

LAS VEGAS

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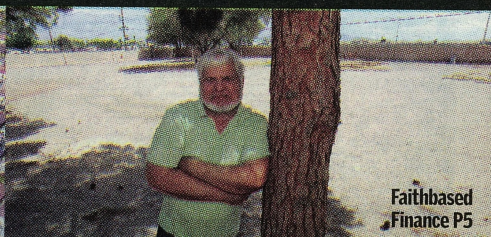
August 13, 2007

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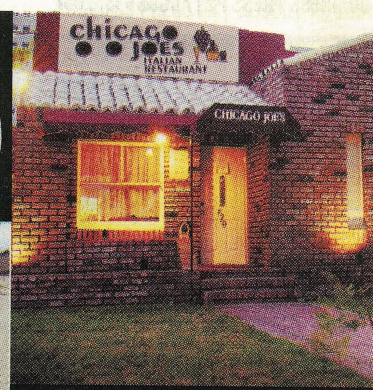
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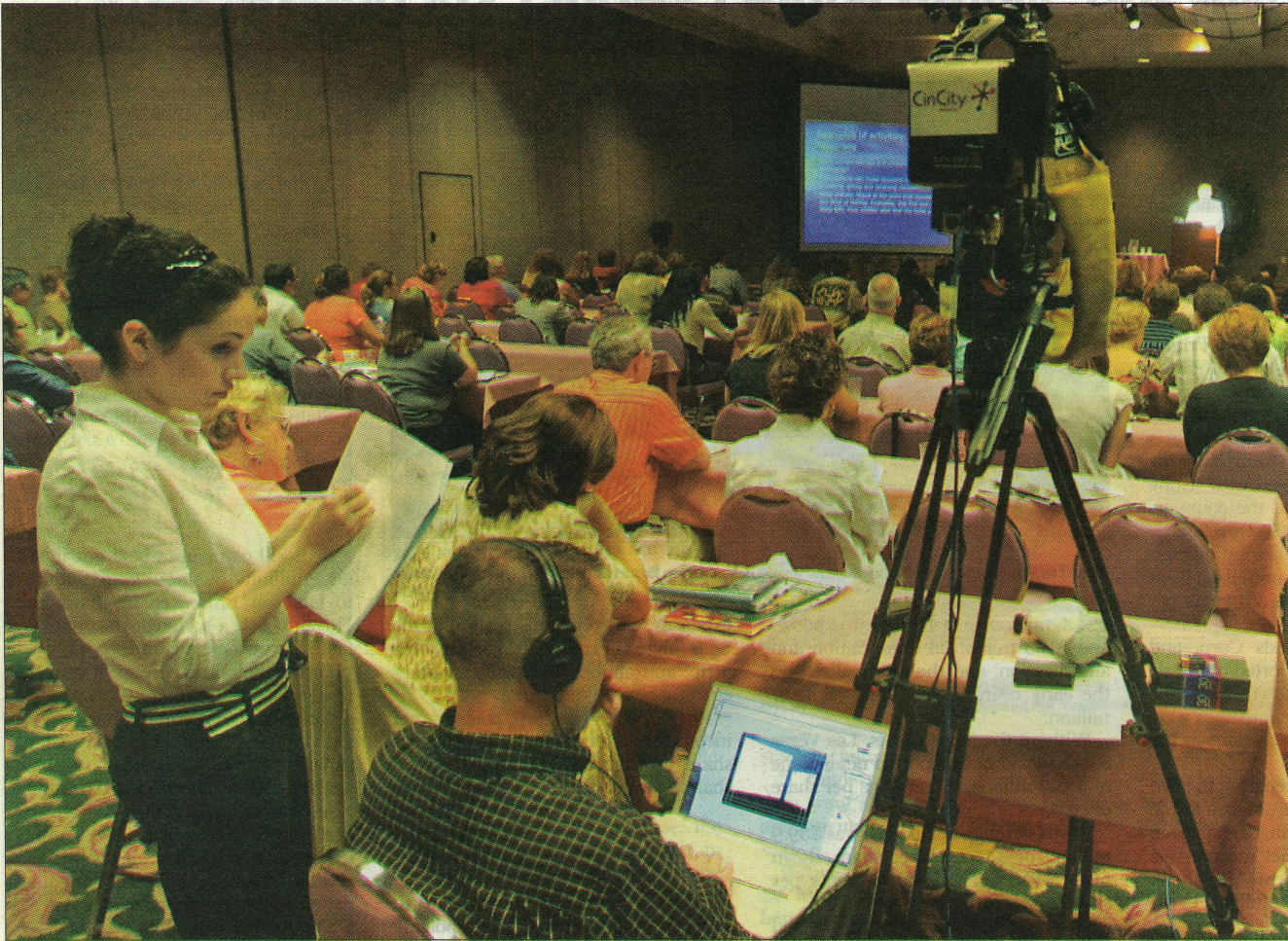
KNOW YOUR VEGAS

Area small businesses can cash in on the city's billion-dollar convention industry if they play their cards right and avoid some common pitfalls.

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COVER STORY



“The gambling, the all-night drinking. Sometimes it is hard to concentrate on the business at hand in the convention center. You don’t want the party aspect to take away from people making sure they get their business done.”

CINDY CESARE
CINCITY MEDIA
FOUNDER

JOHN GURZINSKI | REVIEW-JOURNAL

CinCity Media associate producer Julia Humbert and videographer/editor Victor Woodall film the Future Horizons Conference at the Tropicana Convention.

Out-of-town work

Despite heavy competition, there’s still money to be made by companies looking to serve conventioners

BY BENJAMIN SPILLMAN

When it comes to finding business opportunities in Las Vegas, focusing on an industry that brings in about \$8 billion annually seems like a good place to start.

But just because Las Vegas conventions generate an amount of money roughly equal to the gross domestic product of Jamaica doesn’t mean it is easy for small business people to tap into the cash.

For starters, the amount of money at stake and the status of Las Vegas as a

beacon for economic opportunists mean the local convention scene is extremely competitive.

Longtime operators aren’t going to let existing clients get away easily. And regular Las Vegas customers are going to be wary of doing business with unfamiliar companies — especially companies looking to use Las Vegas as a venue to put their best feet forward for customers or corporate bosses.

That doesn’t mean it’s impossible for newcomers to get in on the action. They

just need to be willing to work for it, even if it entails going beyond traditional service to become the client’s personal expert on Las Vegas.

“I kind of see myself as a little ambassador of this city,” said Cindy Cesare, a former television reporter who founded CinCity Media. The firm offers video and editing services to companies in town for conventions, meetings and corporate events. It records and edits events, presentations, product demonstrations and interviews.

Cesare said convention clients are often unfamiliar with Las Vegas, which means a big part of the job is holding their hand throughout their Southern Nevada visit.

“The gambling, the all-night drinking. Sometimes it is hard to concentrate on the business at hand in the convention center,” Cesare said. “You don’t want the party aspect to take away from people making sure they get their business done.”

CinCitymedia is one of hundreds of firms included on the list of vendors maintained by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. The alphabetical list includes businesses offering everything from balloon displays to complete transportation and destination management services.

The businesses do work in the Las Vegas Convention Center, hotel convention centers and around town on off-site events for convention and meeting visitors and their spouses.

One of the common threads among

CONVENTION: Continued from page 8

operators of businesses that serve conventions, tradeshows and corporate meetings is that there is more to it than knowing the customer. They recommend knowing Las Vegas, knowing hotel operators and knowing how to help travelers avoid gridlock, confusion or any other mishaps that can ruin a business trip to Southern Nevada.

Longtime operators say knowledge and contacts are the resources that separate them from the revolving door of startups that come and go from the Las Vegas scene.

"Basically it is a referral business. One person is going to tell another person that this guy is OK and does a nice job," said Jack Sheridan, owner of The Butler Did It, a catering business.

Sheridan has been catering full time for about 12 years. Before the catering business he operated The Vineyard and the Inn at Silk Purse Ranch restaurants.

Catering to convention and meeting visitors has a lot more variety than running a restaurant, Sheridan said.

"Once you make it successful you really can't change it that much. You end up with sort of a boring existence. Catering is always something different," he said.

Sheridan has airlifted meals and seating for 50 by helicopter to the rim of the Grand Canyon, hauled supplies for a breakfast to the top of Sloan Mountain and lugged food and supplies by boat up Black Canyon to Willow Beach.

"You are more of a moving company than you are a chef half the time," he said.

Sheridan gets convention and meeting business mostly through destination management companies seeking a caterer for off-site events. That means sometimes he knows little about the end clients other than the logistics required to feed them.

That said, positive word-of-mouth advertising is critical to his success.

"All it takes is one bad event," Sheridan warned.

Catering and video aren't the only opportunities in the convention, tradeshow and meeting sector. Large events such as the Consumer Electronics Show and SEMA, a major car parts show, require dozens of contractors and hundreds of workers.

Chuck Schwartz, chairman of ConvExx, the company that produces SEMA and owns the Las Vegas Bike Fest, said that for SEMA his firm hires about 25 contractors and the exhibitors hire about 50.

Schwartz, who has been in the tradeshow and convention business more than 25 years, said firms like his make a point to get to know all the

companies offering support services.

New entrants into the market would be wise to start with a list of reliable contacts and references, he said.

"When somebody gets started they usually came from the industry and already have some contacts," he said. "As they become known and are accepted by the industry, they get more business."

One area in the sector where opportunity exists for newcomers is providing security services, Schwartz

said. A shortage of available security and competition between events, conventions and even construction sites means operators of a big show like SEMA may need to hire several security firms.

"All security companies are pretty much low-paid jobs and there is just a shortage," he said. "No one company can supply all the staff. I'm looking for ways all the time to find some technology that will give me some relief for the need for all those people."

But even in areas of opportunity, people serving the sector recommend learning as much as they can before jumping in with both feet. One way is to get a job with an established firm to learn about the nuances of the business sector.

"There are easier ways to make a living," said Sheridan. "I would advise them to go work for somebody first."

Ben Spillman writes for the Business Press's sister publication, the Review-Journal. He can be reached at bspillman@reviewjournal.com or

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