As a viable source of non-dues revenue, annual meetings at chambers across the country have evolved, in many cases, into major productions, with elaborate invitations often serving as a prelude to what guests can expect the event to be. While annual meetings are required by law, it doesn't mean that they are required to be boring, with speeches expounding on the chamber of commerce's accomplishments over the past year or its future direction. Nowadays, chambers add sizzle to annual meetings by aiming to attract a large audience and making the event worth the ticket price of admission, including everything from big-name sponsors and special touches to high-profile guest speakers and outlandish themes.

By Tania Kohut
Lackluster dinners are a thing of the past.

“People need to be entertained. Considering all of the events members and other guests choose to go to, this is the one that must meet their expectations,” says Andra Bennett, Director of Communications at the Fort Worth (TX) Chamber of Commerce.

But highly creative events are hard to keep up year after year. When you start getting that déjà-vu feeling about your annual meetings, consider a few ideas from other chambers.

When it comes to outlandish themes, the Charlotte (NC) Chamber of Commerce is all over it. With an organizing committee of 15 people, many of whom have planned the Chamber’s annual meetings for more than 10 years, the Chamber has presented themed meetings over the years with flair: from Star Trek to Mission Impossible to “Night of the Living Chamber” to engaging a David Letterman look-alike to recite a Top Ten List of the Chamber’s successes.

“One year we had our incoming board chair swing into the room as Tom Cruise did in Mission Impossible. The following year, when his tenure was up, he exited the same way,” muses Blair Stanford, Chief Operating Officer at the Charlotte Chamber.

Creativity is also what brings the members of the Walla Walla Valley (WA) Chamber of Commerce to its annual awards banquet. For the past five years, each table has been offered for sponsorship, and the sponsor is responsible for decorating the table with a centerpiece and a small gift at each place setting. Centerpieces have ranged from traditional flower arrangements and ice sculptures to the unusual, such as a local office supply and furniture company setting up an office chair as their centerpiece.

“We’ve found this to be a great way to dress up an event with little work on our part, while at the same time giving our members an opportunity to be a part of the affair and to promote themselves. It certainly cuts our overhead, and the event sells out every year. The anticipation of finding out how each sponsor will decorate the table and try to outdo one another is great,” says Amy Kinney, Membership Development Manager at the Chamber.

Like many chambers, the Walla Walla Valley Chamber successfully weaves creativity with sponsorships—a pairing that takes the meeting to another level.

**Sponsorships.**

Sponsorships are often the ticket to helping make an annual meeting the financial success it can be. For instance, the Fort Worth Chamber sells sponsorships for every aspect of the event, including speakers, entertainment, tables, presentation folders and more.

“It’s a risk and big expense to pay some of these speakers, but if you can get someone to underwrite them, you and the underwriter can get so much out of it to boost attendance and revenues: marketing, publicity, notoriety,” says Bennett.

Since the chamber has sold-out their meeting for the past six years, local businesses are eager to be part of the event, and some sponsorships are sold a year in advance.

“Our total resource campaign provides the opportunity to maximize the potential for sponsorships for the annual meeting. People will want to sponsor your event if, as in our case, you have 800 people attending it. The sponsors will be proud to be associated with it, and those who come back year after year not only enhance the image of the event, but also validate the quality,” says Marilyn Gilbert, Executive Vice President of Marketing at the Fort Worth Chamber.

With help from the chamber’s total resource campaign and the success of its annual meeting luncheons, the Fort Worth Chamber has been able to increase the amount they receive from their sponsors, resulting in a 68 percent increase in revenue over five years.

The Charlotte Chamber also relies on its total resource campaign to help ensure financial success for its annual meeting, selling more than 100 sponsorships, totaling $350,000. Together with the sponsorships and about $47,000 in annual meeting ticket sales, the chamber generates revenue of more than $400,000 while keeping expenses at about $120,000.

**It’s all in the details**

With annual dinners, sometimes it’s the special touches, themes, or that big-name guest speaker who makes the event popular—or at least has everyone in town talking about it the next morning.

But what happens when your annual dinner relies on a big-name speaker to draw a crowd, and the guest does not want his identity revealed before the event? The Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce secured President George W. Bush impersonator Steve Bridges as its guest speaker in 2005. However, the element of surprise is a critical part of Bridges’ success. As a result, the chamber had to devise a way to promote the annual meeting without identifying the speaker.

“At $70 a ticket, the promotion needed to be clever and convincing,” says Bennett.

The pre-event marketing featured a fuzzy photograph and a ticket marked ‘CLEARANCE’ in red letters, which hyped curiosity. In addition, the invitation copy, media releases and chamber newsletter articles made only vague references to the guest speaker. The chamber created a stir among members; several called the chamber to ensure they had cleared security.
Here are some theme ideas that chambers across the country have shared with ACCE.

- **“Cruise to Success.”** With the facility decorated like a cruise ship, the chamber asked everyone to wear vacation attire. Tables were named for different Caribbean islands, and a photographer took pictures, much like when boarding a cruise ship.
- **“FEMA Blue and You” Membership Luncheon.** An ‘unsinkable’ chamber whose regular venue lost its roof in a storm, used blue tarp as table cloths; MREs, flashlights, and candles as centerpieces; and invited the local meteorologist to be its emcee. Author Mike Tidwell spoke about his book, which explores the coastal erosion of Louisiana caused by hurricanes and storms.
- A spotlight on the local military featuring the commander of the local Air Force base as keynote speaker.
- An all-sports theme. The silent auction featured sports items: autographed footballs, baseballs, season tickets to local schools, etc. Guest speaker was a business owner in the state and an NFL referee. Centerpieces were made from footballs cut in half, filled with flowers.
- Using the theme of the community coming together to accomplish goals, the chamber engaged The Passing Zone juggling team. The jugglers emphasized how tough it is to juggle many projects in the area. Guests received juggling kits and balls with the chamber logo.
- **“Gems and Jeans.”** The casual-attire event included dinner, silent and live auctions and social time. The gems involved included frozen gems—one real and others manufactured—sold for a chance you might buy the genuine.

In the end, in spite of an unknown speaker, Fort Worth’s 2005 Annual Meeting exceeded all attendance, revenue and publicity goals, with the event netting $63,048. Presidential impersonator Bridges was a big success.

On the other hand, rather than hosting a keynote speaker, the Greater Richmond (VA) Chamber of Commerce presents their annual Impact Award at its annual meeting. The award recognizes a local, for-profit business that has made a significant, positive impact in the Greater Richmond region.

“For years we hosted the traditional annual dinner with a keynote speaker. But, it’s a challenge to keep the audience engaged, so several years ago we added the presentation of our Impact Award. The award has elevated the dinner to a new level and generated more excitement,” explains Stephanie Phillips, Director of Events.

After learning that their guests wanted more time to network during the event the chamber added a networking dessert reception and made it another sponsorship opportunity.

Gilbert, of the Fort Worth Chamber, who has worked 16 years in the chamber profession, also reminds those who plan annual meetings that sometimes, a smaller, more intimate meeting heightens the event’s “specialness” factor and can make it just as financially successful, if not more so.

“We could easily move to a larger venue to accommodate more guests, but we’ve made a conscious decision to host our meeting in a smaller facility. This way, we’re not spending more money to decorate the room or more time trying to fill up tables. It becomes an exclusive event,” explains Gilbert.

**Balancing business with pleasure**

It is important to remember that first and foremost, the annual dinner is, in many instances, your annual meeting. A captive audience, who has paid to be at your event, presents an invaluable opportunity to promote the chamber’s many benefits and hard work for the community.

“Of course we incorporate business items to our annual meeting’s agenda, but we also realize that our guests want to have fun. We keep our speeches light-hearted and to-the-point, and we incorporate a video about the chamber’s accomplishments to keep the evening moving and guests engaged,” mentions Phillips of the Greater Richmond Chamber.

Keynote speakers can also include your chamber’s messages in their presentations. In Fort Worth, Bush impersonator Steve Bridges was given information about current issues in the Dallas-Fort Worth area to incorporate into his routine. In addition, organizers of the event are careful to schedule the event’s entertainment after the “business” aspect of the meeting to ensure that guests stay to the end.

To keep the audience’s attention during the program, the Charlotte Chamber hosts a one-hour meeting, theatre style, followed by a heavy hors d’heouvres reception.

“We’ve found that it is easier to get our message across by separating food and drink from the actual presentation. In the first hour we take care of business, introduce incoming leadership, do our year in review and present our Citizen of the Carolinas Award. Afterwards, our guests can network and enjoy one another’s company,” says Stanford.

**Steal the show**

Whether your event is traditional or boasts an elaborate theme, you want to make sure your guests take home your chamber’s message. Sure, a dynamic speaker, impeccably decorated room and other special details, courtesy of generous sponsors, will make for a memorable and financially successful evening. But remember, your guests are attending your event to support the chamber and recognize all the work you do year round—make sure the chamber is the one that steals the show.