



CORPORATE GURUS

*A new crop of wellness experts
is showing corporations what motivation and performance
rewards look like in the New Age*

BY ANDREA ZOE ASTER

WHEN CONFERENCE DELEGATES FILE INTO one of Alexandra Villada's iridology sessions, she looks deep into each person's eyes. Iridologists study the patterns in the coloured part of the eye to assess a person's health and happiness levels. Everybody fits into a combination of four general categories. "You're a jewel and a flower," the petite lady with a commanding stare might say. People who are flowers have round patterns, like petals, in the fibres of the iris. They tend to be creative and fear abandonment. Back in the 1980s, Villada was director of sales at both the

Royal Meridien King Edward Hotel and the Crowne Plaza in Toronto. She started her own company, Guru & Associates Corporate Health Services, last June. Since then, with a team of about 20 health professionals, she has provided services such as massage, iridology, stress management and nutritional counselling for corporate retreats, conference sessions, hospitality suites and annual awards banquets. Her colleague, Christine Adelhart, president of Creative Consulting, a meeting and event planning firm in Toronto, has known Villada for 15 years. Adelhart says Villada's eyes used to be brown and now they're blue. Villada confirms this is true and attributes the change not to coloured contact lenses, but to the transformative powers of a spiritual journey.

If that sounds somewhat flaky, consider this. Companies have always invited corporate cult figures and sales gurus to keynote meetings and conferences. The belief is that these oracles of the modern age will dish out a few take-home mantras

FEELING GOOD: Members of Guru & Associates Corporate Health Services, clockwise from top left (with grapes): nutritionist Murat Vardar, stress management consultant David Gellman; rehabilitation therapist Dr. Frank Amodeo; energy clearing "Reiki" therapist Lois Stone; owner Alexandra Villada, meditation specialist Jennifer Via; massage therapist Trinita Bowden; posture realignment "Trigger" practitioner Paul Overy

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and insights to motivate sales staff to sell more. Many companies have recently expanded their rosters of motivational tools and rewards by recognizing that employees who can handle stress, are more productive — which translates into a more profitable bottom line. For meeting and incentive planners considering adding fresh content for a conference session or retreat, or for those toying with more long-term strategies to motivate performance on a daily basis, there is a whole range of effective, if unconventional strategies based on the simple principle that the better people feel, the better a company does.

To cite a few examples, at a recent training session, Canadian Tire in Toronto brought in a consultant to teach employees how to relax with deep-breathing techniques, and Canada Life Assurance in Toronto offers its employees weekly massage. Warren Shepell Consultants Corp., one of Canada's largest employee counselling firms, has just completed a redesign of its head office in Toronto to "revive employee energy," based on the Chinese art of *feng shui*. The firm has added a miniature waterfall to its boardroom and painted it bright red.

The Right Crowd

"Bringing someone like Alexandra to a meeting gives it fresh current content," says Ellen Boddington, conference coordinator at Deloitte & Touche in Toronto. "Of course, it has to be the right kind of meeting." Boddington knows how to effectively incorporate what may be considered unconventional conference content. For a recent three-day national conference for 200 accountants from across Canada, she brought in New Age author and guru Deepak Chopra to speak. The conference theme was building relationships. "Bringing in Chopra to speak rounded out the concept of relationships to include the personal sphere," she says.

Another way of incorporating speakers and sessions on stress reduction and high performance nutrition, is to make it part of the content at an off-site retreat. Annette Redican, director of convention services at Tourism Toronto, brought in Villada and one of her partners to do iridology analysis and stress management



PRE-MILLENNIUM BOARDROOM: Warren Shepell Consultants Corp.'s office gets redesigned with a shot of feng shui energy.

seminars for a one-day, 20-person staff retreat at Eaton Hall Inn & Conference Centre near Toronto last December.

For an off-site retreat where the goal is to relax anyway, using Villada's team was an appropriate match. "Everyone was whucked out, and it was a logical fit to have a day of wellness programs," says Redican. "They're a jaded bunch. They've seen everything and they get invited to everything. It was a good program alternative to the old scavenger

hunt for every type of meeting group. "You need a certain level of sophistication to be open to considering this. "Certain companies, maybe a heavy-weight financial planning conference, they'd write it off before you opened your mouth."

Nevertheless, Villada says her programs work for co-ed delegate groups, and even male-dominated executive teams are receptive to what she does. "I love what I do," says Villada. "Iridology empowers the indi-

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vidual. I asked one big corporate fellow, 'Did you ever think of creative writing?' He's been an accountant for 20 years but he has just read The Celestine Prophecy and he says, 'I'd like to do that,' and I say, 'I know. You don't have the eyes of an accountant.'"

Instead of a Las Vegas-style revue at the next awards dinner, attendees can be treated to a massage or a nutritional consultation, says Villada. "I tell people the most important thing they can do is build up their immune systems. The world is more toxic now. Good nutrition is preventative medicine. But people want minimal change with maximum results. So we call it the modified plan. Eat rye bread. It's better for you than a croissant."

Like Boddington, Redican has reservations about endorsing such program-

ing for every type of meeting group. "You need a certain level of sophistication to be open to considering this. "Certain companies, maybe a heavy-weight financial planning conference, they'd write it off before you opened your mouth."

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