sales and marketing at Universal Orlando Resort, said planners may currently be able to negotiate favorable rates, especially on multiple-year bookings. If room rates are not flexible, there may be good deals for such things as food and beverages.

Creative decisions regarding meeting locations and transportation issues can make meetings more attractive to participants and attract higher attendance. Favorable location factors include in the following

- Easy in-and-out abilities
- Less need for ground transportation

- Convenient transportation to airports
- Proximity to the majority of participants
- Relevance to the meeting purpose

Meetings that appeal to all four of the generations currently in the workforce (Matures, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y) will deliver higher value. This is the first time in history all four generations have worked together, said **Jason Ryan Dorsey**, The Gen Y Guy™.

Each generation shares unique characteristics. "Generations are simply clues to know how to work with someone." Dorsey listed four key factors that determine and define a generation.

- **Parenting trends:** "The most significant indicator of how you work and how you prefer your meetings run."
- **Technology:** Each generation has a different relationship with technology.
- **Economics:** Gen Y is more affluent than any generation in U.S. history. The current economy will only impact the buying habits of Gen Y if it lasts longer than two years. "If it is over in less time, then it will only be a blip on their radar. If it is longer than two years, it will change their beliefs."
- **Lifespan:** "How long you think you'll live impacts what you do with the time you have left."

Methods for involving all generations in the meeting experience include having older employees mentor younger ones and making meetings more member-focused and less leadership-focused.

One participant said, "You can't please everyone all the time, but it might help to set up a room with options for the comfort levels of multiple generations. Give your participants options."

### What's next?

Changes in a conference's underlying structure or architecture can give meeting professionals more clout and deliver better business results to their organizations.

By expanding their operations to handle all aspects of a meeting, some meeting planners are cutting costs and improving the quality of the meetings they deliver. Becoming a one-stop shop allows meeting planners to improve the efficiency of their planning process and prevent communication problems. Focusing on internal growth and avoiding outsourcing can help a business to remain profitable despite the current economic challenges.

A participant said she has more control over the entire event since becoming a one-stop shop.

“I have the last word on all the checks and balances, and my events run smoothly because I manage them myself. There is only one set of hands in the pot, instead of several people at once.”

## Moving Forward

By sharing ideas, innovations and solutions, participants at MeetDifferent 2009 demonstrated that the current economic challenge may actually provide new and unique opportunities for the meeting industry, including the following.

- New meeting topics and discussion areas relating to the current economic climate
- New clients emerging from the economic turmoil
- New technological solutions and creative alternatives for the meeting process
- New partnerships focusing on innovative cost-saving methods and building on the strength in collaborations
- Innovative marketing techniques in response to smaller budgets and resulting in increased Web visibility for companies
- Delivering high value by lowering costs for participants and emphasizing customer service

The meeting industry is responding to the economic challenge through creative, innovative solutions. By leveraging the opportunities presented by the economic downturn, meeting professionals will define a new way to MeetDifferent.

By Mitchell Beer, CMM, president of The Conference Publishers,  
[www.theconferencepublishers.com](http://www.theconferencepublishers.com).

