

Another Successful Meeting

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A Lifesaver for LIFESAVERS

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That's the definition for synergy, and at Gaylord Hotels, it is also the inevitable result of savvy, passionate hospitality professionals working together for the benefit of the client. In this story, the first in a series designed to share a behind-the-scenes look at how we deliver against specific client needs, you'll see how a dedicated team leveraged its collective knowledge and Gaylord's resources to rescue an annual conference on the verge of crashing in the midst of a challenging economic environment.

In 2006, when Mary Magnini, of Virginia-based Meetings Management Inc., booked the 2009 convention for her biggest client, she had no expectation that the timing of the U.S. economic meltdown would dovetail with the National Conference on Highway Safety Priorities (Lifesavers 2009 Conference). Imminent threat of attrition loomed on the horizon, largely due to budget cuts and travel restrictions placed on her client's attendees, predominantly government and not-for-profit employees.

Six weeks prior to the March meeting, already on a tight budget and now faced with the challenge of decreased registrations and attendees booking a shorter stay than planned, Mary's concern turned to worry: bad economy or not, lower projected attendance and a significant decrease in pick-ups could spell disaster for her bottom line. Given the stakes, the potential for colossal failure was huge. "Will

we have to cancel? Will the attrition penalty wreck my margins? What if I lose the Lifesavers account after ten-plus years of great meetings?" These were the questions reverberating in Mary's head.

Interestingly, the answers to those questions arrived in the form of a well-oiled team of Gaylord STARS who never said "that's not my job," but instead rolled up their shirt sleeves and stepped outside the proverbial box, working together to find creative solutions for Mary's dilemma. Ultimately, collaboration and partnership netted a win-win for everyone, to the tune of final pick-ups at 107% of the booking and consideration of a future conference reprise at Gaylord Opryland. Not a bad day's work in a down economy. And if you ask Mary why she is considering booking her meeting again at Opryland, in a word, it all boils down to relationships.



As a case in point, meet **Alan Mitelsdorf, Gaylord Opryland Sales Manager** and, from Mary's perspective, a critical piece of the puzzle in terms of the overall success of the Lifesavers meeting. Traditionally, at many hotels, once the ink is dry on a contract, the sales force transitions the meetings client on to the convention services team. That's not the case at Gaylord Hotels and not with Alan, who remained involved throughout the planning process for Mary's meeting and demonstrates in concrete terms Gaylord Hotels' commitment to flawless service:

"Throughout the contract process, Alan did a phenomenal job selling the city of Nashville, in addition to the Opryland property. He was well-versed in what the city had to offer — a plus, given that we typically book in larger cities. But what really stands out to me was his level of involvement once our meeting was booked, particularly when I began to worry about attrition. He stayed plugged in and had good ideas for solutions. His obvious camaraderie with colleagues and depth of knowledge about the company enabled him to connect me with others on the Gaylord team who could solve my problems. I really feel like he listened, and the promises he made were delivered in spades by the convention services team who executed the meeting."

Indeed, the relationship component is a key difference in the way Gaylord approaches meetings and conventions. The time spent getting to know a client is a huge value

add and a big part of how we "make it happen" every day. Both sales and conventions services teams make it a priority to understand both the client's goals and their chief concerns. **Bradley Jendryk, Convention Services Manager for the Lifesavers meeting** explains it best:



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"I knew from working closely with Alan that Mary was caught between a rock and a hard place. Her attendees were canceling their third night and her registrations were not trending to meet their normal count of about 1900. I also knew she had a tight budget. We decided to brainstorm with Marketing and our in-house event technology partner, PSAV, to come up with creative incentives to encourage more of her people to book their trips, as well as stay that third night. Mark Fragos from PSAV and I conceptualized staging a concert featuring an up-and-coming musician. This was not some-

thing the group had experienced before, and the best part is that we did it at little or no additional cost to Lifesavers."

Mark Fragos goes on to share that when he and Bradley reached out to Mary with this idea, they knew it was a risk to offer something out of Mary's comfort zone. Instead of proposing a costly second stage for the concert venue, Mark suggested using the same infrastructure to customize a main stage that would work for both the general session and the finale performance. And given that the meeting was taking place right in Music City, it was not



difficult to find affordable, quality talent to headline the concert. In fact, as luck would have it, an audio engineer for PSAV and aspiring musician named Gis headlined the show, brought the house down and continues to be requested for other meetings with similar needs.

“An unconventional approach, yes, but the way the concert unfolded is a great example of how Gaylord faces challenges and leverages knowledge and connections to tailor solutions for the client,” says Chaye Spector, Catering Manager for the meeting. “Although I don’t usually scout meetings in advance, I had the opportunity to observe Lifesavers 2008. Given that Bradley and I are essentially the left and right arms of a convention for food and logistics, we were able to

understand the dynamic of Mary’s group from the ground level and trouble shoot effectively based on our first-hand knowledge.”

Chaye notes that she and Bradley try to function as one, saying that *“our constant communication helps us think for each other, often allowing us to finish each other’s sentences.”* This side-by-side working relationship was another value add for Lifesavers. High quality food was a priority for Mary, but because Chaye was acutely aware of budget constraints, she was able to amend the menu slightly, yet cut costs considerably. For the Tennessee paella (an often-requested Opryland signature dish), omitting more expensive seafood, such as mussels, helped keep the reception menu on budget without sacrificing quality or appeal.

In this economy, it’s no secret that hotels in the meetings and conventions industry are working hard to implement strategic solutions to counter attrition, and many are catching on that it’s not just a numbers game. But as you think about planning your next meeting, remember the value of relationships is not news to Gaylord Hotels. On the contrary, **our entire business model is built around our relationships among our STARS and with our clients.**

Flexibility with our menu items is just one example of bringing creativity to the table to solve clients’ needs.

