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**RESORT RECREATION PROGRAMS FOR CONFERENCE GROUPS:  
PROGRAMS AND PRICING**

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**ABSTRACT**

The increase in recreation programs for conference participants occurs at the intersection of three trends: 1) an increase in the number and frequency of business or association related meetings, 2) a corresponding increase in conferees accompanied by spouses and children, and 3) a growing interest, by the resort sector, in the business traveler. The data reported in this study examine the types of recreation programs provided by resorts when the primary purpose of visiting the resort is to attend a meeting or conference. Recreation programming and pricing data from resort recreation directors at 43 Resort and Commercial Recreation member properties are presented in this paper. General programming policies and patterns are presented as well as the most popular activities, recreation programs, conference

theme parties and conference spouse programs arranged by recreation departments. Selected data about policy documents is presented with implications for resort recreation directors.

**INTRODUCTION**

Nearly a million meetings are held in the United States each year (19) and double digit increases in the number of conferences are projected annually for the next several years. In 1990, the \$6 billion dollars in meetings revenue comprised 43% of total resort revenues (14). Since nearly 70% of all convention travelers combine leisure with business travel (1), these estimates are likely to under-represent the economic significance of conferences and meetings.

To date, the "vast majority of research on (meeting) planners and hotels has focused on physical facilities, equipment, attributes and amenities.. (16)." Although supportive anecdotal and testimonial data abounds, when analyzed separately, recreation amenities and programs have not figured prominently in the meeting planners and conference organizers decision-making (9, 13). Some evidence, however, indicates that recreation amenities may be very important to the decision to return to a resort property (2, 9, 15).

## PURPOSE

This research determines programming trends and managerial issues in conference recreation at resorts. The Conference Recreation Survey contains questions about the types of conference recreation programs that are offered by resorts, resort staffing and planning considerations and pricing information about programs. As more leisure activities are added to balance the learning environment of the meetings of the future (12), this programming and managerial information could be a valuable resource.

## LITERATURE

The review of literature is organized around two themes: changes in the meetings and conferences sector of business travel and, the expansion of resort recreation programming and marketing for business travelers. Taken together, these two trends frame this analysis and discussion.

Meetings and groups are important segments of business travel. According to recent industry data, 48% of all business travelers

attended a meeting or convention on one or more of their business trips (18). The meetings market is growing; between 1979 and 1989, according to industry estimates, the meetings business increased by 236% (7). In "1989, over a million meetings, conferences and conventions were attended by more than 75 million people... contributing more than \$50 billion to the U.S. economy (5)."

A recent survey of meetings planners forecasts an 11% increase in conventions and a 14% increase in educational seminars and trainings (11). The greatest amount of growth will occur in "local and regional meeting markets due to the speed with which change will occur (12)."

In 1987, five million spouses accompanied husbands or wives to corporate meetings and, often with children (6). The United States Travel Data Center (USTDC) estimates that 14% of all business trips in 1992 included one or more children (4). According to several interviews with industry professionals, this is an upward trend with some resorts reporting 50% or greater increases in families attending meetings (6). During the recession-plagued 1980's, taking the family along on a conference or business trip proved to be an easy and inexpensive way to have a family vacation. The current sluggish economy, combined with more regional meetings, will increase reliance on automobile travel to meetings, thereby facilitating more family involvement in conference and meeting travel.

Meeting planners can be expected to increase their use of resorts because "resort meetings provide the perfect forum for combining professional education and vacation/recreation opportunities (8).

Whelihan & Chon (20) concur by identifying meeting groups and children's programs as two of the three resort marketing strategies for the 1990.

## METHODS

### Instrument Development

Since the literature provided so little guidance, a panel of eight veteran RCRA resort recreation directors participated in the development of the survey instrument. In the first round of survey development, panel members were asked to identify areas conference recreation needing examination. The investigators then prepared a draft of a questionnaire to be critiqued by the panel. After extensive revisions, the instrument was returned to the panel for additional improvement. The second round elicited a few minor changes which were incorporated into the final version of the questionnaire. The final version of the Conference Recreation Survey was 6 pages long and had sections examining resort organizational structure, policy and pricing data about conference recreation programs, program offerings, staffing and categorical information about the resort. An enormous amount of data was returned by the survey respondents. Program offerings and pricing data are presented in this paper.

### Data Collection

Each survey packet contained a personalized letter on RCRA letterhead describing the importance of the study and a participation incentive. The survey and a business reply envelope completed the packet. The pre-sorted, bulk mail survey packet was distributed shortly after Labor Day, the end of the summer season. Three and five

weeks reminders were sent after the initial mailing and announcement appeared in RCRA publications. The methods used in this study followed Dillman's (3) mailed survey recommendations with the exception of the replacement surveys and the certified mailings.

### The Population

RCRA members included in the 1992 membership database were selected if the name of a resort or hotel appeared in the "company name" field. The senior job title was selected to receive the survey when more than one member came from a particular property. One hundred and twenty-seven RCRA members met these conditions. In an effort to include any resort recreation directors who might be receiving mail at a personal address without specifying a resort affiliation, all RCRA members who specified "Professional" in the company field were also mailed a survey. No usable surveys, were returned from this group.

In spite of repeated appeals to participate, only 48 directors returned the survey. Three indicated that their properties did not provide conference recreation programs and their surveys were not included in this analysis. Two other survey contained insufficient information for analysis. The return rate based on the 43 usable responses was 35%. This response rate is low when compared to many mailed recreation surveys however it appears to be an 'occupational hazard' since 30-40% response rates appear frequently in the hospitality literature. (9, 10, 13, 17).

Sampling error was not a concern since all RCRA recreation directors received a survey. Nonetheless, non-response patterns

needed to be identified. Twenty resorts were randomly selected from the list of non-respondents. Telephone contact was made with 85% to compare selected demographic and categorical characteristics of the resorts. Respondents were more likely to be from Florida, to work at resorts (instead of hotels), to be from larger (RCRA Division 111) properties, to report directly to the General Manager and to report greater percentages of conference business. These non-response patterns could be anticipated based on the subject matter of the survey and RCRA's organizational strength in the Southeast.

Although there are differences between respondents and non-respondents, the data reported here are still useful because they reflect conference recreation programs at the types of resorts most likely to attract conference business.

## **DATA ANALYSIS, SELECTED RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Conference recreation programs are evenly split between pre-programmed and pre-priced (e.g. "canned") programs and custom programs prepared and priced individually. Resort recreation departments provide unstructured recreational opportunities less frequently than planned programs. Program offerings are seldom changed based on the property's occupancy rates. Most conference recreation programs are scheduled throughout the day. When a trend exists, programs starting in the evening after 6 pm are the most common programming slot for resort conference groups.

Table 1 includes the types of recreation activities that the recreation department will provide for conference groups staying at the resort. This table is based on a forced

choice question with eight options plus a place for other responses. The most common activity the recreation department will arrange for conference recreation groups is special events. At 84%, special events are a full 19% ahead of the next two activity types: off-site tours/activities and equipment rentals.

The tennis and golf emphasis reflects the prevalence of golf and tennis as the primary conference recreation amenities at resorts, a finding which supports previous research by both Massengill, (9) and Brayley, (2).

Brayley's research suggests that golf is a requirement for loyal (returning to the same resort each year) and footloose (varying their conference locations) conference groups. Certain other characteristics, such as traveling with families and recreation programs, were significant predictors of loyalty (return) to a conference resort. This possibility deserves further study.

Unlike the information contained in Table 1, the program offerings questions allowed open-ended responses. Table 2 lists the most popular conference recreation programs, theme parties and spouse programs and their price ranges. Respondents were allowed to provide pricing data by the person or by the group. The pricing data varied greatly and direct comparisons are difficult beyond providing some broad parameters to estimate the pricing range of programs. See the right-most columns of Table 2 for the range of pricing information.

The most popular resort recreation programs for conference groups include beach games, kids camps, sport tournaments, tours and hikes. The relatively small percentage of properties offering any particular program

underscores the tremendous variability of conference recreation programs. The master list of programs includes 216 programming options. Theme parties were similarly diverse. The greatest pricing range exists in the theme party category. Presumably this variation is due, at least in part, to food and beverage expenses. Prop rentals also inflate the price in some instances.

Spouse programs showed a little more popularity with two types of programs, tours and shopping, being offered by almost 30% of the resort recreation departments. These two types of programming could easily be classified as 'sightseeing', the most common recreational activity in the majority of the published tourism studies.

Taken together, the program offerings in Table 2 indicate substantial programming opportunities for conferees. By implication, families are welcome. At least half of the list of conference recreation programs could include a spouse and/or family.

While any of the theme parties could be provided for conferees only, it is likely based on the extensive listing of spouse programs, that at least the spouses are attending the theme parties. This evidence of the significant presence of spouses at resort-based conferences illustrates the important role conference recreation departments may play in the developing the loyal base of corporate clients discussed by Brayley.

Survey respondents were asked to include certain materials (e.g. organizational charts, program promotion materials, policy statements and evaluation materials) with the surveys. Only 16 of the 43 resorts sent any enclosures. However, some valuable information can be gleaned from these

materials which are summarized in Tables 3 and 4. Brochures on group programs, spouse programs and kids programs are the most common enclosures. Seasonal brochures and theme event brochures are less common, at 37% and 31% respectively, but sometimes a property publishes up to three different seasonal brochures and supporting materials for dozens of theme parties. Off-premises programs are only provided by three (18%) of the 16 responding properties.

This brief summary masks extreme variability within the promotional materials. Some packets are extremely sophisticated with many brochures, sample menus, letters of appreciation from previous clients and coordinated color schemes. Other programs are less well packaged with informational material consisting of a photocopy of a list of program titles from a dot-matrix printer.

A few properties created recreation brochures that represent all the recreational amenities of the resort and nearby attractions. This may be a good strategy because it provides advanced information that might encourage a conferee to come early, stay longer or bring the family.

Table 4 contains information about program evaluation procedures and selected recreation policy documents. Separate event evaluations and general resortwide customer satisfaction forms with recreation-specific questions were sent by fewer than 50% of the recreation directors who included the requested materials. Program evaluation and participant satisfaction are two fundamental principles of sound programming. This is an area that clearly needs more investigation and, based on these data, more attention by resort recreation directors.

Most (54%) recreation departments do not prepare contracts for use with conference groups and even more (63%) do not have written cancellation policies for use with conference groups. Only 23%, or ten, of the resort recreation directors responded 'yes always' to a question about the use of contracts for conference groups. Of the sixteen directors who responded with materials, only three provided sample contracts. Formats ranged from blank NCR, pin-fed, perforation paper with the policies printed on the reverse to contracts that were a check-listing of all programming possibilities. The third example was a customized, 'form-letter' outlining the programming possibilities. Each contract allowed for a great degree of program variability. Many properties have some type of memorandum or letter of agreement. These 'contract letters' were not included in the totals presented in Table 4.

Cancellation forms were also uncommon. Only three of the sixteen directors who sent materials included a cancellation form (interestingly, only one of the three

cancellation forms came from a property with a contract). In two cases, the cancellation clause was included in a group information brochure. At the other resort, the cancellation clause appeared as a paragraph in a letter of agreement.

Several directors have stated that recreation programming is not expected to make a profit, therefore contracts and cancellation clauses are unnecessary. On the other hand, one relatively simple way to 'professionalize' resort recreation programming would be to adopt contractual agreements that include a strong cancellation clause.

To conclude, these findings provide an important baseline against which a resort recreation director can measure her or his conference recreation programs. These data could prove useful for planning as more participants combine business and leisure travel. As the conference market grows, the importance of conference recreation programming can only increase.

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TABLE 1  
FOR CONFERENCE GROUPS THE RECREATION  
DEPARTMENT WILL ARRANGE...

Activity Type	Number <sup>a</sup>	Percentage <sup>b</sup>
Special Events	36	84
Off-site Tours/Activities	28	65
Equipment Rentals	28	65
Tennis Reservations	21	49
Theme/Meal Parties	19	44
Tennis Tournaments	14	32
Golf Tee Times	12	28
Golf Tournaments	7	16
Other Activities	10	23

<sup>a</sup>Number of respondents = 43. <sup>b</sup>Percentages do not sum to 100 because respondents could check more than one activity type.

TABLE 2  
MOST POPULAR RECREATION PROGRAMS BY TYPE

	Number <sup>a</sup>	Percentage	Prices
<b>Most Popular Conference</b>			
<b><u>Recreation Programs</u></b>			
Fun/Beach Olympics	16	37	\$3/person - \$750/group
Children's Camp	8	19	\$3/hour - \$7/day
Volleyball Tourneys	7	16	\$15 - \$200/group
Golf Tourneys	5	12	Free - \$40/person
Tours	4	9	\$6/person - \$150/group
Hikes	4	9	Free - \$50/group
Crab Races	3	7	\$20/person - \$350/group
Team-building	3	7	\$30 - \$50/group
<b>Most Popular Conference</b>			
<b><u>Theme Parties</u></b>			
Fifties	6	14	Free - \$1500/group
Western/BBQ	6	14	\$11/person - \$1000/group
Casino	4	9	\$500 - \$1600/group
Pirate/Shipwrecked	4	9	\$150 - \$2000/group
Luau/Beach	4	9	\$37/person - \$1000/group
M*A*S*H	2	5	Up to \$1700/person
Holiday	2	5	Varies with holiday

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	Number <sup>a</sup>	Percentage	Prices
<b>Most Popular Conference</b>			
<b><u>Spouse Programs</u></b>			
Tours	13	30	\$20 - \$60/group
Shopping	12	28	\$5/person - \$150/group
Massages	5	12	\$5 - \$55/person
Nature Walks	5	12	\$10/person - \$150/group
Fitness	4	9	Free to \$100/group
Shell Symposium	3	7	\$10/person - \$150/group
Shoreline Cruise	2	5	\$10/person - \$300/group
Beach Walk	2	5	\$6/person - \$250/group
Bike Rally	2	5	\$10 - \$12.50/person
Fashion Shows	2	5	Free - \$500/group

<sup>a</sup>Number of respondents = 43.

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**TABLE 3**  
**FREQUENCY OF PROGRAM ENCLOSURES BY TYPE**

Enclosure Type	Number <sup>a</sup>	Percentage
Group Programs	12	75
Spouse Programs	11	69
Kids Brochures	7	43
Seasonal Brochures	6	37
Theme Event Brochures	5	31
Off Premises Programs	3	18

<sup>a</sup>Number of resorts sending enclosures = 16.

**TABLE 4**  
**FREQUENCY OF POLICY ENCLOSURES BY TYPE**

Enclosure Type	Number <sup>a</sup>	Percentage
Event Evaluations	6	37
Guest Satisfaction Forms	5	31
Contracts	3	18
Cancellation Forms	3	18

<sup>a</sup>Number of resorts sending enclosures = 16.