

## A Case for Theming Meetings: The Challenges and the Rewards

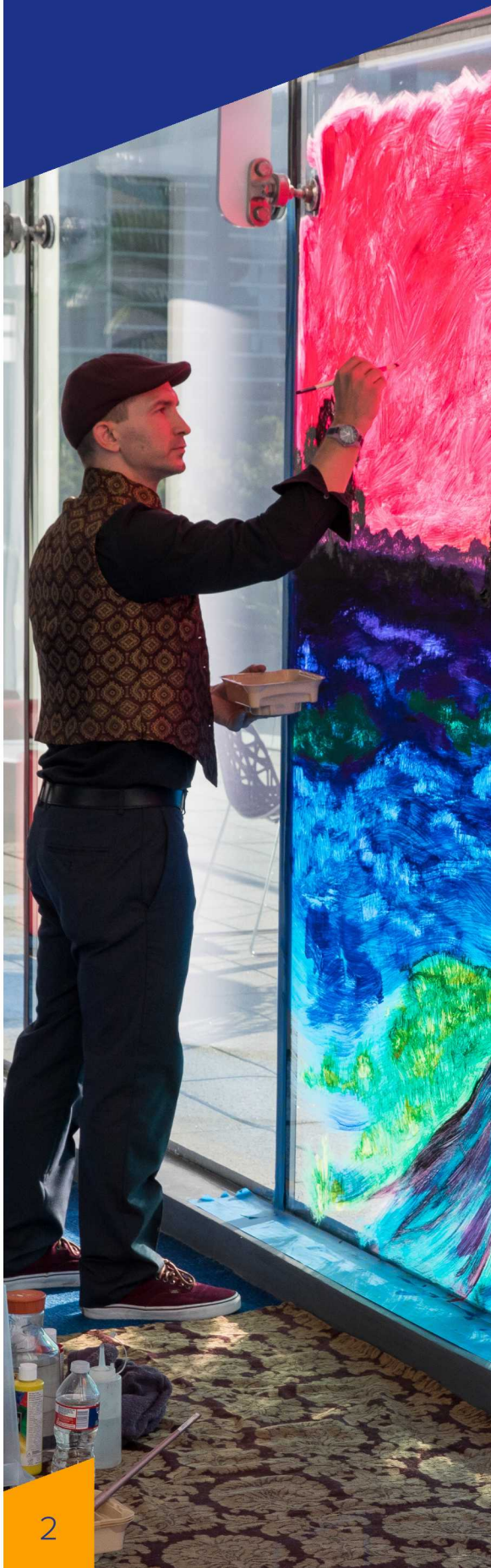
A conference or event can be many things. It's almost like building a city from scratch, turning on the electricity and watching it come to life before tearing it down to leave only shadows of memory.

But that is also the fun, the challenge and the path to growth. In the meetings world where anything can happen, planners get to be the genies that make cities out of air, create meaning from imagination and progress from lessons learned. The point is to provide a forum where like minds meet because it is only within this environment of engagement that problems are solved and new ideas are born. Stoking this process is the energy of the planning teams—the brainstormers and idea generators that take meetings and events from walled rooms to wowing places of possibility, all with the power of theming.

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maritzglobalevents.com  
636.827.4000

1395 North Highway Drive  
Fenton, MO 63099



But three days of glad-handing and networking is usually six months in the making and comprised of a host of moving parts that start at arrival at the airport and don't end until the last guest goes home. "There are always things that can be forgotten. Hotels may do a great job on arrival and then go onto the next group and leave your group hanging. There is no perfection in this work. You always have to be aware and conscious, looking for 'what ifs,'" says Karen Watson, Sr. Director Strategic Events, Maritz Global Events Design Studio.

Watson leads an internal team that produces e4, the Maritz Global Events premier annual customer conference that brings together some 250 top level client contacts with their Maritz and Experient account managers for showcasing ideas and peer-to-peer exchanges. The challenges are formidable in a good year, not to mention the trials of outdoing the successes of the previous year.

"But this is what we do," Watson says, recapping the theme riddles and answers of last year's e4 in Houston, Texas. For that three-day event, held at the Marriott Marquis just ahead of the devastation caused by Hurricane Harvey—perhaps one of the few truly uncontrollable events that keep meeting planners awake in the wee hours—the planning committees came up with and ran with the concept of "RE."

## The Power of "RE"

The human instinct of curiosity—which was also a talk given on stage during the event's general session—was satisfied when attendees understood the core principles of "RE" and found those principles playing out in imaginative ways throughout the conference.

The "RE" here meant Reset, Rethink, Revisit, Rejuvenate and Relax. Attendees got to retool their "RE's" through a variety of themed experiences. These included rejuvenating at the hotel's pool and spa as well as rethinking and regrouping through discussions and sessions.

"We had a mindfulness center for meditation and opened it before the official welcome reception for those who came early," said Watson. "We set up water aerobics, yoga, boot camps, a 5k run and we added much more. The content was geared toward waking up your mind and rethinking."



## Four A's and Four E's

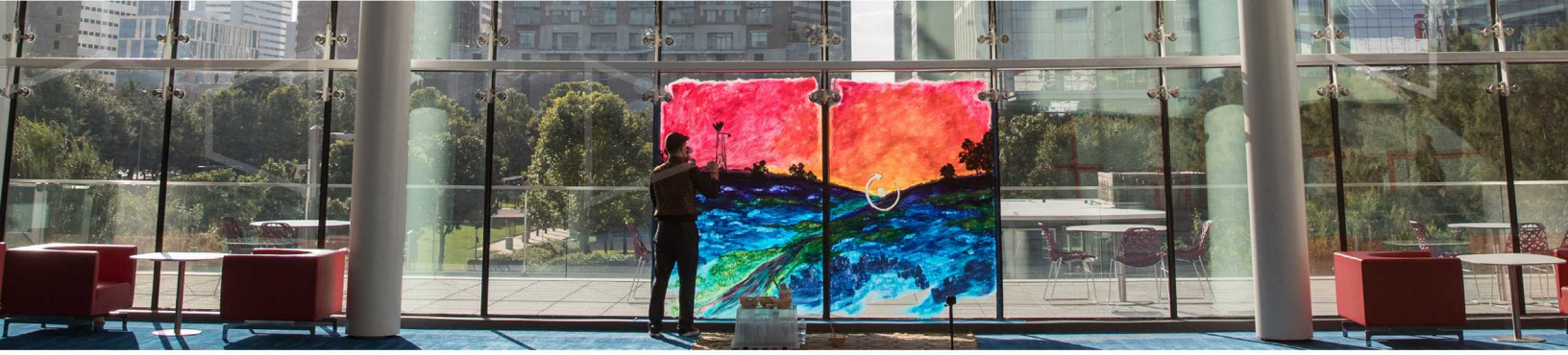
Watson remembers spending many hours of active brainstorming with her team and others ahead of the meeting to ensure the eight phases of a well-planned meeting were met with the right details to mirror both the theme and the goals. These details were anchored to four A's and four E's: Announcing, Anticipating, Arriving, Entering, Engaging, Awards, Exiting and Extending. Within the wider themes of wellness and resetting, guests were able to take advantage of the hotel's onsite pool for team building and relaxation—a benefit that is not always available at other properties. The team had to make sure to fill empty spaces where they could find them with opportunities for attendees to be wowed, see things anew and share.

One of those challenges happened at a key dinner reception that required guests walk from the Marriott, through the convention center to the Hilton on the other side. It could have been a bland walk of no importance but Watson's team saw an opportunity for an experience there instead.

Waiters handed out tall glasses of sparkling wine as an opera singer dressed in a red gown with a 50-foot train entertained. Guests sipped and listened as they walked along the long corridor. Eventually they encountered an artist painting a massive, complex and colorful mural. That meant more stopping and looking, and thinking and sharing as guests made their way to the Hilton where, as they deposited their now empty flutes, another woman wrapped in red with a 50-foot train along the opposite end of the path played a riveting solo concerto for violin.

And when it came time to bid their adieus the guests returned to the Marriott along the same corridor that was now lined with all manner of tempting pastries and desserts for the taking. But the entertainment this time was a clever ensemble of musicians dressed as after-the-party cleaning crew and playing an assembly of janitorial instruments made from mops and trash cans and brooms.

“You always have to up yourself, up your game,” Watson says. “So often it is hard to repeat same elements of a previous event, even if the event was successful.”



## Lessons of Location

Watson adds that location and hotel choice is half the battle when preparing a grand theme and seeing it through its entirety. Planning an event in Las Vegas or at a theme park is easily aided by resorts and DMCs that have plenty of resources at their disposal—furniture and props can be cost prohibitive to ship in for an event. But along with the amazing sets and sounds a theme park might bring, there is a loss of control for the planners.

“You have menus that have to be set up this way, or an event can be held only at this time, or this is where the busses have to go and this is how the guests must be routed,” Watson says. “This can be good—and bad—for the planner.”

However, some ideas can stand up to the test no matter where the venue or location.

She cites an event in Kansas City that was themed as “high school.” While the underlying message was “back to basics,” the planning team had fun setting up coffee breaks as, say, an AV club meeting with pocket pen sets and handmade posters and Rice Krispy treats. They planned lunch one day as a visit to the cafeteria that had hair-netted servers dishing out Salisbury steaks and Jell-O. They set up school elections and campaigns with speeches and debates, ran a team-building gym class, staged a talent show and transported guests in

school buses. The conference culminated with prom night with rented tuxedos and corsages.

“When we go in on a theme, we go all in,” says Watson.

And when it comes to ROI, the buzz is the thing. “At e4 we are looking at the four E’s—Escape, Experience, Encounter and Engage. But there is a fifth and a sixth E. We add Experience and Experiment. We are trying to create new experiences for our guests and show them what is possible, and we are experimenting for the future because what is possible now is always changing into something new.”

## Next in Anaheim

This year’s e4, held in August, will be in Anaheim and split between two hotels across a grand plaza—a set of logistics that is bringing in more new challenges and some impressive solutions. The What’s Your Next -themed event will be city- and beach-focused rather than relying on Disneyland, and Watson expects guests will be wowed and delighted even if Micky and Minnie are not part of the action this time. It’s more of a test perhaps, Watson says, but presents more control for the meeting planner and in a world that can spin out with the weather, if not equipment breakdowns, vendor no-shows, even weak Wi-Fi, a little control can go a long way.



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North America  
1395 North Highway Drive  
Fenton, MO 63099 USA  
636.827.4000

Latin America  
312.287.4769

Europe, Middle East and Africa  
+31.70.4069.053

Asia Pacific  
630.953.2123