

RESORT MEETINGS

Exclusive:

What Resort Reps Say Behind Closed Doors

Insight From DH&R's Sales Conference

By Barbie Perkins-Cooper

Want to know what resort reps are talking about behind closed doors? I found out this January when I attended Destination Hotels and Resorts' annual "DH&R Sales Conference" at Wild Dunes Resort near Charleston, S.C.

Wild Dunes is part of DH&R's suite of hotels, and the mission of the conference was to educate sales staff about the need for human connections as a way to find, win and keep customers, including meeting planners. Their mission seems to be working as DH&R was recently ranked by *Hotel Business Magazine* as one of the Top 10 U.S. Hospitality Management Company.

It seemed fitting that "Human Synergy" was

the main theme of the conference, because meetings business is a top priority for DH&R.

In fact, Charlie Peck, DH&R president, revealed that everyone at the conference was focused on meetings and that DH&R works directly with meeting planners to facilitate successful events. "In addition to empowering our professional sales teams at each of our properties, DH&R provides national sales offices located throughout the country to work directly with planners to assist in reviewing and pricing our properties with the right availability and fit, working to coordinate the process of preparing proposals from multiple DH&R properties."

According to Peck, there are numerous advantages to booking a meetings hotel through a management company, including offering meeting planners one point of contact when reviewing several properties. "Our national sales directors work collaboratively with property teams to ensure that we're providing the best value to meeting planners, based on their specific needs. The properties in the DH&R collection are varied—from oceanfront resorts to urban hotels in major markets—and each has something special to offer planners."

While acting as a one-stop-shop, DH&R officials are pushing the message that they don't do "one-size-fits-all" meetings. "We typically find the 'bundle approach' doesn't work for meeting planners looking to hold meetings at our properties since our portfolio of properties is so unique and their needs are generally not uniform," Peck said. "Instead, our team works together to accommodate customized and unique needs for each client, while providing the best in value and customer service."

Steve Migliara, Wild Dunes director of sales and marketing, agreed that the one-size-fits-all approach does not work when accommodating meetings at the resort. "Wild Dunes has a history of working closely with planners to customize solutions based on the planner's particular needs. For us, it is not a matter of changing strategy to fit a shift in the economy, but continuing the focus on consistency in service, which is always the key in our business. Our team does what has historically made us successful by working with the planner not only before the meeting to assure we have a clear understanding of the goals, but staying in step with them during and after to ensure we are not only meeting but also exceeding their expectations in delivering an exceptional experience. By doing this, we have a high percentage of repeat meetings year after year."

Dave Gerdes, a regional director of sales and marketing with DH&R, said resort properties are especially about "value, value, value." However, he said that "deep discounting is not part of our strategy to attract customers in 2011. Our ►

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value propositions focus on an incredible environment conducive for absolute success that will re-energize your team. Meetings are more than just meetings at our properties. We major in meetings and offer many settings unlike our local 'vertical' competitors. We're sensitive to the spend, but we also know that we do not price ourselves to compete with the brands."

Joe Blake, director of sales and marketing for DH&R's Rizzo Conference Center in Chapel Hill, N.C., admitted that for many planners, cost is the bottom line factor in booking a facility. "We're finding that a hot-button for planners continues to be knowing up front what their total cost will be for a conference. As a solution, Rizzo provides all-inclusive package pricing to the planner in advance of the meeting so there are no surprises." One of Blake's top sales strategies is to educate prospective clients on the value of being an International Association of Conference Centers-certified property.

The Driskill Hotel in Austin, Texas, has forged ahead a strategic paradigm shift toward targeting business. "Being an urban property, we are not short of incoming leads, but our primary objective is to choose whom we want to forge partnerships with versus selecting the best of whom wants to come to us," said Brett Boreing, director of sales and marketing for The Driskill Hotel. "This means utilizing traditional tools in tandem with one another where as, historically, they have been individual conduits of identifying prospective business. We combine this approach with new and continuous electronic web-based platforms such as social media, News Feeds, News Channel Alerts, etc. It seems that new avenues appear daily such as those that reveal business and events news, encouraging our sales professionals to strike while the iron is hot. Our team's goal is to be faster, smarter and more concise than our competitors...and that makes

all the difference."

The DH&R meeting also focused on team-building activities such as a challenge that required building a bicycle. The bicycles were then given to 25 children from Cainhoy Elementary School, which is located in the rural community of Huger, S.C.

Wild Dunes Resort is located 30 minutes away from historic downtown Charleston and specializes in meetings by offering numerous venues like The Sweetgrass Pavilion and The Grand Pavilion and by elevating the attendee experiences through a host of on-site amenities such as beach, golf, tennis and dining. ■

Barbie Perkins-Cooper is a freelance writer and book author who loves the journey and exploration of hospitality, travel and health. She resides in Charleston, S.C., with her husband, Phil and three precious pups.

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