



## Don't Forget Fun

For the past seven years, nearly 200 suppliers and employees have converged for four days of education, training, networking, team building and motivation in Pennsylvania.

BY DIAN BARBER

**W**ith just basic items—a couple of pool noodles, plastic sheeting and a roll of tape—your team is challenged to not only build a boat that floats, but carry one member across a pool. Team cohesion and its requisite skills of communication, collaboration, creativity and resourcefulness are quickly and starkly evident: Does it sink or float? Challenging, yes, but also a lot of fun.

"I think I giggled the whole time," says Kate Stockton, CMP (MPI Philadelphia Area Chapter), president of Stockton & Partners, an event planning, meeting management and destination management company in Philadelphia.

This is the sort of team-building event that her team planned for alphabroder, the leading distributor of brandable sportswear and accessories in North America, for its 2013 National Sales Meeting and Supplier Marketplace (NSM), held at The Hotel Hershey (Penn.), a retreat-like setting easily accessible from corporate headquarters in Philadelphia.

"While some team members are building the boat, other team members can go out and play games like cornhole and throw the loop on the peg to win dollars to buy more stuff," she says. "As all of this is going on back and forth, they have to build a boat, they have to name their team, they have to decorate the boat, they have

to present a song or something about their boat and then that boat has to make it across the swimming pool with a team member on it. It was hilarious! And, oh my gosh, it was the most fun."

Jason Buchanan, senior vice president of sales for alphabroder, cites the 2013 NSM as one of his most memorable and favorite events.

"It is hard to pick one...[but] my favorite was the September 2013 NSM, where we were bringing our company together as 'ONE.' Not only did [Stockton & Partners] do a fantastic job assisting in the theme and helping us to visualize the move from four divisions to one company, they provided a great team-building event," Buchanan says. "The boat-building contest was awesome on several fronts. It truly was a memorable and collaborative event. I would definitely do this event again!"

### BUILDING SUCCESS

"Our industry is a team sport," declares Debra Mosser, sales manager for the Sheraton Philadelphia Society Hill Hotel, the location of the 2014 alphabroder NSM and



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upcoming 2015 event. This year, the Supplier Marketplace component will be held at the Pennsylvania Convention Center.

Stockton & Partners is an event company that understands that concept very well; an event is a team effort and anyone building a team challenge for an event must understand the clients' expectations and objectives, but also has to have a solid, cohesive team themselves.

"The key to success in every business is having the best people ever work for you. And we do," Stockton says. "I am the creative partner and my business partner Jennie Udell (MPI Philadelphia Area Chapter) leads the logistical charge for this meeting. First and foremost, it is her knowledge and her real dedication to getting the best that we can get for our customer and for the event itself. She has great relationships in the indus-

try and that makes a big difference."

In addition, Stockton & Partners has a great support team that handles all elements of the NSM from creating the team-challenge events, contracting print work, menu creation, registration and myriad other details that define a successful event.

On both the client and supplier side of alphabrod-er's NSM, relationships are also a key component for a successful event.

"There isn't another company out there. Kate and team are so personable it is like dealing with family," Buchanan says. "She takes great pride in



**KATE STOCKTON, CMP**

President,  
Stockton & Partners  
MPI Philadelphia  
Area Chapter

## WHAT I LEARNED

"Clients are looking for and need the place where great execution crosses with great content and interactive, smart, creative engagement. This is where the [meeting and event] industry is. For this event, [success] is unquestionably what happens with the sales team. If they walk away and they are actively talking about the new product, what the new pricing structure looks like, to have those conversations means that we have succeeded in exciting these people."

making sure we are 100 percent satisfied with the plan and they walk you through, step-by-step, leading in to the event. Once the event gets there, we all know the play-book, so it's just about execution. Her team makes a stressful and important event easy."

The staff at the Sheraton understands the critical value of relationships as well.

"We built a great relationship with Kate and her team and look forward to welcoming the group back," Mosser says. "Kate's input is very important because we feel each event is unique. The pre-planning stages are critical to us and Kate is our biggest asset. With her guidance, we uncover objectives and put a plan in place to exceed expectations."

#### **COLLABORATION**

During each year's NSM, Stockton and her stakeholders meet to discuss next year's NSM.

"We hold the property, we try to think ahead," she says. "Hold the space and then we sort of fill out how we think things are



going to happen and then as we get the bones of it together, we get to sit down with the customer and start talking about it: 'So what happens this year? What are you looking forward to next year? What were your challenges and do we want to talk about them?' And we just have this discussion, sort of a state-of-the-union kind of meeting, if you will, to think about what's coming down the pipe, 'Are there going to be acquisitions for you or are you releasing a

new product?' and we kind of put those all together and come up with what we think [it's] going to be. And sometimes it happens really easily and sometimes it takes a long time to kind of grind through everything to come up and distill it down into something that we can express."

And sometimes, it is that 1 percent spark of inspiration that comes from the 99 percent of perspiration that ignites the process.

"[We] still have to hash it out, but it is



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EXHIBITORS SMILE**

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**DOUG SCHACTEL**

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great to be on the same wave length," Buchanan says. "[Kate] is so in tune with our business when we hear the message we both have that 'light-bulb' moment and then we are off and running."

How do you attune the event to not only the needs of the client, but also its attendees? Within alphabroder, there is a very diverse group of people, ranging from 20-somethings to 60-somethings; people who work very hard, are sincere about delivering to their customers and have a great sense of humor; road warriors and people who sit at a desk all day; people that need assistance and marathon runners. You have to wow them. Stockton's most memorable and sentimental favorites were during the 2011, 2012 and 2013 NSM.

When alphabroder rebranded their logo and moved from four divisions into "ONE," Stockton & Partners put a great deal of creative thought and fun into the content of the opening for the 2013 NSM. With a beautiful Plexiglas set, different parts lit up and the set unfolded into a different word as each member of the C-suite came up and spoke

about being part of one company, one mission, one team.

During the 2013 NSM awards dinner, the winners walked up from the audience to the stage on a red carpet, complete with paparazzi, to shake the president's hand amid cheers from the audience. The event took place at The Hotel Hershey's massive garden on one side of a fountain. As the ceremony ended, fireworks were shot off from the other side.

In 2012, a year that challenged many companies' spirit, the NSM opened with a remake of the opening court scene of *A Few Good Men*, but starring the executive team with a flipped script to fit the company message of holding the line on pricing. For the 2011 NSM at the Hyatt at The Bellevue, the curtains opened to a panel of top customers—a first as customers had never been invited to an NSM before—with TV host Tucker Carlson as moderator for a discussion on what makes a great sales relationship.

Stockton calls this a "rubber-hits-the-road" kind of moment, an opportunity to

receive real, valuable feedback. In addition, these events got attendees abuzz with conversation, a palpable metric of success for an event.

"Clients are looking for and need the place where great execution crosses with great content and interactive, smart, creative engagement," Stockton says. "This is where the [meeting and event] industry is. For this event, [success] is unquestionably what happens with the sales team. If they walk away and they are actively talking about the new product, what the new pricing structure looks like, to have those conversations means that we have succeeded in exciting these people."

Stockton & Partners view a post-event e-survey of attendees as critical in defining the success of the NSM.

"We take those very seriously and our client does as well," she says.

Great content, an awesome team, great meeting architecture, delivering the giggle and the wow are a kind of seamless magic that makes an event successful. ■



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