Meetings & CONVENTIONS
An Orange County Business Journal Special Report

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Time, Place Drive Meeting Spaces’ Marketing Moves

Changes Focused on Youth, Food, Local Flavor

By PAUL HUGHES

Orange County hoteliers said their meetings and events marketing is heavy with the local “flavor”—from surf to sand to entertainment—and new food offerings.

They also report new faces making decisions about where corporate clients will stay and meet—and play and eat.

“It’s not, Here’s the menu, here’s the (event) space,” said Scott Blakeslee, general manager of Pelican Hotel & Spa.

The Huntington Beach hotel opens in the spring with 250 rooms and 35,000 square feet of meeting space. It’s selling a “CMP”—or complete meeting package—concept integrating “audiovisual, food, and rooms for a per-person price.”

Blakeslee said Pelican thinks of customers in psychographic terms—what they’re like in “culture or brand identity”—versus demographics, such as age or income.

Demographics still play a part, though, because “decision makers are (increasingly) millennials,” he said.

Millennials are the much-discussed generation that had for a time been more or less synonymous with “20-somethings,” but its oldest members are entering their early- to mid-30s and taking on greater responsibility for corporate buying decisions as they advance in their careers.

The generation just prior to millennials—known as “Generation X” or simply “Gen Xers” and now in middle age—were “about being educated or informed about an area” they traveled to.

Blakeslee said, “Millennials want (even) ‘more of the above.’ They say, ‘I want to be a local.’”

Generation Gap

A Gen Xer might have wanted a fajita bar, while a millennial event planner or corporate guest wants “an entire south-of-the-border experience complete with mariachi band.”

He described Pelican as pursuing a “subtle luxury” vibe: “Exclusivity offering(s)” in “landmark” Surf City. That translates to a “beach food” menu and the requisite “craft” cocktails made local—mai tais, for instance—at a communal table in front of a grilling area behind floor-to-ceiling glass.

“It’s a bespoke experience, and the aesthetics have to be there,” he said.

Hospitality executives say millennial event planners are becoming more common and that that they want to see new things.

“The millennials are making (event planning) decisions,” said David Wani, chief executive of Twenty Four Seven Hotels in Newport Beach. “They’re getting to the level where they’re selecting the venues for meetings and banquets.”

The company runs Townplace Suites in Anaheim and 13 other hotels in California, Arizona, Nevada, and Idaho.

Wani said his company often uses social media to make initial contacts with prospective groups, requesting them to follow or “like” the company on Facebook or Twitter, or subscribe to its YouTube or Instagram accounts.

“They’re calling 10 places, so we’re getting a leg up by sending links to images or videos,” he said.

The “foodie craze” has touched Wani’s operations, and he works with local restaurants or brings food trucks on-site.

“The biggest complaint is the rubber chicken jokes about food,” he said. “Instead of saying, ‘You have to use our food,’ we give them a selection.”

Local Motions

Other hotels also carve out local angles.

Cindy Han-Reta, destination sales executive at Irvine Marriott, said the hotel gets corporate guests who aren’t necessarily going to get out much.

“They have specific needs, and that might not include the beach,” she said. “Localiza-

Marketing 19

Poolside: Renaissance ClubSport Aliso Viejo Laguna Beach plays up proximity to latter city

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Marketing

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The hotel has 485 rooms and 28,500 square feet of meeting space at the intersection of Michelle Drive and Von Karman Avenue.

"We’re near the airport and visible from the freeway—which people coming in from out of town appreciate," she said.

New public areas opened last year that provide some of the localization, Han-Rets said.

"We have Wine Down Wednesdays, which is kind of a happy hour for wine tasting," she said. "We try to keep our [wine] choices as local as possible."

The hotel also offers a range of bourbons, and on-site Thursday evening entertainment also tends toward the local.

"2016 is all about food and beverage," Han-Rets said. "The spaces are gorgeous, and the food pulls it all together."

One hotel changed its name in order to market the local element.

Michael Robby, director of hotel sales at the former Renaissance ClubSport Aliso Viejo, added Laguna Beach to its name early last year in a rebranding effort.

"It’s in the first city but promotes its proximity to the seaside second locale about six miles away."

He said the marketing tack is to be an alternative between "standard business class hotels" and beachfront choices that cost more.

The hotel’s Facebook page notes that it will help plan trips to Laguna.

"If they’re coming for three or four days, they’re going to want to get out and enjoy Southern California," Robby said.

The hotel has 174 rooms and about 5,500 square feet of indoor meeting space, a 3,000-square-foot patio, and 3,000 square feet of artificial turf for limited use by some groups.

"We know these people, their families, and showed off the space."

The space includes a new 10,000-square-foot lawn the hotel opened last year and called the "backyard." The hotel opened renovated public spaces—a new bar, restaurant lounge area, and a grab-and-go-shop—in late 2014.

Quint said guests from other parts of the U.S. seeking a "central SoCal location" put the hotel in quite a good position.

"Getting them on-property is key."

His staff works with destination marketing groups, and when meeting prospects visit, the hotel can show other Irvine Co-owned properties, including a golf course, marinas, and retail centers.

Hotel Irvine has expanded the food and localization approach to pursue overall branding as a lifestyle hotel rather than a straight business-class offering, Quint said.

"We have a new story to tell," he said. "We’re not like other hotels, and that’s kind of the point."
### DATA DRILL: Hotel Meeting Space Managers

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OC-based hotel managers have meeting space as far afield as Florida and Mississippi and in some cases own the properties they manage. Disneyland Resort’s parent, the Walt Disney Co., has 1,017,000 square feet of meeting space at hotels and resorts in Florida, Hawaii, Hong Kong and France. This list includes the bulk of the field. Several other OC-based companies didn’t respond to requests for information.

Source: Companies and Business Journal research

Graphic by Beth Allocco