

SOUND OFF

Atlanta hospitality leaders discuss their industry



Daniel Senden

Director of sales and marketing, Sheraton Atlanta Hotel

Cost-effective: Because many of our largest vendors are also our clients, we are able to both offer and pursue concessions that allow each party to achieve a healthy balance of profit. Focusing on servicing our existing customers also allows the hotel to keep a more effective sales cost structure.

Backlash: The Sheraton brand has had an enormous resurgence in the past few years. This economic climate allows the Sheraton Atlanta to introduce itself to two new customer bases — the luxury guest that has been displaced by the 'AIG effect' and the select service customer that hasn't been able to book at brands like Sheraton in the past.

Technology: There is a focus on environmentally sound products, such as the Sheraton's energy-efficient building automation system and a water purification system that can recycle up to 80,000 gallons of laundry water per day.



Ann Bergstrom

Executive director, Chattahoochee Nature Center

Cost-effective: Like the majority of nonprofit groups in metro Atlanta, we have sustained staff layoffs and overall payroll reductions to stay ahead of declining revenue. Also, over the past several years, we have laid the groundwork for new technology programs that have greatly increased efficiency in several areas of the organization, especially finance, membership and program registration.

Backlash: For decades, we have supported the principles of recycle-reuse-reduce. The Chattahoochee Nature Center is naturally in a position to benefit from changing consumer attitudes. Education classes that appeal to this sentiment, such as backyard organic gardening, are filling up immediately.

Technology: We recently developed the capability to register people for our programs through our Web site. The time-starved consumer wants to browse the site at their convenience.



Michele Swann

General manager and CEO, Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre

Cost-effective: Our current operating model positions us to achieve efficiency necessary to meet the needs of our customers, while reducing overall costs. We continue to focus on energy management, cross-training and labor sharing between the Cobb Galleria Centre and Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre employees.

Backlash: We are using a more targeted approach to retaining and capturing business and working to create partnerships through cooperation and collaboration. Understanding our customers' preferences, budget parameters and long-term objectives is paramount to return business.

Technology: Technology — whether it's wireless Internet access on site, an interactive Web site, smart phone applications or social media — offers us a great opportunity to listen and interact with current and future clients. We are working to become more engaged in those arenas.



Ed Walls

General manager, Westin Peachtree Plaza

Cost-effective: We are very fortunate to be a part of Starwood Hotels & Resorts. We have leveraged our size and brands to be more cost-effective in purchasing. Where possible, we have created job-sharing to maximize opportunities for our associates to stay fully employed. We have reworked many of our contracts for service to decrease price during lower-volume periods.

Backlash: We have focused on value — some packaging and special offers. We have worked with our group clients, being very flexible with arrival and departure patterns and cancellations. We take a partnership approach with clients, as we are all in this together.

Technology: Our reservation systems continue to evolve and online marketing and sales is a huge part of our strategy. We also have very good state-of-the-art tools for our group customers that make our planners' job much easier.

1. What is your company doing to be more cost-effective and efficient in a difficult market?
2. Considering the current backlash against luxury consumption, how is your company trying to appeal to potential customers who are cutting back on spending?
3. What are the latest ways hospitality-related businesses are using technology to remain competitive?