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On the Cover: ©Explore La Crosse



## EDITOR'S LETTER

Fall is upon us, which means it's back-to-school time, and this issue is taking us to the college town of La Crosse.

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to attend a conference at the La Crosse Center. Unfortunately, it was a quick trip and I only had one night to explore the city. While there, however, the view of the Mississippi, the charming downtown and the unmistakably Midwestern

hospitality stood out and left me wanting to come back soon. Check out Page 22 for more details on this treasured Wisconsin destination.

One advantage of holding a meeting or event in La Crosse is the opportunity to unwind and commune with nature (which luckily can be said of most of Wisconsin). The surrounding area provides more than enough options for getting outdoors, exercising, hiking, biking, watersports, etc. More and more, planners are recognizing opportunities to focus on health and wellness in their meetings and events as it's proven to make attendees happier and more productive. As a result, planners are turning to the three Ns — nature, nurture and noshing — to let attendees refresh and recharge and support their wellbeing. See Page 16 to read more.

But healthy meetings aren't just limited to in-person happenings. You can incorporate wellness into your virtual events as well. On breaks, you can guide attendees to stop for stretching, hydration or meditation, for example. But before you dive into digital health, you must decide which platform to use for your online or hybrid events. What digital platforms deliver what you want to accomplish between breaks and stretches? On Page 30, major digital platform providers suggest how to determine which platform is right for you and your event.

Don't forget to brush up on Industry News on Page 8 and the recent renovation of The Abbey in Lake Geneva in the Venue Spotlight on Page 10. As always, enjoy the read!

Best,

Carrie Mantey  
Editor  
cmantey@ntmediagroup.com



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## IN THE NEWS

### MILWAUKEE OFFICIALLY SELECTED FOR 2024 REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION

Milwaukee recently became the first city to win back-to-back Democratic and Republican national conventions since 1972. In August, the Republican National Committee officially confirmed that Milwaukee will host its 2024 convention, bringing hundreds of millions of dollars in near- and long-term economic benefit to the hospitality industry, which employ tens of thousands.

Beyond the economic boost, the Republican National Convention (RNC) can help elevate the profile of the city, attracting other major events and conventions to Wisconsin, leading to more business invested in the state's economy. "At VISIT Milwaukee, we promote tourism to generate economic growth that ultimately creates a better, stronger Milwaukee. It's our job to pursue conventions that don't just bring us hard dollars, but those that will bring prestige and exposure that will ultimately enhance our reputation as an amazing place to visit, work and live," says Peggy Williams-Smith, president and CEO of VISIT Milwaukee.

"Bringing this convention to Milwaukee was the result of sustained collaboration from a statewide, bipartisan coalition that deeply loves our community and believes in the results this convention will deliver. We are thrilled to get to work with our community and hospitality partners to help the RNC's planners pull off their best convention yet," adds Williams-Smith.

### WORKOUTLOUD LAUNCHES INTUITIVE, ALL-IN-ONE VIRTUAL EVENT PLATFORM

**WorkOutLoud** recently launched WorkOutLoud Venue, an intuitive, all-in-one virtual event platform for hosting events of all sizes. Unlike other community platforms that rely on external applications for event support, Venue manages the entire event lifecycle — from pre-event invitation, registration, flexible payment processing, advertising and communication management to post-event surveys, reporting and analytics that deliver insights for improving future events.

As a standalone service or integrated with the company's community engagement platform, the platform manages multiple concurrent presentations, booths and other unique sessions. Supporting up to 14 presenters per session, Venue provides extensive chat functionality to strengthen event engagement.

According to Chris Hellweg, senior HRIS analyst at Aspirus, who recently hosted a more than 200-person user group event on Venue, "No other virtual assembly service comes close to Venue's ease of use and consistent quality. A single sign-on gives participants the freedom to move between multiple concurrent breakout sessions without having to log in to each."

### MENOMINEE INDIAN TRIBE PARTNERS WITH HARD ROCK TO RELAUNCH KENOSHA CASINO EFFORT

In partnership with Hard Rock International, the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin is reviving efforts to open a destination entertainment center and casino in the city of Kenosha. Menominee would own the casino and related facilities, while Hard Rock would develop and manage the project.

A previous Menominee Hard Rock Project in Kenosha was approved by the city of Kenosha, county of Kenosha, and United States Bureau of Indian Affairs and Department of the Interior, but was rejected by then Gov. Walker during the midst of his early presidential campaign in 2015.

Menominee Chairman Ronald J. Corn Sr. said that one change for the Hard Rock Kenosha project is that the size of the casino would be trimmed back to reflect the increased number of gaming facilities in both Wisconsin and northern Illinois. "The proposed project will not be as big as it was previously envisioned, but it will still create jobs and be substantial. It will still be a Hard Rock brand, and be an incredible addition to the community, the local and regional economy, and the state," he said.

### HARLEY-DAVIDSON MUSEUM ANNOUNCES NEW DIRECTOR OF SALES

**1903 Events at The Harley-Davidson Museum** in Milwaukee recently appointed Dave Larson as the new director of sales for all rentable event spaces at the museum, including MOTOR Bar & Restaurant. He will lead the 1903 Events team in booking corporate and social business functions for various spaces, including The Garage, a brand-new 8,200-square-foot event space that opened in August.



DAVE LARSON

Larson joins as an event professional with 20 years of experience in event production and management with a focus in the Milwaukee market. At VISIT Milwaukee, he was responsible for executing over 350 events a year with an economic impact of \$158 million. **www**





Pictured: Janesville Woman's Club

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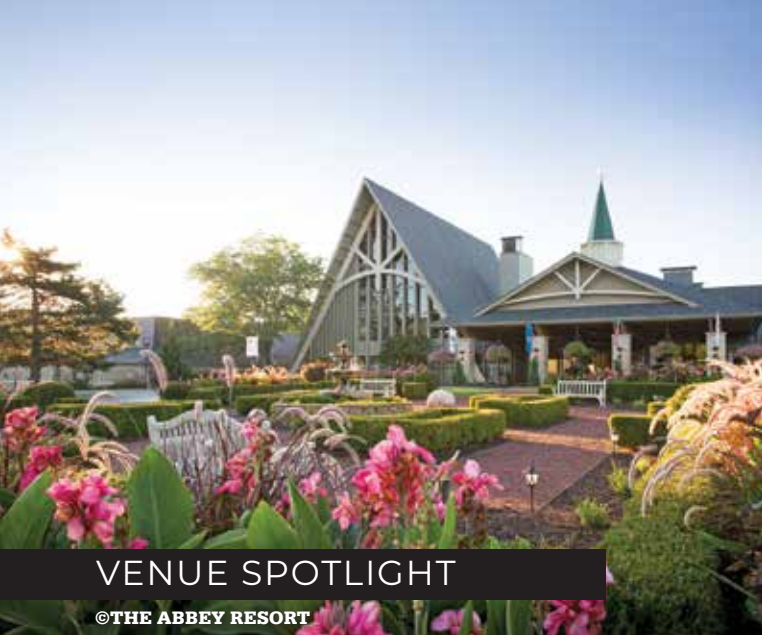
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## VENUE SPOTLIGHT

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# LAKEVIEW MEETINGS COME TO LIFE AT THE ABBEY RESORT

THIS VENUE'S RECENT RENOVATION, LAKESIDE SETTING AND MODERN AMENITIES MAKE IT ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO LEAVE FEELING LIKE THE EXPERIENCE WAS ALL WORK AND NO PLAY.

BY SUE SVEUM

By honoring history while looking to the future, The Abbey Resort in Fontana also manages to celebrate the present. That's easy to do at a venue that offers 90 acres of lakeside experiences, the newly renovated Avani Spa, and beautifully modernized meeting rooms and guest rooms. With a multi-year renovation reaching completion, The Abbey staff is excited to present their newest resort amenities to event attendees and leisure guests alike.

According to Dan Dolan, director of sales and marketing, the renovation, which was done primarily in the off-season, was designed to meet the evolving needs and tastes of today's meeting and resort guests. "It balances our unique design and history with modern conveniences and technology," he explains. "As guests approach the resort, they still see our iconic 130-foot-tall, wooden, A-frame structure, which was built in 1963. People often ask if the space is still used for events today — and it is."

But the renovation also brought many changes. "We wanted to transform our lobby into a destination for guests," Dolan says, "so we created a social hub by adding couch areas, nooks and high tables. And large screens behind the front desk continuously project video of our fabulous lake views, so when guests walk in, they immediately get the sense that they arrived at the lake."

Dolan reports that The Abbey offers some of the best indoor and outdoor settings — perfect for both hybrid and in-person meetings and events. "There's 30,000 square feet of indoor meeting space with 14 breakout rooms, half of which show off the beauty of the area with direct views of the resort and water," he says. "That creates an uplifting atmosphere for meeting attendees."

During the renovation, the side-by-side Wisconsin and Harbor ballrooms were completely torn apart in order to achieve that same atmosphere. Decorated in a concert of blues and grays, the spaces now feel larger and airier, providing the perfect mood-booster for all-day meetings.

The smaller Geneva Lake Conference Center, which holds 20 to 60 people, was also completely reimagined into a small, self-contained conference center, with all of the meeting rooms and common space in one hallway. Then The Abbey updated to a gigabit-speed fiber network, replacing all of the equipment around the resort and resulting in faster, smoother internet service for meetings.

But equally important as meeting spaces was the guest room redesign. Each room now has a private deck or patio, and smaller leather-wrapped benches instead of boxy dressers, making rooms feel larger and giving guests a clear view of the resort outside, reinforcing that feeling of "I've arrived at the lake."

"We want to be known as the best choice for meetings in the region," says Dolan. "And with that, there comes an element of reward recognition for attendees through being invited to a conference at a place like The Abbey — with the added bonus of a lakeside resort experience."

And there's a lot to experience. Guests can go zip lining or enjoy a beautiful Geneva Lake cruise. The marina and Fontana Beach are just steps away. Or guests can dock their own boats at The Abbey's private slips and pier. In addition to its lake frontage, the resort boasts four pools, and of course, Avani Spa.

Guests past and present have indelible memories of their time at The Abbey. "We hear stories every day — that's part of the fabric of what The Abbey is," stresses Dolan. "Of course, we want to be known as a fantastic event space, but sometimes it's our outdoor space that's memorable!" With The Abbey's lake views and modern amenities, it's almost impossible for conference-goers to leave feeling like their event was all work and no play. **WM**



*Sue Sveum is a freelance writer based in the Madison area.*





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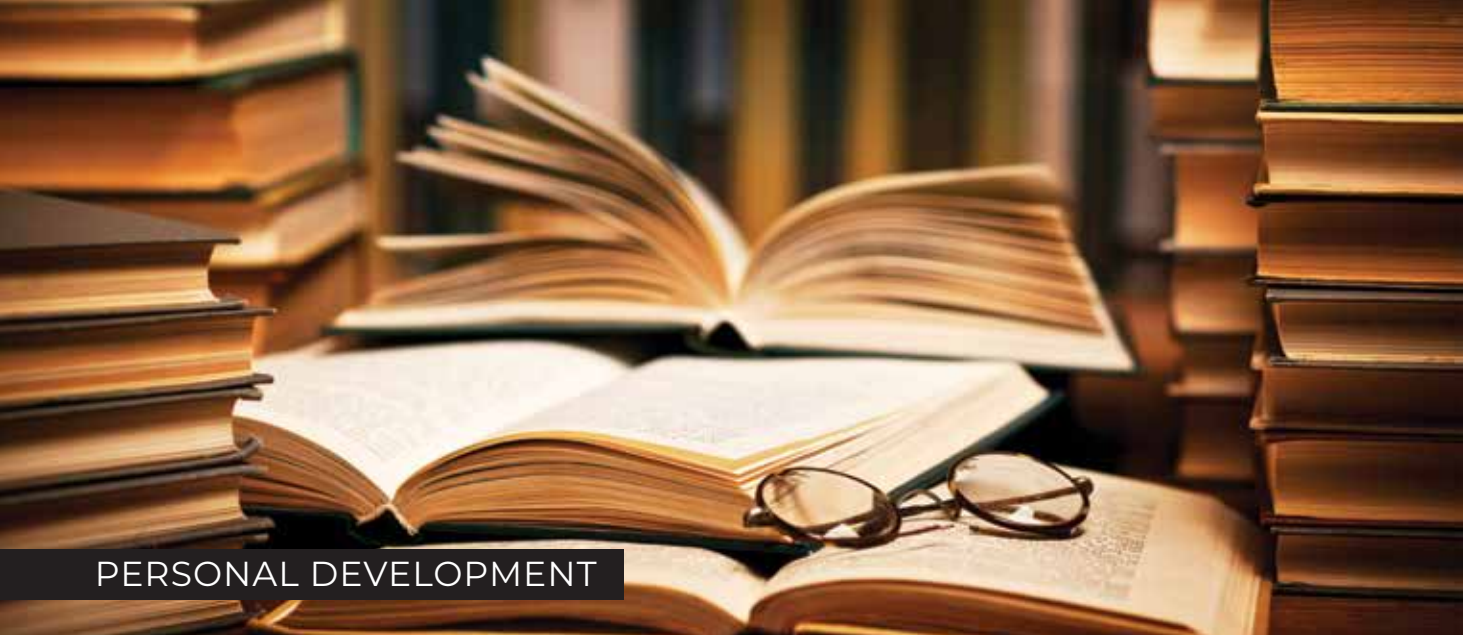
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## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

# HOW TO GET TO THE HEAD OF THE CLASS

## SCIENCE REVEALS STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE LEARNING – THE EASY WAY.

BY MOLLY ROSE TEUKE

Whether you're indulging a desire to learn about ancient Rome, boning up on bird identification or trying to achieve a professional goal (say, passing a certification or licensing exam), knowing things is so satisfying. But learning can be hard — and some educators think it ought to be even harder.

In a counterintuitive quirk of human learning, when you make learning harder, not easier, you increase the strength and durability of your learning and, in the long run, the ease of retaining knowledge. Without continued access and use, knowledge seems to decay. Yet it's not a decay problem; it's a retrieval problem.

Learning comes down to more than remembering. It requires forgetting, too. Retaining isn't the hard part of learning; your brain easily retains everything you pour into it. Accessing it is the real challenge. With rare exceptions (think "Rain Man"), the brain isn't organized like a card catalog that tells you where on the shelves of your vast mental warehouse certain information is stored.

Knowledge turns out to be more dependent on your ability to access, or retrieve, information than your ability to store it. And your ability to retrieve a given bit of information (a memory) is strengthened the more you do it. Bottom line: The more often you forget, the harder you have to work, and the stronger and more easily retrieved the memory is in the long run. This phenomenon led Robert Bjork, principal investigator at UCLA's Bjork Learning and Forgetting Lab, to develop a concept he coined "desirable difficulties."

### SPACE IT

One way to create a desirable difficulty, hence harnessing the power of forgetting, is to break study sessions into small chunks, and space them apart by hours or days. That increases the number of times you forget and have to retrieve the material you're trying to learn. Given a total of six hours to study, you're far better off studying for one hour a day for six days than for six straight hours in a single session.

### MIX IT UP

Your brain often uses visual and physical cues to aid in remembering. Another desirable difficulty is eliminating those cues by mixing up the environment where you learn. Research from as long ago as 1940 suggests that students perform better on tests that are administered in the same environment as the learning — but that doesn't hold up in real life. There will be few times you need to retrieve a bit of information in exactly the same place where you learned it. If you vary the setting, you make recall tougher in the short run, and stronger over time and in varied circumstances.

Another way of mixing it up is to work on multiple related concepts in one learning session instead of focusing on one exclusively until you master it. The technical term for this is "interleaving" and it's especially useful in learning motor skills. A classic study tracked varsity baseball players learning how to swing at three different types of pitches. When the players had one hour to practice and swung at one type of pitch exclusively until they mastered it, they showed immediate improvement, but they didn't perform so well later in a game.

Switching from a curve ball to a fast ball, then to a change-up during that hour led to better results on the field than devoting a 20-minute block to each of the three in sequence. Mixing it up in this way creates a little forgetting, and that memory blip, no matter how brief, enhances long-term learning and retention.



DESTINATION



## LAKE WINNEBAGO REGION

*C'mon in.*



Hello, I am Darcie, and these are my dogs. I just thought this was a fun way to get your attention, and now that I have it, I would like to give you my TOP FOUR unbreakable rules as a CVB salesperson...

1. I understand travel for meetings is going to be less frequent, so in-person gatherings must be more meaningful, memorable, impactful and be of great value and have great service...we got this!
2. I will always work to connect the dots for the planner — I will be your Fond du Lac and Waupun Sherpa.
3. The answer is always "YES" — especially at happy hour.
4. I will work to alleviate the struggles and maximize the value — the competition is tough in your field and mine, so let's shine together.
5. I will be your "meetings tailor", no off-the-rack meetings here, only bespoke events — you tell me if you want a FAM, you tell me what incentives are impactful, and of course you tell me how to customize your event.

Ok so maybe that was FIVE unbreakable rules, so to my planner friends, if you are looking for a partner-in-crime to pull off an awesome event, you've found her, me, Darcie Holte.



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## DAYDREAM

In her book, “A Mind for Numbers: How to Excel at Math and Science (Even if You Flunked Algebra),” Barbara Oakley asserts that brains have two main types of thinking — focused (highly attentive) and diffuse (more relaxed) — and we cannot solve a problem (or learn) without using both.

The focused mode is very specific and focused on a problem or concept. But it can be so focused that you’re unable to broaden your thinking. You reach a preliminary solution or perspective, and pretty soon you’re in a mental rut, a condition known as the Einstellung effect. You get so focused on your initial idea that it prevents you from seeing an alternate, possibly better, solution or way forward. It becomes a mental roadblock.

In the diffuse mode, we relax our thinking and let ourselves daydream our way to a broader perspective. “This relaxation can allow different areas of the brain to hook up and return valuable insights,” writes Oakley, adding that the insights returned are often anchored in thinking done in the focused mode. When we are in the diffuse mode, however, our brain seeks patterns and connections that can move our understanding forward.

Your brain’s diffuse mode is good at doing its work in the background. That’s why you so often solve problems while you’re driving, showering, exercising, maybe sleeping. Your ability and willingness to toggle between focused and diffuse modes of thinking increases your ability to learn. The lesson: Take a break.

## DON’T KID YOURSELF

A very real problem when you’re trying to learn is the illusion of learning, notably the illusion of repetition. Imagine you’ve spent a couple of hours studying and you feel you know the material well because you’ve read it over and over, complete with highlighting. After this exposure, the material feels familiar and you

believe you know it. In reality, you recognize it readily, but that’s not the same as learning. There’s a name for this illusion of competence — the Dunning-Kruger effect. It’s a cognitive bias under which you may wrongly estimate your mastery. You haven’t really learned the material and that very fact prevents you from accurately gauging how well you actually know the content.

The concept is named for a couple of Cornell University psychologists who tested subjects in three areas (humor, logic and grammar). They found those who ranked in the bottom quartile rated their skills far above that. “Those with limited knowledge in a domain suffer a dual burden,” the researchers wrote. “Not only do they reach mistaken conclusions and make regrettable errors, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it.” The problem is lack of metacognition — the ability to step back and accurately assess your knowledge or skill.

In a weird twist, learning a small amount about something may make you *more* prone to the Dunning-Kruger effect. If it’s something you were previously ignorant about, that little bit of knowledge may now make you feel like an expert even though you have no real depth of knowledge. Ironically, those who are least competent in a body of knowledge are generally the most likely to overestimate their understanding, which bears out that old saw, “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.”

There’s an easy fix for the Dunning-Kruger effect: Test yourself. Research shows that a lot of low-stakes quizzing is an excellent strategy for learning. When you finish studying, close the book, put away your notes and test yourself on what you learned. Then go back to the material and see how well you did. The benefit is two-fold. First, it helps you more accurately assess your learning and the gaps in your knowledge; second, quizzing yourself requires that you retrieve information



from memory, and the act of retrieval strengthens both the memory and your subsequent ability to access it.

## MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICE

You probably have a pet subject you know you’re not any good at. It could be any number of things. Yet, the likelihood is that, rather than not being any good at them, you simply haven’t tried to learn them in ways that make learning possible.

In his TED Talk, “How We Learn Is More Important than What We Learn,” educator Dr. Glenn Dakin poses an especially relevant question for those of us who know that we are no good at (fill in the blank): “If you don’t do well immediately, is that an opportunity to judge or an opportunity to learn?” And that’s a question worth answering. **WM**



*Molly Rose Teuke has an enduring curiosity about what makes our brains tick. Pre-COVID-19, she offered a program for Nicolet College called Getting Your Brain on Your Side and*

*delivered brain-based leadership training for the NeuroLeadership Institute, a global leader in the performance arena. She also hosts a weekly classical music program on WXPB-FM. You can reach her at [mollyrose@mollyrosecoaching.com](mailto:mollyrose@mollyrosecoaching.com).*

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# Meeting *Healthy*

INCORPORATE THE THREE Ns — NATURE, NURTURE AND NOSHING — TO BOOST THE WELLNESS QUOTIENT OF EVERY MEETING AND EVENT.

By Ronnie Wendt

**T**he growth of the health-conscious movement is catapulting health and wellness from dingy hotel gyms into the spotlight where it now takes center stage at meetings and events. The trend is moving health, wellness, stress relief and exercise to the forefront, where planners expect it to stay. According to Kortnee Carroll, the sales manager at **Kalahari Resorts & Conventions** in Wisconsin Dells, “Today, planners seek workout classes and spa services, or set aside time for attendees to use our on-site gyms and water park.”

Dawn Justin, marketing director of **Justin Trails Resort** in Sparta, echoes Carroll’s sentiments.

“Our business has exploded with folks wanting to be outside enjoying a healthy lifestyle of exercise, walking, disc golf and eating well,” she says.

Planners already know health and wellness keeps attendees happy, healthy and productive during meetings and events, but what does “meeting healthy” look like?

## **Get Out in Nature**

According to the National Park Service, 5 minutes of walking outdoors improves mood, self-esteem and relaxation, and physical activity in a green space reduces stress and lowers cortisol levels by 15%. Just 30 minutes outside improves heart health and circulation, and lowers cholesterol,





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blood glucose and blood pressure. By simply knowing these effective benefits, planners can seek natural settings and environments, and plan activities around them.

Many venues across the state provide the kind of respite attendees crave. “The entire experience at Sundara is tranquil, quiet and peaceful,” says John Morris, general manager of **Sundara Inn & Spa** in Wisconsin Dells, for example. The secluded retreat, nestled amongst pines, appeals to many. “We do forest bathing activities, which gets people to immerse themselves in nature,” he says. “They can breathe in the benefits of the outside air, take in the forest’s beauty and meditate.”

“We also have hammocks in the woods, and a tranquility garden next to our infinity pool,” he adds.

Because Justin Trails Resort offered Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) the kind of sanctuary in nature it desired, the organization recently chose the 200-acre eco-resort for its annual event. “They chose our resort not only because the director wanted a dog-friendly option,” Justin says, “but because they also loved our nature trails. Attendees could go for a morning walk or midday hike, and watch the sunset or sunrise. When guests here climb a hill, they can see for miles.”

Benches dot Justin Trails’ landscape and provide a place for guests to relax as they trek the resort’s 14 miles of trails. “There is absolutely no sound other than those found in

nature. It’s relaxing,” Justin adds. “Visitors can sit and listen to the birds chirp, while taking in our restored prairies, wildflower gardens and oak savannas.”

Justin reports that some groups incorporate walking meetings, nature runs or disc golf tournaments into their schedules. “Our venue is a blank slate, where planners can create customized programs, or activities that increase health and wellness,” she says.





**Grand Geneva Resort & Spa** is a AAA Four-Diamond resort known for its lush landscape of rolling hills and pristine views. The resort's outdoor activities include rock climbing, baseball, volleyball, tennis, pickleball, mountain biking, archery, hiking, golfing, swimming, skiing, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and ice skating, just to name a few. But while Grand Geneva offers much to choose from, Brad Lyles, director of sales and marketing, shares that many groups revel in the guided hike around the resort's pastoral and historical grounds.

### Nurture Well-Being

Gallup's State of the Global Workplace report, released in June, reported employee stress has hit all-time highs. Employees report being

stressed about their jobs, the political landscape, inflation and more. When a meeting or event incorporates opportunities to nurture their well-being, attendees can shed stress and leave it behind, all while leaving a good impression.

Spa therapies present an enjoyable way to release stress and reset the body. "Massage therapy is the most popular thing to incorporate into the day," Morris acknowledges. "It's a proven fact that massage therapy can lower blood pressure, reduce stress and more. But we also offer energy therapies, and introduce CBD oils and other creams into our massages."

Lyles agrees that massage is popular among planners. He says, "Adding any spa service gives attendees time to

take a deep breath, relax and focus on themselves." Popular spa treatments at Grand Geneva include: the Relax Me Massage to rebalance the body, and release stress and tensions; Aromatherapy Massage with essential oils; and detoxifying, destressing facial treatments, which use magnesium-rich, volcanic rock to boost and detoxify the skin.

Choosing rooms with whirlpool tubs injects a nice treat, too, adds Justin: "Five of our on-site lodging accommodations offer BainUltra whirlpool bathtubs with powerful air jets that deliver a therapeutic acupressure-based massage to trigger beneficial physiological reactions from head to toe, reducing tension, relaxing muscles, combating stress and eliminating toxins."







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Nurture can come in other forms as well. Meditation is another popular option. Sundara offers meditation rooms, some dedicated to silence, and a meditation trail with stops that correspond to the body's seven chakras or energy centers. "We also offer a salt treatment room and purifying bath ritual," says Morris. "We find when groups meet here, they are rarely in a conference room from nine to five."

## Nosh Healthy

It's a known fact that eating clean keeps skin, teeth and eyes healthy; supports immunity; strengthens bones; and lowers the risk of heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and cancer. Yet, too often, meetings and events offer rich, calorie-laden, fried foods, and little in the way of health and wellness.

Venues are trying to step away from these foods to offer healthy eats that accommodate gluten-free, keto,

vegetarian, vegan and allergen-free diets. Justin says, "Planners today want healthier food options and ask us to meet more dietary restrictions than ever before. When we are asked to accommodate special diets, we take our offerings to a new level and make sure the food is never boring."

Grand Geneva also offers made-to-order banquet menus that include varied healthy and fresh foods. "We offer options that allow planners to craft their own dinner buffet, and choose from two proteins, two sides, a salad and a dessert," Lyles says. "You can truly choose something for everyone with this option."

Sundara's menu includes plant-based proteins, nonalcoholic cocktails and organic foods. "We work with a local farm called Country Bumpkin for our farm-to-table menu," Morris says. "We also grow our own vegetables in our rooftop greenhouse using hydroponic

## SIX EASY WAYS TO MAXIMIZE MEETING WELLNESS

- 1. Eat more greens.** Emphasize healthier food by putting plant proteins, vegetables and greens on the menu.
- 2. Cut it out.** Remove sugar, wheat flour and processed foods from people's plates.
- 3. Get moving.** Build in opportunities to stretch and stand up. Better yet, incorporate yoga, walks, races and other forms of exercise into the day.
- 4. Prioritize mental health.** Give attendees time to relax and recharge with spa services, meditation and "me time."
- 5. Stress the snacks.** Make time for more than visits to the restroom during breaks by incorporating snacks, beverages and networking.
- 6. Go natural.** Let attendees breathe in some fresh air by getting outside. Walking meetings, forest bathing (which means spending time communing with nature and trees) and meditation outdoors can provide respite during a grueling day.

techniques. Plus, we work with groups to plan custom menus."

Health and wellness once fell to the bottom of planners' to-do lists. Today these topics top their lists. Planners understand that incorporating the three Ns — nature, nurture and noshing — can boost the wellness quotient of every meeting and event. **WM**



Ronnie Wendt is a freelance writer based in Waukesha, Wisconsin.

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— DESTINATION —

# La Crosse

THERE ARE MANY REASONS THE “BEST OF” CITY  
SHOULD TAKE A LEAD SPOT ON  
PLANNERS’ PLAYLISTS.

By Ronnie Wendt

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La Crosse makes regular appearances on “best of” lists for its outdoor amenities, university and livability. CNN Money named the city nestled on the shores of the mighty Mississippi River a Best Place to Live. The city also took 77th place on Livability.com’s Best Places to Live in 2020.

Forbes put the college town on its list of Best Small Places for Business and Careers. U.S. News & World Report listed the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse as the top university in the University of Wisconsin system and as one of America’s best colleges. In fact, it has ranked as the No. 7 best regional university in the Midwest as well.

With remarkable venues, varied food and beverage options, and ample after-hours entertainment and outdoor activities, the river city also might make a “best of” list for meetings and events — and deservingly so. The city of just under

53,000 people welcomes over 2.5 million business and leisure travelers every year, an impressive feat for such a modestly sized municipality.

La Crosse houses over 2,500 hotel rooms and can host events from 100 to 6,000, says Ben Morgan, director of group sales and sports services at Explore La Crosse. Many planners hold events at the **La Crosse Center**, which completed a \$42 million expansion in 2021, and **Stoney Creek Hotel La Crosse – Onalaska**.

## Varied Venues

The La Crosse Center, which has been a staple for sports and events in the community since the 1980s, is the star attraction on La Crosse’s venue list. The city recently renovated and expanded the building. Now it’s just 60 feet from the riverbank and offers 120,000 square feet of multipurpose space, including a new ballroom and rooftop terrace with spectacular river views.

“The original building comprised a North Hall and an arena,” says Director Art Fahey (who plans to retire by year’s end). “In 2000, we expanded and just about doubled the square footage. But in 2021, we completed another expansion, adding on a large ballroom and accompanying space that overlooks the Mississippi River and Riverside Park.”

The upgrade also included a new air ventilation system and arena seating, and facelifts to all restrooms, dressing rooms and concession stands. A new front lobby/atrium completed the space. “As we expanded, the building became a little compartmentalized and we could not move foot traffic around efficiently,” Fahey says. “Now the lobby wraps around the entire building to help people move quickly.”

The updated facility can accommodate events of up to 6,000 attendees. The South Hall has two levels of event space.





The upper level includes a new ballroom, three boardrooms and a conference room, while the lower level includes South Hall A at 24,000 square feet and South Hall B at 12,000 square feet. The South Hall ballroom delivers 6,000 square feet of flexible event space and overlooks the Mississippi River. “The new ballroom can seat up to 660 people banquet style and accommodate up to 900 people classroom style,” explains Fahey. “We also can divide the ballroom into three rooms.”

The North Hall delivers 15,000 square feet of sophisticated, yet casual event space in three levels. The upper level houses three meeting rooms; the second level includes the Riverside Ballroom, Riverside Terrace and three meeting rooms/suites that overlook the arena; and the main level is made up of meeting rooms.

“In the middle of everything is our arena. This multipurpose space works well for trade shows, general assemblies and even for arena seating during larger events. Our Riverside Terrace has turned out to be a real homerun for us,” Fahey





adds. "It's a great area for social functions and its awning provides shade on warm days."

**Radisson Hotel La Crosse** connects to the La Crosse Center via skywalk. Its more than 160 rooms can accommodate attendees of La Crosse Center events, but with 11,500 square feet of its own flexible meeting space, the hotel is a great meeting venue, too. The Radisson can host meetings of up to 400 guests in an elegant ballroom for larger events and has boardrooms for smaller meetings. "The Radisson's Wisconsin Room can break into three different sections and the Minnesota Room breaks into two sections," Morgan says.

**Holiday Inn & Suites La Crosse – Downtown** additionally offers 114 guest rooms and connects to the La Crosse Center. This facility can accommodate smaller meetings of up to 30 people in a 480-square-foot room.

Nearby, the 126-room **Hampton Inn & Suites La Crosse Downtown** offers 1,116 square feet of event space in two well-appointed rooms. **The Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott La Crosse Downtown** and **Courtyard by Marriott La Crosse Downtown/ Mississippi Riverfront** are also within walking distance. Both offer space for smaller boardroom-type meetings and receptions.

"There's been a boom of hotel rooms in the downtown area," says Erik Sjolander, director of convention sales for Explore La Crosse. "We have a lot of hotels within

walking distance [to the La Crosse Center] and two that are connected. But in terms of a venue that can handle everything, we also have Stoney Creek in Onalaska."

A few miles north of La Crosse in Onalaska is Stoney Creek Hotel La Crosse – Onalaska, which pairs pastoral scenery with rustic charm. Situated among rolling hills, the ballroom venue offers "a log cabin meets hunter's lodge" type of feel with ample spaces for events of up to 500 people in its 7,000-square-foot Northwoods Salon.

Additional rooms are available for breakout sessions and smaller meetings. The intimately sized Hearth Room, for example, hosts five to 15 people comfortably. The Pines Room and Timberlands Room can hold up to 50 people, while two lower-level spaces can accommodate up to 90 guests.

"We have 11 locations across the Midwest, but we're not like a Marriott or Hilton, which are tied to specific brand standards," explains Carter Bahr, sales manager at Stoney Creek. "We can fit any budget to give groups the extraordinary experience they crave. It's an outstanding 'home away from home' experience in a cabin getaway."

After-hours, participants can retire to one of the hotel's 157 rooms, which include theme rooms. "We have Hunter's Haven, which mimics a hunter's lodge, and a premier suite that overlooks the nature sanctuary," he says. "Our rooms provide higher-end amenities,

such as expanded whirlpool tubs and fireplaces."

The hotel contracts with several local caterers, while also offering smaller breakfast and snack-type items through the hotel. "Our catering staff can accommodate just about any budget, whether it's box lunches or full plated dinners," notes Bahr. "They are amazing to work with and hold themselves to the highest standards."

Downtown La Crosse is a short drive away. However, Bahr emphasizes, "We have a picturesque nature sanctuary that has the La Crosse River running through it, and beautiful walking and biking paths in our own backyard."

The 50,000-square-foot **Onalaska Omni Center** also works well for groups. It sports two large arenas, three flexible meeting spaces, a full kitchen and a semi-enclosed picnic-type shelter.

While **Celebrations on the River** in downtown La Crosse has racked up accolades as a popular wedding venue, it also doubles as a sought-after venue for meetings and events. All in, the facility hosts around 200 events a year in three separate spaces.

The facility's River Park can accommodate more than 200 guests, and captures the natural beauty of the Mississippi River through spaces that connect guests to indoor and outdoor amenities. The Center Court features a banquet hall that treats up to 450 guests to stunning riverside





views. Its outdoor patio overlooking the venue's gardens and nearby river can host up to 150 guests. On the other hand, Serenity Hall pairs perfectly with smaller, more intimate gatherings of up to 150 guests, and features a stunning ceiling with a large stage, full-service private bar, food buffet room and crystal chandeliers.

"We host everything from all-day conferences with breakfast and lunch included down to groups of 20 to 30. Recently, Ashley Furniture brought in 750 people for an event," says Adam Etrheim, general manager and partner for Celebrations on the River. He also says Celebrations' riverside location is the venue's claim to fame. "We have a gorgeous backyard with impressive trees and twinkling lights, and our fire pits are beautiful in the fall."

The full-service venue leaves nothing to chance, offering planners everything from centerpieces to tablecloths and signage, as well as set-up and tear-down services. It also provides bus transportation to 14 nearby hotels.

**The Charmant Hotel** makes another fine backdrop for corporate gatherings, board meetings, cocktail parties and holiday celebrations. Its 613-square-foot Serenada Room accommodates 40 people for sit-down functions, or 50 for standing receptions and theater-style events. The Royal Crown, a 338-square-foot boardroom, accommodates 12. Meanwhile, the Rooftop Terrace offers planners a stylish space overlooking the city. It has a wood-fired pizza oven and a bar pouring handcrafted cocktails. The Restaurant houses a private dining room that serves French-inspired cuisine to up to 14 guests.

For planners seeking a nontraditional venue, La Crosse doesn't disappoint. Sjolander recommends **The Court Above Main**, which brings "big city views with a historic feel" to upscale meetings and events. Originally used as a public hall for social gatherings and later as a YWCA gym, the space features 16-foot ceilings, original wood ballroom court floor, floor-to-ceiling windows and custom bar.



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**Buzzard Billy's** is a bar and grill in an 1860s brick hotel. The unique Cajun restaurant and bar dishes up authentic New Orleans-style cuisine and craft beers. Its Starlite Lounge, a 1950s-style cocktail lounge on the second floor, ushers up a Rat Pack atmosphere with great martinis, wines and single-malt scotch. Another popular eatery is **The Crow**, an American restaurant and bourbon bar, voted as the Best New Restaurant in La Crosse in 2015 and 2016. Its draw is a healthy mix of excellent food, rare and unique spirits, quality craft beers and Wisconsin hospitality.

For fine dining, event-goers can check out **Piggy's Restaurant & Lounge** in the 1871 Pioneer Foundry building. The restaurant works its smoker every day with hickory and Minnesota applewood to dish up choice prime rib, hearty pork loins and its famous pork belly. Diners can revel in the live blues music and comedy shows, plus a ballroom upstairs offers 2,000 square feet of event space.

These restaurants offer just a sampling of the food available. "There are Thai restaurants, Mexican restaurants, you name it, all within walking distance of meeting venues and hotels," says Morgan.

### After-Hours Fun

The downtown is home to boat and trolley tours, axe throwing and more. "Groups won't want to miss the La Crosse Queen," Morgan says. "Many groups do dinner cruises or sightseeing tours." **La Crosse Queen Cruises** offers seven different sightseeing and excursion boats that operate out of Riverside Park.

Historic trolley tours begin downtown where Frankie La Salle, a character garbed in authentic 1800s clothing, takes people on historic excursions. "There's also a Dark La Crosse tour that talks about the seedy side of the city from the time of gangsters, prohibition and brothels," Morgan says. "It's a popular attraction that groups enjoy."

Meanwhile, the **La Crosse Escape Room** provides a great team-building exercise for groups. The interactive adventure game locks people into themed rooms where they have to follow clues, solve puzzles and crack codes to break free within a set time limit. And **The Driftless Axe and Arcade** throws competitive axe throwing into the mix of possibilities. "Because there are so many things to do downtown," Morgan says, "there is something for every group."

Though the revamped La Crosse Center often takes center stage, Fahey stresses it's not the city's only draw. "Every city has unique things to offer and La Crosse is no exception," he says. "We have a facility right next to an active downtown that offers great restaurants, shopping and other amenities. We also have the Mississippi River and the coulees. These are the valleys between the bluffs in the Driftless Area unique to this part of the state." **WM**



"It's a striking facility," Sjolander says. "I've attended a few events there and they're always very nice."

The Myrick Park Center, nestled in La Crosse's bluff lands, wetlands, woodlands and native prairies, is also fun for events. "It's great for groups that want a getaway," Sjolander confirms. "It's tucked away in a forestry area, but just down the road is downtown La Crosse. It also has little cabins and walking trails."

### Delectable Dining

Being a college town, the nightlife and foodie scene in La Crosse cannot be beat, adds Morgan.





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# How to Identify the Ideal Digital Platform

EVERY VIRTUAL MEETING OR EVENT REQUIRES A DIFFERENT LEVEL OF INTERACTION, MOBILE-FRIENDLINESS, ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND METRICS.

By Maura Keller

Technology continues to drive advancement in the meetings and events industry. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when virtual was the only way to gather for meetings and events, planners' attention turned to understanding the multitude of digital meeting platform options that emerged overnight.

As Rachel Andrews, senior director of global meetings and events at **Cvent**, points out, the pandemic completely disrupted how meeting planners and event professionals operate: "We've come a long way in leveraging technology to plan and manage the event experience, but pre-pandemic, there was still not a lot of priority given to digitizing or analyzing the actual in-person experience."

That all changed when things went online.

As Andrews explains, it was this forced digitization that caused a transformational shift in how meeting planners and event designers view their events. "They could easily monitor elements of event engagement like seeing session attendance, or attendees' touchpoints or clicks within the virtual event site; leverage what sessions were most watched on demand; or dig into chat comments," Andrews says.

"These insights are extremely valuable to have more personalized follow-up conversations and they help event producers deliver better events. So today, planners want those same insights at their in-person or hybrid events — and they're leveraging technology more than ever to do it."

Also, it's important to note that virtual events no longer limit attendance to those who are geographically close, or have the budget and capacity to travel and attend in-person events. "While virtual was the only option for events during the pandemic, Bizzabo's research found that 42% of virtual attendees would attend an event online again because it's their best option," says Lauren Grady, director of the Global Event Center of Excellence at **Bizzabo**. "Event organizers can now use tools incorporating a virtual component into their in-person events, allowing access to those across the nation or even the world to attend and gain valuable insights," she continues.

## FINDING THE IDEAL PLATFORM

"Today's attendees expect compelling speakers who deliver shareable content that is easy to digest — and they expect to be able to view that content live or on demand," says Andrews. And the main thing meeting planners and event professionals should remember when it comes to any virtual experience is "think TV show, not PowerPoint," according to her.

After being submerged for so long in a digital environment, virtual fatigue is real, and it takes much more than a passive experience to attract and engage an audience. Even simple webinars are being reimagined as miniature virtual events that offer more interactive elements to keep attendees interested.

Virtual attendees also expect a dynamic experience that minimizes blank screen time and session lulls. It's best to work in interactive content



like thought-provoking polls or topical message boards, quizzes with fun prizes, or opportunities for more meaningful conversations using breakout rooms or virtual exhibitor booths. “Ultimately, it comes down to offering more ways to engage and interact, which helps create a more immersive experience, which is ultimately what drives attendees to come back for more,” Andrews explains.

Different event types also have different needs. Robin Bunevich, product marketing manager for **Zoom Events**, says meeting planners and event organizers should choose digital platforms based not on event size, but rather on the level of interactivity desired.

She offers an example: One-time events that require a one-to-many approach would benefit from a webinar-style event platform, offering an easy solution to host the event with the ability to customize the level of interactivity. “This kind of solution is great for getting information out quickly to a large number of people. However, a multi-day conference would benefit from a more robust digital events platform that can handle simultaneous sessions and it should offer some kind of virtual networking experience so attendees can forge connections.”

## ON-DEMAND VS. LIVE PRESENTATIONS

For most attendees, the standard expectation is that virtual events offer both live and on-demand options, but not every platform manages to do this well.

“Live presentations allow for real-time engagement, make the experience seem more human, and give viewers a sense of urgency and anticipation that drives attention and curiosity — but the reality is not everyone

can be everywhere at once,” Andrews says. Attendees may want to catch the event in parts or rewatch whole sessions that they find particularly useful on demand.

Choosing a platform that allows attendees to do this is paramount for planners and organizations looking to extend the life of their meeting or event program, and make a lasting impact with their audience. With an on-demand option, the content lives on long after the event itself ends and this extended engagement is key to maximizing return on investment in the long run.

## MOBILE-FRIENDLY OPTIONS

Cathy Song Novelli, chief marketing officer at **Hubilo**, mentions that the meeting or event audience is everywhere these days, equally likely to be in their home office as much as at their kids’ soccer practice. As such, she says it’s vital to have a simple cross-platform user interface that has engagement features that are as easy to use on mobile as they are on desktop.

“The return to in-person and growing needs to meet the expectations of a hybrid audience will also drive the necessity for a mobile strategy, so make sure you’re thinking through your event tech stack when you begin your 2023 planning,” she warns.

Mobile-friendly online registration and event websites are also essential to enhance the overall attendee user experience. As Grady explains, the goal is to make it as easy as possible to register, attend and participate in events using a mobile device. “It’s also essential to create mobile-friendly event websites because internet search engines (such as Google) favor mobile-friendly websites since more search inquiries come from mobile devices,” she says.

## FOCUSING ON METRICS

One benefit of virtual and hybrid events is the ability to access data and analytics you might not necessarily be able to capture in person.

Because of this, Robin Bunevich, product marketing manager for Zoom Events, says meeting planners should look for a platform that offers transparent analytics around registrations, booth sponsors, livestream views and view duration, content downloads and tickets sold. Also seek out a solution that allows you to easily access and share insights from these metrics. “For example, we developed the Zoom Events dashboard, where hosts can generate reports, utilize enhanced sorting functionality, and view, export or download metrics,” Bunevich says.

Lauren Grady, director of the Global Event Center of Excellence at Bizzabo, points out that, while in-person events can provide powerful data, virtual events allow access to even more granular data, such as how many people registered for specific sessions, view duration, mobile app usage, sentiment surrounding sessions and gross revenue. “This data helps event organizers adjust before, during, and after an event, rather than being limited to implementing the feedback for the next event,” she says.

Although event metrics should vary depending on event goals, Grady says some key performance indicators to track for virtual and hybrid events include:

- The audience conversion rate or the number of people who attended the event vs. registered for the event, including on-demand views.
- Audience engagement or how attendees interacted during the event with chats, polls, Q&As, one-on-one meetings and emoji reactions.
- Attendee behavior or what sessions they attended, how long they viewed sessions, what materials they downloaded and the time spent in virtual sponsor booths.
- Social sharing or the number of event mentions before, during and after the event.



## ENGAGEMENT FEATURES

Using engagement tools, such as chat and Q&A, throughout events provides attendees with opportunities to express their thoughts, questions and feedback, which connects them even more to the event. “That feeling of connection leads attendees to stay longer in sessions, a key indicator of an event’s success,” Grady says. “Virtual attendees also appreciate events that provide a variety of sessions, such as hands-on workshops, wellness activities and unique entertainment.”

*“Today’s attendees expect compelling speakers who deliver shareable content that is easy to digest — and they expect to be able to view that content live or on demand.”*

— Rachel Andrews, Cvent

Additionally, meeting and event organizers should provide their audience with digital networking opportunities to connect one on one or in group settings. Grady

suggests using an event app for live polling to bring your audience in on the action or a sophisticated session tagging system to help create a more personalized attendee experience. “All of these features drive engagement and foster connection amongst attendees to build community beyond the event itself,” she reinforces.

## GAMIFICATION

Gamifying isn’t a new concept, but it can be improved. Some gamification approaches lead to a small group of attendees vying for one top prize while others disengage, for instance. A points-to-rewards strategy could encourage more participation by offering a larger number of smaller, instantly accessible prizes.

For Bizzabo’s own Event Experience Summit in May 2022, the company gave attendees the option to participate in the official Summit Activity Series. Points were associated with a list of online activities, such as attending sessions, participating in roundtables, scheduling demonstrations and more for a chance to win one of three special prizes. Participants tracked their progress during the event via an online leaderboard on the

event website. The Summit Activity Series was a resounding success.

“Gamification at events appeals to the audience’s competitive tendencies and incentivizes engagement,” Song Novelli says. “Organizers can use gamification quite effectively to direct people to specific sections of the event by offering greater points for their participation completed in specified activities. There are different levels of gamification, too. You may want to have a system that encourages certain activities incentivized with points or offers contests with prizes.”

## COST CONSIDERATIONS

While digital platforms can reduce certain hard costs like hotel rooms, travel, or food and beverage, you have to balance those savings with the costs associated with delivering an engaging virtual or hybrid event, such as more robust audiovisual technology, studio space and other production needs, depending on the complexity of your meeting or event.

That’s why Andrews says it’s so important to find a technology provider that offers broadcast-quality recording and simple, user-friendly editing tools right in the platform, thus avoiding the issue of finding extra money in your budget for professional recording equipment.

“There haven’t been many variations in pricing, but offerings have certainly become a lot more robust,” Song Novelli adds. “Platforms have evolved based on client and market feedback. I believe changes in the next two years in particular will drive the direction we can expect for years to come.” **WM**



Based in Minneapolis, Maura Keller is a seasoned writer, editor and published author, with more than 24 years of experience. She has written about business, meetings, event design, marketing, health care and a wealth of other topics for dozens of regional and national publications, as well as Fortune 50 companies.



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## PLANNER PROFILE

# WORKING TOWARD THE BIG CHEESE

LINDSEY HESS' EVENT RESUME QUICKLY GREW FROM COMPANY POTLUCKS TO ASSOCIATION CONFERENCES TO HYBRID LEADERSHIP TRAINING. NEXT STOP? CHEESECON.

BY CARRIE MANTEY

Lindsey Hess, the programs and office coordinator at the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association in Madison, has been planning events ever since she entered the workforce. But what started as “simple staff outings, potlucks and mostly internal planning” at an accounting firm quickly grew to planning board and committee meetings, and conferences at Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association in Madison.

Hess says, “I was new to planning events, so what started out as assisting another staff person at [Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association] turned into taking the lead and planning more than 25 events a year.”

Then after 13 years of association experience, Hess hitched her wagon to the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association. Because she's only been there six months so far, she's still learning about all the events. Right now, she plans quarterly board meetings, and in-person, virtual and hybrid leadership trainings.

And while she evolves her role with the association's large events — the World Cheese Contest, the U.S. Cheese Contest, CheeseExpo and CheeseCon — there's much to do with four board meetings, leadership trainings, committee meetings, and a golf and trap shoot outing (which covers four golf courses and one trap-shooting range).

## IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKING

Because her skillset has been expanding as a result of each new role, Hess decided to start formalizing her education by joining Meeting Professionals International (MPI) in May 2014 and earning her Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) credentials in November 2019. She notes, “Joining MPI has taught me so much when it comes to planning meetings and learning from amazing speakers at our education days.

“But the best part of being a member of MPI is all the networking. There is no way I would be where I am today without connecting with other planners and having great relationships with suppliers. I know if I have a question, I can reach out to other MPI members and someone will be able to help me. We are here to help each other.”

Hess supports MPI-Wisconsin in the role of monthly programming director now that she's on the board of directors. “I recruit volunteers to lead and assist our monthly chapter meetings. I oversee educational teams that coordinate all the logistics for monthly education programs, including menu selection, audiovisual needs, room setup, registration and hotel arrangements. I also work with the vice president of education on speaker selections and contracting for monthly education programs. I've been asked to join the board for a few years, but it was too much of a time commitment ... I have a bit more time to give now. I also want to continue to grow and learn, and with the board members I am working with, I will no doubt continue to grow.”

Hess mentions that a planner's networking skills don't only come in handy at MPI meetings, though. “I always try to have a great relationship with the venue's staff I'm working with,” she explains, “from the moment we sign the contract with the director of sales to the day of our event working with the catering staff. Everyone is working hard to help us execute the best event possible. I want to show my appreciation to them all!”

## MOVING TOWARD THE FUTURE

Hess is encouraged and excited that many events are back on track in person as she strives to move more association meetings to in person as well. “It is awesome to see members reconnecting after three years of hiding behind a screen, but I know not all meetings will go back to in person,” she acknowledges.

As a matter of fact, Hess mentions that a few Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association trainings actually work better virtually because they can include members from all over the U.S. without the cost of travel and lodging. However, she says the downside is hybrid setup, “and making sure those who are not in person are feeling connected. It's hard to engage with members virtually when cameras are not on!” **WM**





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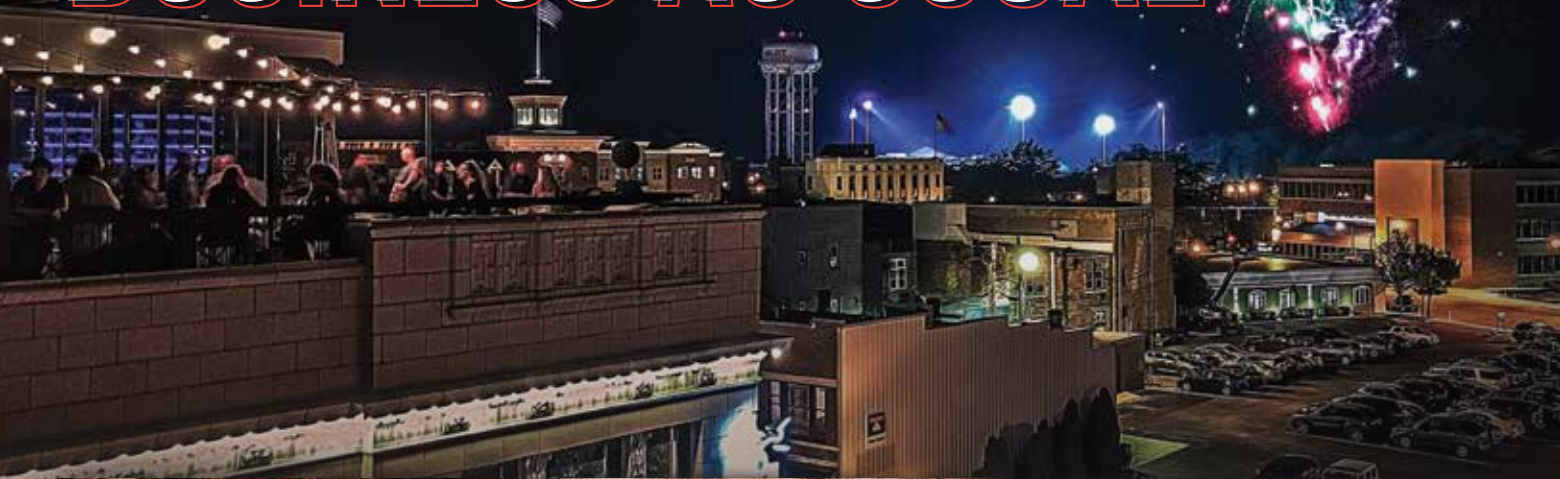
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