



(RE-INVENTION)

NICHE FINDERS

These professionals found, and then capitalized on, their own unique place in the industry.

You know them. Those people who find a hole in the market and come up with a brilliant plan, follow through with that plan and develop something smart and successful. Those people who are ahead of the curve—like the early adopters of technology or those who went green before green was even a thing. Those people who make you slam your hand against your forehead and say, “Why didn’t I think of that?” Do you know those people? Well, we found some of them right here in Minnesota’s hospitality industry, doing all sorts of smart things we all wish we thought of ourselves.

Read on. Be inspired.

By Amanda Fretheim Gates
PHOTOS BY TODD BUCHANAN



Shawna Suckow, SPIN Planners Network, SPINCon

In 2008, Shawna Suckow, a meeting planner with some 20 years experience, was learning how to use LinkedIn. She was searching for a way to connect with other veteran planners like herself and, on the spot, created a LinkedIn group called SPIN: senior planners industry network. Six months later, this group had 500 members from around the country and today has 2,000 members.

"There was no grand plan," Suckow says. "I'm not this mastermind with a great vision that some people might like to tag me with. Apparently, I was feeling like 2,000 other people were feeling. It's fantastic that it's growing into something that's providing a service to our industry. It's culminated into this amazing association."

As SPIN grew from a support group of sorts into a full-fledged association with think tanks held around the country, the idea for a conference came to mind. But not just any old conference; Suckow knew this had to be a different

kind of conference that met the needs of her peers—people who, frankly, have seen it all.

"We really had to discover what's new and stimulate their senses, curiosity and creativity," she says. "It's hard to do because my team and I, too, have felt like we've seen it all. They've been to conferences that have much bigger budgets and are all glitz and glamour, and that's not us. We're setting a new standard, where it's by their peers for them and we don't have to cater to any other audience."

So, how did she do it? First, limit suppliers. The conference only accepted supplier sponsors at a 1:3 ratio to planners, which meant Suckow had to turn away much-needed cash until planner attendance allowed. Second, challenge every speaker to deliver a presentation in a brand-new, collaborative fashion—no talking heads. (Speakers had to apply to participate; 36 applied, 10 were chosen.) Third, incorporate corporate social responsibility (CSR) in a new, seamless and budget-friendly way. Fourth, make it affordable.

Add all these together and you get SPINCon 2011, which was held June 2-4 in St. Paul. (Suckow sent RFPs to many cities around the country, and St. Paul won it fair and square.) One unique session, led by Sam Smith of Interactive Meeting Technology, was a hybrid meeting. Planners rotated rooms and participated in each aspect of a hybrid meeting—live event, pod in a remote city, individual at home (complete with a robe and slippers)—with the purpose being that they not only partake in a hybrid event, but actually learn how to pull it off and learn how each member of their audience feels. Throughout the conference, attendees also sat at half rounds with individual monitors or on unconventional seating; speakers paced a catwalk throughout the crowd instead of standing in front on a stage; attendees participated in small CSR projects during each break; and attendees signed a waiver promising to "check all preconceived ideas at the door."

The future of SPINCon looks promising, as the SPIN association continues to grow. Suckow hopes to eventually have a SPINCon each year on nearly every continent (maybe not Antarctica, she says). "We really need to work at getting the word out all over the world," she says. "If there's a need here, I hope there's a need on other continents as well. I really feel we're building a different mousetrap."

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Amanda Lange, Restaurant Connect

Amanda Lange grew up in the hospitality industry. When she went off to college, she knew she wanted to work in the restaurant business, so she got a degree in entrepreneurship, and set her sights on Parasole Restaurant Holdings after graduation. For five years she worked with Parasole, starting as a manager and then becoming its director of business development. She co-created the company's dining club rewards program, which now has 50,000 members.

When the industry took a turn in 2008 and big banquets and corporate events were downsizing, restaurants saw a boost in private dining. Lange was then charged with going from restaurant to restaurant under Parasole's umbrella and formalizing the group dining packages. Inevitably, with the influx of private dining requests to Parasole properties came the requests Lange wasn't able to fulfill. The wheels in her head started turning. "What if there was a business that could accommodate every group?" she remembers thinking. "Like a restaurant broker, restaurant hub, Open Table with a real person. I hated the idea of not being able to accommodate my clients."

Just 75 days after the light bulb went on, Lange quit her job at Parasole and founded Restaurant Connect, a dining concierge service that places groups in a private dining event space that fits all the group's needs. She modeled her company after another big name in the industry, HelmsBriscoe. Just under a year later, Lange has more than 50 restaurant partners, including Manny's, Cooper Irish Pub, Café & Bar Lurcat and Al & Alma's Charter Cruises. "What clients love about it, whether it's an admin or a meeting planner or a financial services associate who needs to host a client dinner, they're like 'Amanda, you're on speed dial. I don't have to have each restaurant in my Rolodex, I can just call you and you'll figure it out,'" Lange says.

When a client calls her up, Lange asks all the necessary questions: What type of event? How many people? Private or semi-private? A/V needs? Valet? Downtown or suburban? Then, she puts together an analysis with up to four different options at no cost to the client. So how does she make her money? The restaurant pays her a fee once she books the event. Fortunately, getting the restaurants onboard was no trouble at all.

"Restaurants kick butt at hospitality, at plan-

ning the event and setting up the menu," Lange says. "But picking up the phone and managing client relationships? Restaurants don't do that. This is a great opportunity to get even more exposure than they would by just answering the phone. The only way there's a charge to the restaurant is if we bring them business, which aligns with how restaurants do transactions. 'Bring me the business, and then I pay my bills.'"

Lange has a two-year goal to have Restaurant Connect in the top 50 U.S. markets; currently she's in the Twin Cities, Chicago and Phoenix. "Restaurant Connect is all about the people," she says. "It's trusting someone who knows what you want and matching you with the restaurant that fits. You get the personal touch. And nobody else is doing it."

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Scott Mehlhaff & Chris Holland-Mehlhaff, The Lodge on Lake Detroit

Five years ago on Memorial Day weekend, Scott Mehlhaff and Chris Holland-Mehlhaff, husband and wife, realized a decade-long dream. They opened The Lodge on Lake Detroit, a unique property that showcased themes that are very important to them, like arts and sustainability. Eco tourism and green building practices were just revving up during this time and Scott and Chris focused on them from the ground up.

When the architectural plans for the new hotel included large, unattractive settling ponds to collect run off, Scott looked into rain gardens. Because this was a newer idea for lakeshore property, Scott's search for an engineer with the expertise to design the project led him to Minneapolis. He also applied for and received a grant from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, who sent experts, in-kind plants and extra hands to help complete the effort. Between the two rain gardens and a lakeshore restoration project, the property now has more than 11,000 square feet of native plants, grasses, shrubs and perennials. "We have a combination of the best of both worlds," Scott says. "We have a very nice manicured lawn

for our wedding and family events, yet all the way around it by the lake and in our rain gardens, it's kind of wild and native."

The couple continued their sustainability efforts throughout the property. In the guest rooms, they use BeeKind body products, which come in biodegradable packaging with part of the proceeds going back to bee research. They offer an organic skin care line in the spa. When acquiring furniture and artwork, they looked for regional artists, keeping their carbon footprint low and helping out their neighbors. Other sustainable initiatives include recycling in all the guest rooms, organic wines and vodkas in the bar and low-flush toilets and florescent light bulbs throughout the property. For the couple's efforts, their lodge received the 2010 Explore Minnesota Tourism Sustainable Tourism Award.

The couple is driving change elsewhere, too. As owners of two additional Best Western hotels, one in Detroit Lakes and one in Grand Marais, Scott and Chris (whose family has been involved with Best Western since 1972) have continue to push the hotel company to get onboard with some of these sustainable practices. And it's worked. "It's exciting to be involved in some of those changes, because it not only affects our hotel but others as well and it'll have a positive impact on the environment," Chris says.

Last year, Best Western rolled out a new description strategy for its properties: Best Western, Best Western Plus and Best Western Premier. When hearing about the Premier designation, Chris felt The Lodge on Lake Detroit fit right in—and they wouldn't even have to change the name. So far there are fewer than 10 Premier properties in North America, with only another dozen in the works. "We chose to open the lodge as an independent hotel because we wanted to do things differently, but this allowed us to find a niche, to still maintain its individuality and our entrepreneurial spirit," Chris says.

"Hospitality has changed," Chris says. "With three categories, this will clearly help people choose a Best Western that's right for their stay. There will be member reward points available and we will have a global presence on their reservation system. As a 54-unit hotel run by the two of us, now we'll have a bigger team to help people find us and understand that we're not going to be the least expensive property in Detroit Lakes, but there is something unique and special about us."

Lisa Giaimo, Torgerson Properties, Hot Hotel Deals

For the past several years it's been tough to be a hotel company, but you would never know that looking at Torgerson Properties. The largest hotel company in the state and management company of nearly 40 hotels and restaurants, Torgerson has grown market share collectively for the last two years. The company's vice president of sales and marketing, Lisa Giaimo, has had a hand in this success by, amongst other initiatives, turning the company's customer website, HotHotelDeals.com, into a money-making venture.

"Everyone has a measure of success when times are good, but when times are tough, this is really when you have a chance to shine," says Giaimo, who was named this year by the Minneapolis-St. Paul Business Journal as a top "40 Under Forty" honoree. "The attitude has to be: Innovate or become obsolete. You have to look for new ways to further engage your customers, to identify revenue opportunities and to challenge yourself to think in an entrepreneurial fashion."

Torgerson uses HotHotelDeals.com as a way to showcase all of its brands and properties together in one place, as well as a place to promote specials and packages. Soon customers were asking for locations in other cities and states, while other properties were asking to advertise on the site. As she was turning these people away, Giaimo had what she calls her light-bulb moment. "I thought, 'This is a tough economy and we need to look at any way that we can to bring additional revenue in, so let's connect these two needs.' There are hotels that want to advertise with us and our customers want more locations—this is a match made in heaven."

For the past 18 months, the company has done a lot of work behind the scenes, building a new website that can remain secure while also supporting the growth that comes with adding more properties. The target goal is to have an additional 150 properties (on top of the site's current number of 28) on the site by year end. Giaimo's been testing the social media waters as well, finding a good amount of customer engagement on both Twitter and Facebook.

In her mind, Giaimo thinks technology plays the biggest part in the future of Torgerson and HotHotelDeals.com. Not only will they continue to have worldwide conversations via social media and broaden the website by including nearby

attractions, but they've also started sending out banquet surveys to planners the day after an event is held in one of their hotels. "We get real-time feedback and we respond to that," Giaimo says. "It's those types of advancements that allow us to do things we couldn't have imagined 10 years ago. I like to use the term 'mass customization,' which is an oxymoron but it's really true. You can reach more people in a more customized fashion today with the technology that we have than we've been able to before. I only see that continuing."

Giaimo's background also drives her success. Her father owned a little hotel in the Florida Keys, and she worked in the housekeeping department. While she swore she would go to college and work anywhere but in hotels, she spent the beginning of her career on the service side. "My background gives me a lot of motivation to really do the best that I can do for the company and the hotels, because I realize all of the associates are depending on it." ■

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