

# ASSOCIATION CONVENTIONS & FACILITIES

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THE SOURCE FOR ASSOCIATION MEETING PLANNING MANAGEMENT

## The Destination Experts



**DMOs Empower  
Planners With a New  
Value Proposition**

**PAGE 20**

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# Budget Strategies

## Small Budget, Large Experience

The current recession has taken a chunk out of almost every sector of the economy, including association meetings and conferences. While budgets may be reduced, attendees still expect a “big” experience while they are onsite, and organizations are strongly committed to continuing to deliver a high-quality event. Here are a few ideas from the Event Services professionals at SmithBucklin.

**Fewer sessions...greater buzz.** Cindy Stark, director, event services, recently coordinated the Special Interest Group on Graphics and Interactive Techniques (SIGGRAPH) meeting in New Orleans. Due to budget constraints for audio-visual equipment, the group needed to reduce the number of sessions and session rooms. Somewhat surprisingly, this enhanced both the attendee and presenter experience, as there were fewer empty seats in each session. The sessions thus seemed more intimate and generated a positive buzz among the attendees. Plus, because not as many submissions were accepted, the final selections were of the very highest quality.

The Emerging Technologies Exhibits area also was downsized this year with fewer exhibitors being accepted. However, the smaller space made the exhibitors in attendance extremely happy, as competition for attendee attention was limited and the floor was always crowded.

Attendees were very interested in the exhibits and did not seem to notice that the area had been reduced in size, again, because of the crowds and the fact that only the highest quality exhibitors were in attendance.

**Tweets and feeds.** Pat Dwyer, senior manager, event services, used expanded sponsorship packages to help fund an enhanced attendee experience at the International Baking Industry Exposition (IBIE) show in Las Vegas. Twitter stations were placed around the exhibit hall and attendees were encouraged to tweet about their experiences at the event. In addition, events on the show floor — including hands-on demonstrations — were shown live on monitors placed throughout the exhibit hall. Another enhancement made available due to sponsorship was the ability to offer all attendees free Wi-Fi throughout the convention center.

**Boxed, wrapped and with a bow.** When Eric Johnson, senior manager, event services, learned that travel budgets were often problematic for attendees of the International Nortel Networks Users Association (INNUA) meeting, he was determined to find a solution. Discovering that members generally had more flexibility in their training budget than their travel budget, he worked with other staff members to bundle the hotel cost with the registration fee, allowing attendees to submit the entire expense to



Linda E. Schwartz


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their company as training rather than training and travel. This resulted in noticeably higher attendance at this year's event, even in light of the current financial downturn.

**Good time...good deed.** When funds are tight, entertainment often is the first casualty, as it is generally seen as an extra and not vital to the main purpose of the event. Nonetheless, the fun part of the meeting is often what attendees remember best and what leaves them with a positive impression of the meeting. Faced with an extremely minimal entertainment budget for this year's Americas' SAP Users' Group (ASUG) conference, Kimberly Vinciguerra, manager, event services, was determined to create a memorable experience on a very small budget. Her research led her to The Foundation for Hospital Art ([hospitalart.com](http://hospitalart.com)). Since 1984, The foundation has been dedicated to softening the hospital environment with colorful paintings, wall murals and ceiling tiles provided by volunteers. ASUG conference attendees assembled at a painting event in the exhibit hall to fill in a pre-drawn, color-coded design. The artwork was then touched up and donated to a hospital on behalf of ASUG. Participants had a great time, were able to talk, laugh and network, and left the meeting feeling good about their contribution.

**Signs of the times.** Signage can take a big bite out of your onsite budget, and, with few

exceptions, cannot be used again, as they typically include dates, session names and artwork pertinent only to that meeting. To reduce expenditures for banners and signage, SmithBucklin event services staff members often use "gobos" — a lighting template technique originally used on film sets. The term "gobo" is derived from "go between" or "GOes Before Optics," and gobo lights can create dramatic effects on walls, floors, sidewalks and even sides of buildings. They can be used to project an association logo, directional information, program changes and other information that would normally be shown on a printed banner or sign — at a far lower cost.

**Fewer dollars? Get creative!** Tight budgets have become a reality, and this probably won't change for quite a while. However, there are a number of ways you can stretch your budget so the attendee experience remains rich, rewarding and exciting. Just put on your thinking cap, do a bit of research and don't be afraid to try something different. You may find that many of your cost-cutting measures actually are viewed as enhancements by attendees and exhibitors! 

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Linda E. Schwartz, senior director, marketing and communication services for SmithBucklin, an association management company headquartered in Chicago, has worked with associations and their members for more than 30 years to develop, implement and manage a broad range of membership programs.