



# talking points

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***Texas Meetings + Events'*** Editorial Advisory Board  
 disusses the economy, secret shoppers and the  
 challenges managing Generation Y.  
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*TEXAS MEETINGS + EVENTS* MAGAZINE convened its  
 Editorial Advisory Board (EAB) last fall to discuss the  
 trends, issues and challenges facing the industry today.  
 It was a lively discussion, full of jokes and laughter, but  
 there was plenty to be serious about, too—and the  
 economy was only the beginning. • Moderating the panel  
 was Barbara Knox (BK), editorial director of the  
 meetings + events publishing group.

EAB MEMBERS ATTENDING  
 THE ROUNDTABE WERE:

- Andy Austin (AA)**, Lite Dallas
- Denise Stokes (DeS)**, Frisco Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Cindy Lo (CL)**, Red Velvet Events Inc.
- Rob Keating (RK)**, Quest Drape
- Marla Watson-Werst (MW)**, Peapod Productions
- Chris Arredondo (CA)**, Eclipse Entertainment
- Kevin Foster (KF)**, Conference and Catering Consulting Service
- Yvette Audrain (YA)**, Pappas Catering
- Dayne Sullivan (DS)**, Adventures LLC
- Jenny B. Davis (JD)**, Editor, *Texas Meetings + Events*

## ► The Economy

**BK:** What are you seeing out there in terms of the economy?

**YA:** People have a lot shorter lead time. They're not willing to sign a contract and commit to something so far out. So I think you have to adapt your business model to be able to respond to your clients' needs in a shorter time frame and that just needs to be your way of doing business.

**DeS:** I think a lot of companies are waiting until they know they have the finances to back the meeting, so it's not another AIG sitting back there going, you know, "We just spent \$400,000 after we got bailed out in '81."

**BK:** What does that short notice do for you as a business person?

**DS:** You know, I used to book things three, four years in advance for national sales meetings. Now we're one year out.

**YA:** During that time when maybe the phone isn't ringing...You need to be calling and be out and about.

**MW:** I agree...People might be sparked to think about what they want to do with you next...I always get a really good response after doing something like that...As far as regular networking, get out and go to all your different industry events.

## Marketing

**MW:** Put some e-blasts together, put together some of your best pictures of maybe your most recent event, a little blurb, a write-up—almost newsletter style. You can even go to the Internet and use Constant Contact or something like that to make it easy on yourself. Put it in your news format and e-blast it out to everybody you've got. I also highly recommend getting involved in social networking groups, because I think that people see you and they remember you, and they go, "Oh, yeah, Andy does this," or, "Oh, yeah, Yvette does this" or "Cindy does that," and it reminds them to use your services again. I believe in LinkedIn for business professionals. I think Facebook is very good, because it's not too overdone and it's easy enough for everybody to understand. I do think it's important if you don't have a website to put yourself on MySpace. And as far as regular networking, get out and go to all your different industry events.

**YA:** One thing that I think there's a misconception about is that networking is expensive. With almost every organization that I'm a part of, there's an educational meeting or a happy hour or just some

sort of gathering that doesn't require any sort of investment, where you'll still have access to people to pick their brains.

**RK:** And another thing I've learned is if you're going to join these groups, join a committee. Otherwise, you'll get lost. Get on the program committee. You'll get your name out there. You won't be lost in the numbers.

**CA:** You do have to network, you do have to run your business, you have to write proposals, but the most important thing I've learned is you've got to balance it, because it's easy to get burned out.

## Doing Business

**YA:** Sometimes you have to simplify what you're offering. So maybe given all the time in the world, you might be able to come up with the most creative solution for something. But you know what? We have some standard packages that if somebody needs us to respond quickly, I know that this can be produced in this time, I know it can be staffed in this time. It's still a great event. It might not be the most creative thing, but it allows us to respond to that and just make it part of our business model.

**RK:** Another thing is, give them a certain deadline. Like for me, they may think the drape is just sitting on the shelves. Well, I've got nine other cities, and I just don't have 1,000 feet of red drape waiting for them, because I'm going to have to get it from Miami. So I need to know by Tuesday of the following week if you want it or not, because I have to have it shipped. So you have to be proactive with them and push them a little bit, because they'll drag it out until the day before.

**YA:** I think it's also important to know what distinguishes you and what your added value is that doesn't necessarily just pop out to somebody. Because people are thinking hard about where they're spending their money, and they might not be the ultimate decision maker. So I need to prepare [that person] with the power phrases and the tools that set my company apart so that when she goes to the decision maker, she's able to sway him in our direction.

## The Hotel Industry

**BK:** Kevin, you've been active in the hotel industry for many years—give us a sense of what's going on in that industry right now, challenges, exciting news, trends.

**KF:** Everything has been very, very last minute—[making it] difficult for hotels to forecast and plan for the future. It's making it tougher for the owners

of the hotels to make those decisions, whether to renovate or to build another hotel in this area or whatever it may be.

**BK:** And how are hotel occupancy rates?

**KF:** Pretty steady for right now.

**BK:** Are the meeting people coming up with new, “We have to have this,” requests? Looking for value-adds?

**KF:** After 9/11 it was that way. Just recently, we were doing OK, and then now things are kind of going the other direction again. The industry is starting to focus more and more on the inquiry call. [When this] comes in, they’re focusing on more now how that call is handled, where it used to be you’d get the answering machine, and hopefully somebody would call you back in a couple of days, now hotels are starting to focus on some more standards of how that inquiry is being handled, because they know how important it is, obviously, when we’re calling or when their customer is calling. So one of the services I offer is basically—I will call the hotel and be like a mystery shopper, if you want to call it that. And there’s a set of standards, and we grade it, and we send it off to them.

**CL:** I have secret shoppers that work for me. They call in and tell me how my assistant’s doing.

**YA:** What you said about being responsive to the guests, we secure a tremendous amount of business because people tell us all the time, “Well, you all answer the phone.” We secret shop everybody else a couple times a year, and it’s astonishing to us how often those calls just don’t get returned, or even once they do—you know, we’ve said, “Hey, I want to book an event with you,” and we can’t get a proposal.

## Customer Service

**MW:** Two of my most recent clients called me and I said, “Hey, what made you choose me?” “Well, we liked your website, but you also were the one that called us back.” And it blew me away. As we got to be better friends, I would kind of ask them, “Who else did you call? Because I’m curious.”

**DeS:** You know what else really works? Shoot me an e-mail. I mean, I keep a list of editors that do not e-mail me back, because those are people that I know that if I can’t get what I want or what I need now, at this point, then what’s the use in me sending another e-mail and hoping and waiting and wishing? I’m way too busy for that. Really, I keep a list of people that do not respond, and I just think

it’s really bad business all the way around.

**RK:** And even send an e-mail that says, “I received what you’re looking for. I’m busy right now, but to let you know, I will be working on it,” so they didn’t drift off into the socks-in-the-dryer world.

**YA:** One thing also that I think you have to be very wary of is when times are good, sometimes people can be dismissive. You called me with an event that’s not even in the price range—you know, you have to treat those people with as much respect—and whether I’m referring them to a lower-price vendor or helping them by answering a question, even if it’s not ultimately going to result in a sale for me at that time, you can’t dismiss them. Especially in the situation of a hotel. Like maybe you are a Four Seasons and someone comes to you and they’re not even close to your budget. Well, guess what—you don’t know what company they’re going to be working for in six months or a year and they might not be that person in charge of the budget that can afford you and won’t do business with you.

## Catering

**YA:** The consumer is more discerning now. In the Tex Mex segment of what we do, we’re already in the very, very top end of the Tex Mex segment. So our profit margin gets smaller, we look for ways to manage our business just a little bit better on every event as opposed to looking for one big silver bullet. Because we offer multi-concept menus, we’re making sure that we have something within the price points that we want to be able to sell at. For our Monday-through-Friday business, we’re pushing a lot of our barbecue menus right now because it’s efficient and it doesn’t require as much labor.

## Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs)

**DeS:** I truly believe CVBs are still very much pulling their weight—they’re still booking the events and getting the proverbial heads in beds. And a lot of cities should be a lot more grateful that they have CVBs that are working on their behalf.

**MW:** If you don’t have a good relationship with your CVB, I feel like you’re almost hurting yourself because those are the people that are on the front lines for you every day.

## Lighting

**AA:** Trends we’ve seen in the last year, some companies are buying some of their own equip-

ment in-house, because they're getting smarter. So if a projector is \$10,000 and you charge \$2,500 to rent it, they're like, "We'll just buy our own." Instead of renting a lot of the gear, a lot of them have their own in-house gear. Then they don't know how to work it or maintain it, so they're hiring us to do that, and it still comes back around.

## Drape

**RK:** What we're finding is drape is kind of the new decor. It's a lot less expensive. I can wrap a whole ballroom in white lighting and then have them call Andy, and he can up-light it, and they've probably saved themselves \$25,000 on decor...When they say, "Well, what can you do with drape?" Then you start talking to them, you're like, "Well, let's wrap the screen with a screen surround, let's do some 22-foot columns and Andy can put lights on them. Let's do drape on drape and tie it off like an hour glass. Let's wrap it around the room." With drape you've really got to educate them.

## Going Green

**BK:** Do you actually get questions from clients? Do they grill you about green?

**AA:** We are now—the corporations, not individuals. But corporations definitely are asking. They're looking—"We've been told to hire a green company. Do you recycle?" Yeah, sure. They just go off of a list.

## Staffing

**AA:** In the beginning, when we started this company, it was trying to keep all of our staff extremely happy. And weekly we were like, "What are your complaints?" The biggest complaint was scheduling: "We can't get our schedules in advance." And we kept, as owners, going, "We apologize. We're working on that. We're working on it," until we finally figured out we can't because of the industry, especially with these late bookings. Instead of trying to work on it, we just had to educate them and train them on the way this industry works. Instead of saying, "We're going to try to get schedules out," it's, "If you can understand how this works, if you want to be a part of this life"... because we want to keep the same staff on. We don't want the revolving door.

**YA:** One of our selling points is our staff likes to work for us. They don't come from staffing agencies. They all understand the Pappas culture and what we stand for. And something else that we do

that I don't know of any other caterer in town that does it is we want to run a criminal background check on every employee of ours. It is a condition of their offer of employment.

**KF:** That's one of the biggest things right now for the hotel side is just trying to keep staff and keep the labor. I don't know if it's the younger generation that's coming through right out of college thinking that it's okay to change jobs in five years.

## Generations X and Y

**CL:** As a business owner, my biggest problem is retention. And first I thought it was pay, so I changed that. No, it's not pay. It's something else. Clearly, I was like—either I'm not creating a culture that makes you guys want to stay, or you find that, yeah, there are more important reasons to leave.

**DeS:** In Frisco, one of our hotels is the Comfort Suites, and the general manager is a graduate of Texas Tech, where there's a hospitality management program. So the manager teamed up with Texas Tech to get people to come to work for him, to help him with the grand opening or to come on for a full-time job. But he said he's had no problems with staffing because he reached out to his alma mater.

**CL:** We've had our [internship] program for about, I guess, now a year and a half, maybe two years, and it's a pretty rigorous process.

**MW:** One of my big soapbox things is that we have to blend the generations: The baby boomers [who] are still working, the millennials and then the Gen-Xers and Y'ers in between. We all operate differently. But we're all finally figuring out how to cohesively work together, and that's got to be the biggest push in our industry—to teach the generations to work together. And I also feel very strongly that the millennials may be good at what they do, but they are incredibly bad at people skills ... they expect, expect, expect because Mom and Dad gave it to them. I feel like they think that they're going to be the corporate CEO within 15 minutes.

**RK:** A lot of the MPI meetings recently I've gone to, we're seeing people that are 23, 24 years old, and you're talking to them, and it's like, you haven't paid your dues. And they're like, "Oh, I'm so tired. I went and partied last night." You don't have any idea what the industry is like. You're in for a rude awakening, you know? 