

CORPORATE MEETINGS & INCENTIVES

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Even amid a lingering downturn in a suffering industry, you couldn't find a sour note among the 603 associates at HelmsBriscoe's 18th Annual Business Conference in Las Vegas in January (which attracted 1,800 associates, suppliers, and guests—a record). They're positive and passionate, just like Founder and CEO **ROGER HELMS**, to whom they are very loyal. When he takes the stage, they're on their feet. And he returns the love, personally handing out 188 awards to top achievers this year. Those winners were among the nearly 1,200 worldwide associates who booked 18,000 programs in 2009. HelmsBriscoe has come a long way, baby.

Q&A

MARKET MAKER

CMI: HelmsBriscoe pioneered the site-selection field. How has its place in the meetings industry evolved?

Helms: We started HelmsBriscoe in 1992. At that time, no one paid attention to us. Then, when we had our first customer who decided to buy through HelmsBriscoe, the hotel said, 'Whoa, you delivered me a piece of business but I don't have the direct customer relationship and I don't know how I feel about that.' It took a few years for us to get comfortable with each other. Hotels realized we have distribution that they can't match. For example, we have 23 people in St. Louis. A hotel company can't have 23 people in St. Louis. We are a great strategy to impact clients

they can't reach. They began to support us, to get in deeper with us, to work with our people in St. Louis to service our clients and generate incremental business. Now, we have incredible partnerships with hotel companies. We have strategy meetings with all the brands on a regular basis. We work through the process together. We both prosper—and our clients receive tremendous value.

CMI: HelmsBriscoe booked \$503 million worth of group business in 2009. It's safe to say you're weathering the downturn.

Helms: For the 10 years prior to 2008, we were seeing 15 to 20 percent growth annually. 2009 was tough on the entire industry, including HB. We were down 15 percent in booked room nights. The state of the industry, however, was such that we still picked up market share. We also had a very good January. Our January 2010 bookings were up nearly 50 percent over 2009.

CMI: You've said that 2009 was spent "making enhancements to own the upside." What did you mean?

Helms: We are bullish on the meetings market and we know it will recover. While we couldn't do much about the state of the marketplace, we could make investments to be sure we were positively positioned to capture business when it returned. We made significant investments in technology and training, creating a new program for incoming associates and revising our technology platform to enhance the way associates share



anecdotal information. We also upgraded our meeting-management system to help large clients better track their spend and savings.

CMI: Part of what you can offer clients is information. Your associates are like a window onto the current meeting market.

Helms: This is where we truly shine. Anyone can get key facts about a hotel: number of rooms, size of ballrooms, and so on. We have all this at our fingertips. But what we also have is proprietary data—rate histories, for example, from every program we have bid. We also have a proprietary database where associate and client experiences are tracked anecdotally. And finally we have the power of our

network. Associates can reach out to each other and ask questions about properties or destinations. We have a great deal of hands-on, first-person perspective we can offer clients.

CMI: One hotel executive told me he thinks of HB associates as extensions of his sales team. On the other hand, clients think of HB associates as extensions of their staffs. Can they be both?

Helms: HelmsBriscoe represents the customer. We will drive business where the customer's needs are best met. That said, we are an extension of a hotel's sales force in that we bring product knowledge to our clients and facilitate the sales process. —Alison Hall