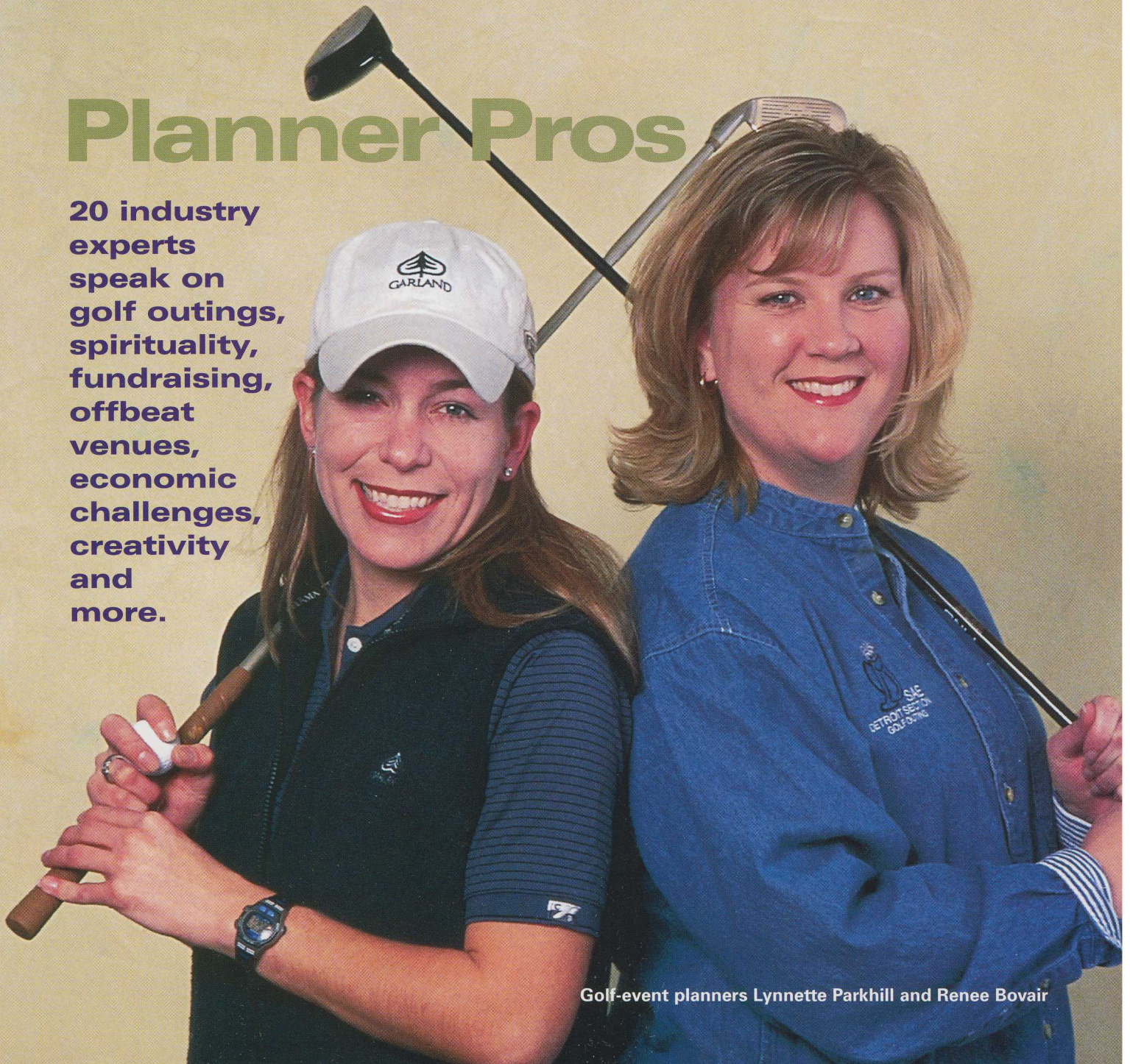


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Planner Pros

20 industry experts speak on golf outings, spirituality, fundraising, offbeat venues, economic challenges, creativity and more.



Golf-event planners Lynnette Parkhill and Renee Bovair

planner pros

creative powers

Meet three meeting and event industry sources
who provide insight into this season and beyond.

By MEGAN SWOYER

Michigan Meetings & Events special

"Planner Pros" package puts several

planners in the spotlight, including three meeting and event planners, two golf-event experts and a professor challenged with an important meeting process. Also, read about our Offbeat Venues in this section and find where innovative specialists make their gatherings fresh and memorable.

Just because conference and event budgets are unraveling faster than a runaway spool of crepe paper, doesn't mean your function as a planner has to suffer. These days, successful planners are spreading the creativity word.

"With the economy presenting everyone with some restraints, it becomes necessary for all facets of every event to be mindful of tight budgets," says Carolyn Hefner, whose Birmingham-based company, The China Closet, handles everything from corporate gatherings to weddings. "This means more creativity with every detail—maybe the RSVP becomes a postcard rather than a response mailed in an envelope. Maybe the menu will include a fabulous presentation of chicken instead of the usual filet mignon. And, guest counts may need to be limited for the time being."

For Chris Burak of VIKTOR Incentives & Meetings, based in Traverse City and Ann Arbor, cost reduction has become a major concern. "How can we save money on this year's meeting?" is being asked by everyone," says Burak. "We must have the creativity and knowledge to recommend ways for our clients to reduce costs without sacrificing quality," he says. "For example, we suggested to one client that they consider a family-oriented incentive destination that all attendees could drive to. The focus would be a family vacation experience. Even with a mileage allowance they would save significant money in air costs. Plus air safety became a non-issue."

Burak knows all about cost-saving tools and ideas. For example, he recommends perhaps cutting a day from the schedule. "Instead of a five-day incentive trip, make it a four-day trip," he suggests. "Why not go to a destination in the off-season or shoulder season?" In Michigan, many ski resorts offer excellent cost-saving packages during the cold-weather months. "The hotel rate-reductions can be startling," says Burak. "Ask hotels to guarantee 2002 food and beverage pricing for your meeting in 2003 or 2004. The possibilities are endless."

Hefner notes that the challenges of convincing clients to continue to hold their events piggy-backs onto the cost-reduction dilemma. "Many companies and many individuals have simply eliminated their special event," she observes. "Our response is to contact our clients and let them know that we can work with their budgets and still produce a wonderful event for them."

And through all this, the fundamental elements of good meeting planning will never change, say planners. Yet, says Burak, "the depth of expertise required will continue to get deeper and deeper."

The following planners provide more insight into how they are facing the event crunch and other insider secrets, from how to gain press coverage to dealing with safety issues.



Carolyn Hefner

owner
The China Closet
Birmingham

Memberships: The Association of Bridal Consultants (ABC); National Association of Catering Executives (NACE).

Company lowdown: Plans and oversees everything from small and big corporate outings/meetings to weddings and special events.

On revenue flow: “When dealing with smaller events, the busiest seasons tend to fall from May through October, so the challenge is to have a good balance of work during the other months as well. We now are focusing on developing the corporate side of our business and are initiating some very unique and creative ideas for companies to use to entertain, inspire and motivate their staffs.”

Theme follow-through: “Every year, events become more incredible than the last due to technology, supply of local resources and simply the fact that clients and guests often demand that their upcoming event be more fantastic than the last one. When guests come in the door, they should realize why they are there. Likewise, when they leave the event, they should be reminded why they were there.” ▼

Mixed palette: Carolyn Hefner offers samplings of catered goods, like this springtime cake, to her clients at her Birmingham office. She uses the colorful ribbons and stationery, behind her, for special-event invitations.

Photograph by Maureen Monte

planner pros

Biggest "wow" event in the past year: A wedding that took place at the Ritz Carlton, Dearborn. "It was what I call a 'winter fantasy.' Tiffany Florist in Birmingham saved artificial trees from the holidays and researched how to create the best artificial snow," recalls

Hefner. It was a veritable paradise brimming with an ice martini lounge, a sweets display, a towering pastry creation that become a lit-from-beneath ice sculpture, a forest of snow, bare-branched trees, dendrobium orchids hanging from the ceiling to create floral snowflakes, a

snowy pathway strewn with roses for the bride and groom and more.

Making the most of media: "It takes persistence, contacts and luck. When an event or a story is worthy, then tell the media way in advance of the event so arrangements can be made to cover the event."

Major business asset: Technology. "My clients receive personal Web-site pages and also an administration site to use for their events. That way the data is in a safe spot and it can be accessed from any part of the world. It also can break out information and print reports."

Interior motives: "My office is my prop," laughs Hefner, who likes to tell clients that her "tea kettle is always on." Located in a charming colonial building, The China Closet is an experience in itself. Set up as a resource center with various rooms, the office includes a dining room with a beautifully set table that showcases rental china, flatware, stemware, linens, upscale, decorative chairs ("there's nothing that can ruin an event more than bad chairs," attests Hefner) and more. Lucky clients and prospective customers get to sit down, sip hot tea and indulge on pastries and fruits while discussing their prospective or upcoming event with Hefner.

Another room is a photography gallery that showcases the works of local event photographers. There also is a charming space that brims with prints, papers, invitation samples, napkins and lots of custom-designed graphic work by a local artist. Hefner's office features a home theater so clients can preview talent, videography and venues.

Smart links: Hefner works with various entrepreneurs on a regular basis to offer her client the best package possible. For example, she recently joined up with interior designer John Breco for event-decor design. "All of us have seen the country club and other major-event sites over and over again ... John gives new

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life to old venues," she says. Meanwhile, Mark Thompson of Mark Thompson and Associates often works directly with Hefner on events. "Event-planning is an environment that feeds on various experts' strengths," attests Hefner.

Dry meeting perk-up: Recently, Hefner oversaw a corporate gathering at the Troy Marriott. Attendees assumed they were going to a dull business meeting. But because the meeting's focus was "positive attitude," Hefner invited a theatrical group featuring Dr. Atticus Attude and he and his assistants "delves into formulas, equations and song and got the staff laughing and singing and thinking about the ripple effects of a great positive attitude."



Patricia Armstead

Patricia Armstead, CMP
director, events management
 DDM Marketing and Communications
 Grand Rapids

Memberships: MPI "for professional development and networking. I also participate in the MIMList, an online community of over 2,500 industry professionals. The MIMList is a great resource," says Armstead.

Company lowdown: DDM offers a full range of marketing and communication services, from the front end of the process—strategy, planning and research services—to the execution end of the process—design and production of just about any form of communication tool ... including meetings and events.

Biggest current challenge: Tightened corporate budgets. "We also see organizations undervaluing the brand impact of meetings and events and their use as important marketing and communications tools," says Armstead. ▼

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