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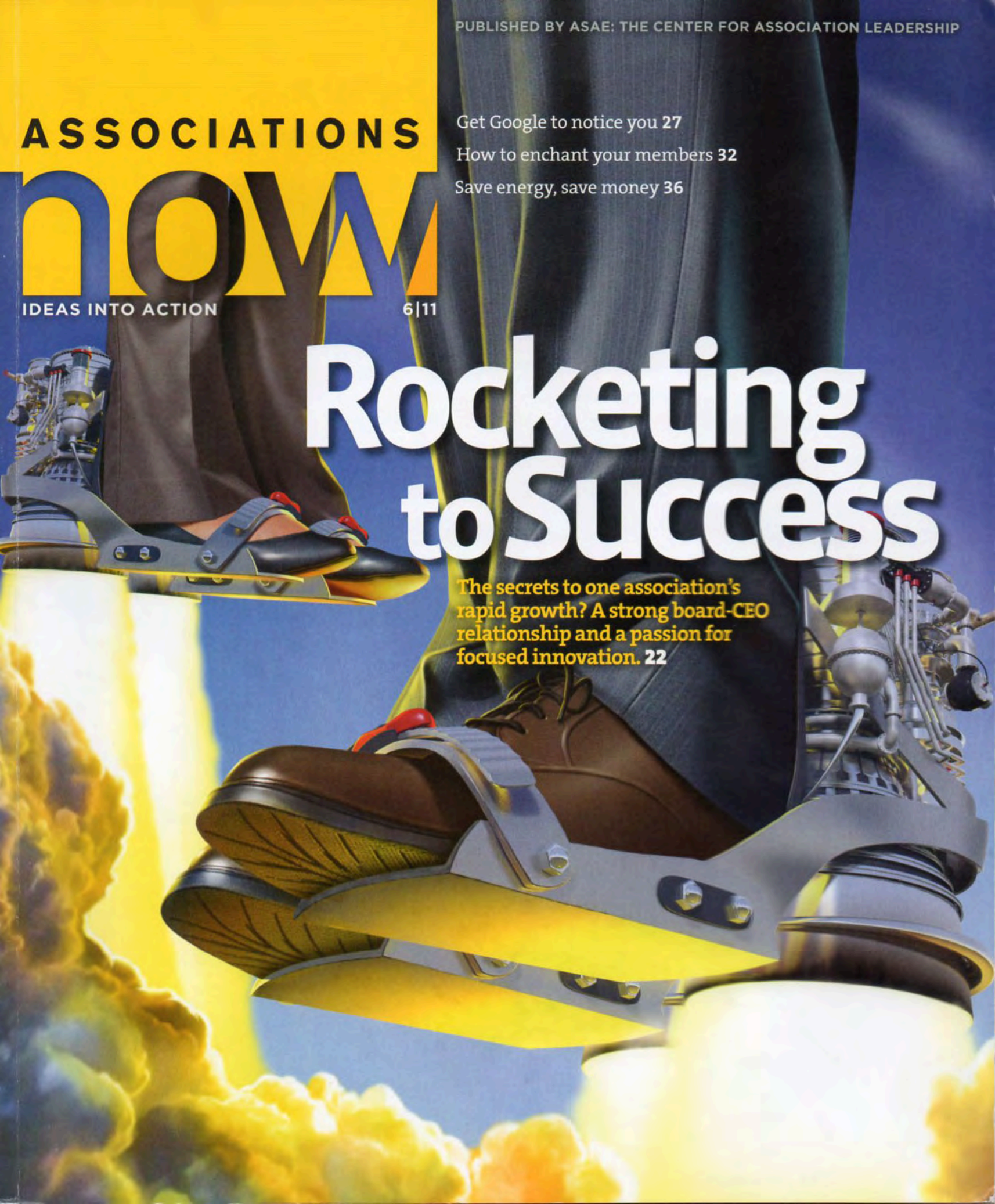
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Make the Most of Your Site Visit

An association conference may last a matter of hours or days, but the planning process begins far in advance with a site visit. Gathering the right details, talking to the right people, and asking the right questions on a site visit will set in motion your meeting's eventual success.

By Nancy Mann Jackson

When Pamela Dorsey once conducted a site visit at a hotel in Chicago, she was unable to see one of the meeting rooms that had been assigned to her organization because a group was meeting in it at the time. When she later arrived for her meeting, she learned that the meeting room had formerly been part of the parking garage, so it included several pillars and a downward slope—not the ambience she had hoped for.

When planning a conference from afar, an association meeting planner may have limited opportunities to view a hotel, conference facility, event venue, or city in advance. But the knowledge gained—or not gained—during a site visit can have major ramifications for the eventual success of a meeting.

After her experience with the garage-turned-meeting room, Dorsey, director of member services and meetings at The Aluminum Association, always makes sure to view with her own eyes each meeting space assigned to her group. Like Dorsey, expert meeting planners know what to look for, who to see, and what questions to ask when they visit a meeting location.

Planning Ahead

Conducting a successful site visit starts long before you arrive at your destination. It involves planning the timing of your visit and preparing information you'll need to share with facilities once you get there. After selecting a destination, most planners try to make an initial site visit between two and four years prior to the meeting.

"Timing depends on the size of the meeting and the timing of your RFP [request for proposal] distribution but of course needs to take place before going to contract," says Linda Cooper, CMP, CAE, meetings manager at the American Student Dental Association (ASDA). "It should be done once you've received RFP responses and have narrowed down the city or hotel, and you should always stay overnight to experience the city and hotel that you anticipate to be at the top of your list."

Alisha Campbell, meetings manager

at the American Association of Medical Society Executives, says she conducts an initial visit about three years out, using the local convention and visitors bureau for scheduling arrangements with select properties and area attractions. Once she has a contract with the property, she goes back for another visit about nine months before the meeting to work with onsite personnel in planning AAMSE's annual conference. "Any more than that and we are still focused on the previous year, and any

less than that doesn't allow us enough time to start theming the meeting," Campbell says. "During this visit, we typically spend two days, which allows us enough time to revisit the property and check up on possible offsite event venues."

Before visiting a potential meeting site, planners should have made several decisions about the meeting and have that information ready to share. Willie Clay, senior sales manager at the Chicago Marriott, says it's helpful for

WHEN YOU CAN'T VISIT IN PERSON

It's preferable to visit a potential meeting site in person, but sometimes budgets or other restrictions make it impossible. When that happens, you can still take steps to ensure your meeting's success.

Use your network. When a visit isn't possible, most planners rely on opinions of other planners and acquaintances. "Besides pray, I count on my peers," says Pamela Dorsey, director of member services and meetings at The Aluminum Association. Talk to other meeting planners, members, and even friends who have visited the destination.

Surf the net. Thoroughly investigate the websites of the CVB, hotels, and facilities being considered, but also look at third-party sites. Dorsey reads up on blogs that mention the destination, and Alisha Campbell, meetings manager at the American Association of Medical Society Executives, looks at online hotel review sites "to get a feel for what a guest at a property experienced," she says. "It is amazing the reviews you can get on a property just by searching their name, but keep in mind people typically rant about negative experiences, because a good experience is expected."

Rely on destination staff. "Ask very detailed questions of the sales staff, as well as a convention manager," says Linda Cooper, meetings manager at the American Student Dental Association. Most destination executives can send you plenty of information to help you make an educated decision. For instance, Sherry Chambers, senior director of sales at the Greater Columbus Convention Center, says her staff will send diagrams of the exact room set planners would need, parking maps, area maps of all the hotels, restaurants and activities surrounding the center, facility floor plans, catering menus, exhibitor forms for electric, internet, rigging, and telephones.

“Be sure to see as much of the city as time will allow. Not only will this give you ideas for offsite events and optional social outings, it may be helpful when attendees ask about restaurants, shopping, and nightlife.”

—Alisha Campbell

planners to share what function space they will use, a room-block grid, a history of the program including food and beverage, a description of the attendees, information about competing events, and their decision process.

While many planners are hesitant to share budget numbers, it's important to share how much you plan to spend on room rental and food and beverage, says Sherry Chambers, senior director of sales at the Greater Columbus Convention

Center. “We understand that not everyone wants to give this information out; however, it only allows us to give the best possible proposal the first time, [so that] we are not redoing our proposals several times to get where we needed to be in the first place.”

It's also helpful for planners to share “specific needs or concerns the group has about a potential destination or if the group has special needs or hot buttons,” says Brent Foerster,

vice president of sales and marketing at Visit Milwaukee. “That way, we can tailor the site to address those needs. If they need support from local officials, we can make sure those individuals are included as part of the itinerary. If an offsite event is important, we can make sure we include tours or offsite venues as part of the itinerary. Do they need local support from other organizations or corporations? If so, we can coordinate meetings with those individuals or at least provide a list of contacts at organizations that fit their needs.”

What to See

Once you arrive, be as thorough as possible to ensure that you gather all the information you need to produce a successful event. As Dorsey learned with the meeting room converted from the garage, it's essential to inspect every meeting space your group will

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use. "Visit the convention center [and] all hotels that are being considered and walk the surrounding area," says Frank Gainer, director of conferences at the American Occupational Therapy Association. "You want to get a feel for what your attendees will experience. You should also make sure you check out the accessible rooms at hotels to make sure that your attendees [with disabilities] will not experience any issues."

When checking out meeting space, make sure the room can accommodate your setups, Dorsey says. Use a checklist to make sure you don't forget all the basics, such as "the lighting and ceiling heights, location of public restrooms and their cleanliness, the location of elevators or escalators to meeting space," Dorsey says. "Check tablecloths for food events, skirting for meeting tables, condition of chairs, and the type of signage the hotel provides."

Campbell recommends sneaking away from your tour guide to see everything your attendees will see. "If you are being led around a hotel by a sales agent, find a spare minute to slip away and take a peek around what she's not showing you; pretend you have to go to the bathroom and then take the elevator to a different floor," she says. "A sales agent is only going to show you the best of their property, but what does the average part of the hotel look like? Also be sure you leave yourself enough time to walk around the outside area of the property. What's directly surrounding the hotel?"

And don't be satisfied with a look at only one guest room, as rooms on various sides of the hotel will offer different views of the city, the river, or maybe the wall of the building next door. If at all possible, spend the night in the destination to make sure you see it from

all angles. "The experience of a one- or two-night stay during the site visit is a good idea if you have time to have the experience with the room services that your attendees might have during your meeting," Dorsey says.

But don't just spend time inspecting the hotel and meeting venues. "Be sure to see as much of the city as time will allow," Campbell says. "Not only will this give you ideas for offsite events and optional social outings, it may be helpful when attendees ask about restaurants, shopping, and nightlife."

And as you look around throughout the destination, take pictures of everything you see to refer to later. "No matter how many sites or properties you may be seeing, there will come a time during planning or contract negotiations that you'll say, 'Wasn't that the place where ...?'" Campbell says. "Your photos will become invaluable."



In January 14, Cleveland broke ground for its new Convention Center and Medical

Mart. Stated to be complete in 2013, the state-of-the-art facility will be high tech, LEED certified and will offer stunning views of Lake Erie. Our award-winning CMP-certified service team will make it easy for you to meet in the city that rocks.

Photo outline: MMPH President Chris Kennedy (center) turns over the first ceremonial shovel of dirt at the groundbreaking ceremony Friday, January 14 for Cleveland Medical Mart & Convention Center. Joining Mr. Kennedy for the groundbreaking ceremony on the historic Cleveland Mart were Ohio Governor John Kasich, (far right), along with Cleveland Council President Martin Swensky, Cuyahoga County Council President C. Ellen Connolly, Cuyahoga County Executive Ed FitzGerald, Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson, Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Bill Mason, and Cleveland council member Joe Cimperman.

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“The experience of a one- or two-night stay during the site visit is a good idea if you have time to have the experience with the room services that your attendees might have during your meeting.”

—Pamela Dorsey

What to Ask

In addition to the opportunity to personally see the city and its properties, a site visit provides one-on-one time with the hotel, convention center, and CVB staff who could help make or break your meeting. Get to know them and learn as much as you can about the destination from them.

Campbell likes to ask local hospitality professionals about the most memorable events they've hosted. “What I'm looking for with this is how creative the staff can be,” she says. “If the sales agent drones on about passed appetizers, I don't think we're going to be a good fit. I'm looking for unique ideas and energetic staff willing to put forth the effort to be sure my attendees are wowed.”

Be sure to ask whether any remodeling is planned over your meeting dates and what other groups will be in town during your conference. In addition, find out about labor contracts and their expiration dates. At one site visit, ASDA planners failed to ask about labor contracts, and its meeting's arrival day turned out to be day one of a citywide strike. “Attendees had to cross picket lines,” Cooper says. “Only one attendee cancelled, but exhibitors couldn't get equipment out until a month later when the strike ended.”

Planners often don't think to ask some questions that can help them save money, says Chicago Marriott's Clay. For instance, ask if the hotel has any need dates your group can fill and how your group can save on food and beverage. Chambers recommends asking about advance deposits that may be required, exclusive in-house providers, and what ancillary charges might be incurred depending on room setups.

One of the best questions a planner has ever asked Milwaukee's Foerster during a site visit was “Why do you want us to come to Milwaukee, and how does Milwaukee benefit from us holding our event here, beyond the obvious economic impact of filling hotel rooms and meeting space?” This question is important because “the answer often reveals the true motivation and support a group will have if they choose a destination,” Foerster says. “Many groups rely on local support to make the event a success. This can come in the

form of dollars, staff, volunteer, marketing, PR, et cetera. A community that sees a benefit of hosting the group above and beyond financial is probably going to be more committed to the success of the event.” ■

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