

Come for the Bourbon, Stay for the Continuing Education

Meeting planners increasingly incorporate Kentucky's signature industries—bourbon and Thoroughbreds—into their conventions and events

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When Bud Ratliff set out to create a LEAN management training seminar in Central Kentucky, he wanted to make it stand out from the rest of the competition for project management workshop dollars. So, instead of dry lectures and breakout work sessions, he planned classes inside bourbon distilleries and horse farms.

Ratliff, president of Solarity.com, an organizational consulting and training organization, incorporated tours and immersive learning experiences about the lean management process at two bourbon distilleries and two horse farms in Central Kentucky as part of the “LEAN Into Kentucky” training event, which will take place Sept. 23–25 in Lexington.

“We’ll go to horse farms, one smaller and one larger, and the participants learn how each operates. On the second day, we go to two very distinct bourbon distilleries,” Ratliff said. “So, not only do the class members get to learn about the principles, they experience applying them to totally different industries.”

At the end of each day, class members team up to develop recommendations to further incorporate lean management strategies into those businesses and present them to a panel from the horse and bourbon industries to get real-world feedback. The winning team receives a gift, such as bottles of Woodford Reserve, or fine leather mementos from a prestigious horse farm. The two-day seminar kicks off with a bourbon tasting and bourbon-pairing dinner at the Kentucky Castle.

“The feedback from [past] participants was that this immersive training was a superior experience for them because it involved all the senses and gave them a better understanding of the management practices than they would receive in a lecture setting,” Ratliff said. “People from out of state said they wanted to come back to Kentucky. And people from in-state had a different, behind-the-scenes experience with the bourbon tastings and the horse farms. Several of them said ‘I have to plan a visit or a convention here.’”

With increased competition for attendees to conventions and continuing education classes upping the ante, some organizers are looking to bourbon and horses as a hook to differentiate their event and attract attendees to Central Kentucky. From hosting bourbon dinners to open a convention to tours and breakout events inside bourbon distilleries and at horse farms, the trend of incorporating unique venues and experiences into conventions and conferences also shows off the unique appeal of the area and, in many cases, encourages return visits.

Tim Knittel, a bourbon expert and founder of Distilled Living, a company that offers guided bourbon tastings, sensory training and other bourbon-based event programming, said

the competition for convention dollars primarily comes down to programming and place.

“Conventions of any size are always based on a primary and secondary value. So is the convention material worthwhile, but then also is there entertainment and travel value?” Knittel said. “Top-tier [convention] cities like Orlando and Las Vegas have built an entire infrastructure around creating secondary value. What do you do when you’re not in the hotel ballroom staring at PowerPoint presentations? And what we’ve seen is that the bourbon industry has become that secondary value for conventions coming to this area.”

Knittel, who helped plan the LEAN Into Kentucky event, has seen other groups

The draw of Kentucky’s signature industries isn’t news to VisitLEX, Lexington’s convention and visitor’s bureau.

“Bourbon and horses are a big attraction for convention attendees—both are authentic and something that you can’t experience in ‘any city USA,’” said Marci Krueger-Sidebottom, vice president of sales and services at VisitLEX. “The meeting industry is very competitive with finding the authentic and unique attributes in a city they are considering.

“We have had planners provide bourbon tasting at opening receptions so that attendees can sample and learn about the distilling process, the history and taste the product. ... We have hosted meetings that start their conference with a half-day of local tours. They most always offer horse farm tours and bourbon distillery tours. Both are very popular and usually sell out.”

Incorporating a bourbon tasting into a day of meetings can also help spur further exploration of the area.

“Since meeting planners have to be very sensitive to agenda programming time, we bring bourbon experiences right into the meeting room. And sometimes they can’t



Bourbon expert Tim Knittel, founder of Distilled Living, says he often gets requests to lead guided bourbon tastings and related programming during group events.

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Beyond tours, lessons from Kentucky's bourbon and equine industries are often incorporated into event programming.

incorporate bourbon into conventions and continuing education.

A continuing education seminar for dentists organized by The Phelps Institute also used the bourbon industry as part of the draw of its event. Hosted by Dr. Christopher Phelps and Dr. Tom Larkin, the three-day workshop focused managing and growing a dental practice, and also incorporated aspects of the bourbon industry into its agenda, including a bourbon dinner at the Kentucky Castle and tours of Alltech, Woodford Reserve, Buffalo Trace, Wild Turkey and Four Roses distilleries. While the event was ultimately canceled due to scheduling issues, its organizers emphasize the value of unique settings and experiences in creating a memorable event.

"Over the past several years, the average attendance at various dental meetings has been in decline. This is most likely due to dentists having more options to get their continuing education online instead of having to get onto a plane to go to a large meeting," Phelps said. "In an attempt to increase the attendance at meetings I host, I've had success with pairing them with some type of experience as well. Last year, for instance, I combined a dental CE event with a tour and wine-tasting experience at some of my favorite vineyards out in Napa Valley, California. After the success of this event and others like it I've held, I decided to search for other unique opportunities to combine education with a great learning experience. With so much history and the current popularity of bourbon, the Bourbon Trail just seemed like exactly the kind of place where we could combine the two again."

build in the travel to the actual distillery,” Krueger-Sidebottom said. “These experiences then enhance the need for attendees to stay later and go to the distillery of their choice after the meeting ends or come back with their family and friends.

“We are very fortunate to have so many working horse farms that allow visitors to come and see their beautiful farms and horses and learn about the business. We have had hundreds of meeting attendees book horse farms tours and host receptions and dinner events on farms, too. The feedback that we receive is overwhelming.”

The region’s bourbon distillers have also seen an uptick in visits and hosted private events as a result of continuing education courses and conventions.

“We have seen a steady increase in group tours year-over-year,” said Amy Preske, public relations and event manager with Buffalo Trace Distillery. “Our growth for the past several years has seen double-digit percentages over the previous year, and convention groups make up a part of the larger overall growth in group tour visitation.

“We also have on-site meeting facilities which are commonly rented by convention organizers who are looking for a true Kentucky bourbon experience for their attendees while they are in town,” Preske said. “Currently, 60 percent of our event rentals are convention related. We estimate 85 percent of our convention groups incorporate a tour—and a tasting in most cases—into their agenda for the day as they are looking for a unique and memorable experience for their guests.”

The possibilities to customize and personalize events are nearly endless. As part of an event called “The Future of Personalized and



Precision Medicine,” for example, bourbon expert Knittel crafted a bourbon tasting for attendees that took into consideration the educational aspects of the conference—in this case a tasting with no added sugar.

“Traditionally, bourbon cocktails [like all cocktails] are built on the philosophy of spirit plus sugar plus contrast, and while there are a few dry bourbon cocktails, they’re not commonly known or readily available,” Knittel said. “Bourbon and food pairings,

too, are usually built with some sort of sweet involved, such as bread pudding, caramel, toffee, cornbread, sorghum, maple syrup, marzipan, apple pie, etc.”

So Knittel developed a tasting of four bourbons paired with a healthier food element—like Maker’s Mark paired with a raw pecan; Buffalo Trace with fresh ginger; Old Bardstown Bottled-in-Bond with fresh orange and Bulleit with dark chocolate.

“This gave the participants a basic bour-

bon palate training by experiencing the different flavors in different styles of bourbon,” Knittel said. It also gave them a tangible example of the curriculum they were studying.

“These conferences are making the bourbon industry and the horse industry a part of the experience and not separate things to go to after the day’s workshops are over,” Knittel said. “Even people who are not in the bourbon industry are seeing the value that the industry holds.” **BL**

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