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STORIED MEETING PLANNER

JNR's Jalet Was Big in Vegas, Now Runs \$25M Incentive Company

■ By Sherri Cruz

Bob Hope almost didn't make it to the opening of Walt Disney World in 1971, where the comedian was expected to crack a few jokes and help cut the ribbon.

Saving the day was James Jalet, now chief executive of JNR Inc., an Irvine-based company that plans corporate meetings and develops employee incentive programs.

Jalet, who's had a storied career, then was assistant director of sales and marketing for Walt Disney Co., his first corporate job out of college.

He was headed to the opening ceremonies with one of his colleagues when he spotted Bob Hope standing alone in a hotel lobby.

Jalet went over, introduced himself and said: "Aren't you supposed to be over at the park?"

Hope replied that someone was supposed to meet him but hadn't shown.

"No one had cell phones back then," Jalet said.

They waited a few more minutes and then Jalet offered Hope a ride.

Jalet's wife had his car. So they drove over in his colleague's ride—a 1957 DeSoto, no air conditioning, fuzzy dice and all.

Hope didn't mind. "He was so cool," Jalet said.

Jalet climbed in the back and Hope rode shotgun.

"You don't see many of these on the road," Jalet recalled Hope saying. Years later, Jalet would meet Hope again.

This time Jalet was a bigwig—vice president for the now-imploded Aladdin Hotel & Casino on the Las Vegas Strip—welcoming Hope, who was performing at the hotel.

Jalet met him at the front door, shook his hand and asked if Hope remembered their first meeting.

"57 DeSoto," Hope replied.

Great Storyteller

Jalet has a slew of stories like that: chance meetings with Mickey Mantle, Terry Bradshaw and Rat Packers Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr. and Dean Martin.

The backdrop of most of Jalet's stories is a colorful time in Vegas history—what some might call Sin City's glory days, when mobsters such as Jimmy Tamer and Moe Dalitz ran many of the casinos.

"He's a great storyteller," said Harold Fraser, a former executive for Honda Motor Co., and teacher who helped start the Entertainment & Management Tourism undergraduate program at California State University, Fullerton.

For several years, Jalet's JNR handled Honda's motorcycle product launches for 10,000 Honda dealers and their families.

Jalet sometimes speaks to Fraser's classes. "The students love him," Fraser said. "He's got real world, fun, exciting stories. He really connects with people."

A knack for remembering names and nurturing relationships is how Jalet built the business he started 30 years ago.

"He never forgets a name," said Maria Dales, vice president of creative services for JNR. "He maintains his relationships throughout his whole life."

Incentive Business

JNR, one of the biggest regional corporate event planners and providers of employee incentive programs, is in the business of making people happy.

Companies use incentive programs, such as a stay at a luxury hotel, to reward and motivate their workers—and hopefully boost sales—when they achieve set goals.

The company competes for business with some big names, including Minnetonka, Minn.-based Carlson Cos., which owns travel, hotel and restaurant companies, and Fenton, Mo.-based Maritz Inc.

JNR does about \$25 million in annual sales and employs 55 people.

Some of its clients include Brea-based medical equipment maker Beckman Coulter Inc., New Jersey's BMW of North America LLC, Fountain Valley-based Hyundai Motor America and Irvine's Kia Motors America Inc.

JNR develops incentive programs designed to give employees bragging rights—a private reception at the Statue of David in Italy, or a party at the restored Palm Springs house where Frank Sinatra once lived, topped off with storytelling by George Jacobs, who was Sinatra's assistant for many years.

JNR does it all—books hotels and airfare, plans menus, and lines up entertainment.

"Food and beverage and entertainment is our expertise," Jalet said.

When the economy soured, many companies cut incentive programs and kept meetings local.

Business is off by about 20%, Jalet said. These days Jalet still hears a lot of, "We'd love to do a program but we don't have the budget."

To which he says: "You don't need an incentive program in the good times. When you really need it is the bad times."

The hospitality industry has weathered a lot in recent years—the 2001 terrorist attacks, airline bankruptcies and the AIG effect.

American International Group Inc.'s now infamous 2008 retreat at the St. Regis Monarch Beach in Dana Point became a symbol of extravagant corporate spending.

It will take a while for the market to return, Jalet said. If companies are rewarding workers with travel, it might include a charitable component, such as helping the poor in Africa and a safari.

While travel is in a lull, companies have ramped up the use of debit card incentive programs. Money is loaded on the cards so companies can reward employees without the appearance of lavish spending.

JNR's debit card division is growing and employs 20 people. The company develops debit card incentive programs and markets them to clients' workers. It takes a percentage of the program funding.

Jalet's toying with a new service—an incentive program that would target the general public and be promoted via social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook. "Most of the public has never really gone on a true incentive trip," he said.

Jalet's Background

Originally from Albany, N.Y., Jalet got the hospitality bug working summers in Atlantic City at the historic Dennis Hotel, which now is part of Harrah's Entertainment Inc.

"If you worked at a hotel, they'd feed you," Jalet said. That was his primary concern at the time, he said. As a bartender's assistant, he made \$50 a week plus tips and stayed at a boarding house for \$12 a week.

"I got caught up in the activity and the ambiance," he said. That led him to study the hotel business at University of Nevada, Las Vegas, then called Nevada Southern University. The university was so small then that when he called to get information, he got the founding dean of the hotel college, Jerry Vallen.

Upon graduating, he was recruited by Disney, which was set to open Disney World in Orlando. He started out as tour and travel director. Six months later he was director of sales and marketing.

At Disney, he filled his Rolodex with names of corporate leaders interested in booking a meeting at the new resort. "The opening of Disney was huge," he said. Everyone wanted to be the first to visit. "It was like taking orders. I got to meet the Who's Who," Jalet said. "I nurtured those relationships."

He stayed at Disney for a couple of years before heading back to Las Vegas. "I grew up with the Rat Pack, Vegas and entertainment," he said. "That's the thing I love so much." Sin City was going through one of its growth spurts, opening a slew of casinos, many of which since have imploded and been replaced.



With "Leo" at the original MGM Grand

The original MGM Grand Hotel and Casino (now Bally's Las Vegas), was the largest hotel in the world at the time with 3,000 rooms. Jalet was hired as national sales manager.

Jalet's photo with the MGM lion, was used to publicize the opening of the hotel.

He recalls the day of the shoot. "My tie fell down in front of the lion," he said. "He took his big paw and whacked my tie."

That pulled his head closer to the lion. "Take the picture!" he told the photographer.

Not because he feared the lion. He feared losing a great shot. The photographer ended up putting down his camera to straighten Jalet's tie and took a tamer shot.

After two years, Jalet went to the Aladdin, a smaller hotel with 1,000 rooms. It was a step down, but he was the top sales guy as vice president of sales.

After five years at the Aladdin, he struck out on his own. He noticed that incentive companies were missing something: someone with an insider's knowledge of the hospitality business.

He moved JNR from Las Vegas to OC in 1984 after setting up an office here to serve one of JNR's former clients. LuAnn Jalet, his wife of 26 years, helped start the business as chief operations officer. She's semi-retired now.

Jalet has a daughter who works at the company as well. Jalet has no plans to sell the business or retire. He recently signed another lease on the building that houses JNR's operations. He teases that his grandson, Jack, is his "heir apparent." He's only four. ■

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