



Visit Orlando has announced the destination welcomed a record 76.7 million visitors in 2025. The announcement was made at Visit Orlando's annual National Travel & Tourism Week event on May 7 at the Orange County Convention Center. Left to right: Casandra Matej, President & CEO, Visit Orlando; Orange County Mayor Jerry L. Demings; and Barb Bowden, Board Chair, Visit Orlando.

U.S. Destinations Celebrate National Travel and Tourism Week

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations across the United States marked National Travel and Tourism Week (NTTW) with airport celebrations, community events, economic reports, and public campaigns highlighting the travel industry's role in local economies and job creation.

The annual observance, organized by the U.S. Travel Association, ran from May 3 through May 9 this year under the theme "Postmarked: Essential." The association says the week is intended to recognize travel's contribution to economic growth, workforce development, and community vitality.

"Travel is not optional—it is fundamental to America's economy, workforce and way of life," the association said in promotional materials for the 2026 campaign.

Tourism organizations and state officials across the country have used the week to spotlight visitor spending and prepare for major international events expected to boost travel to the United States in the coming years.

In Wisconsin, Gov. Tony Evers and the state Department of Tourism launched a statewide promotional tour celebrating what officials described as a record-breaking tourism economy.

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AHLA Report Warns of Lackluster World Cup Bookings

By Jordan Bradley

The American Hotel and Lodging Association (AHLA) conducted a market analysis of what American host city hotels can expect from the 2026 FIFA World Cup and found that bookings could "fall short of expectations."

According to the FIFA World Cup 2026 Hotel Outlook report conducted in late April and released on May 4, around 80% of respondent hotels are

seeing summer bookings generally "lagging behind a typical summer."

Despite more than five million tickets sold to World Cup games, "this demand has not yet translated into strong hotel bookings," AHLA said in the report. "Forecasts show that domestic travelers are outpacing international travelers—an imbalance that threatens the broader economic impact the World Cup was expected to generate."

Respondents to the survey cite new taxes and fees in host cities, international perceptions of visa delays, TSA wait times and funding uncertainty, increased gas and jet fuel prices, and room block cancellations as barriers and deterrents for international travelers.

"Hotels across host markets have spent years preparing for the World Cup, and while there is real excitement,

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Worker Crushed by Industrial Dryer at Orlando Hotel

By Jordan Bradley

A hotel worker at the Orlando Hilton was crushed to death by an industrial dryer in late April.

According to the Orange County Sheriff's Office, deputies responded to a report of an industrial accident at the Hilton Orlando at approximately 9 p.m. on April 23. When they arrived on the scene, they found that "a male employee in his 30s was located under an industrial sized dry-

er," the OCSCO said in an emailed statement to *USAE*.

"Orange County Fire Rescue pronounced the man deceased at the scene," the statement from the sheriff's office continued. "No additional information is available at this time."

The office confirmed to local news outlet, *Florida Today*, that the identity of the worker was 30-year-old Aurelius Katinde. It is not currently clear what caused the incident.

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ASAE Research Foundation Announces ASAE-USAE Travel Scholarship Recipients

By Todd McElwee

Recognizing the commitment of five association professionals to advance their knowledge, expand their networks, and strengthen their association management careers, the ASAE Research Foundation has announced the recipients of the 2026 ASAE-USAE Travel Scholarship,

The scholarship provides funding for travel, housing,

and related expenses to attend the 2026 ASAE Annual Meeting & Exposition, taking place August 15–18 in Indianapolis.

"Congratulations to this year's ASAE-USAE Travel Scholarship recipients for their commitment to growth, leadership, and service to the association community," said Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAiP, President & CEO, ASAE.

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HOTS

HOTS Boston Baker Screams for Ice Cream... A bakery in Boston is screaming for its ice cream...cone statue that was stolen from atop the building. The co-owner of the Flour Bakery on the Boston Common, Joanne Chang, is even willing to offer a reward—in the form of “pastries, gratitude, anonymity”—for the safe return of Swirly, as the giant vanilla cone is known, according to a social media post about the missing dessert. The large plastic cone is a fixture of the baker, and initially, Chang believed Swirly blew away. However, in her social media post seeking Swirly’s re-

turn, Chang included a photo of what appeared to be Swirly in the window of a building adjacent to Flour Bakery. “He was possibly spotted in a nearby dorm window looking down longingly at home and we have reason to believe he may be confused about where he is,” Chang wrote in her Facebook plea. Chang said she is only seeking Swirly’s safe return and doesn’t want to cause trouble. “To anyone who is temporarily sheltering him: thank you for protecting him from this winter, please return him safely, no questions asked, in exchange for baked goods and out eternal gratitude,” Chang wrote. HOTS hopes that the hearts of Swirly’s captors have been melted by Chang’s compassionate (and generous) plea.

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

HOTS Muscle Man... A 49-year-old athlete now holds the record for heaviest vehicle pulled by the neck, Guinness World Records confirmed on May 6. Egmond Molina, of Aruba, pulled a 21,737-pound bus more than 65 feet on January 9 using only his neck to earn the new record. “With the rope compressing my airway, I must generate force while carefully controlling my breathing under intense strain,” Molina told Guinness World Records. “It becomes a psychological battle to remain composed while the body is under severe stress.” This is not, however,



Destination DC held its annual Travel Rally in conjunction with the U.S. Travel Association at the historic Lincoln Theatre on May 6. The organization announced the destination had welcomed more than 27.2 million people to the nation’s capital in 2025 and touted other travel-related accomplishments. Left to right: Elliott L. Ferguson II, President & CEO, Destination DC; Geoff Freeman, President & CEO at U.S. Travel Association; Virginia Ali, co-founder, Ben’s Chili Bowl; D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser; and Fred Dixon, President & CEO, Brand USA.

the first record achieved by Molina, UPI reports. He has also received Guinness World Records titles for the fastest 20-meter bus pull with one finger, the fastest 20-meter tram pull with teeth, the fastest hot water bottle burst, and

the most crown cap bottles opened with both hands in 30 seconds. Molina told Guinness that he dedicates his records to his children, as well as the youth of Aruba. HOTS thinks that’s one wheely dedicated and strong man.

WEEKLY NEWS OF ASSOCIATIONS, CVB, AND HOTELS

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MPI’s WEC to Include a Quartet of Keynotes

By Todd McElwee

Discussions about adversity, travel, memory and a magic show will be featured during four keynote sessions at MPI’s World Education Congress (WEC) in San Antonio.

Dr. Magie Cook, CEO and Founder, Maggie’s Salsa; Jon Dorenbos, magician and former NFL long snapper; Jim Kwik, bestselling author, brain performance expert; and Lilah Jones, leadership strategist, will speak during the June 2–4 event.

Speaking on June 2, Cook will share how adversity can shape identity, strengthen leadership and create new momentum. Building her company from the ground up, she later sold it with Garden Fresh to Campbell’s for \$231 million.

“Through personal storytelling and practical insight, she offers a powerful perspective on resilience and growth, along with takeaways attendees can apply in their own lives and work,” MPI said.

Dorenbos spent 14 seasons in pro football but became widely known for his appearance on “America’s Got Talent,” where he finished third. On June 3, he will touch on quieting self-doubt, shifting mindsets, and leading with greater optimism and purpose.

“Jon Dorenbos brings humor, heart, and perspective to a keynote that is far more than a magic show,” organizers said. “Through powerful storytelling and moments of surprise, he shares a moving message about resilience, self-belief, and choosing joy even in life’s hardest moments. Attendees will leave inspired to quiet self-doubt, shift their mindset, and lead with greater optimism and purpose.”

For more than 30 years, Kwik has helped people unlock greater focus, productivity, and mental performance. He is the author of the bestseller *Limitless*, which has sold more than a million copies. He is set for June 4.

MPI said: “In a world of constant distraction and rising expectations,

unforgettable events start with sharper thinking and more intentional design. In this high-energy keynote, brain coach and memory expert Jim Kwik shares practical strategies to improve focus, strengthen memory, and perform at your best under pressure.”

Drawing on leadership roles at Google and Microsoft, Jones has more than 20 years of experience guiding teams through change. Courage and curiosity will be themes of her June 4 address.

“Her work equips audiences with practical tools to lead more boldly through transition and growth,” MPI said.

Find more information [here](https://www.mpi.com).

Hotel Death

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USAE reached out to the Hilton Orlando for comment but did not receive a response by press deadline.

In a statement immediately after the incident to *Florida Today*, a Hilton spokesperson said the company was “deeply saddened by the very unfortunate incident” and extended their “heartfelt condolences to all those affected and remain[s] committed to supporting them during this difficult

time.”

The 26-acre property is an upscale resort hotel located nearby the region’s most popular attractions, including Universal Epic Universe and SeaWorld, and the Orange County Convention Center.

According to the official Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) website, an investigation at the Hilton in response to the incident was opened on April 24 and is ongoing.

NEWS

HSMAI to Hold Commercial Strategy Conference in San Antonio

By [Jordan Bradley](#)

The Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International (HSMAI) will host its Commercial Strategy Conference in San Antonio at the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center on June 16–17.

The annual conference focuses on “key commercial disciplines” in the hospitality sector, HSMAI said, including marketing, revenue optimization, sales, and distribution, and is designed to provide attendees with a “cross-functional experience.”

Topics at the 2026 Commercial

Strategy Conference include general sessions on how fan culture can provide hotels with insights into increased occupancy, navigating the economic and geopolitical “crosswinds” in North America, the future of the hospitality industry, and more, as well as breakout sessions focused on the current applications of AI in hospitality, emerging trends in hospitality sales and marketing, the future of revenue management at hotels, and more.

General and breakout sessions will be led by hospitality and tech leaders from organizations such as Hyatt Hotels Corporation, IHG Hotels &

Resorts, data research firm STR, MGM Resorts International, Omni Hotels & Resorts, Aimbridge Hospitality, and more.

The schedule of events for HSMAI’s annual conference also carves out time for networking opportunities, by-invitation-only executive roundtables, evening receptions, and partner showcases.

“Hospitality is evolving at an unprecedented pace, and success today requires a more integrated and agile commercial approach,” said Brian Hicks, President and CEO of HSMAI. “Our Commercial Strategy

Conference brings together the industry’s brightest minds to share ideas, challenge convention, and shape what’s next. We’re excited to welcome professionals from across the industry to learn from one another, gain real-world insights, and leave equipped with actionable strategies.”

Future iterations of the conference will be held in Orlando, Florida, on June 29–30, 2027; Denver, Colorado, on June 13–14, 2028; and in Charlotte, North Carolina, on June 12–13, 2029, according to HSMAI.

Find more information and register [here](#).

And the Winner Is: PCMA Announces Visionary Awards Honorees

By [Todd McElwee](#)

Achievement and excellence was recognized by PCMA on May 7 in Washington, D.C., during the association’s Visionary Awards.

The winners:

- Business Events Strategist of the Year—Kyle B. Morris, Vice President, NMR Events
- Corporate Event Marketer of the Year—Kim Hastings, CMM, Director, Event Marketing, Procore Technologies
- Digital Experience Strategist of the Year—Dahlia El Gazzar, Chief Ruckusmaker, DAHLIA+Agency
- Experience Design of the Year—

Kimberly Keating, MA, Director of Conference Education, Viticus Group

- Groundbreaker Award—Nuria Fernández Roldán, Online Learning Specialist, Kenes Group
- Impact Award—Bianca DeStout, Sr. Sales Manager, Visit Cincy
- Outstanding Service to a Chapter or Region—Melissa Peticolas, CEM, CMP, Account Executive, Vista Convention Services
- Business Events Supplier of the Year—Lori Adlesick, Vice President, Strategic Partnerships & Events, Choose Chicago

Find the complete list of finalists [here](#).

Encore and Boldpush Release 2026 Experience Design Report

By [Todd McElwee](#)

Offering new insights into how event professionals are designing experiences and where critical gaps remain, Encore and industry research/media firm Boldpush have released *The Experience Design Report: What’s Shaping Live Experiences in 2026*.

Findings are based on the perspectives of 447 event professionals, with researchers noting the results reveal a disconnect between what planners say matters most and how events are actually structured.

“Live experiences are at the core of how humans do business and learn about the changing world. This research brings clarity to how top event professionals are creating impactful experiences. A must have tool for companies shaping the future of events,” said Julius Solaris, Founder of Boldpush.

Among respondents, 49% rank peer networking as the most important factor in event success, yet only 8% of producers dedicate more programming to structured connection. Organizers note this gap presents a major opportunity for planners to better align programming with attendee expectations.

“Face-to-face networking and shared experiences are the strongest drivers of trust at events,” the firms said. “While human interaction is key, delivering those moments at scale requires intentional design supported by production, technology and environment.”

Concerning the keynote address, the report found it isn’t becoming less important but rather is evolving. According to 65% of respondents, keynote speakers contribute

to registration, but formats are shifting toward shorter, interactive and multi-speaker experiences. When keynote budgets are reduced, production becomes the top area for reinvestment (26%), ahead of connection (24%) and workshops (23%), pointing to changing priorities in experience design.

Technology and AI are critical but require integration, findings show. Mobile apps deliver the highest connection ROI (33%), while AI-driven tools are still emerging.

Production is emerging as a strategic investment. Nearly half of planners already view production partners as strategic or creative collaborators, not just vendors. However, less than one-third involve production partners at the concept stage, limiting their ability to influence experience design.

“The data makes one thing very clear: connection isn’t a ‘nice to have’ anymore, it’s the core outcome of live events but the industry hasn’t fully operationalized that priority,” said Jill Hunt, Vice President of Customer Experience and Insights of Encore. “There’s a real opportunity for planners to rethink how they design formats, content and experiences to better align with what attendees value most.”

The companies added the report encourages event organizers to rethink how time, space and programming are allocated, especially as AI continues to reshape how people consume information outside of live events. They added as automation grows, the report suggests the value of live experiences increasingly lies in what technology can’t replace or replicate: human connection.

Find more information [here](#).



Dr. Steven G. Johnson, Executive Vice President, Events DC, during the PCMA Foundation Fashion Show: Living in Color! on May 6 at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, DC. The show was presented by The Palm Beaches and was part of PCMA’s Business Events Industry Week.

Industry Movers



Scott Herndon has joined RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment) as Executive Director. He brings more than 14 years of experience to the specialty pesticide and fertilizer trade association. Herndon led government and industry affairs in Washington, D.C., for Corteva Agriscience, and was President of Field to Market: The Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture. Herndon earned a J.D. cum laude from the University of Miami School of Law.



Susan Sullivan Kinney is now Equipment Leasing & Finance Association's (ELFA) Sr. Vice President of Policy & Government Affairs. She will lead ELFA's federal and state advocacy, oversee the association's government relations strategy, and serve as the primary voice before Congress and federal agencies. Kinney joins ELFA from the Independent Community Bankers of America, where she most recently served as the sr. vice president of congressional relations.



Autumn Griffith has been named as the General Manager at the Royal Park Hotel, a boutique property in downtown Rochester, Michigan. Griffith brings more than 15 years of hospitality leadership experience to Royal Park Hotel, with a career rooted in boutique and lifestyle properties. She most recently served as General Manager of the Daxton Hotel, Curio Collection by Hilton in Birmingham, Michigan. She worked in Palm Springs.



Kyung Lee is the new General Manager of Ocean Edge Resort & Golf Club in Brewster, Massachusetts. Lee brings nearly 20 years of hospitality experience to the role. Most recently, he was hotel manager of Hard Rock Hotel NYC. Before that, he served as general manager of Gurney's Resort & Seawater Spa in Montauk, New York. He was part of the opening team at The Langham Boston.

[See More Industry Movers](#)

AHLA

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the data points to a more nuanced outlook," said Rosanna Maietta, President and CEO of AHLA.

The report surveyed 11 host cities: Seattle, San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, New York/New Jersey, Kansas City, Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, Miami, Philadelphia and Boston. Data was gathered using a combination of publicly available and AHLA-sourced market data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, data research firm CoStar/STR, and Oxford Economics/Tourism Economics.

Many respondents in Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Seattle described the games as a "non-event" following the release of hotel room blocks by FIFA earlier this year.

Two-thirds of hotel respondents in New York City said bookings were softer than expected and typical of a normal summer, and more than 60% of these respondents "point to international travel barriers and geopolitical concerns influencing the soft bookings," AHLA said.

The report referenced New Jersey's proposal of a "last-minute, temporary World Cup tax" that is "highly unpopular" among residents, according to the report.

"The tax burden would fall on local families through higher prices for everyday goods and services, adding to the cost-of-living squeeze already facing households near the stadium," the report said. "This creates an unfair competitive advantage to the counties included in the proposed tax increase legislation."

The report also pointed to New Jersey Transit's visitor surcharge on FIFA World Cup match days which would increase fares from NYC's Penn Station to MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, from \$12.90 to \$150 round trip. Transit fare mark-ups have also been announced in Los Angeles and Boston.

"A range of factors have tempered early optimism, though forward indicators show there is still meaningful opportunity ahead. To fully realize that potential, the U.S. and FIFA must ensure a welcoming and seamless experience for international travelers," Maietta said. "That means avoiding unnecessary cost increases on visas and transportation to and from the games, and discouraging local jurisdictions from adding last-minute tax hikes that hurt the games and consumers."

Atlanta and Miami were the only two cities to offer positive feedback regarding booking pace and expectations, according to the report. In Atlanta, around half of hotels participating in the survey said booking pace was in line with or ahead of expectations, and ahead of a typical summer. They attributed this largely to "team base camps, strong air connectivity, and diversified demand sources."

In Miami, 55% of respondents said that booking pace for June and July was ahead of expectations "and typical summer benchmarks," the AHLA said.

Still, Maietta and AHLA are encouraging fans of the FIFA World Cup to book sooner than later.

"And our message to consumers is clear: now is the time to book your hotel," Maietta said.

ASAE Research Foundation Announces Award Winners

By [Todd McElwee](#)

The ASAE Research Foundation has announced the recipients of the 2026 Sal Martino Foresight Award and the inaugural NextGen: Rising Star Award.

The Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) is receiving the former, with Leslie J. Frazier, MPA, CAE, Sr. Vice President of Community and Industry Relations, Virginia REALTORS, receiving the latter.

"Congratulations to this year's

ASAE Research Foundation award recipients, who reflect the strength, creativity, and forward momentum of the association community," said Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAiP, President & CEO, ASAE. "These honorees are helping shape a more innovative, resilient, and future-focused association community through their leadership and vision."

Formerly known as the Sal Martino Grant for Conscious Inclusion

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Charles Starks, President & CEO, Music City Center, received a Lifetime Achievement Award during the PCMA Foundation Visionary Awards in Washington, DC on May 7.

NEWS

Scholarship

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“Investing in your development is an investment in the future of our entire sector. We’re proud to support your journey and look forward to the impact you will continue to make as you build connections, expand your expertise, and help shape what’s next for associations.”

The 2026 ASAE–USAE Travel Scholarship recipients are:



Zachary Grays II, CAE, Sr. Membership and Operations Manager, Smithbucklin/American Evaluation Association



Haley Jones, CAE, Director, Member Engagement, American Staffing Association



Alyssa Klopatek, M.A., Executive Director, Bowling Centers Association of Wisconsin



Adrian Uphoff, MPH, MPP, Manager of Health Policy and Regulatory Affairs, Minnesota Medical Association



Rebecca Weinstein, Director of Membership & Communications, American College of Medical Toxicology

The ASAE–USAE Travel Scholarship program is made possible through a \$100,000 donation to the ASAE Research Foundation in 2021 from Ross E. Heller, Founder & Publisher Emeritus of *USAE* and CustomNEWS, Inc. This restricted fund was established to provide financial assistance to association professionals seeking to attend the ASAE Annual Meeting for professional development, networking, and career advancement.

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Group Travel Remains Strong Despite Challenges, Report States

By Jonathan Trager

The U.S. Travel Association on May 6 released a new report portraying the nation’s group travel sector as resilient despite economic uncertainty, declining international visitation, and a slowdown in government-related meetings during 2025.

The report, titled “U.S. Group Travel Report: Strength Beneath the Surface,” was issued to coincide with Global Meetings Industry Day. It argues that demand for in-person events remains strong even as the industry adjusts to volatility and changing travel patterns.

According to the report, domestic attendance at meetings and events held steady last year while international attendance declined across most major inbound markets. Government-related meetings “dropped sharply after the first quarter,” but demand from the private sector remained robust, with requests for proposals for meetings exceeding 2019 levels.

“Travel is the industry that makes every other industry possible,” Kevin Hinton, Managing Director of Group Travel for the U.S. Travel Association, wrote in the report. “Events move ideas. Being together in the same place builds trust. And group travel creates human connections that drive business, strengthen communities and shape the future.”

The report characterized 2025 as a “flat year marked by volatility but little growth,” citing concerns tied to geopolitical instability, tariffs and increased uncertainty in global markets. Still, the organization said the sector showed signs of recovery late in the year, with activity rebounding in the fourth quarter after a slower summer.

Industry officials said planners and business leaders remain optimistic

about 2026, particularly as companies continue prioritizing face-to-face interaction.

“Demand for in-person experiences remains strong and essential,” Hinton

wrote. “Poorly executed meetings hurt everyone, but events designed with clear value and purpose can overcome any obstacle.”

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Destinations International Invites Registration for Tourism for All Program

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations International (DI) announced on May 6 that registration has opened for the second cohort of its Tourism for All Certificate program, a six-month virtual initiative designed to help destination organizations create more welcoming and community-centered tourism strategies.

The program, which launched its inaugural cohort earlier this year, is aimed at tourism professionals, destination organizations, and community leaders seeking to strengthen accessibility, inclusion and resident engagement within the visitor economy. The second cohort will run from June 5 through November 30.

DI said the program focuses on four pillars: workplaces, visitor experience, community partnerships, and marketing and promotion. Participants complete online modules, practical exercises and local action plans intended to help destinations align tourism growth with community well-being.

“Creating destinations where everyone feels welcome requires intention, collaboration and leadership,” said Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI. “The second cohort of Tourism for All is an opportunity to deepen that commitment and expand its impact across the industry.”

The program is delivered in a self-paced virtual format and includes ongoing access to educational materials and industry experts after completion. DI said participants also work with organizations including HospitableMe, TripAdvisor, Tourism Cares, The Culturist Group, and Wheel the World.

The certificate program reflects a broader push within the travel industry to address accessibility, representation, and community engagement as tourism rebounds and destinations compete for visitors. Industry groups increasingly have emphasized the economic and social value of inclusive tourism planning, particularly as travelers seek destinations that reflect diverse communities and experiences.

“Tourism for All helps destinations move from intention to action,” Welsh said earlier this year when the program first launched. “It equips leaders and businesses to create places where everyone belongs and feels welcome.”

Participants in the inaugural cohort said the program provided practical tools for expanding local partnerships and improving inclusion efforts within their destinations.

Registration pricing has been set at \$795 for DI members and \$995 for nonmembers.

Find more information about the program and register [here](#).

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NEWS

National Restaurant Association Names Richard Marriott a ‘Legend’



By Jordan Bradley

The National Restaurant Association will honor Richard “Dick” Marriott for his lifetime of contributions to the restaurant and hospitality industry, designating him as the 2026 Legends Award recipient.

Marriott has been “a steadfast leader” and an advocate for the American restaurant industry “for more than six decades,” the National Restaurant Association (NRA) said.

The NRA’s Legends Award recipient is selected by the association’s Governance Committee. Recipients demonstrate “a lifetime of dedication to the restaurant and hospitality industry” and “exemplify the highest standards of service, integrity,

and commitment” to the future and wellbeing of the industry, the association said.

Marriott was born into the hospitality industry as the son of J. Willard Marriott, the founder of the Marriott International hotel brand. Marriott first took a job at his parents’ restaurant, Hot Shoppes, when he was a teenager, and has been working in the hospitality industry in some capacity since. In 1965, he officially joined the company as a restaurant manager, and eventually went on to start his own hotel company—Host Hotels & Resorts—with his brother, Bill, in 1993.

Throughout his career, Marriott has served on various industry organization boards, including as Chair of the National Restaurant Association Board in 1992.

He currently serves as Chairman of the Board of Host Hotels and of First Media Corporation.

Marriott “has been deeply engaged in advancing the Association’s mission to protect and promote” the restaurant industry. Part of his contributions include acting

as “the driving force” behind the Richard E. Marriott Golf Invitational, which benefits the Restaurant Advocacy Fund, supporting advocacy for industry priorities in state and local governments, according to the NRA.

“Dick Marriott embodies what it means to be a true legend of our industry—someone whose leadership, generosity, and commitment have made restaurants better places to work for everyone who depends on them,” said Michelle Korsmo, President and CEO of the National Restaurant Association. “Through decades of service to the National Restaurant Association and his unwavering support of the Restaurant Advocacy Fund, Dick has helped create a stronger policy environment where restaurants can thrive and people can build meaningful careers.”

Outside of direct industry support, Marriott also helped to establish the Bridges from School to Work program in 1989, a nonprofit that connects

youth with disabilities to jobs, often in the hospitality industry. He has long served as the nonprofit’s Chairman.

In his capacity as Chairman of the Marriott Foundation, Marriott helped to create the J. Willard Marriott School of Hospitality at the University of Utah last year, supporting education efforts for the next generation of hospitality industry workers.

“His impact reaches far beyond any single role or moment, and we are proud to honor him with the 2026 Legends Award,” Korsmo added.

The National Restaurant Association will celebrate Marriott at its annual Gold & Silver Plate Awards event hosted by IFMA The Food Away from Home Association on May 16 at Union Station in Chicago.

Tourism Week

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“Tourism is a powerhouse of economic development and prosperity in our state,” Evers said.

In Las Vegas, the Las Vegas CVA partnered with Harry Reid International Airport to greet arriving travelers with showgirls, giveaways, and photo opportunities in baggage claim areas and rideshare pickup zones. Officials said the airport activation was intended to thank visitors and showcase the city’s hospitality industry at the start of the busy summer travel season.

Visit Orlando announced that the Florida destination welcomed 76.7 million visitors in 2025, a 1.8% increase over 2024 and the highest visitation total in the destination’s history. The group meetings segment also showed strong momentum, increasing 3.1% year over year to reach 5.8 million visitors.

“Orlando’s continued growth in the group meetings segment is a testament to our community’s unwavering commitment to being the premier destination for corporate, association and incentive meetings and events,” said Casandra Matej, President & CEO of Visit Orlando. “With major infrastructure enhancement projects underway at the Orange County Convention Center and Orlando International Airport, Orlando is well-positioned to continue leading as the top choice of meeting planners today and in the years ahead.”

Destination DC announced records for the third consecutive year, with more than 27.2 million people visiting the nation’s capital in 2025—modestly surpassing the previous year’s record by 20,000 visitors—as well as a record \$11.9 billion in visitor spending.

“The fact that Washington, D.C., saw record economic impact for the third straight year, especially in a challenging global environment, speaks to both the enduring appeal of our destination and efficacy of our sales and marketing,” said Elliott L. Ferguson II, President & CEO of Destination DC

In Jacksonville, Florida, tourism officials organized a weeklong schedule of networking events, community gatherings and educational programs tied to the national observance.

Meanwhile, destinations along the Alabama Gulf Coast used the week to highlight tourism’s influence on employment and public funding. Local officials said visitor activity supports hotels, restaurants, charter operators, and infrastructure projects throughout the region.

The weeklong campaign came as U.S. destinations are preparing for a surge in international attention tied to the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the nation’s 250th anniversary celebrations.

“The World Cup is weeks away. America’s 250th birthday is right behind it,” said Geoff Freeman, President & CEO of the U.S. Travel Association. “Tens of millions of visitors are coming, and the travel industry is what makes that possible.”

Marriott has been “a steadfast leader” and an advocate for the American restaurant industry “for more than six decades,” the National Restaurant Association (NRA) said.

“With major infrastructure enhancement projects underway at the Orange County Convention Center and Orlando International Airport, Orlando is well-positioned to continue leading as the top choice of meeting planners today and in the years ahead.”



University of Virginia (UVA) leadership and guests officially welcomed the Virginia Guesthouse Hotel & Conference Center at a grand opening ceremony on April 29. Left to right: Ellen Sinclair, Executive Vice President of Operations, Pyramid Global Hospitality; Gregg Hilker, General Manager, Virginia Guesthouse; Scott Beardsley, President, UVA; Isaac Hicks, COO, Pyramid Global Hospitality; Russ Cronberg, Director of Hospitality, University of Virginia Foundation; and Deborah van Eersel, CEO, UVA Foundation. Credit: Virginia Guesthouse

Scene at PCMA's BEIW and EIC's GMID Celebration



NEWS

Global Wellness Institute Launches Meetings and Events Initiative

By Todd McElwee

The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) has announced the formation of the Meetings and Events Initiative—a global effort designed to help the industry apply wellness as an evidence-based performance driver through practical and measurable event design strategies.

David T. Stevens, Co-Founder of Olympian Meeting, will serve as Chair, with Reina Herschdorfer, Director of Marketing and Public Relations for Caesars Entertainment Meetings & Events, serving as Vice Chair.

“Meetings and events already shape human wellbeing, whether we mean to or not,” said Stevens. “This initiative is about helping our industry take that responsibility seriously and turn it into action. Wellness must become

practical, credible, measurable, and operational.”

GWI describes the Meetings and Events Initiative as an effort to help the industry apply wellness as an evidence-based performance multiplier by turning it into practical event design strategies that improve attendee experience, strengthen belonging, support public health, and drive better business results.

The initiative will be guided by a practical framework built around the 4 M’s: Mindfulness, Movement, Meals, and Meaning, with a first year focus on developing a best practices playbook for application across markets and event types.

Herschdorfer said: “This initiative creates an opportunity for the meetings and events industry to move forward with greater clarity, stronger

standards, and a more intentional approach to designing experiences that support both people and performance. I am honored to help shape this work alongside the distinguished industry professionals contributing to this effort. Their leadership and influence are instrumental in driving meaningful change, and together with the broader global wellness community, we have the potential to significantly advance the future landscape of meetings and events.”

Stevens and Herschdorfer will be joined by Dr. Senthil Gopinath, CEO, ICCA; Stephanie Harris, President, Incentive Research Foundation (IRF); Tahira Endean, MSc, CITP, CMP, CED, Head of Program, IMEX; Dena Lowery, President, Opus Agency; and Rachel Benedick, Chief Revenue Officer, MPI.

“The launch underscores the grow-

ing recognition that meetings and events directly influence organizational performance,” organizers said. “When wellness is intentionally integrated into event design, it supports stronger business outcomes, higher attendee satisfaction, increased engagement, improved content retention, a greater sense of belonging, and enhanced overall wellbeing. The Meetings and Events Initiative is focused on advancing practical, evidence-based strategies that deliver these results consistently across the industry.”

GWI is a 501(c)(3) with a mission to empower wellness worldwide by educating public and private sectors about preventative health and wellness. The global wellness economy is valued at \$6.8 trillion.

Find more information [here](#).

USTA Report

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The report highlighted several areas expected to fuel growth, including business meetings, technology conferences, and youth sports travel. The association said the youth sports industry now exceeds \$40 billion in value and has become a major source of travel demand for midsize U.S. cities.

U.S. Travel also said smaller businesses are expected to increase spending on business travel in 2026, with 86% of business travelers anticipating more group travel and 72% planning to attend at least two meetings during the year.

The report comes as the broader

travel industry faces mixed economic signals. Recent U.S. Travel data showed domestic demand strengthening early this year, while overseas arrivals remained below 2025 levels after months of decline.

Even with ongoing challenges, the association said industry confidence has climbed to its highest level in five years, with planners increasingly adapting to what the report described as a “new normal” of market volatility.

“As AI continues to infiltrate our work, the industry is seeing a renewed craving for authentic human connection,” Hinton wrote. “We aren’t just recovering; we are building for the future.”

Find the report [here](#).

ASAE Awards

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Research, the Sal Martino Foresight Award, honors an organization and its leaders who push boundaries, challenge conventional thinking, and pioneer the use of foresight to build resilience and prepare for the future.

In addition to recognition for its leadership and foresight practices, CUR will receive a cash award of up to \$7,000 to further advance its foresight initiatives. Lindsay Currie, CAE, Executive Officer, CUR, is the proposal lead.

The honor is named for Sal Martino, FASAE, CAE, retired CEO of the American Society of Radiologic

Technologists and past chair of ASAE and the ASAE Research Foundation. ASAE said it is made possible through the support of Webster Chamberlain & Bean LLP.

The NextGen: Rising Star Award recognizes an emerging leader under the age of 35 who demonstrates exceptional promise, dedication, and impact within the association profession. ASAE said it facilitated through the support of DelCor and Experience Columbus.

“Recipients of this award are distinguished by their ability to inspire, lead with purpose, and drive positive changes, setting a powerful example for peers and future association professionals,” ASAE said.

Find more information [here](#).

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Amy Calvert, President & CEO of the Events Industry Council, speaks during a May 6 Global Meetings Industry Day event at the French Embassy in Washington, D.C.

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A New Era of Style, Culture, and Connection at Le Méridien Indianapolis

In the heart of downtown Indianapolis, where historic charm meets modern energy, a new chapter has been unveiled at [Le Méridien Indianapolis](#). Following a comprehensive renovation, this boutique hotel has reemerged as a refined destination for travelers, creatives, and business leaders alike, blending European-inspired design with Midwestern authenticity.

From thoughtfully redesigned guestrooms to a reimagined culinary experience and tech-forward meeting spaces, the transformation positions the hotel as one of downtown's most compelling places to stay, dine, and connect.

A Historic Landmark, Reimagined for Today



Originally built in the early 1900's as the Canterbury Hotel, this iconic property has long been woven into the fabric of downtown Indianapolis. Today, after an extensive renovation, it stands as a modern lifestyle hotel that respects its past while fully embracing the future.

Guests arriving at the hotel are immediately immersed in the brand's signature arrival experience, an interplay of art, lighting, scent, and sound designed to stimulate the senses and set the tone for the stay. The design seamlessly juxtaposes historic architecture with contemporary finishes, creating a layered aesthetic that feels both timeless and current.

The renovation also introduces a more curated and immersive guest journey, aligning with [Le Méridien's](#) global ethos of unlocking destinations through culture, cuisine, and creativity.

Elevated Guestrooms Designed for Modern Travelers

At the core of the transformation are the hotel's 99 newly renovated guestrooms and suites, each thoughtfully designed to meet the expectations of today's traveler.

Rooms now feature clean, modern lines paired with warm textures, creating an environment that is both calming and functional. Enhanced layouts include ergonomic workspaces,

upgraded bathrooms with oversized showers, and technology that supports both productivity and relaxation.

Whether visiting for business or leisure, guests will find spaces that effortlessly transition from work mode to unwind mode. High-speed connectivity, intuitive lighting, and elevated finishes ensure every detail contributes to a seamless stay.

A Refreshed Culinary Experience at Spoke & Steele

At street level, the hotel's signature restaurant, [Spoke & Steele](#), has been refreshed to reflect a bold, contemporary dining vision rooted in local flavor.

Originally conceived as a centerpiece of the hotel's transformation, the restaurant continues to draw

inspiration from the region's motorsport heritage while incorporating global influences. The space itself is light-filled and inviting, with design elements that emphasize craftsmanship and authenticity - from whitewashed brick walls to curated materials sourced with intention.

The updated dining experience brings a renewed focus on approachable yet elevated cuisine, complemented by a dynamic bar program. Whether guests are stopping in for breakfast before a day exploring downtown or settling in for cocktails and dinner, [Spoke & Steele](#) delivers a vibrant, social atmosphere that feels distinctly Indianapolis.

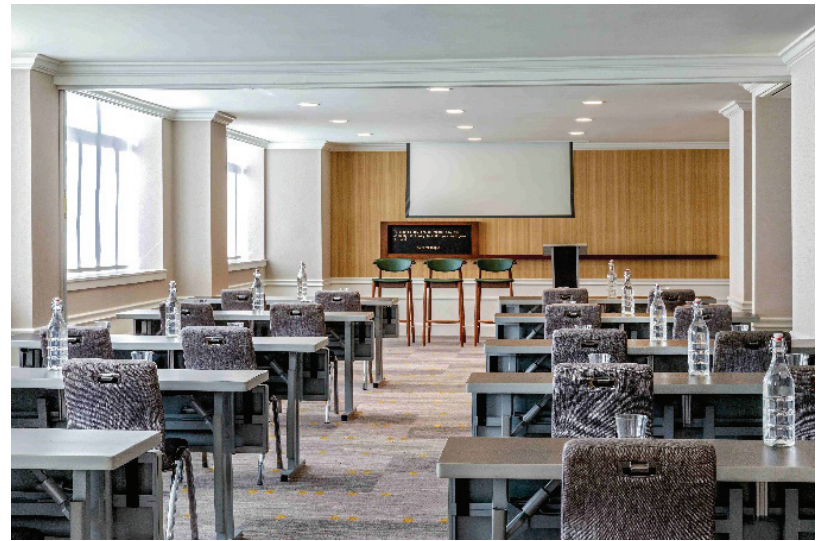
The Hub: Where Creativity and Connection Meet

More than just a lobby, [The Hub by Le Méridien](#) has been reimagined as a sophisticated gathering space that invites guests to linger, collaborate, and connect.



Designed as a modern reinterpretation of the traditional hotel lobby, The Hub blends café culture with creative energy. Guests can enjoy expertly crafted coffee from the brand's Master Barista program while surrounded by artwork curated by local creative Ella Ashwill from [theERA](#).

The refreshed space encourages both productivity and relaxation, equally suited for informal meetings,



solo work sessions, or casual social interactions.

Meeting and Event Spaces Built for the Future

For corporate travelers and event planners, the renovation delivers a compelling upgrade to the hotel's meeting and event offerings.

With more than 2,500 square feet of [refreshed meeting space](#) and multiple flexible venues, the hotel is designed to accommodate everything from executive board meetings to intimate social gatherings.

What sets the experience apart is its focus on technology and productivity. Enhanced AV capabilities, high-speed Wi-Fi, and adaptable room configurations create an environment where ideas can flow freely and presentations come to life. Event planners also benefit from customized catering options from [Spoke & Steele](#), adding a culinary edge to meetings and celebrations alike.

The result is a collection of spaces that feel less like traditional meeting rooms and more like curated environments for innovation and collaboration.

A Destination in the Center of It All

Location remains one of the hotel's strongest assets. Situated at 123 South Illinois Street, [Le Méridien Indianapolis](#) is just steps from the [Indiana Convention Center](#), and Lucas Oil Stadium making

it an ideal base for both business and leisure travelers.

From here, guests can easily explore downtown Indianapolis, including cultural attractions, sports venues, and a growing culinary scene. The hotel's central positioning ensures that everything from meetings to entertainment is within easy reach.

Inspired by History. Elevated for the Future.

The transformation of [Le Méridien Indianapolis](#) is more than a renovation—it is a reinvention of what a boutique hotel experience can be in downtown Indianapolis.

By blending design, culture, and functionality, the hotel now offers a dynamic environment that caters to today's traveler—whether they are seeking inspiration, productivity, or simply a place to unwind.

To explore more or book your stay, visit the official site: [Book Your Stay at Le Méridien Indianapolis](#)

To enquire about meetings, celebrations and events, connect with Director of Sales – Jenny Russell – Jenny.Russell@LeMeridienIndy.com // Direct Line: 317-737-1603

In a city known for its energy and innovation, this reimagined hotel stands as a reflection of both—inviting guests to experience Indianapolis through a new lens of style, creativity, and connection.



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