

# INSURANCE & FINANCIAL MEETINGS MANAGEMENT

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Scott Shontz, Vice President Conference  
Centers, Aramark Conference Centers

# Built FOR Meetings

## How Conference Centers Are Changing With the Times

By Steve Winston

If you're looking for a place that knows how to do meetings for insurance and financial groups, knows how to work with planners and knows how to address last-minute issues, you couldn't do better than a conference center.

The biggest advantage, of course, is that conference centers are purpose-designed and purpose-built for meetings. In addition, they're showing a knack for being on top of the learning curve when it comes to adopting new technologies. Since meetings are their only business, they've seen, heard and done it all in this industry. Another factor is that, for many years, conference centers had a reputation as dull, staid places in which to hold meetings. These days, however, many of them are attached to luxurious resorts, which means that attendees never have to leave the premises — it's all there.

The standard-setting organization for conference centers is the International Association of Conference Centers (IACC). And that's a good place to start.



**Tom Bolman**, Executive Vice President  
International Association of Conference Centers, St. Louis, MO

### The View From IACC

"IACC-certified centers are generally self-contained facilities that are built for meetings, and that provide the perfect environment for meetings," says Tom Bolman, executive vice president of IACC. "Our members don't just sell space, rates and dates. They partner with planners to accomplish their goals and objectives for their meetings. And, because meetings are their only business, they're uniquely qualified to handle any situation...and to turn potential last-minute crises into resolvable situations."

These centers not only are involved in the newest trends occurring in the meetings industry; in many cases, they're setting the standards. Food and beverage is in the spotlight nowadays in the con-

ference-center world. People are now interested in lighter, more healthful meals. And they're interested in food that is sourced from local farmers. In fact, many centers are undertaking serious studies about how to shape their menus to provide not only the best

*"Conference centers understand the science of staging productive meetings. And we understand the science of staging them for insurance and financial companies — because they're our second-largest market."*



Photo courtesy of Tempe Mission Palms

*Destination Hotels & Resorts' Tempe Mission Palms offers 30,000 sf of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space. Meeting facilities are IACC-certified.*

technology, he says, is collaboratively based, so that virtual attendees in Des Moines or Dallas can have access to the same programs and speakers and breakouts as physical attendees in Washington, DC.

In addition, IACC's Bolman says there's a movement toward greater amenities, as well, because quality onsite amenities keep attendees onsite, which increases their opportunities to swap ideas and to network outside of the meetings. In past years, spas and fitness centers tended to be afterthoughts — a keep-up-with-the-Joneses type of thing. Now, however, attendees at many conference centers have access to spas and fitness facilities that are larger and more elaborate. And, because many centers are attached to full-service resorts, there's a whole range of options right outside attendees' doors.

"IACC conference centers are specialists — meetings are all we do," Bolman says. "So we can partner with the planner and the company to create the most effective environment for their meeting. There are no other groups at the facility; no outside noise. And all the technical and AV equipment is right on the premises — along with people to maintain and operate it.

"Conference centers understand the science of staging productive meetings," Bolman says. "And we understand the science of staging them for insurance and financial companies — because they're our second-largest market."

### Major Players

**Dolce Hotels & Resorts.** Vice President of Conference Centers Paul Dolce is the son of Andrew "Andy" J. Dolce, the founder of Dolce Hotels & Resorts, which has 27 resort

properties, 10 of which have IACC-certified conference centers. Dolce's had a ringside seat on an industry that is being transformed, and is debunking old perceptions.

"Our average meeting has between 20 and 40 attendees," Dolce says. "But we can handle as many as 500. The planners with whom we work all tell us essentially the same thing: Conference centers are more conducive to productive meetings because they're designed, built, equipped and staffed for holding productive meetings. Meetings aren't a sideline for these centers — they're the whole business.

"If the economy continues to grow," he says, "we think our industry is in a good position to rebound in 2012."

Dolce adds that the old image of conference centers as being somewhat unaccommodating in pricing negotiations — especially after the past few years — has changed. He notes that the Complete Meeting Package (CMP) in effect at conference centers is not an inflexible document, but a starting point that can easily be customized for each client.

"If planners can be flexible with their dates," he says, "sometimes even by just one night, they'd be surprised at the savings they can achieve." He notes that weekends (when centers are generally not being used) offer better opportunities for savings. Dolce also notes that "green" is not just a



Photo courtesy of The National Conference Center

*The National Conference Center in Leesburg, VA, boasts 265,000 sf of IACC-approved conference space with 250 meeting rooms.*

buzzword at conference centers: It's now an operational philosophy: All IACC members must subscribe to the organization's Code of Sustainability.

**Aramark Conference Centers** manages more than 50 conference centers around the country, 11 of which are formally accredited by IACC. The centers, which offer turnkey, customized services for clients, can host meetings from six to 1,000 attendees (the National Conference Center in Leesburg, VA).

"Conference centers are a planner's best friend," says Scott Shontz, vice president of conference centers for Aramark Conference Centers.

"And so is the CMP. It allows us to provide everything in one package, as opposed to the à la carte approach, and this saves planners a lot of money. The venues are distraction-free. They're built for meetings. And, because everything's in one location, it makes planning much easier."

Aramark is noticing a trend toward

smaller meetings than before the recession, and toward shorter stays (perhaps one day less), as planners remain extremely budget-conscious.

Shontz says it's possible to trim expenses even further — if you know where to look. And if you're willing to show some flexibility.



"Look at the facility's booking patterns," he says, "and try to remain flexible. For example, here at

*"If planners can be flexible with their dates, sometimes even by just one night, they'd be surprised at the savings they can achieve."*

**Paul Dolce, Vice President, Conference Centers  
Dolce Hotels & Resorts, Potomac, MD**

Aramark we post specials. Consider the time of year. Summertime has some softer weeks, which are a good opportunity to save money. And when thinking about the CMP, don't forget to think about the value

you're getting for items for which conference centers don't charge, for instance, parking."

**Benchmark Hospitality International** owns and operates 13 Four Diamond, IACC-certified hotels and operates some 30 privately owned centers.

"It's all about productivity," says Hal Powell, regional vice president, sales and marketing. "Meetings in conference centers are more productive. And planners tell us these meet-

ings have a higher ROI than their meetings held elsewhere."

Powell points out that the meeting rooms are ergonomically designed and comfortable, and that state-of-the-art technology is standard.

Benchmark properties place great importance on teambuilding. As a result, there are ropes courses at some of them, along with canoe races and culinary team-building, among other types of team-building exercises.

"In the insurance/financial area," he says, "we're seeing a number of trends. One of them is more work groups, rather than classroom education. There are more breakouts and more work on innovation. And we're also seeing some movement toward more golf events. During the past few years, of course, many companies stopped having golf events. It's still not the way it was before. But it's coming back."

Powell says the most common meetings for insurance and financial

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**Scott Shontz, Vice President Conference Centers  
Aramark Conference Centers, Philadelphia, PA**

companies are training, board and committee meetings.

Steve Sackman, vice president of marketing for **Destination Hotels & Resorts**, helps oversee an empire of 35 hotels, seven of which have IACC-certified conference centers.

"Financial and insurance planners have always liked conference centers," he says, "because the centers are perfect for their frequent training meetings. They tell us all the time that they see conference centers not just as a place to hold meetings, but a place where planners can achieve the desired outcome for their meetings. In addition, it helps planners show the validity of their meetings and the ROI."

Sackman, too, has noticed a trend toward top-of-the-line technology to

*Situated on 40 acres of alpine splendor, Dolce Hotels & Resorts' Aspen Meadows Resort in Aspen, CO, offers 22,000 sf of IACC-approved meeting space.*



Photo courtesy of Aspen Meadows Resort

accommodate the changing nature of meetings at these centers. Video-conferencing technology is more important than ever. And because the



June for a meeting in June. We can do this, because the CMP makes the process simple. But the longer planning process, in some cases, is certainly a good thing to see. Hopefully it means that things are getting back to normal.

"These days, surprises are a planner's worst nightmare," continues Sackman. "But with the CMP, you know the exact costs ahead of time. There are no overruns. And there are no surprises."

### Resort Options

For business meetings designed to give equal time to downtime, the location and resort amenities must be as top-notch as the meeting facilities. Omni Hotels offers two excellent examples in Florida.

Tucked into beautiful Amelia

nature of meetings has changed — with shorter notice, and less cross-country flying — centers have been early adapters of the technology to address those changes.

*"In the insurance/financial area we're seeing...more work groups, rather than classroom education. There are more breakouts and more work on innovation. And we're also seeing some movement toward more golf events."*



**Hal Powell, Regional Vice President, Sales and Marketing  
Benchmark Hospitality International, The Woodlands, TX**

example, we're seeing a shortening of the planning process in some cases, and a lengthening in others. It's not uncommon for us to get a call in

Island near Jacksonville is Omni Amelia Island Plantation, one of the most distinctive resorts in the Southeast, on 1,300 acres of live

## New and Renovated IACC Centers

### Benchmark Hospitality International

- Opening in fall 2012 is the Deloitte University Center in Dallas, an 800 guest room conference facility for Deloitte's own employees.

- Recently acquired: The Inn at Virginia Tech/Skelton Conference Center, Blacksburg, VA, and the Villas of Grand Cypress/Conference Center, Orlando, FL.
- Recently completed \$20 million renovation of Cheyenne Mountain Resort, Colorado Springs, CO.
- Currently renovating the Turtle Bay Resort/Conference Center, Hawaii.
- Recently finished renovations at The Chattanooga, Chattanooga, TN.

### Dolce Hotels & Resorts

- Now building a new conference center, as yet unnamed, in downtown Indianapolis due to open fall 2012.

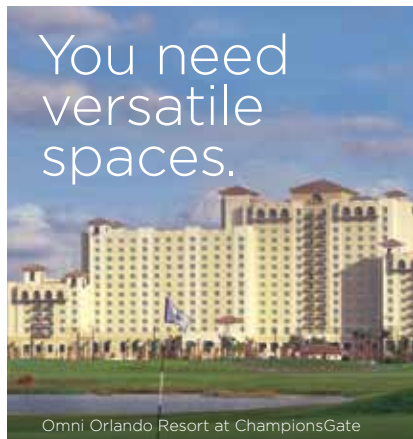
### Destination Hotels & Resorts

- Rizzo Conference Center, Chapel Hill, NC, has recently undergone some improvements.
- Tempe Mission Palms Conference Center, Tempe, AZ, is currently undergoing renovations to meeting spaces and other areas

— SW

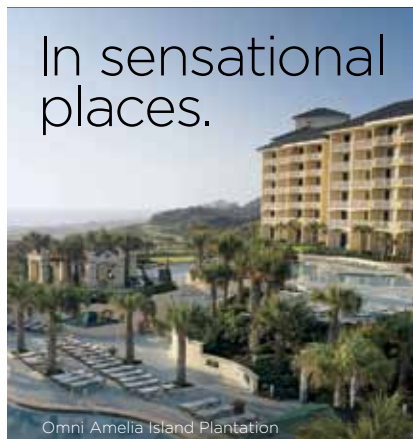


*Benchmark's Cheyenne Mountain Resort in Colorado Springs, CO, recently completed a \$20 million resort-wide renovation.*



You need versatile spaces.

Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate



In sensational places.

Omni Amelia Island Plantation

## Omni understands

That's why we offer full-service resorts that feature flexible event space plus so much more. Like amazing golf courses. Luxurious spas. And endless on-site activities. Relax, because we have your resort needs well covered. Call today to learn about special offers.

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Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate's 82,000 sf of meeting space is as impressive as its two Greg Norman-designed golf courses.



Photo courtesy of Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate

oaks, rolling sand dunes, and beaches. Accommodations include the Amelia Inn with 249 oceanview guest rooms, and the Villas of Amelia offering one-, two- and three-bedroom villas with ocean, golf or resort views. Amenities include 54 holes of golf, a spa, shopping village and endless outdoor activities from fishing and sailing to hiking and bike rentals. There is nearly 50,000 sf of flexible meeting space, including two ballrooms, 15 breakout rooms and prefunction space. The expansive grounds provide ample outdoor meeting and reception opportunities — including coffee breaks on one of the patios to steel-drum music. The resort recently announced a \$75 million expansion, which will add 125 guest rooms and a 16,000-sf ballroom. Nearby is the 1890s town of Fernandina Beach, with its authentically restored Victorian buildings and several great seafood restaurants. Here, the sidewalks are red-brick, the street lamps are gaslit, and the preferred mode of transport for visitors is horse and carriage.

A bit to the southwest, the AAA Four Diamond Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate is similarly spread out — over 1,200 acres. Here, in the middle of the biggest attractions in the world, it's hard to tell you're in Orlando: The resort is a self-contained oasis. The 720-room luxury hotel offers 82,000 sf of indoor meeting and banquet space, including two ballrooms of 25,000 and 20,000 sf; and 70,000 sf of tropically land-

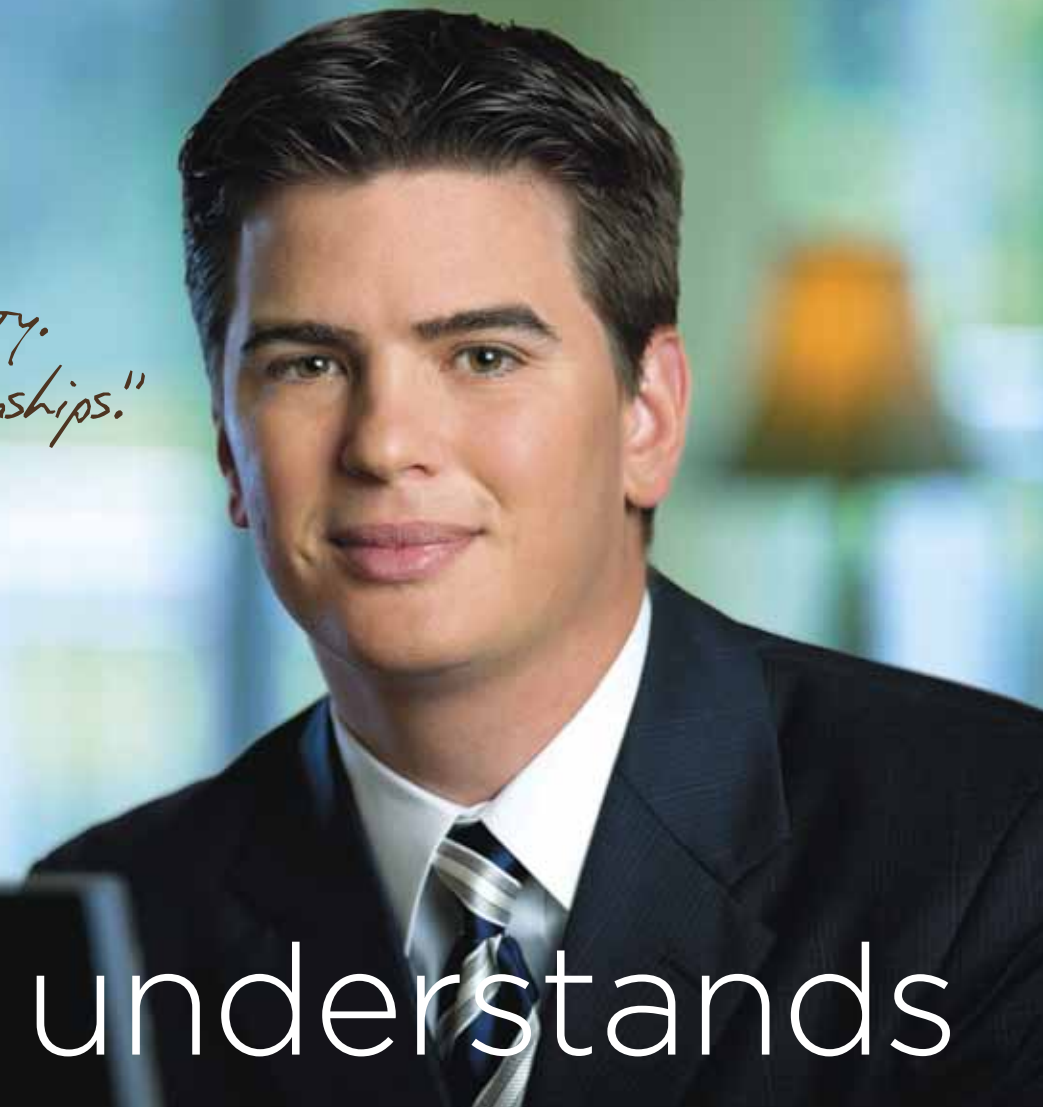
scaped outdoor event space. There are two golf courses designed by Greg Norman, and the headquarters of the prestigious David Leadbetter Golf Academy (where Michelle Wie trains). There's also a nine-hole, par-3 course, lighted for night play and great for teambuilding. Other amenities include a Serenity Spa and Salon, lazy river and five restaurants. This Omni, too, has announced exciting new expansion plans. It's breaking ground this fall on 46,000 sf of additional meeting/event space, which will include a new ballroom and eight breakout rooms, scheduled for completion in 2013.

### The Last Word

"We've all faced some real challenges over the past few years," says IACC's Tom Bolman. "But I'm seeing positive trends right now. In this day and age, when planners are more budget conscious than ever before — and when they have to definitively prove the ROI of their meetings — conference centers are well-positioned. We're the only meeting facilities built specifically for meetings. Yours will generally be the only meeting going on. And we have the expertise to stage productive meetings, to partner with planners, and to make planners look good. There's not a lot of new construction going on now. But there's some pent-up demand building. And as the economy continues to improve, I think we'll see a bunch of new ones in a few years." **I&FMM**

*"I do more than check availability. I build relationships."*

**Ryan Parr**  
National Sales Manager  
Omni San Diego Hotel



# Omni understands

Some hotel brands check availability and call it a day. But at Omni, we're different. We learn your business. We understand your needs. We're invested in your success. Because to Omni, you're more than dates, rates and space. You're a partner.

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Omni Hotel at CNN Center, Atlanta



Omni Dallas Hotel  
Opening 11/11/2011



Omni San Diego Hotel



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