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Snapshot of HelmsBriscoe in 2009: 18,000 Programs, 3 Million Room Nights

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Marsha Irvin, chancellor of Agassi Prep School, accepts a donation on behalf of the Andre Agassi Foundation for Education from HelmsBriscoe CEO Roger Helms (right) and MGM Mirage EVP Chuck Bowling.

Photo by Michael Holt

Founder and CEO Roger Helms welcomed 604 HelmsBriscoe Associates and 893 hotel and tourism partners to the company's 18th Annual Business Conference, held January 19–22 at the stunning new Aria Resort & Casino at CityCenter in Las Vegas.

This year's event was the largest ever for the site-selection company, which has grown from a little idea Helms had back in 1992 to a driving force in the meetings industry. HB's 1,200 worldwide associates booked \$503 million worth of group business in 2009. That's 18,000 programs and 3 million room nights. The company represents the largest single source of group business for InterContinental Hotels Group, Hilton Worldwide, Marriott International, and Starwood Hotels & Resorts.

Helms got a standing ovation when he walked on stage to greet the gathered troops. He acknowledged the tough year that was, adding his belief that now is "a time of renewal. Our company is strong and our industry is rebounding. Let's celebrate the end of 2009 and let's celebrate the opportunities ahead."

Helms said the Scottsdale-based company is ready for those opportunities, having made the decision in late 2008, when the economy's downhill slide really began, "to position ourselves to own the recovery" rather than "build a bunker" and wait out the storm.

That meant new investments in technology and training and the hiring of a record number of associates in 2009. HB has begun using Cvent as its site-sourcing and online RFP provider, a system that Helms says HB Associates find more intuitive than the system they used previously. Cvent also has proven to respond quickly to user issues that arise, he said.

HB introduced its revamped InSite, an online forum for associates to share their knowledge with each other. And it began using a strategic meeting management system to offer sophisticated reporting for clients that are focused on tracking their spending and their negotiated savings.

On the international scene, HelmsBriscoe brought its previously contracted international associates under the HB umbrella. "This consolidation enables us to create a seamless corporate culture with consistent expectations," Helms said. "We are now one company with global reach."

And with the hiring of David Peckinpaugh, CMP, as vice president of business development last June, HB signaled its intention to go after the association market more aggressively. With \$200 million in association business booked in 2008, HB has a significant presence already. But Peckinpaugh—a longtime fixture in the association meetings market, most recently as president and CEO of the San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau, will convene an advisory board of association executives in March to hear from them about their unique needs.

Where HB Associates Are Booking

HelmsBriscoe Associates booked 18,000 programs in 2009. Here's where they went.

Top Domestic Locations

1. Las Vegas
2. Orlando
3. Washington, D.C.
4. Chicago
5. San Diego

Top International Locations

1. Paris
2. Barcelona
3. Toronto
4. London
5. Dubai

"The demand for strategic sourcing has never been greater," Helms said to wrap up his keynote. "And although we expect demand to return in 2010, it will not be strong enough to push up rates. So we have a real opportunity. The reduction in rates has turned the meetings marketplace into a tremendous value. Attendees can have a great experience and every guest experience is a unique opportunity for us to impress our clients. Let's use these lean times to make an impact and build future demand by impressing clients today."

The presence of the Annual Business Conference at Aria Resort & Casino barely five weeks after the property's opening day was itself evidence of partnership in action. Agreeing to shift its usual summer dates to January to help longtime partner Chuck Bowling, executive vice president, MGM Mirage, launch the new resort with a successful program, HelmsBriscoe took a fair amount of risk booking an unproven—not to mention unbuilt—property. "We committed to Roger and Peter [Shelly, the 2010 ABC chairperson and HelmsBriscoe's executive vice president] that we would be open," Bill McBeath, president & COO, Aria Resort & Casino at CityCenter, told attendees. "It was a little scary but they were unwavering. They had confidence and they gave us something to strive for and to look forward to." (For more on Aria Resort & Casino, [read our reporter's notebook.](#))

As it does at each ABC, HelmsBriscoe made a donation to a local charity on behalf of its associates. This year's recipient was the Andre Agassi Foundation for Education. Aria owner MGM Mirage made a matching contribution as well. In accepting the donation, Marsha Irvin, chancellor of Agassi Prep, the K–12 school for economically disadvantaged kids that is funded in part by Agassi's foundation, talked about the school's first graduating class, the class of 2009. Each member of the class has gone to college, she said with pride.

Peter Shelly told attendees that HB also had made a donation to the American Red Cross to help with the earthquake recovery missions in Haiti.

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