

The 25 Most Influential People in the Meetings Industry 2007

The Editors of *MeetingNews* Magazine
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For the 13th year, the editors of *MeetingNews* have selected the 25 Most Influential People in the Meetings Industry. Some are familiar names —veritable pillars of the industry. Others are newly minted, deserving honorees.

As you read through the list, take a moment to reflect on just how many people are affected by the ever-growing economic footprint of the meetings and hospitality business. Only then can you put into perspective the effect our honorees have on the well-being of countless people. Most impressive, indeed.

Michael Boulton, CEO, StarCite, Philadelphia

As chief executive of StarCite, Michael Boulton this past year engineered the merger of his meetings technology company with its only serious rival, OnVantage. The August 2006 merger consummated a consolidation of five pioneers in meetings technology that began five years ago.

Now that StarCite has established itself in North America as the leader in meetings procurement software, Boulton and company are aggressively seeking new converts in Europe. Toward that end, StarCite in May acquired Travent Ltd., a U.K.-based distributor of its technology.

Terri Breining, President, Concepts Worldwide, San Diego

From her beginnings as a one-person operation in the late 1970s, Breining has come a long way. Besides running her 27-person independent planning firm, various other industry engagements keep her finger on the pulse of the meetings business. The most prominent one: Since January, she has been chairwoman of the Accepted Practices Exchange (APEX) commission, an industry initiative launched in 2001 that identifies and disseminates the best practices in the meeting planning business. The effort has the backing of every major association in the industry, and Breining, through a raft of speaking engagements, is spreading the good news far and wide that help is here for planners of all types of events. When Breining got involved with planning meetings “by accident,” she says, the activity was not even considered a career path. So, for years now, she has been a zealous member of the movement to bring the value of meeting planning front and center before corporate executives. And to prepare the next generation of meeting and event planners, she teaches meeting planning at San Diego State University.

Sue Brush, Senior Vice President, Westin Hotels & Resorts, White Plains, NY

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It's tough to be the first one out of the gate with an idea, so Westin likely held its collective breath when it went smoke-free in all its properties. But if one looks at the hotel industry today, the power of that move is clearly in the air—brands like Gaylord Hotels, Disney, and 2,300-property Marriott International followed suit, and surely other hotel companies will follow before very long. Overseen by Brush, Westin's global brand leader, the smoke-out is part of Westin's "Personal Renewal" promise, an effort to make guests feel relaxed and happy from arrival until checkout and even beyond. It's another Brush-supervised effort to which travelers are breathing a big sigh of relief.

John Byerly, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for Transportation, and Daniel Calleja, EU Director of Air Transportation

Although Byerly and Calleja's names might be unfamiliar, their combined power has changed international air travel through the April passage of the U.S.-EU Air Transport Agreement. More commonly known as the Open Skies Agreement, the act allows for all U.S.- and EU-based airlines to operate between every city in the United States and/or the European Union, among other provisions. With more competition in many markets, airfares could go down after the March 30, 2008, implementation date. These two gentlemen crossed the "t"s and dotted the "i"s to make it happen.

Burt Cabanas, Chairman/CEO, Benchmark Hospitality, The Woodlands, TX

Conference center operators complain that buildings of their ilk are sorely lacking throughout the country. But rather than looking at the situation with his hands in the air, Cabanas is fixing the dearth of facilities by opening conference properties all over the place.

Benchmark swung open its doors in six spots this year and signed on the dotted line for a seventh, which is set to open next year. Recent debuts have been in places as diverse as downtown New Brunswick, NJ, and French Lick/West Baden Springs, IN.

The seventh facility of the pack, in Vero Beach, FL, is being developed by singer/producer couple Gloria and Emilio Estefan to pack some celebrity punch.

Sure, the Estefans are a household name, but they have some catching up to do with Cabanas on conference resort development. Benchmark now boasts 30 facilities.

Roger Dow, President/CEO, Travel Industry Association, Washington, DC

When he joined the Travel Industry Association as president and chief executive in January 2006, Dow promised to raise the tourism industry's voice in Washington and get results. That promise is paying off. Under Dow, TIA and its main lobbying partner, the Travel Business Roundtable, have successfully lobbied the federal government to delay enacting certain new passport and visa requirements pending less-disruptive solutions. Also, a longtime industry dream—a national government tourist office—is making headway in Congress, thanks to Dow and colleagues, who have raised the bar on what they expect from Washington.

Dan Fenton, Chairman, Team San Jose; President/CEO, San Jose Convention & Visitors Bureau, San Jose, CA

Though San Jose is relatively small, Fenton is doing very big things and envisioning even bigger ones. And we're not even speaking of Team San Jose, the unprecedented coming together of the San Jose Convention & Visitors Bureau, the San Jose McEnery Convention Center, labor factions, and cultural attractions under one executive's leadership, thus precluding turf battles that damage the customer experience. That successful effort pioneered by Fenton was nice, but that was 2004. What

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further impresses us these days is Fenton's plan to not only expand his convention center but to redefine the concept of the convention center altogether so that it is used for a wider array of activities. It's also his commitment, through a new system, to have visitors wait no more than five minutes for a taxicab at the city's international airport; and his arranging of a taxi stand in front of the San Jose Marriott—adjacent to the highway—when everyone else said that simply would not be possible. The man's got vision, and other cities' convention and tourism entities are taking notice.

John Foster, Senior Partner, Foster, Jensen & Gulley, Atlanta

Think you've seen the name John Foster in industry conference brochures more than usual this year? You're not seeing things. The bulldog attorney, who only accepts cases where he represents meeting buyers, clocked a whopping 75 speaking gigs in the past year, a nearly 25-percent jump from past years, all while continuing to take on a heavy caseload. So his legal perspectives, put forth at various meetings industry events, have been absorbed by thousands of meeting planners and suppliers alike in just the past 12 months.

Why the increase in appearances? Today's sellers' market has created more complicated contracts, resulting in more questions among planners. So, time and again, like a caped crusader, Foster has arrived on the scene—whether at an industry-wide event or at a private seminar at a company—to provide answers.

Eli Gorin, Owner, gMeetings Inc., Aventura, FL

Gorin is making waves in the meetings industry at the tender age of 28 by championing Latin America as an emerging destination. He uses his close proximity and first-hand knowledge of the area to extol its virtues to anyone who will listen—including MPI's VP of global development, Didier Scaillet. Gorin will also present on the issue at the MPI World Education Congress in Montreal later this month. "I don't think it's a matter of people not being interested, but rather people not knowing about the wide array of options," he said. "For meetings and incentives, Latin America will surprise you at almost every turn."

John Graham, President/CEO, ASAE and The Center for Association Leadership, Washington

Thanks to the Web, which allows like-minded people around the world to find each other as never before, associations are arguably facing the most formidable challenges to their preeminence as the vehicle by which professional and businesspeople connect with each other. As chief executive of what's often called the association of associations, John Graham has perhaps done more than anybody to maintain the association as a vital American institution through various initiatives this past year. ASAE conducted two groundbreaking studies to strengthen associations: one about how successful associations succeed, and the other on why people join associations. In addition, ASAE strengthened itself by forging partnerships with the likes of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Microsoft, and Gaylord Hotels.

Jonathan Gray, Senior Managing Director, The Blackstone Group, New York

Just as we went to press in early July, equity firm The Blackstone Group, which co-owns MeetingNews' parent, The Nielsen Company, announced the biggest deal ever in the hotel business: It had agreed to buy Hilton Hotels Corp. for a record \$26 billion worth of equity and debt. For

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Jonathan Gray, who oversees Blackstone's real estate portfolio, bagging Hilton was just the latest in a string of blockbuster acquisitions. Blackstone was involved in the second- and third-largest U.S. hotel portfolio transactions of last year, paying a combined \$6 billion for Meri-Star Hospitality and La Quinta Inns & Suites, according to Jones Lang LaSalle Hotels. And those acquisitions were built on Gray's acquisitions of the year before, when he combined premier properties once belonging to Wyndham International and Boca Resorts to form LXR Luxury Resorts. This latest deal, pending shareholder approval, will allow the firm to control Hilton's flagship chain, plus Embassy Suites, Doubletree, Hampton Inn—and the Waldorf=Astoria Collection. Hotel owners dictate their objectives to hotel management firms. So Gray and his associates have their fingers resting firmly on the scale that weighs hotel revenue requirements versus meeting groups' budgets.

Steven Hacker, President, International Association of Exhibitions and Events, Dallas

It's no accident that Hacker is often quoted in this publication. He's well-versed in numerous trends and topics, because he's personally involved in virtually all of them. The issue of the industry engaging Gen X? IAEE just created the Future Leaders Institute to do just that. Improving inbound travel, which would help IAEE's trade-show organizer members land more attendees and exhibitors? Hacker participates in many efforts to get that done. The rise of China in the business world? IAEE's first seminar there is taking place this month. What's more, the 80-year-old association changed its name this past year and simultaneously created a public-event organizers council, making the bold move of expanding its ranks beyond business-to-business show organizers. It's tough not to be influential when you're involved in nearly everything.

Kate Hanni, Founder, Coalition for an Airline Passengers' Bill of Rights, Napa, CA

Following a nine-hour delay aboard an American Airlines flight last December, Hanni went from average traveler to a fly in the ointment of air carriers. Hanni founded CAPBOR, then worked her way onto nearly every major news outlet from the Today Show to the New York Times to explain why air travelers deserve better treatment and to announce her launch of a "Strandings Report Card" that lists details of flight delays and diversions by carrier. Senators Barbara Boxer (D-California) and Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) and Representative Mike Thompson (D-California) have taken up her cause and proposed legislation. "People are capable of so much more than they believe," said Hanni, who continued, "If you commit to something, do it. Be unstoppable."

The Immigrant

Most Americans have a strong opinion one way or the other on how to handle undocumented immigrants. But the fact remains that the hospitality industry relies heavily on recent immigrants to fill front-line service jobs that make hotels, resorts, convention centers, and other venues run—and at prices that planners have come to expect.

So the wrangling in recent months between President Bush, Senator Ted Kennedy, Senator John McCain, and other legislators over an improved immigration framework will at some point dramatically affect the meetings and hospitality industry.

A plan for documenting many of the immigrants through temporary or permanent work visas, among other remedies, was placed into several bills that wended their way through Congress in recent

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months. But in late June, the most recent incarnation died in the Senate, adding uncertainty to the entire situation—and at a time when slower economic growth could make it more difficult for hotels to deliver acceptable profit figures to their owners. In other words, service levels at properties may be cut. Another aspect of immigration affecting conferences, conventions, and trade shows is the dearth of H1-B visas given out each year by the federal government that allow immigrants with specialized skills or expertise to come into the country. About 115,000 were given this year—a figure far too low for the demands of American businesses, evidenced by the fact that they are filled by June. Unfortunately, Congress has not come to an agreement on a higher number for 2008, and does not seem to hold it in high priority. As a result, companies are scrambling, in this low-unemployment environment, to fill positions with employees who must be brought up to speed in specific skill sets and areas of expertise—making meetings more critical than ever to multinational firms.

Bruce MacMillan, President/ CEO, Meeting Professionals International, Dallas

MacMillan wasted no time putting his imprint on the meetings industry's largest association, Meeting Professionals International, when the former chief of Tourism Toronto arrived to become MPI's president and chief executive this past January. He shook up the MPI staff, replacing members with new blood he hand-picked; among the dramatic turnover, five staffers were moved out in one fell swoop.

But more importantly, he is heading MPI's aggressive new global growth strategy, announced in March. MPI plans to hold its Professional Education Conference for the first time in the Middle East, in April 2008 in Dubai, and open an Asia-Pacific office, in Singapore, later this year.

David Marriott, Senior Vice President Global Sales, Marriott International, Bethesda, MD

"Revolutionize" is not a word we often invoke, but it seems accurate when describing what David Marriott did to the payment method of independent meeting planners' commissions. He set up an entirely new system internally at Marriott that required third-party planning firms to register with IATAN, a travel-agent association, to streamline the payment process and weed out questionable independent planning entities from obtaining booking commissions. And while the move was not well-received—in fact, many independents declared a boycott of Marriott or attempted to revise their contracts to avoid registering with IATAN, which required a fee—Marriott didn't back down. As a result, gone are the days of Marriott doling out money needlessly to the occasionally undeserving third-party claimant who essentially did nothing to aid in the placement of a meeting at a property. Other hoteliers have said only that they're "watching" the Marriott move. But you can bet dollars to doughnuts that their attention is focused on both the public-relations fallout and the bottom-line results of Marriott's cost-savings measure.

Michael Massari, Vice President, Meeting Sales & Operations, Las Vegas Meetings by Harrah's Entertainment, Las Vegas

In 2004, when the enormous merger between Harrah's Entertainment and Caesars Entertainment was pending, Massari took on a role that put all meeting sales and operations for 18,000 guest rooms and about one million sf of meeting space across six properties—Bally's, Caesars Palace, Flamingo, Harrah's, Paris, and Rio—under his command. He soon decided to unify the meeting sales and operations of the properties. The unit was named Las Vegas Meetings by Harrah's Entertainment, a

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new behemoth in the meetings capital of North America. Massari then put salespeople into teams by region rather than by property, and sold planners access to any combination of facilities, venues, and options across the six properties. The kicker: Planners still get a single contact, negotiate and sign a single contract, have one F&B minimum, and see one bill.

Apparently, planners like the new setup; total meeting and event revenue at the properties rose 42 percent, to \$380 million, in the past two years alone. Massari's actions changed the face of Vegas' meetings business in a way that makes planners' jobs easier—and which competitors may try to emulate.

Stephen Perry, President/CEO, New Orleans Metropolitan Visitors and Convention Bureau
Perry continues to fight the good fight for New Orleans, which is struggling to rebuild itself and its hospitality industry nearly two years after Hurricane Katrina.

Helped by his able convention sales staff, the chief executive won critical conventions for the city this past year, including last November's National Association of Realtors' annual meeting, which drew about 24,000 people. Perry has also led a public relations blitz across the United States and Europe as part of the bureau's new marketing campaign to emphasize the city's timelessness, under the slogan "Forever New Orleans."

Thanks to Perry's indefatigable spirit, there's little doubt that the bureau will continue to play a large role in the city's recovery—and that groups will continue to choose New Orleans.

Jack Phillips, Chairman, ROI Institute, Hoover, AL

With the release early this year of the meticulously detailed book *Proving the Value of Meetings and Events: How and Why to Measure ROI*, as well as his partnership with Meeting Professionals International (book-related seminars at MPI conferences are now routine, and crowded), Phillips has pushed far forward the discussion of how exactly to determine the value of meetings. He has won over many planners to his method—and he has also found a few vocal dissenters who prefer to champion a concept called return on objective (ROO). In light of the debate, Phillips has clarified his methodology to stress that only a small percentage of meetings reach what he labels "Level Five," or the ability to quantify a specific financial return from an event. In any event, he's played a prominent role in giving planners the power to alter their bosses' perceptions to that of enhancing a firm's revenue rather than simply incurring expenses.

Mary Power, Former President/CEO, Convention Industry Council, Washington, DC

For many, sitting atop an industry's umbrella organization would mean automatic influence. In Power's case, influence came not just by the natural hierarchy but also by action—and in staggering amounts. She grew the Certified Meeting Professional accreditation from a minimal effort to a designation held by 12,000 people in 33 countries, and she took the Accepted Practices Exchange Initiative (APEX)—a Herculean challenge of creating best practices in most areas of event planning—and ran with it until completion. Her unstoppable energy got things done.

Power says that she will look to land back in the meetings industry in some capacity, and we can't wait to see her next move. Meanwhile, watch this space next year to see if her replacement at CIC is

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a mover and shaker on the same order of magnitude. It would be no average feat.

Rossi Ralenkotter, President/CEO, Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority

Once again, the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, led by Ralenkotter, drew more meeting delegates than any other U.S. destination—a record 6.3 million people in 2006. And, unfortunately for the competition, Ralenkotter and the LVCVA won't quit while they're ahead. Armed with an annual operating budget totaling \$215 million—several times more than any other U.S. convention bureau—the LVCVA is aiming to break more records. The authority's new goal is to achieve a 25-percent increase in attendees by 2010 versus 2006. To that end, the LVCVA board in May approved an \$890-million plan to improve the Las Vegas Convention Center, already among the nation's largest convention facilities.

Gary Sain, President/CEO, Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau

Sain had some big shoes to fill when he took over for William Peeper as chief executive of the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau in February. Peeper, who led the bureau since its inception in 1984, was a giant in the industry, until retiring in December. Formerly chief marketing officer for the highly regarded hospitality advertising and public relations firm Yesawich, Pepperdine, Brown & Russell (now called Ypartnership), Sain demonstrates the leadership necessary to keep Orlando not just a top leisure destination but also one of the strongest meetings destinations in the United States.

Deborah Sexton, President/CEO, Professional Convention Management Association, Chicago

The Professional Convention Management Association has traditionally commanded the loyalty of its members through its commitment to career development through high-level education. Leave it to Chief Executive Sexton, on the job for a bit more than two years, to raise the bar. With the Executive Edge program, Sexton teamed up with University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business and University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management to offer graduate-level education for planners who aspire to become association executives. She also opened PCMA's invitation-only Leadership Conference to all members and offered planners the chance to learn about broad business developments from national experts through the Master Series.

Ed Shartar, CEO, Experient, Twinsburg, OH

Shartar continues to build the firm formerly known as Conferon Global Services into more of a meetings-management powerhouse than it already was.

Last year, the company changed its name to Experient, reflecting the full integration of the three companies that merged prior to Shartar's arrival as chief executive in 2004. And just last month, Experient opened an operations center in Las Vegas, the first in the company's history and its first office in the nation's top convention destination. Under Shartar, Experient last year broke its own record by managing more than 3,000 events accounting for 3.3 million attendees and 4.72 million room nights.

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John Wilhelm, President, Hospitality Industry Unite Here, New York, NY

The labor front in the hospitality industry has been quiet recently, and we can thank Wilhelm for that. In the past year, labor contracts came due in many key meeting cities (e.g., Boston, Chicago, Hawaii, Los Angeles, and New York) but successful renegotiations kept the peace—at least enough so that meetings at those destinations were not affected. In the meantime, Wilhelm used Unite Here as a jumping-off point for other efforts: the Informed Meetings Exchange (INMEX), an information clearinghouse for meeting buyers on which hotels and destinations are labor-friendly; and Hotel Workers Rising, an information campaign just for hotel workers. You can bet you'll hear Wilhelm's name again before long: Contracts are about to come due in Washington, DC, and Las Vegas, and several more are up for renegotiation in 2009.

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