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Meeting And Event Planners Find Optimism For 2011 During Slow Holiday Season



Thomas Neighbors, left, and Gregory Jenkins, owners of Bravo Productions in Long Beach, display their numerous awards recognizing their event planning work. Their office is in the historic Ocean Center Building at 110 W. Ocean Blvd. The firm opened in 1987 and its clients have included Warner Bros./Drew Carey Show, Smithsonian Institution, Princess Cruises, Pacific Monarch Resorts, Disneyland, the U.S. Army, Vons Companies, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Auto Club, City of Beverly Hills, Spain and The Boeing Company. For more information, visit www.bravoevents-online.com (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

■ By **TIFFANY RIDER**
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Events for the holidays have scaled back during a typically slow season for local party planners, yet growth is expected for 2011, according to several Long Beach business executives.

International forecasts for the remainder of 2010 and for 2011 show that those hosting events – families, businesses and associations – are tending to avoid frills for a more conservative celebration. According to the Exhibition for the Incentive Business Travel and Meetings (EIBTM) 2010 Global Industry Trends and Market Share Report, 2010 advance bookings are up and the overall industry shows cautious optimism.

The report, compiled by EIBTM Industry Analyst Rob Davidson, shows that “whilst for 2010 most economists were divided on whether the global recovery would grow, stall or even reverse, now at the end of the year there is talk about favorable prospects for global recovery albeit it slow and uneven,” Davidson said in a release. “However, the vast majority of indicators for the meetings and events industry point to improved business conditions ahead in 2011.”

Many event-planning agencies in Long Beach have this same optimism about the future for the industry, even during the slow winter months. Ryan Choura, CEO of Choura Events, said that the holidays are typically not a busy time for event planning. His business during the winter months usually revolves around smaller custom orders – meaning holiday parties for businesses or families. “We probably, in

the month of December, will do over 250 events, so we're touching [on] a lot of different . . . orders," he said.

About 90 percent of Choura Events' business is done between Manhattan Beach and Laguna Beach, with the occasional event in San Diego, Santa Barbara and the Bakersfield area. His company offers bundle packages for customers, helping with the planning process as well as catering, venue selection and equipment rentals to set the stage for an event. As for business in 2011, Choura said business is not as it was in 2007 but that by diversifying services he is able to stay profitable. "I didn't see the kind of reductions that other people talked about in regards to holidays in our business," he said. "Of course we felt it from '08 [which] was our peak, '09 took a hit, but we've been doing more business than we were doing last year."

Greg Jenkins, co-owner of Bravo Productions, said business has been OK but the repercussions of the recovering economy are reflected in the size of the events the company plans. "A lot of companies have definitely scaled back for holidays. They don't have the capital, but also perception plays a major factor," he said. As an eternal optimist, Jenkins said he thinks consumer mentality will continue to improve through 2011. "My prediction would be around June 2011 that more and more people would see that the economy is improving," he said.

Bravo Productions specializes in staging corporate, association, nonprofit, government and social functions nationwide. Although based in Long Beach, most of the company's business is done out of state. Jenkins said his company also has developed ways for businesses to economize on their events, such as using smaller plates to control portion size to reduce the amount of food being wasted or narrowing down the time frame of the event. "I think that part has been very helpful because it creates a win-win situation for the client and also as an event planner," Jenkins said.

Kimberly Goetz, owner and operator of A Pixie Planned Event, said her business is on the slow side right now, but she has already booked weddings for 2011. Goetz has seen her work change relative to the economy as brides are trying to save money. Her business, which offers event management and full-service planning, has seen an increase in day-of event planning assistance.

Goetz remains optimistic. "I'm not too worried about it," she said. "December is wedding ring giving season, so that's

always something to be optimistic about. Business will pick up in January for sure." While business has been slow, Goetz said she has been spending a lot of her time volunteering and charity hosting. "For me, my business is more about relationship building, getting involved within the city," she said.

Facilities in Long Beach have also seen a decline in events during the holidays. Cristina Cruz, facility rentals coordinator for the Museum of Latin American Art (MoLAA), said that although things are a bit slow, she thinks the museum is doing better than its competitors. "We had a pretty good winter here for corporate events," she said. Cruz manages all of the sales and banquet rental sales for corporate events, social events and meetings at the museum. The clients that she serves, she said, choose MoLAA to bring an art experience to their guests, particularly with corporate events. "I think because of the economy, they really wanted to choose a place that benefits the community, them and us," she said. Cruz expects business to be good next year coinciding with the 15-year anniversary of the museum next year.

Sarajeva Vazquez, special event coordinator for the Long Beach Museum of Art (LBMA), said the events she organizes have shrunk slightly to become more intimate with a focus on smaller get-togethers. For the holidays, she tends to work on small events with appetizers and a hosted bar. "I think in the past, everyone had a lot of money so a lot of people were spending money left and right, and I think this year people are a little more conscious of the decisions they're making as far as the types of chairs they're renting, plates, things like that," she said.

Vazquez said she focuses on helping clients have an elegant event without going over budget by lowering prices for rentals and adjusting events to save them money. This is a change of focus for the museum, Vazquez said, because in the past "if you didn't have the money, then you couldn't have the party." Today the museum hosts more Long Beach locals as the venue has repositioned itself. "Now they feel like they're part of the community and they feel like they're part of the LBMA family," Vazquez said.

After the New Year, Vazquez said LBMA begins to book more events. The venue is also a popular spot for weddings, which Vazquez said are already getting booked for 2011. ■