

MEETINGS AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL

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Merging of the Minds

When corporations consolidate, meeting planners face huge change



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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 Meridian King Edward Hotel and the Crown 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 (clockwise): nutritionist Maart Vander, stress management consultant David Gelman, rehabilitative therapist Dr. Frank Amadio, energy clearing "Reiki" therapist Lou Stone, owner Alexandra Villada, meditation specialist Jennifer Via, massage therapist Theresa Bowden, posture management "Tiger" practitioner Paul Overy

Big business has always concentrated on fiscal health, but protecting future fiscal health also means paying attention to the physical health and well-being of key executives and star performers.

Health & Wealth

Stress management programming can be incorporated into meetings or short off-site retreats. But as part of a longer incentive-caliber experience, one hotel in Florida is the first in North America to offer full medical diagnostic testing and stress education. The 891-room Peabody Orlando, across the street from the Orange

County Convention Centre, receives major conference and incentive traffic. Unlike a spa where the goal is to be pampered and relax, the Peabody's program is medically-based. Executives can get a full physical, including cholesterol tests, blood work, cancer- and heart-screening, as well as personal consultations with health professionals. The program works in partner-

ship with the Institute for Corporate Wellness, part of the seven-hospital system in central Florida. Meeting planners can bring groups for the complete three-day program, or create a package that includes healthy cooking classes and workshops where delegates evaluate how well they balance all the different compartments of responsibility in their lives.

"Health is wealth," says Barry Anderson, vice-president of marketing. "Big business has always concentrated on fiscal health, but protecting future fiscal health also means paying attention to the physical health and well-being of key executives and star performers."



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CORPORATE HEALTH: Larry Roofner (right) director of the Orlando Regional Institute for Corporate Wellness.

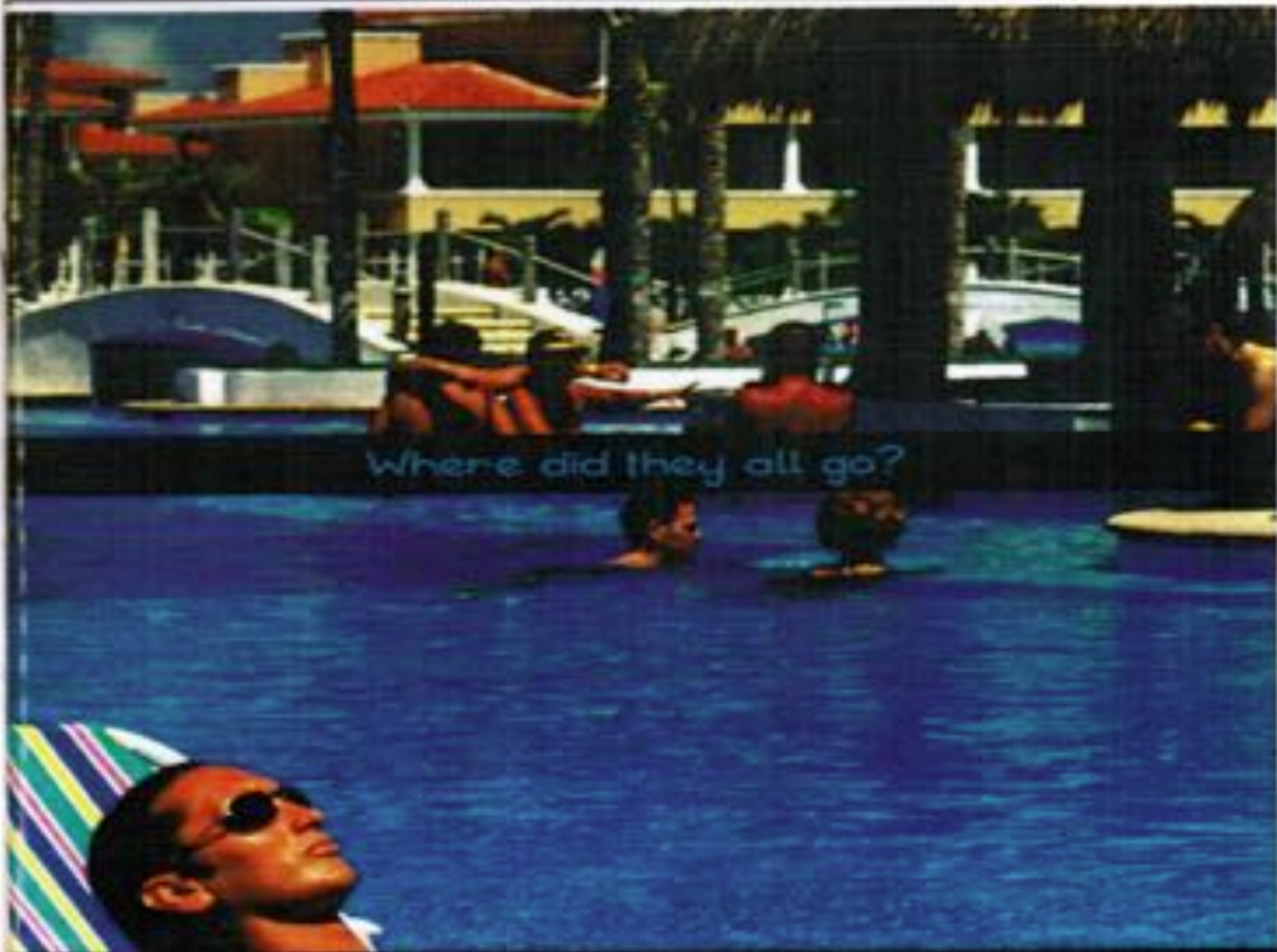
One of the program's most magnetic speakers is Steven Sinatra, a cardiologist who says Latin diving is his favourite way to manage stress in his own life. Sinatra's own father died of a heart attack in his son's arms. He believes the loss of a loved one, or any major heartbreak, has a physiological effect on the heart comparable to heart attack.

"The number one predictor of a heart attack is job dissatisfaction, but that's never included in conventional assessment of risk factors," says Larry Roofner, director of the Orlando Regional Institute for Corporate Wellness. "In the US, a study has shown heart attacks occur most frequently on Monday morning

between eight and nine o'clock. No other animal dies more on one particular day. It doesn't strain anyone's imagination to figure out what's going on. It's the beginning of the work week."

A Motivational Makeover

A fresh coat of paint is about as far as some companies get when revamping office space. Warm Shepel Consultants Corp. is one of Canada's largest employee counselling firms with 300 employees and 1,000 social workers located across the country. At the Toronto head office, there are beach-glass mobiles in the bathrooms, a waterfall in the freshly-painted poppy-red board-



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and insights to motivate sales staff to sell more. Many companies have recently expanded their systems 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 trying 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 consulting 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 revealed our 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 astrology analysis and stress management



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

sessions for a one-day, 20-person staff retreat at Eaton Hall Inn & Conference Center 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 whacked 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. "Intuition empowers the sub-

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lim." Redican says she was surprised by the level of interest in the programming. "A lot of it is common sense," she says. "It's not outlandish. There are simple changes you can make as an individual to increase productivity."

"I'm sure I'm not the only one who always goes to the personal development sessions at conferences," says Adelhart. "But I don't just want to bring in a speaker on stress management anymore. I want practical skills. If I'm scared of flying, a session on learning how to do deep breathing is a practical way to master the problem and that's better take-home value than just a speaker's message."

Like Boddington, Redican has reservations about enforcing such program-

ming. "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 retreat 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."

rooms, and the offices are vibrant colours like juicy apple-green and lavender.

"We'd reached a plateau. The energy level just wasn't as vibrant as it had been and that translates into low productivity," says Charles Benayon, the firm's executive vice-president. At the initiative of forward-thinking vice-chairman, Morris Berchard, the company hired a *feng shui* practitioner named Malca

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"Energy is money, and money is what
makes the world go around."*

Narrel. (She was also the *feng shui* consultant for the design of the new Room flagship store at Toronto's Eaton Centre.) The term means "wind and water" in Chinese. The goal is to increase the chi or energy of a space by

arranging the objects in it in a certain way. A room is divided into nine sections that correspond to a person's dreams and goals, or in the case of an office, the company's mission statement. For example, according to *feng shui* principles, it may be bad luck to put a garbage can in the "wealth" corner.

"When Malca first came, she said she had no idea what our product was," says Benayon. "Our walls were lined with Canadian art. She said she couldn't tell if we were an ad agency or an art collector. Considering our motto is 'making a difference in people's lives' that wasn't good." At Narrel's suggestion that the space reflect the company's motto and vision, Benayon went through 6,000 letters from unsolicited clients that had been sent to the firm over the years and settled on 40 of them to frame and hang on the walls, instead of the art Narrel said was "toxic." "It was a powerful experience for me," says Benayon.

To help employees feel a deeper connection to their company, they each had their picture taken for an employee "Wall of Fame." Beside the fountain in the rd boardroom, the lobby windows were replaced with frosted glass, so people couldn't see off the elevator and see straight into the boardroom. Plants and mirrors scattered throughout the office added warmth and a cozy feel. Employees who had desks in their offices facing a wall, were instructed to rearrange their furniture. Having your back to the door supposedly dissipates energy.

"At three in the afternoon, I used to be ready for a nap," says internal systems auditor Vijayantee Ramkumar about one month after the recent renovation. "Now I'm energized around this time."

Nevertheless, for all the talk of *chi* and *feng shui*, it's not like companies are jumping on some hippie caravan and losing sight of why they're adopting these effective, if unconventional methods of motivation and recognition. Benayon's new office is located in the "wealth and prosperity" corner, with a small soft-light lamp to generate extra energy. "Energy is money," says Benayon, "and money is what makes the world go around." ■■■■



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