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WALK THE WALK

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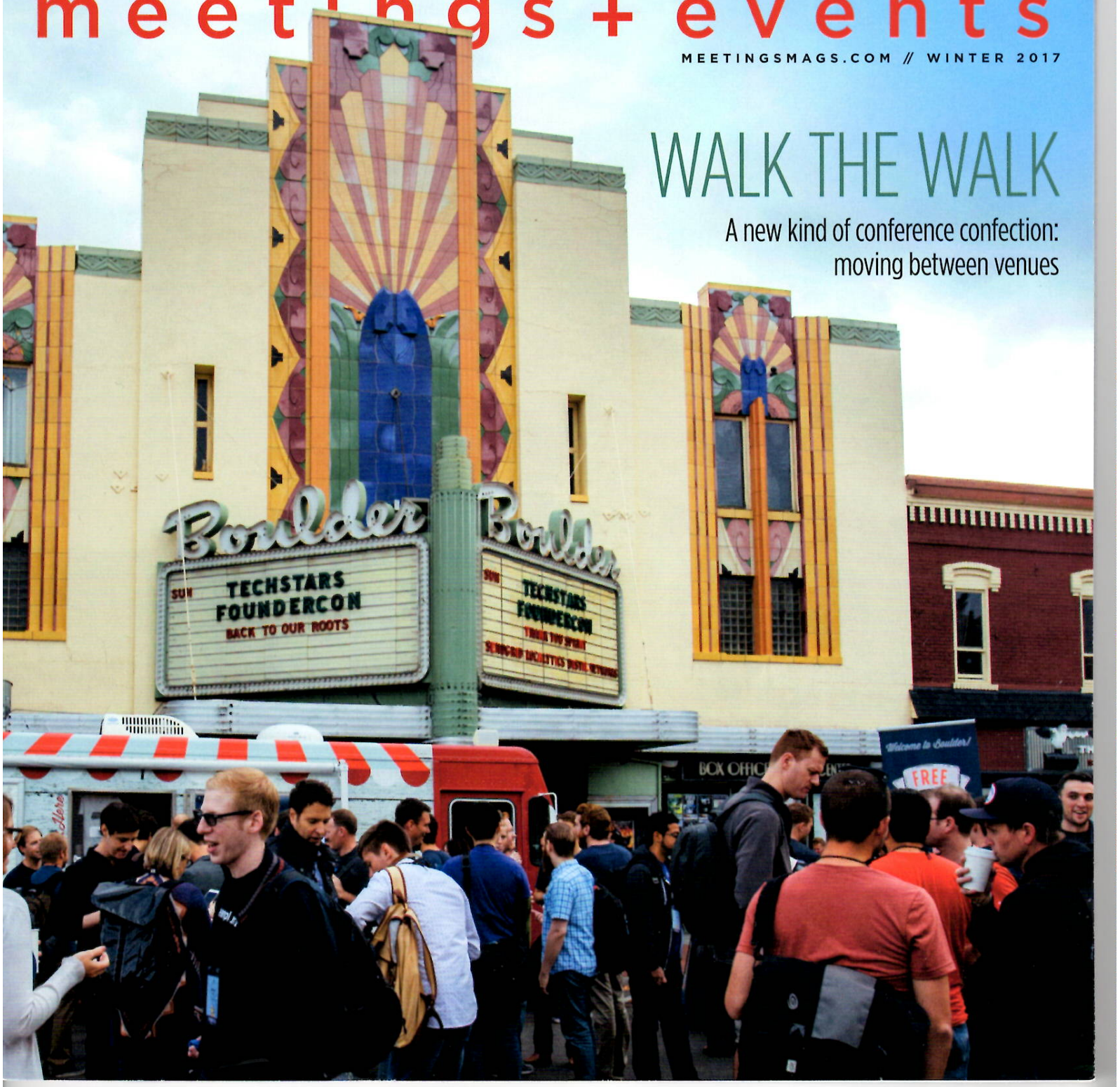
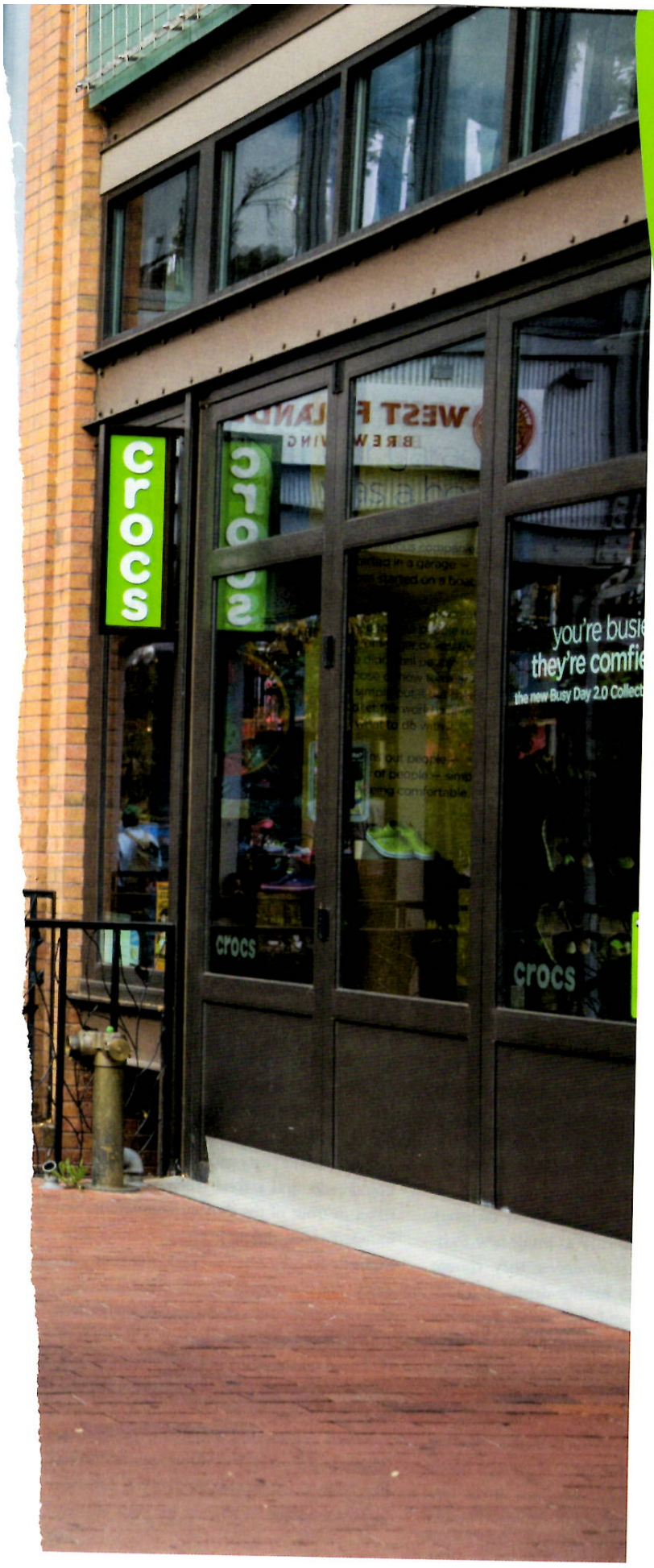


BOULDER'S WALKABLE DOWNTOWN WAS A SELLING POINT FOR TECHSTARS' FOUNDERCON.



WAKE UP ATTENDEES *with* WALKING CONFERENCES

Stir up engagement and tune into a host destination with gatherings that utilize multiple venues.

By Beth Buehler

DESTINATION MARKETING ORGANIZATIONS, hotels and venues are partnering to make it possible for Colorado towns like Aspen, Boulder and Vail to host larger conferences and get people outside during a meeting, and not just during free time and activities. The term "walking conference" is surfacing, encompassing the concept of a gathering where attendees move between various venues instead of staying primarily within one hotel or conference center.

"It gives the attendees a way to really see a town through the eyes of a local. Cool places that can be incorporated are the modern art museum, food trucks, music halls, rooftop bars, parks, etc.," suggests Kim Farin, director of marketing for Boulder Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB).

"Groups have become tired of Las Vegas and being in large conference halls. Corporate groups want to do something different," adds Sarah Reynolds Lesser, director of sales for Aspen Chamber Resort Association. "Walking between venues in Aspen's downtown is the same as in a big hotel but it's more exciting and gets folks outside."

BOULDER

Known as a vibrant college and entrepreneurial city, the first walking conference Boulder Convention & Visitors Bureau assisted was Chefs Collaborative's 2014 Sustainable Foods Summit. A local businesswoman was serving on the nonprofit's board of directors and worked closely with the CVB to think out of the box and come up with a combination of venues, which included several restaurants and farms.

"We were getting a lot of RFPs for groups of 300 to 500 people, and it was frustrating to sit back and say, 'Here is a contact for one of many of our Colorado partners who had the adequate space.' Walking conferences give us the option to sell Boulder differently than in the past," explains Andrew Heidt, director of group sales and marketing for Boulder CVB.

Usually held in large cities like Boston, Chicago and Austin, Boulder was selected to host Techstars' 2015 FounderCon. "We wanted to bring our founders, who participated in accelerators all over the world, the opportunity to see where it all started. We had never used the walking conference format, but thought that the footprint of Boulder with its walkable downtown and eclectic environment was the perfect place to try it out. It worked brilliantly," says Techstars Network Catalyst John Hill.

Founded in 2007, Boulder-based Techstars empowers entrepreneurs to bring new technologies to market wherever they choose to live and has 25 mentor-driven accelerator programs around the world. Founders of the accelerator programs gather annually for FounderCon, featuring keynote addresses, informative panels, in-depth workshops, fun activities and BizDevDay.

Taking place Oct. 18-20, 2015, the gathering for 725 attendees was held at various hotels and venues in the famous Pearl Street area downtown and based out of Boulder Theater. Meeting and event spaces at Hotel Boulderado, St Julien Hotel & Spa, Galvanize, E-Town Hall, Rembrandt Yard, Techstars' headquarters and some of the company's portfolio companies like SendGrid and SimpleEnergy also were tapped. An event app helped attendees know where they needed to be and communicate with each other.

"We wanted founders to have plenty of informal networking time. When you're walking from talk to talk, you get a chance to interact with different people," Hill says.

The social aspects included an opening party at Boulder Theater, an evening of entertainment including Two Bit Circus at Boulder Theater and the party game Werewolf at Hotel Boulderado, and a food truck lunch on the street in front of the theater. One afternoon, founders could choose from experiences such as the Banjo Billy Bus Tour and vintage arcade games and libations at Press Play Bar. The conference wrapped up at Bohemian Biergarten with Swag Swap Happy Hour, which Hill says is "based on the spirit of international soccer matches where players trade jerseys at the end of games."

When considering a walking conference, "think in the gray," Hill recommends. "If you have a city as a footprint, it offers you a chance to host a unique experience for your partici-

KONICA MINOLTA HELD GENERAL SESSIONS AT ASPEN'S BENEDICT MUSIC TENT.

pants and the community. We're a big believer of leaving a residual effects in any city we go into and this type of conference format leaves an indelible mark on all."

Next up for Boulder is a walking conference for the International Foodservice Editorial Council in November 2017. "We are just starting to proactively market this, but it's one of our game plans in order to bring groups 400-plus to the city as a smaller meetings destination," Heidt says. "CVBs can give advice and help with the permitting process. Our role is to connect with the right people and to have planners in town to see the flow with venues and lodging."

The Boulder CVB has a meeting cash incentive program to help with extra costs, such as those that can be incurred when using a variety of venues, and has unique ways to take the walking conference one step beyond the norm. A company's name can be placed on flags that line the pedestrian-friendly Pearl Street and on the marquee of Boulder Theater, and the local bike-sharing program B-Cycle offers conference rates to help link venues that are a bit farther apart. Farin suggests that it would be fun to try a Fitbit challenge to see who walked the most during a conference.

ASPEN

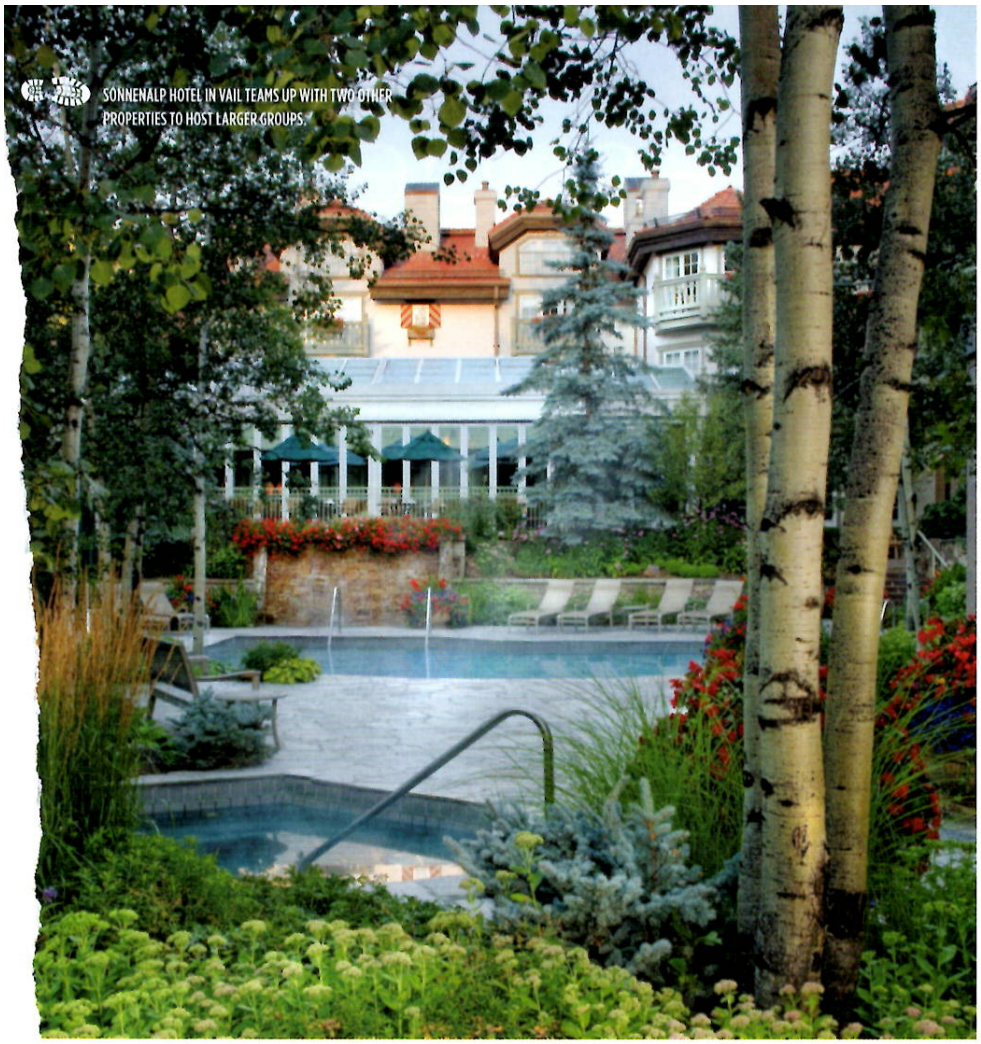
Konica Minolta booked 750 of the 2,000 rooms in Aspen and another 300 in nearby Snowmass for its 2016 Dealer Conference on Aug. 28–30 to network, learn about business innovations and showcase new technology and products. Shawn Thomson-Palermo, chairman of the Aspen-based destination management company RMC, partnered with Michael Campbell of U.S. Motivation incentive company to think outside of the traditional box of a hotel or convention center and present an entire town concept to Konica Minolta.

"Typically, a meeting like this would be in Los Angeles or Las Vegas. We were thrilled to show off one of the most magnificent towns in America during one of the most beautiful times of the year," says Thomson-Palermo. "We are now receiving this request from other corporate organizations across the country."

Aspen Chamber Resort Association's group sales team also was actively involved to help coordinate this citywide meeting based at Aspen Meadows Resort (located on the community's west side), where meeting spaces were used for sessions, expos and press conferences, and a food and beverage tent was set up for lunches. General sessions and a product expo were held at Aspen Music Festival's neighboring Benedict Music Tent (capacity of 2,050) and a concert by John Oates staged at the festival's Harris Hall, also used for breakout sessions. Evening dinners were held at The St. Regis Aspen Resort, Aspen Meadows Resort and Chapparal Ranch.

The Little Nell, St. Regis, Hotel Jerome, Limelight Hotel, The Westin Snowmass Resort and The Gant and other properties throughout town also were booked and attendees shuttled to the main location to satisfy Konica Minolta's lodging needs.

Like Boulder, Aspen has started hosting multiple walking conferences, says Reynolds Lesser. In February 2015, a group of approximately 550 utilized the Wheeler Opera House



SONNENALP HOTEL IN VAIL TEAMS UP WITH TWO OTHER PROPERTIES TO HOST LARGER GROUPS.

as a general session venue and booked rooms at Hotel Jerome, Limelight Hotel, Sky Hotel and St. Regis, all located downtown. A fun progressive "Bites & Bar" reception circulated between the Limelight and Sky Hotel.

VAIL

Pacific Crest Securities has hosted its invite-only technology investor conference in Vail since 2000. It started as a small intimate event at one hotel and has expanded into a program that spans lodging and meeting space at three hotels—Sonnenalp Hotel, Four Seasons Resort and Residences Vail, and The Sebastian - Vail—and pretty much takes over Vail Village in early August for 900 to 1,000 attendees.

"Each hotel has a unique feel that allows us to incorporate different aspects of our program across the three venues for the benefit of our attendees without losing the intimacy our event had when we utilized only one hotel," says Jen McBee, PMP, program director for Pacific Crest Securities: Technology Specialists of KeyBanc Capital Markets. "We run three separate parts of the program at each venue. The Sonnenalp is the main venue with company presentations, investor meetings, breakfast, lunch and cocktail parties. At The Sebastian we have our Mosaic Summit … which offers more customized meetings around specific topics. Then over at the Four Seasons, we host very interactive industry workshops."

Some meals and events are held nearby at The Arrabelle at Vail Square and The Lodge at Vail, plus small group dinners are hosted at many of the restaurants in Vail Village.

"The walking conference concept works for this event largely because the town of Vail is very walkable. We have built the program around the relaxed, intimate and more remote setting that is Vail as it lends itself to better networking," confirms McBee, who notes that lodging at The Lodge at Vail, Austria Haus Club & Hotel, Lodge Tower, The Arrabelle and Tivoli Lodge also is utilized. "Ensure all the venues are truly within walking distance (10-minute walk or less or provide shuttle service) and have a great walking map!"

It's not by accident that The Sebastian, Sonnenalp and Four Seasons were the primary partners for this gathering. Located very close to one another and with 23,000 square feet of meeting and event space and the ability to accommodate up to 300 attendees, the properties very intentionally started marketing together as The Pinnacle in 2014 to land larger conferences than would be otherwise possible.

"We play really well in the sandbox together. We are going after business that the three of us could never individually get," says Patricia McNamara, director of sales for Sonnenalp Hotel. "We try to make sure all three hotels do well with rooms and food and beverage."

It has ended up being a fairly easy concept to sell, McNamara says, especially once planners visit, see the close proximity and understand how well it can work. For an upcoming gathering in April 2017, a group using The Pinnacle concept needs 120 guest rooms and likes the idea of moving back and forth between the three properties and offering lodging choices, she shares.

Any extra investment effort wise on the planning side provides big dividends in response. Hill says, "It's more difficult to change locations and to take on a dispersed conference approach, but the uniqueness helps it stand out from what's become a very crowded conference landscape."

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