

Monday, December 06, 2010

- News
- Business Wire
- Press Releases
- Economy
- Business Life
- Opinion
- Legal Center
- Classifieds
- Executive Calendar
- Networking Calendar
- Events
- Subscribe
- Archives
- Get on the list
- Contact Us
- Links
- Media Kit
- Home

SPONSORED LINKS

Meetings With Meaning

More corporate retreats add community projects

BY LAURA EMERSON

The ivory-colored walls at St. Jude's Ranch for Children open up to green grass that surrounds the Boulder City campus.

The ranch seems an unlikely site for a business retreat, but local industry representatives say places like St. Jude's are becoming increasingly popular among companies that are trying to be more fiscally responsible in a down economy.

Las Vegas Meetings by Caesars Entertainment, for instance, hosted two resort familiarization events this year that culminated in participants completing a community service project at the ranch. In September, a group of potential Caesars Entertainment customers gathered to paint the interiors of 14 apartments at the ranch, and in November volunteers aided in landscaping projects.

Las Vegas Meetings by Caesars Entertainment, which employs more than 1,000 people, is the convention services and sales division of Caesars Entertainment Corp. that includes salary and hourly employees.

Professional meeting planners are charged with helping an association or business meet a predetermined goal, such as increasing membership or boosting sales for the coming year. Once a goal is set, planning companies discuss tactics for an event, including which meeting space to use and what image to present to attendees. For 2009, Las Vegas hosted more than 19,000 meetings, conventions and trade shows. They attracted about 4.5 million people and generated \$4.5 billion for the local economy.

Las Vegas Meetings by Caesars Entertainment Vice President of Meeting Sales and Operations Michael Massari said that companies are increasingly scheduling community service projects in place of more traditional team-building and recreational excursions such as golf or spa days. Massari said community service is becoming more attractive partly because of the economy, given that it can help companies cut conference costs and increase morale.

"We've had that somewhat trending here for a while," said Stacey Starck, executive director of convention services for Mandalay Bay.

Massari said the meetings business has been down along with the economy, but has been picking up again in the past few months.

"Companies are really very quickly realizing they need to have meetings to expand," Massari said.

Marketplace

Search Classifieds:
[Search]

COURTESY CAESAR'S ENTERTAINMENT CORP.

As part of a recent resort familiarization event, Las Vegas Meetings by Caesars Entertainment took potential customers to St. Jude's Ranch for Children to complete a team-building service project.

Even at the smallest level, Massari said people need to meet to bounce ideas off one another and learn about new trends within their industries.

"Almost every great thing is preceded by a meeting," Massari said.

Massari contended that interaction adds depth, texture and value to an experience. He likened a meeting versus a telephone call to a concert versus an iPod.

About 250 people attended Caesars' free customer event in mid-November, which was designed to show potential customers what resort amenities, meeting space, restaurants and entertainment Southern Nevada and Caesars can offer. The weekend-long resort familiarization event was held in hopes that attendees will schedule a Las Vegas meeting in the coming year.

At the event, attendees heard professional speakers, danced at the casino group's nightclubs, ate catered meals and volunteered at St. Jude's. On Nov. 13 the businesspeople worked for six hours at the ranch, landscaping grounds, painting homes and cleaning the chapel.

Massari wouldn't disclose the cost to host a resort familiarization weekend like that, but did say that "it's a significant sum."

"It's truly the best way for our customers to understand who we are and how we can be their partner," he said.

Sarah Sheehan, communications and events director for St. Jude's Ranch for Children, said companies have been including service projects in corporate retreats for years, but added that bookings have increased in the past 12 months.

"I'm definitely seeing a trend in the marketplace overall," Sheehan said.

Sheehan thinks that although the slow economy has impeded their ability to donate money, companies still want to incorporate charitable work into their meeting plans.

The manpower and resources a company brings to a charity like St. Jude's can make a huge difference, Sheehan said, because nonprofits often lack money for extras like landscaping or paint.

"It's a huge benefit to us, because what they're able to accomplish in six hours we wouldn't be able to do in six months," Sheehan said.

Starck said that instead of throwing money around, companies are thinking of free or low-cost activities to do while hosting a meeting.

"I think we have a much more socially conscious environment now. As the economy has been negatively affected, it's going back to creativity," Starck said.

In the past, Massari said companies typically brought employees and customers to Las Vegas for a nonstop party filled with excursions like Lake Mead boat cruises. That still happens, but Massari said ever more people are asking what worthwhile things they can they do in the community.

He said companies that have scheduled 2011 events in Las Vegas already have asked about community outreach activities that they can perform during their meetings.

Massari said Caesars Entertainment will never go back to filling customers' days with excursions. He feels strongly about integrating service projects into company-based offerings.

Recent corporate events have yielded donations of clothing and money for St. Jude's. Also, the nonprofit has received inquiries about hosting future team-building days on the ranch.

"It's really important because that's now 250 people who know who we are," Sheehan said. "It's a great opportunity for folks to give back."

Sheehan said that Ben & Jerry's and the Professional Convention Management Association are booked in January to host team-building events at the property.

Las Vegas meetings can cost anywhere from \$1,000 to \$10 million, depending on the options client choose.

Contact reporter Laura Emerson at lemerson@lvbusinesspress.com or 380-4588.