

LAS VEGAS VALUE

NO MATTER THE BUDGET, A ROBUST LAS VEGAS EXPERIENCE IS WELL WITHIN REACH. **BY EMILY CARRUS**



Las Vegas skyline

It's no surprise that exhibition space at the Consumer Electronics Show comes at a premium: This preeminent Las Vegas event draws in upwards of 175,000 attendees. So when independent meeting planner Ramie Friedman was asked by Bose Corporation to establish a presence there for its automotive division in 2016—but gave her a tight working budget—she knew she'd have to flex her creative planning muscles.

An outdoor space at the Las Vegas Convention Center would have consumed most of the

allotted funds—and that didn't even include the tent, displays, or any other program elements. So she came up with an offsite alternative and found the perfect venue: MEET Las Vegas, a multipurpose freestanding facility in the downtown area of the city where the space—and the price—was right.

It became a limited, invitation-only experience for a select set of clients, who would be shuttled to MEET Las Vegas from the convention center for an experience that felt completely exclusive in style: They'd be picked up by professional drivers in premium

cars featuring Bose audio systems, and then greeted by coat check and custom-designed food and beverage services. Attendees would also receive private, personalized walk-throughs of the company's displays.

The plan, Friedman learned, was not only budget minded—but also uniquely effective in its delivery. So for the 2017 show, she booked MEET again and expanded the scale of displays to utilize more of the space. “We could get the target audience from the show that we wanted in a way that felt very exclusive. You can't do

that at the trade show, which also becomes a cost-effective measure when you're trying not to waste people's time,” says the Boston-based planner. “Compared to being at the show, it was so much more economical. And from our customers up to senior Bose executives, we heard all kinds of great comments.”

DEALS IN THE DESERT

With 11 million square feet of meeting space and 150,000 hotel rooms, Las Vegas has a boardroom and a bed to match every budget. But in the city known for its butler

service, big-name stars, and balconies overlooking Las Vegas Boulevard, attendees can often have grand expectations—and so the challenge falls to planners to stage a Las Vegas experience for meeting groups that is sensitive to cost without feeling cheap.

Luckily, room rates throughout the destination remain relatively low as compared to other destinations, in part due to recent—and significant—increases in inventory. “There were 10,000 new rooms added in 2009,” enthuses Mike Dominguez, senior vice president and chief sales officer for MGM Resorts. “Not only do we have those new assets, but it also means our room rates are not as

aggressive as they are in other destinations, which may be feeling some compression.”

In the face of the city’s flashy, sky-high resorts, planners may also forget that Las Vegas’ room inventory spans a wide range—and that includes some appealing lower-end options. “We have products much like you would find in other destinations that are behaving exactly like their brand intended them to—as a good value for smaller meetings, between 10 and 200 folks,” says Chris Meyer, vice president of global business sales for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA). He highlights as an example the Courtyard and Fairfield Inn and Suites flags under Marriott, and

says these kinds of properties offer some value-adds that are not insignificant. “They offer things like a complimentary morning breakfast as part of the room rate and sometimes even an evening reception.”

Planners who want to be close enough to Southern Nevada’s attractions—Hoover Dam, Red Rock Canyon, the Colorado River, Lake Mead, and the like—but are willing to consider some of Las Vegas’ outer-lying areas, will find the price point scale shifts even more in their favor.

“As you move out from the center of Las Vegas, you’re going to find some really, really good value—and we can help engage that,” says Meyer. Indeed, the LVCVA represents

the areas of Boulder City, Mesquite, Laughlin, Primm, and North Las Vegas in addition to the city proper. “That widens the amount of available meeting space and rooms all at different price points,” he says. Mesquite, for example, has 80,000 square feet of meeting space and—because the area is a mecca for all things sports, including large tournaments—has some value-oriented overnight options, such as hotel rooms with bunk beds, which is a great option for budget-oriented business programs inclusive of families.

CLOSE AT HAND

Back in the city, Downtown Las Vegas is one centrally located area that caters to groups with

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appealing price points and attractions to boot, such as the Fremont Street Experience. “There has been an exciting coming-together there as a number of properties have banded to create the Downtown Las Vegas Alliance,” says Meyer. That includes dedicated business facilities like the World Market Center, hotels, and special event venues, such as the Mob Museum. The inventory of all available meeting space, Meyer says, is nearly 1 million square feet. “They can package pieces together on a single proposal for meetings from 10 to 75,000 people—at very attractive price points.”

The right price is what Friedman found at the Golden Nugget, where she booked



The Park

rooms for her event team of about a hundred people, and says the level of attention and hospitality expertise exceeded expectation. “This is not the Golden Nugget of years gone by; they have really done a great job of upgrading. Everyone had a nice room and a nice experience. Those that wanted

to go to the Strip could do so as they wished,” she says, also highlighting this cost-saving attribute: “That we could walk back and forth to the hotel from our meeting venue meant that we didn’t have to deal with parking or rental cars.”

The density of the city, plus the resort-style nature of

Las Vegas’ properties, means transportation costs can be minimal. “Even within one of our buildings you have multiple restaurants,” says Dominguez. “You don’t find that in a lot of destinations.”

That means that even groups who meet on the Strip can find ways to cut out transportation

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costs completely and allocate those funds to other aspects of the program. All over the Boulevard are clusters of hotels, meeting venues, and attractions that make it easy for attendees to transition from one program element to another on foot. The Park, for example, is a new dining and entertainment district that was opened by MGM Resorts last year that abuts both the Monte Carlo and New York-New York hotels, as well as the T-Mobile Arena and the brand-new Park Theater. This and other “ecosystems,” as Meyer calls them, allow programs to have that “indoor-outdoor experience without planners ever having to engage any outdoor transportation.”

TASTES AND TEASERS

Cost constraints can put lots of pressure on planners to get creative, and if there's ever a city to spark imaginative programming, Las Vegas may be it. But before any meeting embellishments—be they excursions or entertainment—are booked, Debby Jacobs Felker, vice president of sales for destination management company Destinations By

VALUE WITH A VIEW

Look no further than the new centerpiece of Las Vegas's skyline for a great group venue that is a surprising value: the 550-foot-tall High Roller observation wheel. LVCVA's Chris Meyer says that it's an ideal locale for many different kinds of events, from group yoga classes to cocktail parties to meeting breakout sessions. “From a cost perspective, that's really just the ticket for an attendee to ride the High Roller, and if it's a group, there's a discount on top of that,” he says. The return, however, can be grand: “Everyone knows you only have 30 minutes to tackle a topic—which is how long each ride is—and it really creates a unique environment for the group. It's a pretty cool way to do a highly focused breakout, and because there are 28 pods you can get through a good amount of small-group topics in a very short period of time.”



Design, reminds planners that in Las Vegas, free time may be the most preferred program element of all—and it doesn't impact costs one bit.

“We find that in Las Vegas attendees want time on their own to explore and experience the Strip as well as the different properties here,” says Jacobs Felker. “Because Las Vegas is so unique in its architecture

and artwork, it very much feels like a museum setting. It is something attendees don't always get to take in.”

The elaborate and enthralling nature of Las Vegas as a leisure destination means even the simplest city tours pack a punch as a low-cost, high-impact activity. “You can see so much just by driving around, from the famous Las

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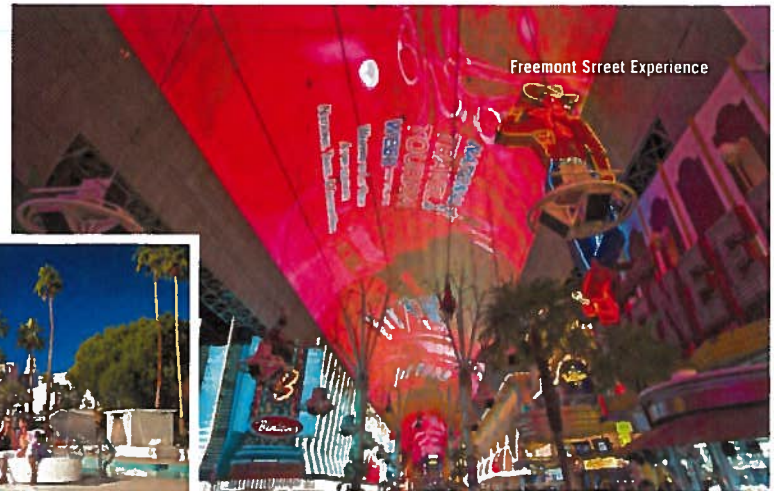
Vegas sign to the city's original courthouse," she says. Guided tours themed around Las Vegas' history, architecture, or art give attendees insider views at a relatively low cost.

When budgets don't allow fully immersive experiences, like backstage tours and blissful afternoons at the spa, Jacobs Felker says there are ways to treat attendees to bits and pieces of Las Vegas's best experiences in ways that still excite them. Dinner at one of the city's Michelin-starred restaurants may be out of reach; but a dine-around still showcases the culinary scene in a more cost-conscious style. "You can highlight places that are on the pricier side by serving heavy appetizers. That way, attendees



get to say that they attended an event at a celebrity chef-restaurant but without the cost of a full meal," she says.

Planners tight on funds shouldn't rule out a meal altogether, though. MGM's Mike Dominguez points out that, compared to full-fledged banquets in a ballroom, a



sit-down event at a restaurant can be somewhat comparable in price—and can leave a greater impact as a memorable experience. "Our restaurants were designed for groups and are equipped for groups. Plus, you lose décor and set-up fees that you would otherwise have to pay when you use a

meeting room," he says. Just a few months ago, MGM Resorts began allowing events in restaurant facilities owned and managed by the brand to count toward food and beverage minimums. "That's an important shift that better allows groups to take advantage of our world-class dining."

Similarly, Las Vegas' nightclubs are accessible to planners from a budgetary standpoint, too. The best part? Nightclubs need little embellishment to make an impact. Because they don't open to the public until late in the evening, groups can rent them out earlier in the day for parties and receptions. "They are quite affordable and exciting for the customer," says Dominguez.

Attendees can feel like they are sunning on the Riviera without any impact on the meeting budget while spending downtime at one of the city's many stunning resort pools. The Tropicana Las Vegas – a Doubletree by Hilton recently underwent a \$200 million transformation that included the creation of its Tropicana Pool, voted the Best Pool in Las Vegas and set on almost two acres. The South Beach-inspired enclave even features a vibrant "daylife" experience at Sky Beach Club and also offers swim-up pool blackjack tables. As an added

IT PAYS TO ASK

Industry experts know the ins and outs of Las Vegas, and delving deep into budget conversations with them can lead to significant cost savings and impactful value add-ons.

- **PIGGYBACKING** – A city that hosts 22,000 meetings, conventions, and trade shows annually means lots of opportunities for the sharing of resources. "Our hotel folks have information sitting in front of them about what else is going on during the time of your program and can look for opportunities to use the same out-of-town speakers or entertainers, for example. They have already got their plane ticket paid for, and often their AV set-up as well," says Chris Meyer of the LVCVA.
- **GIVE AND TAKE WITH DATES** – The fact that Las Vegas has become a year-round destination can be a boon to groups with a little wiggle room in their programs. "With Las Vegas's size and inventory, there is always value with respect to room rates and other aspects of a meeting if there can be flexibility with date patterns and sometimes even programming," says MGM Resorts' Mike Dominguez.
- **HIDDEN GEMS** – Las Vegas insiders can point out lesser known—and lower cost—venues that have lots of appeal. To name just a few, Meyer points out the Brunswick Room at the South Point Hotel Casino and Spa—"a very fancy, very cool room with a classical ambiance, and yet the price point and engagement is quite favorable," he says. He also highlights Springs Preserve, a 180-acre nature park just a few miles from downtown that has event space and several meeting rooms, including a ballroom. There's also a high-end, red velvet-seat theater at the Oquindo Center, a facility that predominantly handles medical meetings and training sessions but is "a great value" for any group. "They often work with government organizations and groups of doctors faced with per diem limits, so they understand limits on spending," he says.

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bonus, planners can book the luxuriously appointed pool villas for networking events, which are reminiscent of an oceanside beach house, complete with a large living room with wet bar,

private balcony, and dining and lounge areas overlooking a private lawn and the pool.


Also exciting is Las Vegas' entertainment scene, which Dominguez says has overtaken

gaming as the city's star.

Indeed, star-studded shows and residencies from some of the music and comedy industries' biggest names are talk of the town, but tickets for Celine Dion

and Britney Spears come with a high price tag. Nevertheless, planners can find ways to work the Las Vegas show scene into group programs that's more favorable with their bottom line by showcasing for them just a few moments of one of the city's large-cast review shows.

"We like to bring entertainers to groups, instead of groups to the entertainers," says Jacobs Felker. "Often, attendees feel like they've gotten a 'wow' moment with even one act or key performer of a show coming in. So even if it's not a full entertainment review, they have experienced something completely new and unique. One special performance from a group like Cirque Du Soleil can really make a meeting come to life." ■



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