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(L-R) Shawn McGowan, senior director of F&B for full-service brands, Hilton Hotels Corporation; Gary Steffen, VP, brand performance, Doubletree; and Don Molinich, executive chef, Doubletree Paradise Valley Resort.

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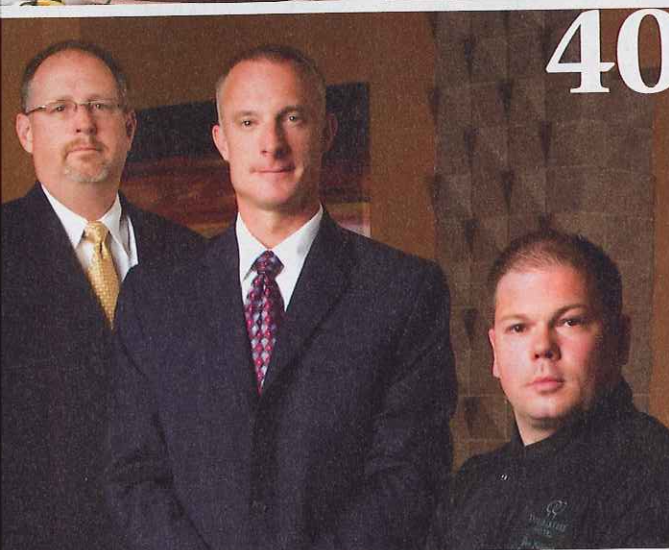
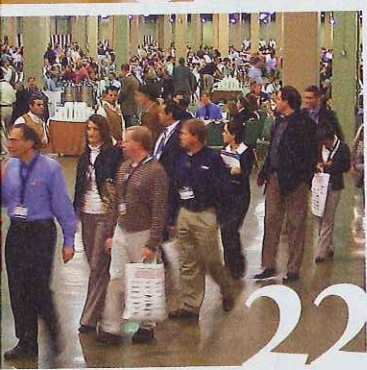
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TWICE As Nice

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COVER: (L-R) Shawn McGowan, senior director of F&B for full-service brands, Hilton Hotels Corporation; Gary Steffen, VP, brand performance, Doubletree; and Don Molinich, executive chef, Doubletree Paradise Valley Resort. [Photo by Michael Mertz]

SUCCESSFUL SCOUTING

An event for thousands at Gaylord Opryland takes a year of planning for a day of perfection. BY MICHAEL COSTA

Sometimes it takes more than in-house organization for a hotel's mega-event to succeed. Often, it takes a road trip. Not the summer vacation kind, but the kind that Diane Skrabec specializes in. She's the catering manager at Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center in Nashville, and part of her job is to scout future clients at other venues—months before they arrive at Opryland.

"I take lots of photos, watch the setups, observe the flow of the buffet, and record notes. I note rushes and when business dies down," says Skrabec, who put those skills to work when she scouted Rockwell Automation's convention in Chicago a year before Rockwell brought their Automation Fair to Opryland.

What follows is a timeline of the months spent planning for the Rockwell event, ending with a lunch buffet for nearly 10,000 people. The hard work paid off, since Rockwell gave Opryland the highest feedback scores possible—all fives on a one-to-five scale.

"We strive for five, and Rockwell said if we had six on our scale, they would've given it to us," says Vincent Dreffs, director of catering operations at Opryland.

NOVEMBER 2007-MARCH 2008: SCOUTING AND SCHEMATICS

Skrabec flew to Chicago, where Rockwell was holding its annual Automation Fair at McCormick Place, the largest convention center in the United States. She toured the facilities with McCormick's F&B staff and met with Rockwell representatives, where she "was able to bond with the client, take them to dinner, and hone ideas right on the spot," Skrabec says. She was able to watch the event unfold live, gathering logistical details to take back to Opryland. Among her observations were:

- ◆ Wait time for the buffet averaged 10-12 minutes.
- ◆ A bottleneck formed around the 10-station dessert buffet.
- ◆ A comparison of actual guest consumption levels against the amount of food purchased by McCormick Place.
- ◆ Observing staff hold "closed" signs in front of buffets that needed replenishing, directing guest traffic away from the area.

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TOP: Gaylord Opryland Catering Manager Diane Skrabec scouted this group of nearly 10,000 people at another venue a year before they came to her hotel for a lunch buffet. **LOWER LEFT:** A year of planning this mega-buffet paid off for Opryland, resulting in the highest guest satisfaction scores possible. **LOWER RIGHT:** To feed nearly 10,000 people, the culinary staff at Gaylord Opryland prepared 9,000 pounds of chicken breast, 1,100 pounds of green beans, 2,075 pounds of potatoes, and much more.

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"Seeing the execution from an operational standpoint is huge. I can compare and contrast immediately and decide how we'll execute with the same group," Skrabec says.

When she returned to Nashville, Skrabec shared notes, photos, and observations with Gaylord Opryland's culinary, stewarding, banquet, and conference setup staffs. Those departments took inventory of supplies, and purchasing budgets were developed for additional equipment needed. Other plans at this stage included:

- ◆ Adding more seats in order to turn tables efficiently. McCormick used 7,000 seats; Opryland initially planned to use 4,900 but added more through existing inventory.
- ◆ Increasing the number of dessert buffet stations to 12 in order to avoid the backup of McCormick's 10 stations.
- ◆ Developing a plan to transport food efficiently from different kitchens at the resort. Since kitchens at McCormick Place were on the same floor as the dining hall, food transportation was not an issue there.
- ◆ Adding the "closed" sign concept to each of the 30 double-sided buffets at Opryland and scheduling employees to hold the signs during lunch.

"At first I wasn't a huge fan of the signs, but Rockwell responded to them in Chicago, and they really helped the flow of the buffet," Skrabec says.

APRIL-MAY 2008: FINISHING THE DIAGRAMS

During these two months, Skrabec, Dreffs, and the rest of Opryland's team finalized the blueprint for the dining hall, including the number of buffet lines, table setups, centerpieces, and recycle bins. They also sent a box of disposable samples to Rockwell, and after the client made their selections, Opryland ordered enough for 10,000-plus people.

[They] chose to bypass pitchers and bottled water in favor of water coolers at multiple beverage stations, where guests could fill plastic bottles given to them for the convention.

JUNE-AUGUST 2008: FINALIZING THE FOOD

Rockwell representatives visited Opryland in June 2008 to finalize the lunch menu. After that, vendors were contacted to supply the food, including 9,000 pounds of chicken breast, 1,100 pounds of green beans, and 2,075 pounds of potatoes. Executive Chef Michael Swann says most of the food arrived just a few days before the event to ensure the freshest possible product.

Water logistics also became a concern since Skrabec had noticed at McCormick Place that pitchers on each table couldn't be refilled fast enough. She and Dreffs chose to bypass pitchers and bottled water in favor of water coolers at multiple beverage stations, where guests could fill plastic bottles given to them for the convention.

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2008: FINAL TOUCHES

The BEOs were finalized, with the team going over each line with the operations staff at Opryland to discuss any last-minute concerns or changes. Additionally, Skrabec and Dreffs decided to provide live music for conventioners lined up in the hallway between the exhibit hall and the lunch area, entertaining them while they waited.



Communication and a team effort from both the front and back of the house at Opryland was crucial to successfully executing this mega-event. Staff for the day included 340 waiters, 75 cooks, and 40 stewards.



On the culinary side, additional equipment was purchased to transport, hold, and present the food during the buffet: 1,000 hotel pans, 60 chafing dishes, 150 chafing insert pans, and 7,500 sheet pans. Staff was scheduled for the day of the event, including 340 waiters, 75 cooks, and 40 stewards.

NOVEMBER 19, 2008: THE MAIN EVENT

As a result of the scouting, months of planning, critical purchasing decisions, and logistical execution, the lunch was a success. Food was replenished without disrupting the flow of the buffet, and there was a six-minute average wait, about half the time as at McCormick Place.

Dreffs says the high feedback scores are a good indication that Rockwell might return in the future, either at Opryland or one of the other Gaylord properties near Orlando, Washington D.C., and Dallas. The foundation that Skrabec laid through scouting helped create a Rockwell template for other Gaylord properties to follow.

"Our business model is built upon being able to repeat this experience for the customer at other Gaylord hotels," says Dreffs. "There's an old adage that it takes years to win a customer and seconds to lose one, so we want the client to be successful no matter where they are." ●

Michael Costa is industry relations editor for HOTEL F&B. He worked for several years in the kitchen and in F&B purchasing at a large convention hotel in Chicago, as well as having attended culinary school.

Hotel F&B TV

Watch scenes from Rockwell's mega-banquet at Gaylord Opryland in Nashville. See both front- and back-of-the-house executional details and listen to commentary from Executive Chef Michael Swann at www.hotelfandb.com

Hotel F&B EXTRAS

For a detailed map of the Gaylord Opryland Rockwell buffet setup, visit www.hotelfandb.com/extras/extras.asp