

THE

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A Strong Network Can Save the Day

When a **Wisconsin association** learned its meeting venue was closing, conversations began and the local MPI network sprung into action to rescue the event.

BY ROB COTTER

THE WISCONSIN SCHOOL COUNSELOR ASSOCIATION INC. (WSCA) recently benefited from the ability of key industry players to harmoniously connect under an MPI baton. Just three months prior to their scheduled 2012 event, WSCA officials learned that their regular Stevens Point convention hotel venue was closing. This was a hammer blow to the association and to its annual volunteer-organized event. It was also a clarion call for Wisconsin's MPI network to start its engine and engage its connections for a solution.

"The dates had already been published and registrations already begun, so finding space available on that date was a big challenge and not one we were confident we could overcome," says Chris Dyer of Morgan Data Solutions (MDS) Association Management (the association administration group responsible for WSCA) and MPI Wisconsin Chapter administrator. "Having to potentially change the date or reschedule could have led to many sleepless nights, and only 90 days out we knew the options could be few or none if we were to keep the same dates."

The Strength of a Network

Grappling with this major challenge meant rapidly reaching out to venues that might be able to meet their needs.

"Given the size of the conference (1,100

delegates), there was a very short list of venues that could handle it," Dyer says. "We also knew there was hesitancy to take the meeting out of a central Wisconsin location and move it to one of the larger cities. Once availability could be determined, we knew it would be important to get the WSCA organizers on site to tour potential facilities."

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"As soon as MDS knew what was happening with the event, they were on the phone working their MPI connections," says Laura Maclsaac, CMP (MPI Wisconsin Chapter), director of sales at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center in Madison. "We didn't bat an eyelid at the number of people they were looking at. The first thing was to look at the dates, as they had already published [them]."

"It is unusual that we should have that portion of space over the dates that they wanted available," she continues. "It was a bit of luck and a bit of timing. The immediate challenge was therefore making sure they would fit, so when I determined that it was looking very favorable, I engaged our CVB, who we have a very good relationship with."

Jeff Holcomb, CMP, senior convention sales manager at the Greater Madison CVB,

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The MPI/meeting industry coalition responsible for saving the WSCA event: Christopher Dyer, MDS Association Management; Heather Dyer, CAE, MDS Association Management; Jeff Holcomb, Madison CVB; Laura MacIsaac, Monona Terrace; and Leah Wiemann, MDS Association Management.

says his adrenaline was rushing when he responded to the call.

"I'd been telling this group for years that they should meet in Madison, and now I had to prove it," he says. "I knew we had to really make an impression on this group and I also knew that the Madison community had to step up and offer a valuable proposal."

Key industry players were already laying the foundation for the event's new era before the WSCA had even come to terms with its staple venue cancellation. In light of ordinary lead-in times for an event of this scale, something extraordinary was under way.

"Within eight hours of the hotel announcing it was closing and that a new location would be needed, MDS staff was able to hold a call with the volunteers and provide a listing of all properties in the state that were large enough to host the event," Dyer says. "Three MDS meeting professionals were on the phones to our MPI contacts all over the state. I remember it being nuts at our office—it was one call after another! Our MPI network began to learn that we were searching for a venue as we talked to folks, and they started reaching out to us to offer advice and help."

"By the end of the day, we had it narrowed down to two properties/cities that

had availability and space," he continues. "We were able to hold a conference call with our volunteer organizers that evening to review their options. We worked with the volunteers and the CVBs of both cities to help our customer understand what each had to offer. The volunteers got off the call with a renewed sense that we were going to be able to pull off this conference."

Monona Terrace in Madison being one of the shortlisted venues, MDS went on to assist their client in preparing an RFP, which in turn helped the Greater Madison CVB pinpoint their most pressing requirements.

"I knew what they needed most," Holcomb says. "I knew the other sites they were considering and felt I had done my homework. The first time I met the WSCA conference co-chairs was at my bid presentation, but I quickly noticed that they are a couple of school counselors and not meeting professionals. I realized that this was a huge, unexpected task that landed squarely on their shoulders—they were genuinely concerned about the future of their conference, which is vital to their organization. So I listened to them. Then I shared my vision for not just moving their convention, but my plan for their success. They came up with many of their own ideas, and together we built their event the way they wanted to."



Another Example of Conversations Saving the Day

Artist Candy Chang specializes in starting conversations. She placed huge chalkboards with the phrase "Before I die, I want to ___" next to an abandoned building that was a community blight in New Orleans. Soon, passersby picked up chalk and wrote in wishes, and suddenly neighbors were getting to know each other. Watch Chang's keynote from July's World Education Congress at <http://mpi.to/SeptChang>.



**LAURA
MACISAAC, CMP**
MPI Wisconsin Chapter



A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

The MPI Wisconsin Chapter has always promoted "Buy MPI," and this circumstance was a perfect example. The collaboration between the association, our building and the CVB worked perfectly to assist in this situation and ensure a smooth transition for WSCA.

Looking to the Future

The strength of the MPI network proved a success, and the professionalism and eagerness of the Greater Madison CVB and Monona Terrace facility ensured the event would take place on the originally scheduled dates. The first step in the rescue mission was complete. The next was to not simply replicate delegate expectations, but to understand where and how they could be improved without compromising the core values of the event.

"The good news was we had worked with the conference for several years, so we knew the realities of space needed," Dyer says. "We reached out to our Madison hotel contacts to secure hotel blocks. The Hilton Madison Monona Terrace sold out of rooms on the first day, and we booked smaller room blocks around the city. The CVB and

MDS called around to the surrounding hotels of the old site and took a best-guess estimate on the room block. Since there was such a short time to put the hotel blocks together, we used multiple hotels throughout the city and then rented buses to transport attendees to Monona Terrace."

The CVB worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that room rates would match those at the previous venue, as part of a wider suite of initiatives to guarantee the financial viability and value of the event.

Thinking in the round served up several initiatives new to WSCA's event, such as help desks provided for visitors, complimentary visitor guides, a welcome letter from the mayor, coupons and bags from CVB member partners and a welcome flyer adding the cherry on top of a smooth

transition to the new venue.

"There was a definite wow and sense of relief once the conference started," Dyer says. "Not only because we had the proper space to accommodate the event, but also because the attendees, sponsors and organizers saw the potential moving forward."

From a cancellation to a conversation to a chain of connections, the coordinated response and successful outcome of WSCA's 2012 event highlights the potency of a network and its finely tuned engine. The potential for moving forward was reflected in WSCA's vote of confidence in their new arrangement by extending their original three-year booking for Monona Terrace after their first outing and by an increase in attendance of nearly 10 percent for their 2013 event. ■

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