

Where to Hold Your Meetings

EXPERT TIPS FOR SELECTING YOUR NEXT EVENT DESTINATION





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ARTICLES WRITTEN BY RACHEL CRICK

All of the decisions you make as a meeting planner, choosing the destinations for your events might be the most important. From easy-to-reach American cities to Caribbean islands and other incentivizing locales, you have an abundance of choices, each of which has its own pros and cons for meetings.

To help you pick the perfect destinations for your meetings — and make the most of your time there — we asked experts from around the events industry to weigh in with their insight on destination selection and management.

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CVBS OFFER MEETING PLANNERS EXTENSIVE SERVICES AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Meeting planners have a lot on their plates: From the initial stages of choosing a destination and venue to managing hurdles on the day of the event, there are a lot of moving parts to keep an eye on.

Luckily, planners don't have to do it alone. Convention and visitors bureaus can be incredibly valuable assets at every stage of the planning. Most CVBs offer a wide range of complimentary or discounted services before, during and after meetings to help planners execute successful events. And since CVB staff are local experts, they can ensure planners and attendees alike get the most out of a meeting or event in their city.

"At the heart of what we do is making that event planning process for a planner as easy as possible," said Jim Mahon, vice president of marketing and brand management for the Akron/Summit Convention and Visitors Bureau.

We spoke to Mahon and two other CVB leaders to find out more about the services their organizations offer to meeting planners.

SHORTENING YOUR TO-DO LIST

When it comes to making meeting planning a little more manageable, CVBs are a planner's best ally to help save time and energy.

The first step in meeting planning is choosing a venue. This includes generating a request for proposal, or RFP. CVBs can work with planners to generate one and send it to local hotels or similar venues for bidding. Some CVBs even organize RFP responses for planners. The Akron/Summit CVB can create a consolidated RFP presentation as a digital flipbook to help planners choose their best option in a simple, easy-to-understand format.

Visit Park City doesn't just send out RFPs to every venue in the area; they analyze which ones make the most sense given a planner's needs and send out RFPs to those specific venues, which cuts down on the planner's workload.

"We're actually doing the legwork for the meeting planner," said Tonya Sweeten, vice president of group sales at Visit Park City. "We'll find what we deem to be the best fit."

On the importance of using CVB services: "We're their ear to the ground and boots on the ground."



Tonya Sweeten

VICE PRESIDENT OF GROUP SALES

Visit Park City

Experience: 40-plus years

On providing CVB services to planners: “It’s about saving time; it’s about saving resources; and it’s about making the event planner’s life a little easier.”



Jim Mahon

**VICE PRESIDENT OF MARKETING AND
BRAND MANAGEMENT**

Akron/Summit Convention and Visitors Bureau
Experience: 32 years

Another way CVBs lighten the planner’s load and take some of the guesswork out of planning meetings is through arranging site tours of prospective venues and off-site destinations. This allows meeting planners to see for themselves what the city has to offer before they decide on booking. For those who can’t travel to a destination, the Akron/Summit CVB offers virtual tours and site visits through a website created to showcase some of the area’s attractions.

Some CVBs, like Visit Park City, offer complimentary transportation and hotel stays for planners considering a venue in their area and even reimburse them for airfare if they book their event at one of those venues. Other CVBs provide similar incentives for booking; the Akron/Summit CVB offers planners an Amazon gift card for booking at one of the CVB’s hospitality partners.

In addition to arranging site tours and helping planners secure venues, CVBs often provide event planning guides, which ensure that planners have the most up-to-date and accurate information to map out the specifics of their event.

“We’re a one-stop shop for proposals, site tours and resources,” said Amy Rivera, group sales manager at the Fox Cities Convention and Visitors Bureau.

ADDING A PERSONAL TOUCH

CVBs have the tools to assist planners with creating a memorable, one-of-a-kind event. They can provide welcome materials such as signage, information tables, maps, lapel buttons, name badges and information kits. Many offer custom details, such as company logos on name badges, which add style and professionalism to events.

The Akron/Summit CVB offers a popular service known as personalized concierge service, meaning they create custom materials for meeting attendees using information provided by planners, such as profiles on keynote speakers or the event’s agenda. It can be offered in a digital or physical format and also features information on local attractions and event accommodations.

“To have that visitors guide embedded in a digital concierge that’s going to be answering specific questions to that group is where that customer service and attention to detail is elevated,” Mahon said.

CVBs can help give attendees a personalized experience from the moment they arrive. The Fox Cities CVB can arrange for an address from local officials or a color guard appearance to give attendees an unusual and entertaining welcome to the area.

Event promotion is another area where many CVBs are happy to offer customized assistance to planners. Services such as press release creation and distribution and connecting planners with local media outlets help an event get the publicity it requires. Using a CVB for help with advertising and media makes sense because they've been part of the planning and already have a sense of the event's goals and objectives.

The Akron/Summit CVB has an in-house advertising agency to best cater to the individual needs of every planner and event.

"There's a little more synergy than trying to bring a true outside party to design a flyer or write a press release," Mahon said.

CREATING A SEAMLESS EXPERIENCE

An important part of event planning is making sure things run smoothly during the event itself. Because they're local experts, CVBs can help planners anticipate and avoid problems with their events. Their knowledge of the area's weather, sports, updated business hours and other events can be extremely helpful for planners who are hoping to avoid surprises on the day of their meeting.

"It's a really good starting point, especially if you've never been to the area," Rivera said.

CVBs also ensure that meeting planners are connected with the best resources in the area, which makes for a memorable experience for attendees. CVB staff are trained to recommend the best caterers, restaurants, shopping, entertainers, keynote speakers and local attractions. They can also design group tours and activities for attendees to enjoy during downtime or as part of a meeting or conference's agenda. Visit Park City offers itinerary building and team-building activity planning so attendees can get the most out of their event.

"A lot of these can't be found on Google," Rivera said of local activities and attractions in the Fox Cities area.

On the help that CVBs offer to planners: "We're very willing to go above and beyond and help as much as we can."



Amy Rivera

GROUP SALES MANAGER

Fox Cities Convention and Visitors Bureau

Experience: 20 years

On the day of the event, most CVBs are willing to lend a hand with everything from greeting attendees at the airport or host hotel to helping out with event registration. They're also there to help when things don't go as planned and can keep the meeting or event on track even in the face of obstacles such as venue closures or technology issues. This assistance means planners have less to worry about when it comes to running their events.

For large groups, the Fox Cities CVB provides volunteers to assist with registration and wayfinding. They will also provide printers for last-minute event materials, such as name badges.

Though the event's planning, promotion and execution are extremely important, there's another aspect of meeting planning that contributes to its success: post-event feedback. Some CVBs, such as the Akron/Summit CVB and Fox Cities CVB, offer custom surveys for attendees to fill out. This feedback can then be analyzed and shared with the meeting planner, which can be used to plan more successful events in the future. This is especially important if the event is held annually.

"If we can be there after the event and help mine some of that information in a way that's going to be useful when they go back to planning the next year's event, we just think that's invaluable," Mahon said.

"If we can be there after the event and help mine some of that information in a way that's going to be useful when they go back to planning the next year's event, we just think that's invaluable."

— Jim Mahon, Akron/Summit
Convention and Visitors Bureau



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Pictured: Take a cooking class with The League of Kitchens, to build cross-cultural connection and access to traditional cuisine.

Island Time

EXPERTS SHARE TIPS ON TAKING EVENTS TO THE CARIBBEAN

An easy way to take an event to the next level is to incorporate the turquoise waters, white sand and warm sun of a Caribbean Island.

Island destinations elevate any meeting or event by combining business with leisure and are an exceptional choice for incentive travel and corporate retreats. While planning an event in the Caribbean does present certain challenges that a domestic event might not, it also comes with plenty of perks.

Here's some insight from industry experts to help you reap the rewards and avoid the pitfalls of meeting in Caribbean destinations.

DEPEND ON A DMC

It can be tricky to plan an event from another continent. Everything from local traffic changes to venue closures can become issues for planners to navigate. And if these details are not handled correctly, it could spell disaster for an event. One way to increase your destination event's chances for success is to use a destination management company, or DMC.

DMCs are travel experts based in a destination; they manage anything inbound to the area and are knowledgeable about all things local, from hotels to transportation to activities.

"Rely on your destination management company," said Andy Ortiz, president and owner of Global Incentive Management DMC, a DMC specializing in events in Mexico and the Caribbean. "We want the business to come to our destinations."

DMCs are great resources for planners looking to source venues and suppliers for their events because they know the area well. They can secure good deals for planners when booking and offer helpful hints about events in the area. For example, if a planner arranges for their attendees to arrive at the hotel via a shuttle from the airport, it may be helpful to know the shuttle takes a lengthy route with 20 stops before it gets to the hotel; this is something a DMC agent would know.

"We often partner with DMCs for certain services at the destinations," said Mike May, owner of Brightspot Incentives and Events, an event planning company specializing in incentive travel. "They're going to know the best new restaurants; they're going to know which transportation company provides the most modern buses."

On the upsides of a Caribbean destination:

"It opens people's eyes to other cultures. That's a great benefit."



Terese Ternullo

FOUNDER AND OWNER

Hibiscus Travel

Experience: 28 years

“The beauty of the Caribbean is that it can offer a new experience for people and a change of pace.”



Mike May

OWNER

Brightspot Incentives and Events, Inc.
Experience: 21 years

DMCs can also help when things go awry, because they're usually based in the destination itself. If an attendee arrives a day earlier or later than anticipated, DMCs may be able to help make arrangements to accommodate them.

KEEP AN EYE ON THE BUDGET

A Caribbean getaway doesn't have to break the bank. While it may initially strike some planners as unaffordable, there are some approaches to make an event more doable.

One strategy for optimal pricing is choosing an all-inclusive property as opposed to piecing the event together a la carte. This is a major difference from meeting planning in the U.S., where all-inclusive properties are rare.

“When we do a meeting or incentive group in the Caribbean, we usually go with an all-inclusive; so it's one price and there are no surprises,” said Terese Ternullo, founder and owner of Hibiscus Travel, an event planning company specializing in travel to Jamaica.

Ortiz also recommends choosing all-inclusive properties whenever possible because they include tax, gratuity and hidden costs that planners may not initially think about. According to Ortiz, some Caribbean or Mexican-Caribbean destinations now consist of mainly all-inclusive properties because they recognize the draw to planners.

“You don't have to break it down,” said Ortiz. “Everything is included in one package, and that's very attractive to planners.”

A drawback to pricing in the Caribbean is import duties. According to May, fees associated with importing certain items for a destination event can double the cost. He added that food costs may be higher as well because ingredients have to be transported to the island.

Another factor impacting travel costs in the Caribbean is the post-COVID travel boom, which May refers to as “vacation inflation.”

“There's a surge in demand, and at the same time there's inflation, so it's kind of creating a perfect storm of rising costs,” said May. To compensate for this, planners will want to keep a close eye on their budget.

TRAVEL CAN BE TRICKY

One of the first questions attendees — and planners — ask when planning an event in the Caribbean is “How will I get there?” The answer, and the associated cost, will vary from group to group, which is something planners must consider.

The good news is that most attendees can secure their passports and get through immigration with ease because these destinations specialize in international tourism. However, any international

travel from the U.S. requires some level of planning ahead from attendees, so making them aware of any travel requirements such as documents, immunizations or local health codes is important.

Flight logistics are an element to consider. A group will have an easier time flying in from Florida than from the West Coast, for example. But if each attendee is responsible for their own flying arrangements, this may also change the level of thought a planner must put into designing the event.

“What we always think of first is airlift to the destination,” said May. “One of the downsides for the Caribbean is it has fewer direct flights.”

Fewer direct flights translates to higher costs, especially as fuel prices rise globally. Other problems such as cancelled flights or weather conditions can also cause headaches for event management, so an added layer of contingency planning is a must.

“We have a lot of airline problems that have been happening recently,” said Ternullo.

Ground transportation is something else that needs to be considered, because local transportation can vary greatly from island to island. Attendee arrival times can change what options for ground transport are available. It’s easier to arrange local transportation for a group arriving on one than for a series of people arriving on different flights over two days.

USE YOUR DESTINATION WISELY

The Caribbean is ideal for incentive travel because it has what May calls “podium power,” meaning it’s a high-value destination for many prospective attendees when compared to a domestic destination. It attracts a lot of attention because of the luxury associated with it, making it a great reward.

“The Caribbean creates a certain branding or expectation for the meeting,” said May. This might mean less emphasis on work and more emphasis on vacation for the attendees.

Because of this association with the Caribbean and the cost associated with travel, it’s ideal for longer events rather than quick trips. It may not be ideal for a two-day conference because attendees want to be able to enjoy their time on the island.

Planners can often get more bang for their buck in the Caribbean, which can really add to an event’s charm. The island backdrop may help save on décor cost, and it only increases the luxurious feel of the resorts and hotels where these events are hosted. Ortiz said that certain aspects of an event often are higher quality in the Caribbean than domestically.

“Especially in the Mexican Caribbean, the service level, the price, the food, the people are 100% different,” said Ortiz.

“I can set up a beautiful sit-down dinner or private parties, and a lot of times this really wows the employees,” said Ternullo, who said these additions are sometimes made possible because of the savings in service costs.

Caribbean destinations are designed to impress, and because their money may go further there, planners should have no difficulty designing something that’s going to go to maximize the attendee experience.



Andy Ortiz

PRESIDENT AND OWNER

Global Incentive Management DMC

Experience: 35 years

**On making Caribbean events successful:
“Use a destination management company if you want your program to do well. Don't do it on your own.”**

Rewarding Experiences

VETERAN PLANNERS SHARE TIPS FOR PERFECTING INCENTIVE EVENTS

What's more motivating than the prospect of a day relaxing by turquoise Caribbean waters or exploring a historic European castle? Very little, which is why companies invest in incentive travel programs, designed to reward their top-performing employees and encourage competition.

Incentive programs often feature breathtaking destinations, luxurious lodging and plenty of fun activities. Incentive travel may seem like more play than work, but designing the perfect trip to reward a company's hardest-working players involves a lot of careful planning.

These tips from industry experts will get any incentive program off to a good start.

DREAM DESTINATIONS

At first glance, choosing the perfect location for an incentive event may seem as simple as locating the nearest beach resort, but there are a lot more factors for planners to account for when designing the perfect program. A glamorous destination is a must, because the program needs to be based in a desirable location to inspire competition and hard work. But not just any desirable vacation spot will do.

"At the end of the day what our customers are looking for are locations that the winners wouldn't necessarily take their families on vacation," said Michelle Crosby, account executive at Brightspot Incentives and Events, an event-services agency based in Irving, Texas.

For example, if a company is located in Texas and its workers tend to vacation in popular domestic destinations like Florida, a more exciting location such as the Caribbean or Europe may be a good alternative. The point is to hit items on their bucket list — rather than run-of-the-mill vacation sites — to truly inspire motivation among company employees.

Other factors, such as the potential attendee demographics, will inform the choice of locale, according to Crosby. The age, gender, travel history and activity level of a company's employees are all factors that planners must consider when selecting a destination. A more active group of employees is more likely to enjoy a destination

"It's really all about the winners having fun and creating memories that really motivate."



Amy Beilke

DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Carrousel Travel

Experience: 25 years

“An incentive is about an experience, so my big focus is trying to provide experiences that surprise and delight ... things people wouldn't necessarily purchase for themselves or provide for themselves but they've always wanted to do.”



Ashley Glade

FOUNDER AND PRINCIPAL

Events Done Right, Inc.

Experience: 16 years

with a lot of potential for outdoor activities than a group of senior-level executives looking to relax.

Another important factor is the history of the incentive program; for many companies, the top performers and winners of incentive trips end up winning the trips multiple years in a row.

“A lot of companies don't like to repeat destinations,” said Ashley Glade, independent hospitality contractor and the founder and principal of Events Done Right, Inc.

Glade also points to logistical factors such as safety as important considerations. It's unwise to plan incentive events on the Gulf of Mexico during hurricane season, for instance. Factors such as group size are also important, because very large groups or very small groups exclude certain destinations by default.

While meetings often take place domestically, the point of incentives is to think big, meaning international destinations are frequently on the table.

“You'd go to Florida for a meeting, but you'd much rather go to Paris for an incentive trip,” said Crosby.

Amy Beilke, director of business development at Carrousel Travel, a Minneapolis-based travel company, pointed out international travel comes with other considerations; factors like obtaining visas or other documents, dealing with air travel, variable exchange rates and fees, and even immunizations are all important to look into when planning an international incentive program.

BUDGETING FOR BONUSES

Another area where planning an incentive differs from planning a meeting, conference or similar event is the budget. That's because incentive planners need to plan for a lot of extra expenses to make the trip special.

The first major budgetary consideration is budgeting for two. After all, one of the biggest purposes of an incentive is “to not only recognize and reward the award-winner who's going on the trip but also those who support the award winner,” said Crosby. In other words, well-designed incentive programs usually accommodate a winner and their plus-one, which

means the budget needs to reflect that. All activities, meals and accommodations should be designed to include two people.

When it comes to incentive travel, the key to ensuring a rewarding experience for the winners is detail: Are they served welcome drinks? Is their luggage taken up to their room automatically? Do they have room credits for a spa visit? Are meals and transportation free? These details are what determines the level of luxury of an incentive program, and often these details don't come cheap.

"Your incentive budget is all about how the winner and their guest don't have to open their wallets," said Crosby.

Another extra to budget for is gifts for winners and their guests. Gifts, which can be simple or more elaborate, depending on the company's requests, are one more thing that leave winners feeling rewarded and appreciated for their hard work. Whether it's a pair of sunglasses or a sweater, paying for a little extra something adds a level of detail and luxury to any incentive program.

One more factor to consider is paying for travel costs; while this may not be automatically included for attendees of a conference, travel to the destination should be included in the incentive program. Since many destinations for incentive travel are international, that means airfare, which can be pricey. There's also transportation from the airport, as well as to and from activities. Planners should include all these expenses in their budgets so that incentive winners don't have to pay for them.

The budget for an incentive trip is usually going to be larger than that for another kind of trip, but the point of having an incentive program is to motivate employees to work harder, meaning it all evens out in the end.

"The whole purpose of an incentive is that it's a self-funded marketing initiative," said Bielke.

CRAFTING AN EXPERIENCE

Just like it's fitting to choose a destination that guests wouldn't normally go to for vacation, it's important to choose activities they might not necessarily be able to do on their own, especially activities that may otherwise not be affordable or accessible to the average traveler. Activities like parasailing or scuba diving are great, as are other excursions or activities unique to the area.

On the difference between planning a meeting and an incentive program:

"It's more about a luxury, high-end experience as opposed to a meeting, which is more regulated and regimented."



Michelle Crosby

ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE

Brightspot Incentives and Events

Experience: 25 years

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DIRECTOR OF
SALES AND MARKETING

KYLE ANDERSON

kyle@grouptravelleader.com



ADVERTISING
ACCOUNT MANAGER

BRYCE WILSON

bryce@grouptravelleader.com



[SMALLMARKETMEETINGS.COM](https://smallmarketmeetings.com)