

Pioneers of cruise-based meetings eye Rio de Janeiro



Joyce Landry, left, and partner Josephine Kling specialize in planning and overseeing meetings, corporate and incentive programs and charters on cruise ships.

CARLE JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

BY MARTHA BRANNIGAN

mbrannigan@MiamiHerald.com

When cities around the globe were vying to host the 2016 Summer Olympics, Joyce Landry and Josephine Kling were rooting for Rio de Janeiro to win the nod from the International Olympic Committee.

Their Miami-based company, Landry & Kling, helped Brazilian leaders propose a plan to use cruise ships as floating hotels to augment hotel bed capacity in Rio, which clinched the games Oct. 2 to become the first South American nation to host the games.

“We provided letters of interest saying that cruise lines would be interested in charters if Rio were to win,” says Landry, chief executive of Landry & Kling, which she founded 27 years ago with Kling, who is president.

The firm specializes in planning and overseeing meetings, corporate and incentive programs, and charters on cruise ships. It's a destination-management company for cruise ships.

Back in 1982, the former Holland America Line managers foresaw the fledgling cruise industry was on the verge of blossoming into a big business, but it was missing the boat on a big potential market -- onboard business meetings and incentives. The friends launched their startup using bonus money Landry received for her work at Delta Queen Steamboat and Kling's baccarat winnings from a Las Vegas trip.

Now Landry & Kling has \$20 million in annual revenue and 27 employees and is synonymous with meetings at sea, though it has a host of competitors vying for the same niche.

“Landry & Kling became the gurus of the meetings and incentives business,” says Rick Sasso, president and chief executive of MSC Cruises USA in Fort Lauderdale.

The pair's push to bring meetings to sea helped encourage cruise lines to design ships that incorporate conference and meeting facilities onboard. Such bookings now account for between 1 percent and 15 percent of cruise lines' business.

When the Cruise Lines International Association named the women to the trade group's hall of fame in April 2009, its president and CEO hailed Landry and Kling as, “the first to identify the potential of meetings and incentives at sea.”

The company has handled all sorts of events for clients ranging from Fortune 500 companies including AFLAC, Microsoft and Pepsico to tiny private firms.

In the current bleak economy, of course, many businesses are more focused on just keeping staffers on the payroll than on treating them to exotic travel.

CORPORATE IMAGES

Even when money isn't a problem, perception is. After AIG's \$440,000 splurge in September 2008 to regale company employees at a California resort, even as the insurance giant was taking an \$85-billion bailout from the federal government, was made public, conferences and business meetings dried up -- on land and at sea.

As the deep recession took hold, “It was a complete, screeching halt” to new bookings, says Landry. During the first quarter of 2009, corporations were putting

off decisions on such spending due to the economy or image concerns. With a backlog of business and government events -- the company toughed it out.

More recently, bookings are beginning to pick up, says Landry. ``Luckily, our government program saw us through as a company."

One advantage: A business meeting at sea can be marketed as an economical choice for business meetings, because most expenses for room, meals and entertainment are built into the ticket, the women say.

In April 2009 in Trinidad, the firm orchestrated charters of the Carnival Princess and Carnival Victory to provide extra accommodations for the Fifth Summit of the Americas.

The recession-resistant government events niche is vibrant. ``Global events are where we're heading," adds Kling.

53 NATIONS

In November, when the leaders of 53 Commonwealth nations gather in Port of Spain, Trinidad, Landry & Kling will be overseeing two cruise ships, the Caribbean Princess and the Serenade of the Seas. The vessels will serve as ``floating hotels" and provide both guest rooms and meeting facilities to complement shoreside space.

The firm, which relies on a group of regular contract workers in addition to its own staff, is involved in everything from security to setting up meetings and audio visual equipment to planning logistics for the flow of participants on and off the ships.

Much of the company's work happens behind the scenes, coordinating a multitude of details ranging from security to such infrastructure concerns as electricity, water and sewage to arranging for gifts to be in guests' cabins when they arrive.

With all the attention to detail that her work entails, it's no wonder Landry's wedding happened as it did. ``There was no planning; it was spontaneous," she says.

In 2007, she and her long-time fiancé Gene Meehan were climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. Five days into a nine-day trek, as the climb grew harsher and the air thinner, "We made a commitment if we were still standing and breathing when we got to the summit, we would get married," she says.

SEA CHANGES

Landry & Kling has gone through a variety of changes over the years. The women sold the company to publicly traded My Travel in 1998 in hopes of growing it and stayed on to run the company. But the merger didn't go as they'd expected, and they wound up buying it back in 2005.

In September, the two women launched what they're betting will be the next big thing in meetings at sea -- a Web portal called Seasite.com, which enables businesses and others to plan and arrange meetings and events online by tapping a wealth of cruise information.

Kling is chief executive of the new venture, and Landry is its president. The women see multiple revenue streams from the site, including advertising and marketing fees. Nine cruise lines have joined as founding partners.

"The timing was great," says Landry. "With the cruise industry in a slump, the lines were grateful for something innovative."

The executives say they aren't worried about cannibalizing business from the full-service side of the operation, since it will likely appeal to a different segment.

"It's really to put the planners more in control," says Kling. "Everyone is trying to eliminate events or streamline costs."

More about Landry & Kling

Founded: 1982

Management: CEO Joyce Landry and

Josephine Kling,

president

Headquarters: Miami

Employees: 27

Revenue: \$20 million

Business: Meetings at sea

Branching out:

Seasite.com, a newly launched Web portal

for booking meetings

at sea that aims to complement the full-service business at Landry

& Kling