

**June/July 2010 Feature**



Easy access: Despite the down economy last year, more than 3,000 attendees flocked to Charlotte, NC, for the American Bus Association's Marketplace.

Photo courtesy of Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority

**Drive-In** Nearby,  
**Meetings** Centralized  
Destinations  
Fuel Attendance

By Andrea Montello

Things are looking up. Finally. After the Great Recession and all the cuts that came with it, business travel and meeting spending is stabilizing, and policies are beginning to loosen — particularly in areas that can be closely linked to revenue growth. According to the third annual American Express/CFO Research Global Business & Spending Monitor, a majority of finance executives worldwide (57 percent) plan to maintain or increase business travel spend compared to last year — with 26 percent planning to increase spending and 31 percent planning to maintain spending.

At the same time, spending policies are being relaxed as companies look to get on the road in ways that can help their businesses grow:

- More than a quarter of respondents (27 percent) plan to loosen spending policies for travel that involves meeting new clients or business development.

- Only 34 percent of respondents plan to restrict travel for staff meetings or internal business, compared to 81 percent in 2009.
- Only 35 percent of executives plan to restrict travel to conferences and events, compared to 79 percent in 2009. (For a link to the full report and white paper, go to [www.americanexpress.com/corp/pc/2010/pdf/CFO\\_Survey1.pdf](http://www.americanexpress.com/corp/pc/2010/pdf/CFO_Survey1.pdf))

Meeting professionals are happy with the news although they are remaining cautious. One segment of the industry that has weathered the economic downturn better than others is second-tier destinations that are easily accessible by car or motorcoach. Not only have groups tried to avoid costly airfares, but the fees associated with a flight have become staggering. Just when many accepted paying for checked luggage, a fee for carry-on bags pops up. Then there is the fee for blankets and pillows. And meals. Headsets, too. Holiday surcharge fees, convenience fees. The future isn't looking much brighter as industry experts predict that travelers will likely have to pay higher fuel surcharges this summer. Ironically, as people feel more confident about travel and the economy in general, flights are becoming more and more expensive and packed.

"There are many reasons today's meeting attendees are choosing to drive rather than fly," said Wilmington, NC-based Margaret Richmond, CMP, founder of Collaborative Meeting Partners, who has been a meeting planner since 1997. "With the new add-on costs many major airlines are imposing on travelers combined with the long wait times, frequently canceled flights and increased security issues, driving has become a much more acceptable means of travel than in years past. Additionally, driving in a relatively fuel-efficient car generates fewer greenhouse gas emissions than flying."

Another reason planners are choosing destinations that are within driving distance is perception. Does drivability drive attendance? In many instances it does.

"Regional meetings requiring less than four hours of drive time can improve attendance at non-mandatory meetings while also improving the level of cost savings now being more carefully observed with most companies," added Richmond.

### **Second-Tier City With Big-City Appeal**

Charlotte is one city that groups are meeting in because of its accessibility. It is a second-tier city with big-city appeal. Consider what's been added over the last couple of years: NASCAR Hall of Fame. U.S. National Whitewater Center. The Billy Graham Library. All unique to Charlotte, affectionally known as the Queen City. These join the mainstays such as Charlotte Motor Speedway, Discovery Place and ImaginOn.

A new ballroom already appears to be reaping economic dividends for Charlotte's convention and trade show business. The 40,000-square-foot ballroom, part of the Charlotte Convention Center, fits up to 2,400 people for a sitdown meal.

The American Bus Association (ABA) had its annual Marketplace in Charlotte last year and attracted more than 3,000 attendees. “As the first group travel show in 2009, Marketplace acted as a leading economic indicator,” said ABA President & CEO Peter J. Pantuso. “With more than 300 operator companies, 300 appointment-taking buyers, more than 100,000 scheduled appointments on the business floor, and more than \$41,000 raised for charity through our Marketplace Gives Back event ‘Strike Out Breast Cancer,’ this event proved again that it’s the premier show in group travel. The activity on the networking floor showed why Marketplace puts the bus in hustle and bustle.”

Registered Marketplace delegates also included 628 destination marketing organizations (DMOs), 559 lodging representatives, 719 attraction representatives and 194 associate members, including suppliers and manufacturers. Marketplace’s new show-within-a-show for equipment providers to meet with operators, the Product Pavilion, featured the most complete exhibit of new motorcoaches anywhere, with 13 models on the event floor, some offered for test drives.

Lynn Brewer is ABA’s senior vice president, meetings, education, and member services. She explained that cities bid on the Marketplace and the ABA chooses the city that offers the best partnership for ABA. “Charlotte was very easy for our members to get to, but more than anything, we chose them because they wanted to increase their group tour business and they have a lot to offer our operators,” she added.



**On the busy Marketplace show floor, American Bus Association attendees learned about new motorcoach-friendly attractions for group travelers.**

Photo by Mark Wheatley