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Meetings Industry Associations in Flux



Eric Blanc, President,
Event Service Professionals Association

Belonging to a targeted trade association gives professionals a sense of community and stability as their own jobs grow and change. But as comforting as it is to think of those membership organizations working steadily in the background on their constituents' behalf, such associations also need to grow and change to keep up with the times. In the meetings world, five industry groups are greeting 2012 with some major strategy and/or personnel changes.

A new mandate Officials at two industry organizations have stepped back to reevaluate how they serve their members. The result is a name change for both associations and a refocusing of their missions.

ACOM becomes ESPA. Created 24 years ago, the Association for Convention Operations Management, known as ACOM, aimed to support convention services managers mainly at convention centers. But over the years, the membership base spread to include housing managers, operations managers, directors of conventions and trade shows, and more. So at the end of 2011, ACOM changed its name to the Event Service Professionals Association.

"When it was founded, convention services managers had been underrepresented in the industry," says Eric Blanc, CMP, director of sales and marketing for the Tampa Convention Center and president of ESPA. "But we found that as it matured, we had not kept up with the changing roles of our people. Our folks were taking on more tasks and their titles had begun to change. They are event services people."

Members got the full taste of the new direction last month in San Diego when, as usual,

the organization co-located its annual conference with the Professional Convention Management Association's Annual Meeting. The change to ESPA precipitated a spike in attendance at the event, jumping 16 percent over the conference held in Las Vegas in 2010.

ESPA also has seen an uptick in its ranks now that the categories have been realigned and memberships are being offered to organizations and not just individuals. Facilities now can enroll five or six employees rather than just the two or three who would join in the past.

Blanc adds: "The truth of the matter is that our people are the ones who sell destinations. Their services keep bringing people back. Our members have long known this truth, but we're trying as an association to get the word out. Our educational programming is geared around helping our members understand that component."

ACSME becomes CSPI. A similar transformation is taking place at the Association for Convention Sales and Marketing Executives. Now called Convention Sales Professionals International, the organization also is changing to accommodate the broader professional roles of its members. A strategic planning session last year concluded that a rebranding was needed to expand the group's appeal and align the association with other professional groups in the meetings industry.

"ACSME worked closely with our association management firm to create a new name and brand that represents where we wanted to go," says Yulita Osuba, CMP, president of the association as well as senior director of sales, marketing, event management and exhibitor services for the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando. "We want CSPI to be the association for all sales professionals who work for convention centers and convention bureaus. Dropping 'executive' from our name opens up membership to all levels and roles in sales and marketing, and adding 'international' helps us to recruit international members."

Osuba says the feedback has been very positive. "When the rebranding was announced to the membership, several people reached out to headquarters to express their excitement. There is an incredible value in belonging to an association like CSPI -- we are a community and a network for career development, and that is never more valuable than in a changing economic climate."

CSPI's annual conference will take place later this month at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C., with a focus on best practices for salespeople at destination management organizations and convention centers.

Change at the top On the personnel front, three leaders who have dedicated their careers to the meetings industry are moving on or retiring. Combined, they represent nearly 100 years of expertise, including a total of 75 years in their current jobs. All will be hard acts to follow.

RCMA. Already sporting the title executive director emeritus, Dr. DeWayne Woodring left the Indianapolis-based Religious Conference Management Association this past Dec. 31, after spending 30 years with the 40-year-old organization. The RCMA board appointed its own vice president, Rev. Harry Schmidt, as the new executive director.



**Dr. DeWayne Woodring,
Executive Director Emeritus,
Religious Conference
Management Association**

Woodring's list of accomplishments is long. Some that he is most proud of include bringing RCMA into the mainstream of meetings industry organizations and helping develop the Certified Meeting Professional program; bringing about an understanding of, and appreciation for, the religious meetings market; and helping to expand the philanthropic interests of the association's members through the donation of \$700,000 over the past six years to feed starving children around the world.

While RCMA's primary purpose has never changed -- it is dedicated to fostering religious meetings and those in the field, and its membership represents more than 800 organizations planning 14,000 religious events each year -- the group has become more diverse and now embraces a multitude of denominations and organizations. "Originally there were just members from a few Protestant denominations," says Woodring. "Today we have Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Unitarian Universalists, Salvation Army members, church-related colleges, TV ministries and megachurches along with Protestants represented within the organization."

One objective for the near future, Woodring says, is to use technology to expand the group's educational ministry.



**Tom Bolman, CAE,
Executive Vice President,
International Association
of Conference Centers**

IACC. At the end of this year, Tom Bolman, CAE, will step down from his position as executive vice president of the St. Louis-based International Association of Conference Centers, which represents facilities purpose-built for small

meetings.

When he joined the staff in 1986, IACC had fewer than 70 active members in the United States and Canada; now 298 conference centers in 13 countries sport IACC approval. Bolman is particularly proud of helping to shape the group's Quality Initiative, developing objective criteria supported by third-party audits to be sure its members adhere to IACC's strict standards.

"More recently, we've begun to see conference centers through a wider lens, that of delivering an innovative and exceptional experience that is unavailable anywhere else," says Bolman. "Going forward, I believe this will inevitably shape the Quality Initiative as IACC finds ways to describe and quantify that experience."

Bolman will not be lingering in the industry once he closes the IACC door: "I plan to make a clean break and devote the next phase of my life to giving back through several community organizations and also by becoming more of an activist for social justice."

IAEE. On Oct. 1 this year, Steven Hacker, CAE, will release the title of CEO of the International Association of Exhibitions and Events in Dallas, having decided not to renew his contract so he can try something new and different. "If the weather's nice, I'll probably play golf and then start sending résumés out," he says. "But I don't feel the need to take a break. Ideally, I'll find some things to do without a lapse in activity."



**Steven Hacker,
CAE, Chief Executive Officer,
International Association
of Exhibitions and Events**

Hacker has been at his current position since 1992. In that time, the organization has grown from about 2,600 to its current 9,000 members. That surge mainly took place over about five years following a change in the bylaws in 2006.

Hacker is proudly leaving the association in a stable, yet flexible, position. "I've been able to assemble a phenomenal staff," he adds. "I take satisfaction in knowing I've done a lot of good things for the organization in that respect."

Hacker's one regret is leaving the 83-year-old group during an exciting time. IAEE is in the midst of creating a public relations campaign about the power of face-to-face meetings, and Hacker will depart just as the results of the hard work will be coming in. "Every time I see one of those reports, I'll think, 'Damn! That thing is working well!'"

The upcoming transition process has been well mapped out. "Back in September, I turned over to the board a 30-page transition plan, which I offered as a kind of road map to ensure a stable, predictable handover from me to whomever they find," says Hacker. "The search committee has been appointed; we are on target. We will wrap up preliminary work in about six weeks, then we will start the second phase -- putting out the call, collecting résumés. With a little bit of luck, it may be that somebody is located and retained sooner than September."