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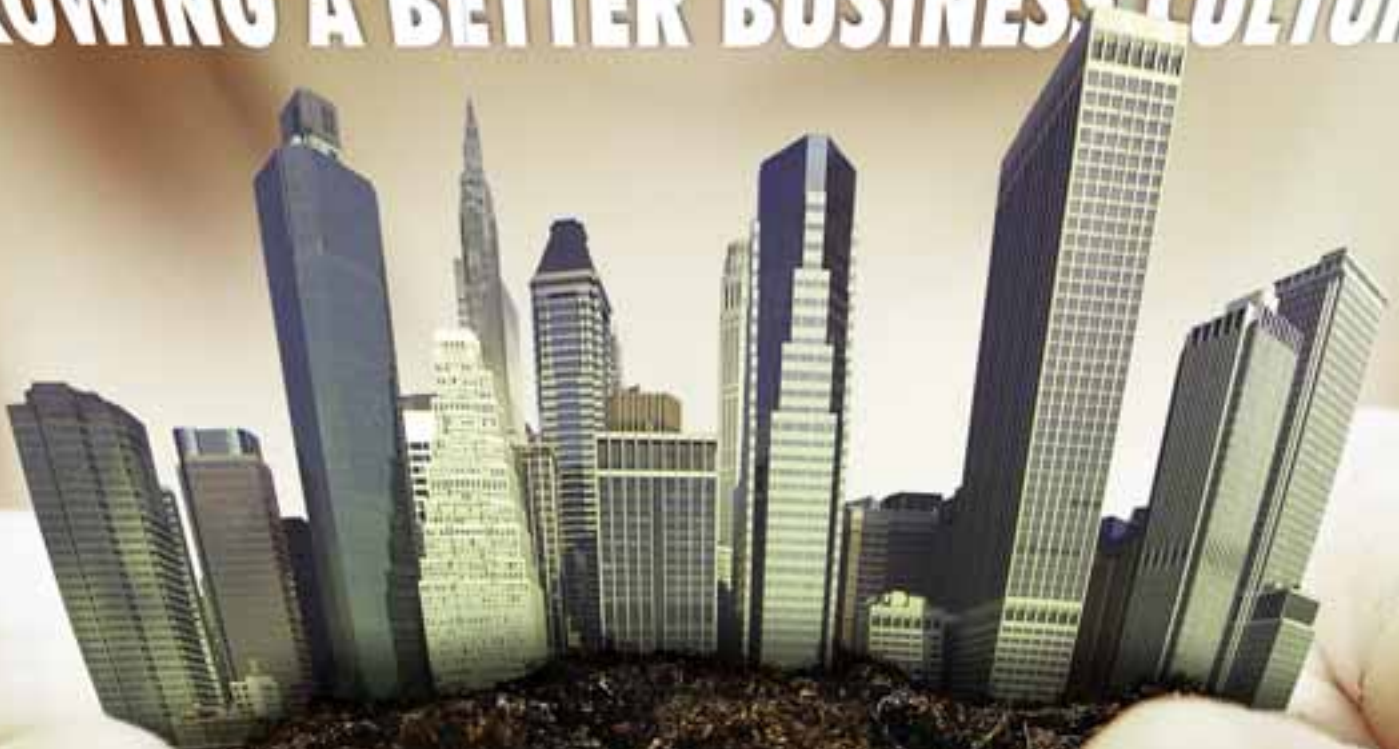
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RESORTS AND CONFERENCE FACILITIES OF THE FUTURE ARE HERE TODAY

BY RAIMEY GALLANT

Given today's societal issues, like one's carbon footprint and the increasing cost of travel, meeting and conference planners are starting to have a lot more to think about when booking a venue besides how many stars or diamonds a facility has – and resort properties are getting geared up to accommodate.

In Canada, the competition among meeting venues is intense. Meetings held nationally dropped five per cent in 2006 and one percentage point in 2007, according to the Convention Industry Council. In other words, it's a meeting planner's market.

For resort properties, gaining or keeping a competitive edge means catering to the emerging and future needs of planners by building or renovating now. For starters, driv-

ing is becoming the preferred method of travel due to cost savings compared to flying, and urban oases will benefit from this trend. Creative meeting places and wireless accessibility at rural properties are some of the other criteria that will soon be at the top of every planner's checklist if not already.

Protecting the planet is an issue at the forefront for developers and renovators in Canada. "That's the big change," says Alan Hart, principal for VIA Architecture, a firm with resort design credits in Canada and the United States. "People are now worried about the impact of their activities on the environment. So the idea that these buildings are built with sustainable considerations in mind, whether the materials or the heating source, so that you're not putting a major impact on

GAINING OR KEEPING A COMPETITIVE EDGE MEANS CATERING TO THE EMERGING AND FUTURE NEEDS OF PLANNERS BY BUILDING OR RENOVATING NOW



the beautiful settings that these resorts are in, becomes a major consideration.” He says that all parties involved are considering their impact – the developers, the host communities and even the resort users.

But are that many organizations really making an effort to choose eco-friendly event venues?

Gwen Kennedy, partner with Details Event Coordination Inc. in Burlington, Ontario, has been making it a point to offer her clients environmentally friendly meeting options. “I think we’re on the cutting edge of that responsibility from a client perspective,” says Kennedy, adding that she has had minimal success in selling green meetings to date.

One study by *Exhibitor Magazine Group* in Rochester, Minnesota, found that although companies are feeling pressure from a significant percentage of stakeholders to adopt green practices, corporate investment in such practices has a long way to go. The 2007-published study, titled *An Inconvenient Booth*, found that five per cent of exhibitors have made a strong commitment, while two-thirds haven’t taken any steps at all.

However, attention to the issue among exhibitors is expected to grow fast. For 2008, 62 per cent of exhibitors responded that they expected their interest to increase.

A December 2007 survey commissioned by the Hotel Association of Canada revealed that more than half of the respondents, interviewed for their 2008 business and leisure travel intentions, indicated that they proactively seek out environmentally friendly accommodations.

If planning green meetings isn’t a trend yet, it’s coming.

HOW TO CHOOSE GREEN

Many aids are being created every day to help meeting planners select the right eco-choice for their event.

The Hotel Association of Canada’s Green Key Eco-Rating Program had more than 860 properties registered nationally, according to

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~ JEAN SOULARD, CHEF, FAIRMONT LE CHATEAU FRONTENAC

Andrea Myers, director of marketing and member services. The system grants venues from one to five Green Keys based on the level of steps taken to benefit the environment. “The past year and a half has seen the program grow quickly,” says Myers.

The LEED Canada Green Building System is a certification program for new construction and major renovation projects.

Kennedy offers some of her clients the option to offset an event’s negative environmental impact by planting trees. At www.treecanada.ca, event planners can request a questionnaire about the details of

their event, and representatives at the organization will calculate what it will take to make the conference carbon-neutral.

Hotels and resorts are even taking it upon themselves to create in-house green programs.

Bellstar Hotels & Resorts, which owns the newly opened Blackstone Mountain Lodge in Canmore, Alberta, has implemented its “Stay Green Program” across all of its Alberta and British Columbia properties. “It’s a comprehensive guest education and environmental consciousness promotion program,” says media relations and marketing specialist Jessica Harcombe.

The initiative includes the use of energy efficient lighting and water fixtures and the use of plants indigenous to the area (where possible) in order to reduce the amount of water needed in irrigating of resort gardens. Recycling bins are placed in every guest room, phosphate-free cleaning products are used, and the resort company has contracted Aveda to provide its guest bathroom amenities. “Aveda is a company known for their eco-friendly practices,” says Harcombe.

By policy, the properties also follow vacation-style housekeeping, which means that linens and towels are changed only once a

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week or upon request. "That really cuts down on water use," she says. Also, the properties are making a concerted effort to (where possible) buy only food grown locally.

"EAT LOCAL" – MORE THAN JUST A TREND

When a small group of conscience-heavy San Franciscans issued a challenge to the world in 2005 to eat only foods grown within a 100-mile radius of their residences, they couldn't possibly have guessed that the idea would grow to the phenomenon that it is becoming today. "Our food now travels an average of 1,500 miles before ending up on our plates,"

according to the pioneering do-gooders' website. The group coined the term "locavore," meaning to "eat local," which the *New Oxford American Dictionary* chose as its 2007 Word of the Year, certainly quite an accomplishment for such a young concept.

Hospitality properties across the country are slowly joining the mission. Hey, why not? Less time in transit means it's good for the environment, it supports local producers and it just happens to be cheaper to not have to fly your brie in from France.

Chef Jean Soulard of the Fairmont Le Château Frontenac in Québec City would agree.

The Fairmont property has made it a priority to buy from local producers for years, and the native from Vendée, France, says that he now lives in a Québec that offers locally produced edibles that in some cases even surpass the quality of competing products from his country of birth. "Fifteen to 20 years ago, we got three kinds of cheese in Québec, and now we have around 500 (made locally)," boasts Soulard.

SPACES DESIGNED TO INSPIRE

When you provide unique places to meet, you encourage better learning and creative brainstorming, according to Vittoria Wikston, CMP

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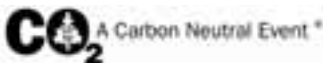


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INVERARY RESORT, BADDECK, N.S.



and vice-president of sales and marketing for White Oaks Conference Resort & Spa in Niagara-On-The-Lake, Ontario. At White Oaks, guests are encouraged to meet just about anywhere.

Says Wikston: "A lot of times, people have to break into small focus groups. They'll take their group of four, and they'll go into the club and find a little mediation centre. They'll be doing brainstorming for corporate business in a wellness area." Picnic blankets, decks, and teepees are not uncommon at White Oaks as alternatives to a boardroom table.

A study by the International Facility Management Association, with members in 60 nations, found that there was a 17 per cent increase in space allotted for collaborative meeting places and amenities.

Companies with offices designed with an emphasis on collaborative work environments can appreciate being able to have the same atmosphere at a resort.

Hart says that when designing the architecture of a resort, his company creates unique and more comfortable meeting opportunities wherever possible. "When we're using hotels for our purposes for our own firm, that's what we look for," he reasons.

URBAN RESORTS WIN THE "DRIVE MARKET"

Resort and conference facilities that are within driving distance of major population centres are becoming choice event destinations more and more, and no longer just for ease of accessibility. Increasing travel costs are compelling developers to opt for property locations in or near urban areas.

Jeff Dover is a director with HLT Advisory Inc., a source used by Canadian and international hospitality, leisure and tourism industries. "For the most part," says Dover, "the conference business of the resorts comes from the local population base, within an hour or a two hour drive." He explains that only a handful of Canadian resort destinations can rely on the "non-drive market." Very few destinations in Canada are unique enough in landscape and climate to be able to attract national and

international business. Even fewer of these destinations are readily accessible by air from the majority of the country.

Hart has noticed the trend toward building urban resorts as well. "The Okanagan is one area that has become very attractive, because it's close to Vancouver and Calgary. You could drive there, or you could take a plane, but you can get there relatively easily without a lot of cost," he says.

THE TECH CHALLENGE FOR RURAL RESORTS

Another concern with rural locations is that they can be too far beyond the reaches of urban-available technology.

It's easier to spot a whale along the Cabot Trail in Nova Scotia than it is to find a resort in an area with wireless Internet and cellular reception.

According to Glen MacDonald, director of sales and partnerships for Cape Breton Island Resorts, the Inverary Resort in Baddeck is located in one of the only high-speed-Internet and cellular-phone enabled pockets in the province. "So it's a huge plus for us when we're attracting groups," says MacDonald.

Another of the companies properties, located in West Bay, Nova Scotia, isn't as lucky. The company installed satellites to remedy the problem. "Our Dundee property is fine now, but we had our challenges over the last five or six years in order to meet the needs of the groups coming in," says MacDonald.

Indeed, meeting planners have a lot of new-age venue factors to contemplate, and no doubt more will follow.

Sol

Raimey Gallant has written articles for numerous Canadian periodicals.

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