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# Diversity Matters

Got CDMP?  
It's a Matter  
of Ethics and  
Economics

By Steve Winston

“Diversity.” It’s a loaded word, these days. There’s even some debate as to what, exactly, it really does mean. But no one can dispute that it’s become one of the most frequently used words in the English language lately — especially in business. No one can dispute that progressive companies are not only thinking about diversity more, but also implementing programs that are teaching their work force what it means in the business world. And no one can dispute, either, that this word has profound implications for the meetings industry and its planners.

Diversity in America? To some, it sounds almost redundant. We are, of course, the most diverse nation in the world, with more ethnic, religious and cultural groups and traditions than any other country in the world.

It might surprise you, then, to know that, as far as the meetings industry is concerned, we lag way behind other countries — particularly Europe — in understanding what diversity means, and in implementing it in ways that can generate more business for all of us.

The fact is, diversity matters more than ever in the business world. And it matters more than ever in the meetings world.

“When it comes to the meetings industry — and to most other industries — the nations of Europe are much more diverse than the U.S.,” said Margaret Gonzalez, president of the International Association of Hispanic Meeting Professionals (IAHMP), based in League City, TX, with chapters in Mexico and Portugal. “European countries have to understand diversity, because they’re much smaller...and much closer to each other. So people who live in those countries are exposed to a lot of different people and different cultures. And meeting planners in those countries always take that into consideration when planning events.”



Graduates of the Certified Diversity Meeting Professional accreditation program: Classes and exams are given each year at the International Association of Hispanic Meeting Professionals' annual conference.

Left photo courtesy of IAHP; Right photo courtesy of Diggpicphoto.com

## Certified Diversity Meeting Professional

Gonzalez has a front-row seat on the diversity issue, because IAHP offers the newest certification in the meetings industry. It's called the CDMP — Certified Diversity Meeting Professional.

Gonzalez, who was one of the founders of IAHP, conceived of and developed the certification program for diversity. Two years ago, she met Linda Pereira, a noted European meetings professional, who was looking for a diversity certification program for the university classes she was teaching in Lisbon, Portugal. Pereira and her university came on board as a sponsor of Gonzalez's program, and Pereira was soon teaching the course. And the rest, as they say, is history.

In fact, there aren't many people in the U.S. better-equipped to run a diversity certification program than



Margaret Gonzalez, president of the International Association of Hispanic Meeting Professionals.

Photo courtesy of IAHP

Margaret Gonzalez. Her family came to Mexico from Spain a few hundred years ago, and has been in Texas for five generations.

"Yet, even though I'm a native-born American," she said, "I noticed in high school that, whenever a Hispanic girl applied for membership in one of the social clubs, she was generally rejected. So I started my own club, called the Cinderellas. And I wasn't lonely, because it soon became the most popular club in school."

Old stereotypes die hard, she said. And this is so in the meetings industry as much as any other.

"Because I'm Hispanic — and I might have been eating with a Hispanic group — I've been told by servers that 'we'll put some salsa on the table for you,'" Gonzalez said. "It didn't seem to matter to them that we were having a prime rib dinner!"

She's still partnering with Pereira, now the CEO of L&I Communications Group as well as the executive director of CPL Events, both in Lisbon, to prove the economic benefits of a true

understanding of diversity. Pereira has a very distinguished background, and is certified in a number of areas, including: certified PCO (Professional Congress Organizer) and a certified Strategic Meeting Planner for NATO. And she's mentored 44 people, from all over the world, who have now earned the CDMP certification.

"Many of us say the right words," Pereira said, "but we're a long way from implementing them — particularly in the U.S. We defend inclusiveness, but we still have very much a 'my way or no way' attitude. And most American meetings outside the U.S. are still 'American' meetings; it's often so difficult to convince the planners to try new practices, new foods and new schedules. I often look at some of these meetings and think to myself, 'Why don't they just do them in the U.S.?'"

Pereira said that many companies refer to themselves as “international” or “world” for economic reasons only, rather than actually implementing diversity practices. However, she believes, these companies are soon found out. And they’re hurting themselves economically in the long run, because, in a global economy, they’re always reactive, instead of proactive. She said that this type of company will always be trying to catch up, rather than setting the pace. And it will cost them a lot of money.

Many American companies and planners, she said, are in this category.

### ‘Startling Incidents Of Ignorance’

“I can give you a lot of startling incidents of ignorance in our industry,” said Pereira. “But here are just two. An American group was holding their meeting on Madeira Island in Portugal, in a four-star hotel. They insisted that the chef of the hotel be woken up — at 3 a.m. — to cook them some burgers and fries. And they didn’t want to pay extra for the service!

“In another incident, there was a hotel manager who would not allow his reception staff to speak Spanish — even when the clients were Spanish. This, he told me, would lower the ‘tone’ of the hotel.”

As a result of practices such as these, Pereira is a devoted missionary of the CDMP certification. This course focuses on all the technical requirements of meeting planning, but also adds a strong component of cultural awareness and meeting-planning skills for international meetings or an international delegate base. Interestingly, it’s not just planners taking it; there have been teachers, university professors, executive secretaries, convention bureau staff, hotel managers and others with a vested interest in the meetings/hospitality area — and in furthering their careers in it. And requests for information have come from countries such as China (before the 2008 summer Olympics), Russia (which is hosting the next winter Olympics), Croatia, Mexico and Italy.

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Margaret Gonzalez  
President  
International Association of Hispanic  
Meeting Professionals  
League City, TX

### The Business Case For Understanding Diversity

Michael Smith is vice president of convention sales for Travel Portland, the marketing arm of the Portland (OR) Convention & Visitors Bureau. He recently became certified as a CDMP — the first CVB executive in America to do so. And his reasons for taking the course are interesting.



Kowana Ragland, CMP  
Director of Meetings  
Meeting Expectations Inc.  
Atlanta, GA

*“If you’re going to do business with people from all over the world, you’d better learn how to more effectively service them. ...In this new global economy, this is not an option — it’s a necessity.”*

“Portland’s known as a very open, accepting kind of place,” Smith said. “And the reputation is correct. We still have a problem in this area, however...and it’s not because we don’t want to be culturally aware. It’s because, simply, we’re not a city with a large minority population, and we’re not surrounded by the multicultural influences that people in some other cities take for granted. I took the course because we want to be a bigger player in the meetings industry. And we want diverse groups to feel at home here — whether they’re from Osaka or from Omaha.”

Smith said that his bureau, in order to be a player in the international meetings market, needs to understand the preferences and requirements of different groups, including their cuisines and cultural mores.

“For example,” said Smith, “we learned that Hispanic groups tend to bring their families more often – so you need to plan things for their families along with the meetings. We also learned about giving a translated speech to an international audience in which most of the attendees don’t speak English...and that sometimes the translation doesn’t come out the way you want it to. And we learned that the casual, informal American way of telling jokes at meetings doesn’t generally translate well with foreign audiences.”

Smith noted that, although Portland is generally not considered a top-tier convention city — especially for international groups — it's taking the lead in this important area. And it's educating Portland businesses in the meetings or hospitality industries about the need to raise the awareness of their staffs.

Gonzalez pointed out that this education can be more complex than most of us realize, because there are many sub-groups. For example, many Anglos tend to perceive Hispanics as one group. However, within that one group are various sub-groups, such as Mexican-Americans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, etc. And each of those groups has different customs, different cuisines, different concerns and different ways of getting together.

"The course and the test for the CDMP certainly raise your awareness," said Smith, "and certainly give you the resources to figure out some of the answers and new approaches. The instructor (Linda Pereira) wouldn't let us get away with a thing! And the test is very challenging; everybody in that room was sweating it out."

## Minorities Within Minorities

African-American women in business are members of two minorities — and they, too, can tell us about "sweating it out."

Kowana Ragland, CMP, is director of meetings for Meeting Expectations, an association-management firm and third-party planner based in Atlanta, GA. She's been in the meetings business for nearly 20 years, and, while she's seen great progress, she believes that much more progress remains to be made. Ragland has been fairly lucky; she has only experienced overt racism once as a planner. She was planning a meeting in the South for an association whose members were almost all white men, and whose past presidents had all been white men. And, apparently, this organization was not expecting to work with an African-American female.

"I extended my hand to one of the board members," Ragland said. "And he wouldn't take it."

Ragland, though, didn't take it personally. Instead, she sees such actions as indicative of an unwillingness to learn, and to adapt to the new realities in a global and connected business world.

"It's only common sense," Ragland said. "Learning and embracing new knowledge helps you grow, not only as a person, but as a professional. And if you're going to do business with people from all over the world, you'd better learn how to more effectively service them, and to relate to them as individuals and to their needs as a group. For any business that wants to participate in this new global economy, this is not an option — it's a necessity."

She says one indicator of progress in the industry is the number of African-American meeting planners, which has been steadily increasing in recent years.

"There are all sorts of growing meeting markets out there," Ragland says, "markets like Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean. And if we don't learn how to see beyond the color of people's skin or the shape of their eyes — or to embrace their cultures — we're going to be at a great disadvantage as meeting professionals."

Jeanne Darling, events and sponsorship manager for the Chicago Association of Realtors, is also African-American. She, too, believes that the drive for diversity is more important than ever before, because it's an economic as well as a moral issue now. Occasionally, when Darling goes to scout out a hotel or other facility, she still receives a cold shoulder from the management. However, she's seeing this occur far less than it used to. Hotels are becoming more aware, and more sensitive.

"The reason is simple," Darling said. "The economy. In a very real sense, the economy is what's propelling the drive for diversity. We're all having the same issues. We're all in this together. And I think people are beginning to realize that we're all going to sink or swim together. It's simply bad business to be closed-minded, or to resist change that might help us all do better. Otherwise you're really limiting yourself."

*"Most American meetings outside the U.S. are still 'American' meetings; it's often so difficult to convince the planners to try new practices, new foods and new schedules. I often...think to myself, 'Why don't they just do them in the U.S.?'"*

Linda Pereira, PCO  
Executive Director, CPI Events  
Lisbon, Portugal

She, too, noted that the concept of diversity is broader than some might realize; it's not just about one group, or selected groups. It's being respectful to any group — and having some understanding of them — with whom you might come in contact.



Photo courtesy of Travel Portland

*"I took the course because we want to be a bigger player in the meetings industry. And we want diverse groups to feel at home here — whether they're from Osaka or from Omaha."*

Michael Smith, CDMP  
Vice President, Convention Sales  
Portland, OR

"If people of a certain country or race or religion don't feel comfortable with your association," said Darling, "it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that your attendance will be lower. And how are we ever going to enhance our economy — and our own job security — if we limit the amount of people who may want to come to our meetings?"

The CDMP

"Certification is far more common internationally than in the U.S.," said Michael Smith of Travel Portland. "But we're the ones who need it most — because we're the ones with the most diverse population. It wouldn't hurt anyone in our industry to look into it."

After Smith applied to take the course, he began receiving manuals and reference materials in the mail from the International Association of Hispanic Meeting Professionals a few months before sitting for the exam. The exam is given each year at IAHP's annual conference. Smith attended the organization's December 2009 conference in Denver. There, he and fellow applicants took a one-day class that emphasized a hands-on approach to subjects such as international meetings, trends in meeting planning, technology, client attitude and more. The test was given the next day.



Jeanne Darling  
Events & Sponsorship Manager  
Chicago Association of Realtors  
Chicago, IL

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According to IAHP, certification is designed “to increase the professionalism of meeting management professionals in the fields of diversity and sustainability issues.” The exam presumes professional experience of two to three years in organizing international meetings and incentives.

The exam consists of questions selected by the CDMP Education Committee from the overall course content, in three parts: 20 multiple-choice questions, five short-answer questions and an essay. Some of the topics covered include:

- Developing a budget.
- Site selection.
- Characteristics and demographics of meeting participants.
- Awareness of diversity issues (e.g., accessibility, cultural sensitivity, holidays, food preferences, etc.).
- Multiculturalism of delegates.
- Creating diversity-aware educational programs.
- International protocol and etiquette.
- International VIP diversity management (e.g., international etiquette and protocol issues).
- Characteristics and demographics of meeting participants.
- Designing programs that can meet the needs of participants of different cultural backgrounds.
- Developing marketing plans for different markets.

### **Sink Or Swim**

It's simple, really. If the rest of the world is embracing diversity, associations that want to remain relevant will embrace it as well.

“Competition among meeting destinations is ferocious,” Pereira said, “and, for planners, keeping a close eye on our meeting budgets is more important than ever. We can't afford to close ourselves off from potential business.

“We either become culturally aware,” she added, “or we sink.” **AC&F**