

WORLDWIDE MEETINGS & INCENTIVES

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Show- Stopping Robots:

Galactic
Meeting Stars



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Promotional Robots: On the March

By Edward I. Placidi

“Electronic stars” are launching meetings into the future

Robots are coming out of the commercial closet. For over a decade they've been selling products at trade shows, but today they're also entertaining at conferences, appearing as “guests” at cocktail parties and acting as MC's at corporate meetings—not to mention competing in backgammon tournaments and playing ice hockey.

The era of the promotional robot is here, and the roots of the phenomenon are firmly embedded in both popular cultural trends and the growing sophistication of robotics.

Electronics have seized the imagination of America (witness the booming electronic game craze, for example) and are rapidly changing U.S. lifestyles; at the same time, a spate of blockbuster films, television productions and series, new magazines and books have fueled an insatiable fascination with outer space and all things futuristic. Consequently, robots have strolled self assuredly into the public eye, unlocking myriad doors of potential expansion for the promotional robot field.

Meanwhile, the face of robotics has undergone a subtle but significant evolution. Promotional robot technology has been improved upon in recent years, but certainly not dramatically. Yet, innovation and creativity have been coupled to mold robots into far more effective communicators, performers and entertainers—into “electronic stars.”

“Today's robot is like an adult toy,” says John W. Anderson, director of operations for ShowAmerica, Inc., a Chicago-based robot firm that has been a leader in the field. “It's fun and interesting, but also effective. The fun wouldn't mean that much if it didn't also really do something for you.”

ShowAmerica, which was established in 1968, is one of the world's oldest and largest producers of electronically controlled promotional robots—and has been at the forefront in exploring the various uses and roles robots can assume. Reflecting both the boom in robot popularity and the company's leadership, ShowAmerica's sales doubled over the last three years. In 1981, its walking-talking marvels logged 250,000 miles in North America, 14 countries in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa—performing somewhere in the world on an average of once a day every day of the year.

Scantrak Corporation, based in Rutherford, New Jersey, is another promotional robot concern that has also whisked its mechanical wizards far and wide. “We've been building and using robots for 14 years around the world,” says General Manager Larry Stone. The list not only includes a number of European countries but Australia, Colombia, Canada, Japan, South Africa and other countries.

Meetings Growth

Last year, Scantrak's robots put in appearances at well over 100 trade shows and other promotional events, not to mention a number of corporate meetings—which is one of the growth areas in the promotional robot field.

ShowAmerica's robots appear at almost 100 sales meetings annually, representing 20 percent of their appearance time (75 percent is at trade shows and conventions, 5 percent at specialty meetings and promotional events). And among the company's clients are such leading U.S. corporations as IBM, International Harvester, Westinghouse, General Electric and Kraft Foods. But, according to Anderson, the surface has barely been scratched.

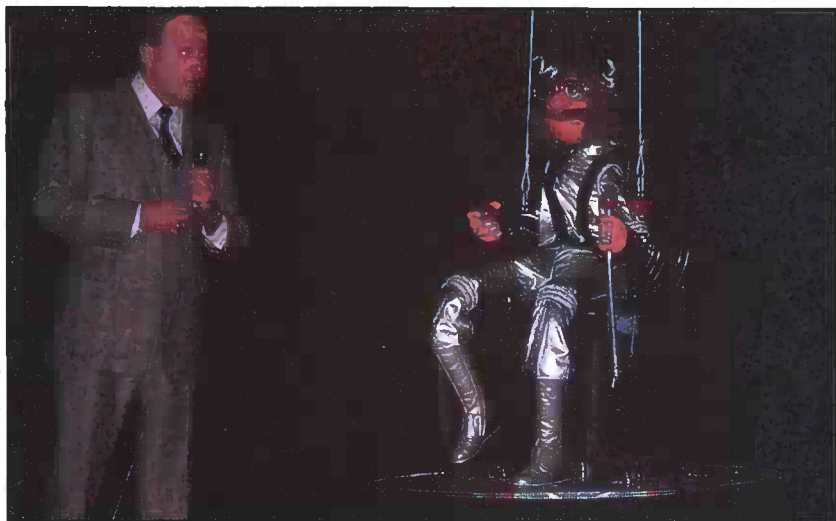
“We'll continue growing with meetings as well as trade shows. It's still an infant market,” he says, adding that “meetings are where we get the most creative use of robots.”

At a recent Norelco sales meeting in Hawaii, for example, two ShowAmerica robots were the stars of an extravagant production with a Super Heroes theme. Things were kicked off before the sales people reached the meeting room, as they were walking from the hotel to the adjacent meeting facility.

A robot was suddenly rolling towards them with Norelco's corporate officers jogging after it. As the two groups come face to face, the robot turned, extended its arm and introduced the president of the company—who, unbelievably, actually came flying-in between the buildings on a cable, wearing a super hero costume.

The startled and laughing sales force then filed into the meeting facility—and out came another robot as MC, cracking jokes and identifying members of the audience with funny remarks about them (such as, “While I'm full of nuts and bolts, this guy's full of . . .”). The robot then introduced the first speaker, who came out in a flash of lights, again in super hero costume.

(At right) ShowAmerica's fiberglass, futuristic-looking, four-feet-tall “Quadracon” is adaptable to a limitless number of roles.



(Top) Wearing spaceman garb and lowered in on a flying saucer at a sales meeting, Rodney became Sheraton Hotel's first representative to the galaxy.

(Bottom) A Scantrak robot appearing as "Miami Mike" to promote a new non-stop route between Miami and Paris.

And so on for the rest of the meeting.

To say the least, the meeting was a success. Not only did it keep the group's close attention, but kindled wild enthusiasm.

At a recent American Tourister international sales meeting, a Scantrak robot pulled off a first in the business—a coup d'état. Prior to the arrival of the sales staff at the meeting site, a large false computer board (an obvious prop) was built around the robot to conceal it. The main account executive, as he pushed buttons on the computer and lights flashed, then kicked off the meeting by announcing that this was a "Lying Computer" to detect equivocation and falsehoods.

The account executive began reporting statistics on past performance and projections for the coming year, and each time the computer interrupted in a flash of lights, declaring, "Prevarication . . . prevarication." This kept up—reducing the meeting to chaos—until the computer finally blew its top. The robot broke out from its computer facade and took over the rest of the meeting, reporting the correct figures.

Diverse Roles

In other meeting applications, robots are cast as protagonists—for example, giving the bad news corporate officers don't want to have to personally tell their employees: "Revenues are down this year so your bonuses will be much smaller." And then there's what Anderson calls the "Our Town" role. During a speech or presentation, a robot is off to one side making comments on what is being said or reported. The speaker just continues on, not acknowledging the robot.

J. Rodney Prescott III, a computerized robotron built and owned by inventor Robert Elnicky, is often used very effectively as a 'devil's advocate' at sales meetings.

"He becomes the voice of the audience," says Frank Dickson, of Ray Bloch Associates, which represents Rodney. "He can express all the concerns and fears that individuals are inhibited to ask of the higher ups."

In another meeting role, Rodney has been a spaceman lowered in on a flying saucer, becoming Sheraton Hotels' first representative to the galaxy; at last year's Meeting Planners International (MPI) conference in Atlanta, he appeared as a cowboy, brought in riding a scaled-down "Urban Cowboy Horse," and carrying on a comic routine with the chairperson of MPI's Denver chapter to promote the next MPI meeting.

Human vs. Futuristic Appearance

Almost four-feet-tall Rodney—who often appears with guitar in hand and two robot-musician-sidekicks playing rock 'n' roll as J. Rodney Prescott III and The Circuit Breakers—is unlike most other robots: he's human rather than robot in movement and appearance. He usually sports long auburn hair, mutton-chop whiskers and eye glasses; his head can move independently of his body and his lips move when he speaks.

Consequently, Dickson claims that Rodney is 10 years ahead in concept and technology—and the most effective robot in the business at meetings.

"From the waist up, Rodney's movements are so fluid and lifelike that it's awesome—he almost seems alive," enthuses Dickson, concluding that "when a large robot-like apparatus appears on the stage the audience cannot identify with it, but Rodney is so human-looking that he becomes the conscience of the audience."

Ray Bloch Associates has gone so far as to sue to protect Rodney's design and concept, and won. Elnicky's invention is certainly unique, but Scantrak and ShowAmerica among others have found that robots fashioned in the image of humans are not necessarily what motivate audiences or work best.

"Since 1968 we've always built the same basic shape," says Scantrak's Stone, "because they are so stable. Arms can go up 90 degrees and you can put a 50-pound kid on each arm."

Scantrak's 273-pound creation stands 5'2" high, with a conical body, bi-pincer hands and a spherical head. This futuristic look is what fascinates as far as Scantrak is concerned—and such clients as IBM, Bayer and Clairol apparently agree.

ShowAmerica's fiberglass, futuristic-looking four-feet-tall "Quadracon" is the company's standard robot—adaptable to a limitless number of roles, from welcoming visitors at the U.S. pavilion at the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville, Tennessee to delivering weather reports at a West Palm Beach, Florida television station.

Easy Control

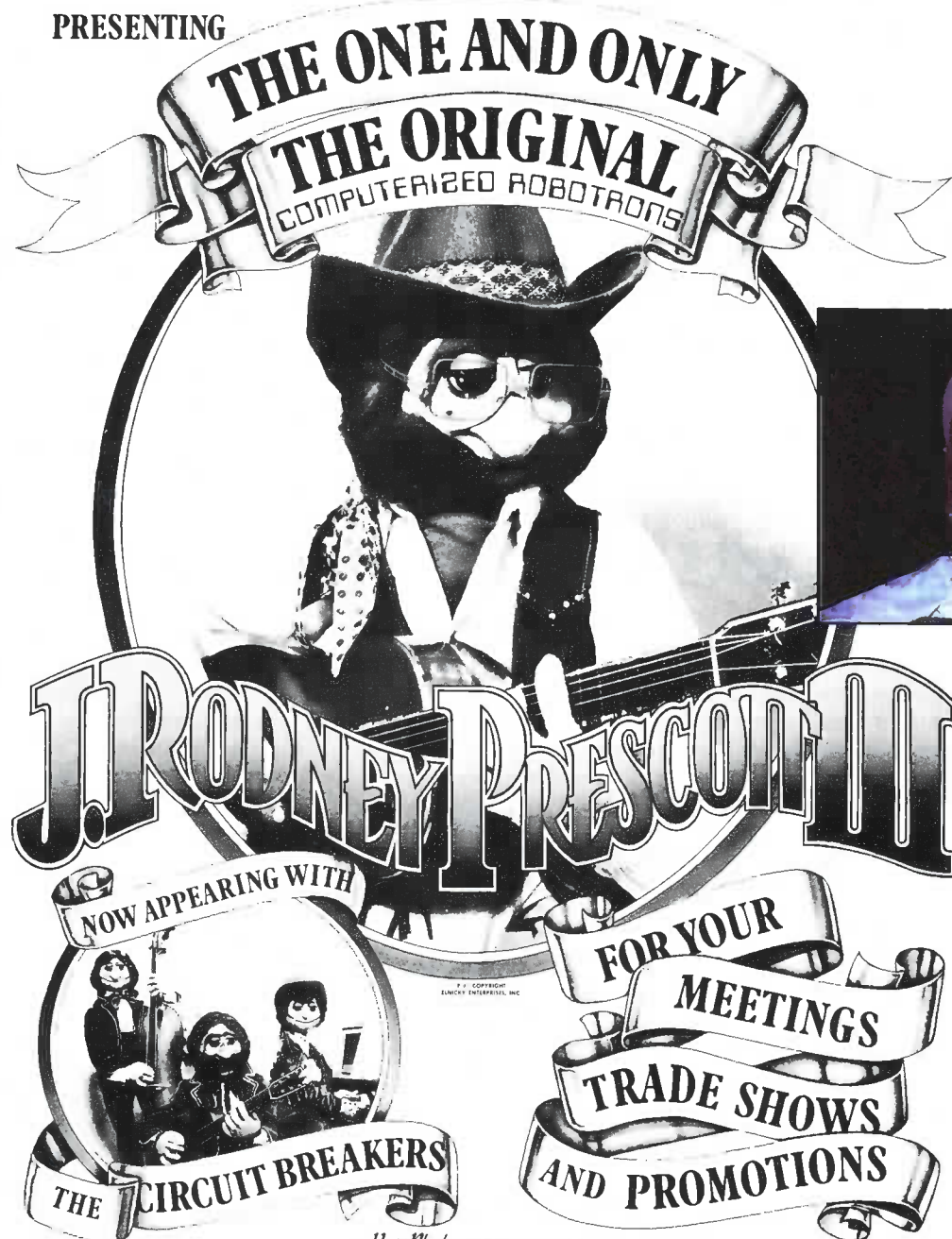
While the Quadracon looks like a complex mechanical gizmo to the eye, the control system (as with other promotional robots) is fairly simple: An operator, usually in the wings off to the side in sight of the robot, wears a two-way radio

PRESENTING

THE ONE AND ONLY

THE ORIGINAL

COMPUTERIZED ROBOTRONS



J. RODNEY PRESCOTT III

NOW APPEARING WITH

THE CIRCUIT BREAKERS

FOR YOUR

MEETINGS

TRADE SHOWS

AND PROMOTIONS

RAY BLOCH PRODUCTIONS, INC.

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Almost four-feet-tall Rodney, who often appears with two robot-musician-sidekicks as J. Rodney Prescott III and The Circuit Breakers, sports long auburn hair, muttonchop whiskers and eye glasses.

headset that enables him to talk to the audience as well as hear questions put to the robot via its hidden microphone. The quick and highly responsive movements—fast crossing of the stage, shaking hands, picking up objects, etc.—are controlled by a box hand-held by the operator. Quadracon flashes colored lights and emits electronic squeals as it engages in two-way animated conversation.

“Engineers built our whole electronic system from scratch,” says Anderson. “We’ve upgraded our system six or seven times in the last 13 years, but the basic technology remains the same. It’s all our own exclusive design—it sounds like you’re listening to your stereo.”

Operator is the Key

However, in today’s robotic world, only about 30 percent of the robot’s performance is technology—the other 70 percent is the person behind the robot.

“We only use actors . . . actors who are used to working with microphones, someone peppy and quick-witted who can ad-lib,” explains Anderson. “We sell the sizzle as well as the steak.”

“The trick of course is to train actors to work in this medium. For example, there’s a fine line between what you can get away with in person and behind a robot. Judging reactions must be learned . . . so as to make them laugh, not insult them. A robot can say things to a gal, for in-

The essence of human fascination with robots—and response, which makes them so valuable promotionally—lies hidden in the ability of these machines to walk and talk and react like humans.

Guide to Booking your “Electronic Star”

Are you looking for that special MC for your next corporate meeting? A host-with-the-most for that cocktail party? Well, here's some practical information to help you book that mechanical wizard of your corporate dreams:

Ray Bloch Associates, in New York City, will provide its famous Rodney for \$3,000 a day, including support staff, plus some miscellaneous expenses. If you want the musical trio—J. Rodney Prescott III and The Circuit Breakers—it's \$4,000 a day for all three. Rates for longer durations are negotiable. Since Rodney is usually heavily booked, three to six months' notice—and more, if possible—is recommended; short notice requests are very difficult to fill. Ask for Frank Dickson at 212-354-8900.

Scantrak Corporation, of Rutherford, New Jersey charges \$1,365 a day for its 5'2”

bi-pincer marvels, or less for a several-hour affair, and this includes the support crew. While at least several months' notice is best, orders can sometimes be filled the next day. Ask for Larry Stone at 201-935-3640.

ShowAmerica, with its main office in Elmhurst, Illinois, provides a Quadracon for \$850 per day, or \$3,800 per week, including operator. Special rates are available for multiple bookings or time periods extending beyond one week. Rates for bookings abroad are quoted upon request. Book as far in advance as possible. Ask for John Andersen at 312-834-7500.

Also, all three companies, in bringing their robots to your site, add charges for crew and equipment transportation, and lodging and meals as necessary. In each case, a complete estimate of expenses can be provided in advance.

stance, a man could never say. But you have to be able to size people up.”

In one pointed instance, a Scantrak robot was hired to promote a new Pan Am route to Tokyo. Rolling off the inaugural flight to greet the Japanese press, he launched into a comic routine that would have meant the head of a public relations person—such lines as “I want to see the factory where you make the one-way airplanes.” The robot, however, kept them in stitches, and got tremendous press.

Robot Power

The essence of human fascination with robots—and response, which makes them so valuable promotionally—lies hidden in the ability of these machines to walk and talk and react like humans. Lovable Artoo-Detoo of “Star Wars” fame assumed such human proportions and evoked such human response that he became something of a matinee idol in his own right. Carrying the concept one step further, the fact that Rodney is actually human-like in appearance helps shape Dickson's claim that it is the most effective of robots.

In Japan, which leads the world in the use of industrial robots (another breed of robot; a robot in the truer sense of the word), workers greet the machines at the start of each day, talk to them and bestow the names of pop singers and sports stars on them.

Perhaps the most startling evidence of robot power involves a wheel-chair-stricken eight-year-old girl. Prior to a promotional appearance, a Scantrak robot put in a stop at a local pediatrics ward of a South Carolina hospital. The size and strength of Scantrak's mechanical marvel enabled it to push the children in their wheelchairs and play games with them.

The girl's legs has been operated on some five weeks earlier and, though the doctors said she

was physically able to walk, she had a mental block that kept her chair-ridden. The robot was trying to get the children to dance with it, inviting the girl on several occasions and then going off to play with other children after repeatedly receiving a “no” answer. Then, suddenly, the girl got up, actually walked over and asked the robot if they could dance now.

Striking Innovations

It would seem that robot power and role possibilities are endless, and apparently no one knows it better than ShowAmerica.

Not only has the company pioneered in actor/operator performance and technological improvement, but has also blazed other trails. The Quadracon's internal mechanism was designed so as to be interchangeable (as is now true of most promotional robots today) with any outer shell—which can be custom designed to any shape, character or theme—and this has enabled ShowAmerica to explore a whole other world of creations.

In Los Angeles, a ShowAmerica robot was transformed into a hockey player, with special modified wheels to move on ice, who challenges fans of the Kings hockey team to one-on-one slap shots between periods. Beating the robot earns the challenger \$25. A man-like robot was created for *Discover Magazine*, a Time, Inc. science publication, with the magazine cover on its chest. “It appears at science shows and other events and at employee meetings,” notes Anderson.

Another ShowAmerica breakthrough, which has been a favorite for trade show use but has widespread application possibilities at meetings and promotional events, is giant cartoon-like characters and product replicas. The same internal mechanism has been fitted with a walking-talking, bigger-than-life Heinz

Ketchup bottle, a Nike tennis shoe, and the Hoover Vacuum characters, "Dust," "Fluff" and "Grit."

Some of ShowAmerica's competitors, however, pooh-pooh this whole approach. Says Scantrak's Stone: "There's a psychological problem here you don't face with a human-like robot. People don't want to be seen talking to inanimate objects—who wants to be seen talking to a cigarette pack or a tennis shoe?"

J.W. Anderson, ShowAmerica's president and owner who launched this innovation, is undaunted by such reproaches. In 1969, to the amazement of many, he pioneered a giant, talking cigarette pack to promote a new brand being introduced on the market, and ShowAmerica has successfully flown with the concept ever since.

Another ShowAmerica tack has been to fit robots with computers, which can be programmed to accommodate any need. While retaining the talents of Quadracon and outer shell interchangeability, adding this computer dimension produces a robot that can also do such things as perform statistical computations at a company meeting. In one case, ShowAmerica programmed a robot to play backgammon which then faced the world champion, Luigi Villa, in Monte Carlo. The robot won.

Perhaps the most striking innovation in the field, however, which could ominously stir Sci-Fi imaginations and fears if one didn't know for certain that promotional robots are entirely dependent on operators, is presently in the works at Ray Bloch Associates, not ShowAmerica.

Rodney will be fitted with the face and appearance of a major figure in the corporate world (the name of whom they will not reveal at this time) and this humanoid will make appearances in lieu of the real person. Acting as the national spokesperson for the corporation, the robot (with the aid of a duplicate) will be able to appear in several places at the same time as well as enable the person (who is getting on in years in real life) to remain ageless—to live forever in a sense—via a humanoid double.

Surge of New Companies

The boom in the promotional robot market has led to the founding of many new robot companies in recent years. Many of them, however, have gone almost as fast as they came. There are only a handful of really professional firms today, and few of them construct all their own equipment.

ShowAmerica, for example, has attained a leading position in the field not only as a result of both the early—and distant—lead it got on its competitors and its multiple pioneering efforts, but of coupling this two-pronged foundation with a strong sales/promotional approach.

"Hobby store equipment is used by many companies today," says Anderson, "and it can't do what ours does. We use aircraft-quality propulsion motors and the best printed circuit



boards, not hand-wired ones. Our shells are expensive molded fiberglass, not the metal sheets and plexiglass other companies use. We don't look homemade.

"We totally custom create for our customers, and this is unique... bringing us the repeat business other companies can't get. We've put a great deal of money into our technology and do a thorough job of preparing our actors. We are a promotional company too, not just a robot company. We work with planners to make their meetings better. All in all, we take a more professional attitude."

Looking Ahead

The forecast for the industry is for continued growth—the differences in opinion centering only on how much growth. Ray Bloch's Dickson, for example, asserts that "Once something gets used too much it becomes saturated. There'll be growth, but not tremendous growth."

Scantrak's robots—which have done everything from act as bodyguards for Elvis Presley to selling tombstones to appearing on two-way ra-

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(Top) ShowAmerica has pioneered fitting a robot mechanism with walking-talking, bigger-than-life, cartoon-like characters and product replicas.

(Bottom) Scantrak robots play an unlimited number of roles at meetings and hospitality functions.

Continued from page 31

dio talk shows ("One of the most effective uses of robots," claims General Manager Stone) to performing as host and "bouncer" for the British Tourist Authority at a hospitality suite function ("Good evening, sir. Do you have an invitation?") to playing "Miami Mike" in promoting a new non-stop air route between Miami and Paris—are cast in new roles all the time. And Stone predicts more and more of the same.

ShowAmerica foresees more than continued growth—a steady upward growth curve, notably in meetings in the U.S.

and abroad as well. With an office already in London and offices soon to open in Canada and Australia, ShowAmerica plans to bring promotional robots to more and more of the world.

In any case, it's hard to argue with the results of robot power to date. At a recent mall-opening promotional event in Dayton, Ohio, some 100,000 came to see Scantrak's robot in action. At last year's Armstrong National Home and Builders Show, throngs fought to see Rodney, who talked about new product lines.

At a recent Quadracon performance for International Harvester in South


Africa the reaction was so tremendous fences had to be erected to keep the crowds back. Prior to each of the robot's appearances, hordes would assemble and chant the name given the quadracon for the show—"Harvey!" "Harvey!"

"Bringing an attraction like this is so unique to a country that's never seen this," explains Anderson.

In Saudi Arabia, despite a language barrier (the operator learned only a few Arabic words), there was instant identification with Quadracon at a Westinghouse exhibit — mesmerized crowds gathered in awe around what was a walking-talking wonder for them.

In modern, industrialized Japan, there's a wild-eyed captivation with robots that shows up throughout society. They are traffic policemen at intersections and entertainers at department stores. Robots are standard fare in books and cartoon strips, and robots in films were old hat by the time "Star Wars" came to Japan.

Robot power is on the move—and who knows the scope it will reach.

In the near future, is it too much to imagine an Arabic-speaking robot created in the image of a drop of "black gold" or an oil derrick playing the protagonist at an OPEC meeting? 

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL MEETINGS			Calendar 1982
MAY 25	One on One (American Express Meeting Planners' Day)	New York City	
MAY 30-JUNE 2	PATA (Pacific Area Travel Association) Travel Mart	Maui, HI	
JUNE 1-6	COTAL '82 (Confederation of Latin American Travel Organizations)	Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic	
JUNE 5-10	PATA (Pacific Area Travel Association) South Pacific Travel Mart	Melbourne, Australia	
JUNE 6-10	Tianguis (International Mexican Travel Market)	Acapulco, Mexico	
JUNE 9-12	MPI (Meeting Planners International)	Denver, CO	
JUNE 14-16	CTA '82 (Caribbean Tourism Association)	San Juan, Puerto Rico	
JULY 12-14	Meeting World '82	Washington, D.C.	
JULY 13-16	HSMA (Hotel Sales Management Association)	New York, NY	
JULY 24-28	International Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus	Philadelphia, PA	
JULY 25-29	HSMA (Hotel Sales Management Association)	Las Vegas, NV	
AUGUST 7-11	ASAE (American Society of Association Executives)	Chicago, IL	
SEPT. 11-16	TIA International Pow-Wow & Travel Mart (Travel Industry Association)	Las Vegas, NV	
SEPT. 28-30	Canadian Incentive Premiums Show	Toronto, Canada	
OCT. 10-16	ASTA (American Society of Travel Agents) World Congress	Miami, FL	
OCT. 11-14	IT&ME (Incentive Travel and Meeting Executives Show)	Chicago, IL	
OCT. 11-14	American Hotel & Motel Association	Vancouver, Canada	
OCT. 25-27	LIMRA (Life Insurance and Marketing Research Association)	Washington, D.C.	
NOV. 6-13	ICCA (International Congress and Convention Association)	Torremolinos, Spain	
DEC. 1-9	World Travel Mart	London, England	
DEC. 5-8	MPI (Meeting Planners International)	New York, NY	

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