

# Another Myth SHATTERED

Who says a small incentive group can't rate big service? BY VINCENT ALONZO

**I**N SPITE OF A DOWN ECONOMY, Viasys Healthcare, a Conshohocken, PA-based provider of respiratory, neurological care and medical/surgical technologies, had what would be considered a successful year by 2002 standards. Sales were not great, but they were good, and considering the circumstances, that was a triumph. So the qualifiers for the company's annual Chairman's Club incentive program were expecting a decent reward. In late September, the small group of 36 (16 award recipients, top management, plus their spouses) arrived at the mythical-themed Atlantis Paradise Island Resort in the Bahamas. There were three obstacles to overcome to ensure the group had a top-notch incentive experience.

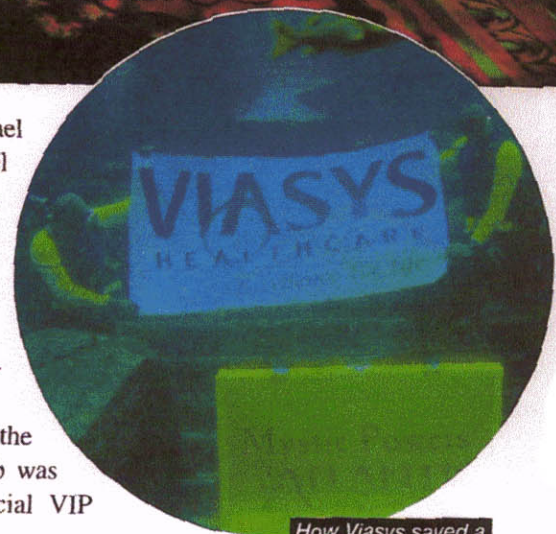
First, there was the size of Atlantis. With 2,442 guest rooms situated on 64 acres, it would be easy for a small group like Viasys to get lost in the shuffle of such a huge property. To make things more difficult, money was tight, so the company didn't have a big budget for a lot of lavish themed events. And, on

top of everything, Michael Jordan, yes, *the* Michael Jordan, was also staying at the resort hosting his very high-profile annual celebrity golf tournament that brought a couple of hundred celebrities on site.

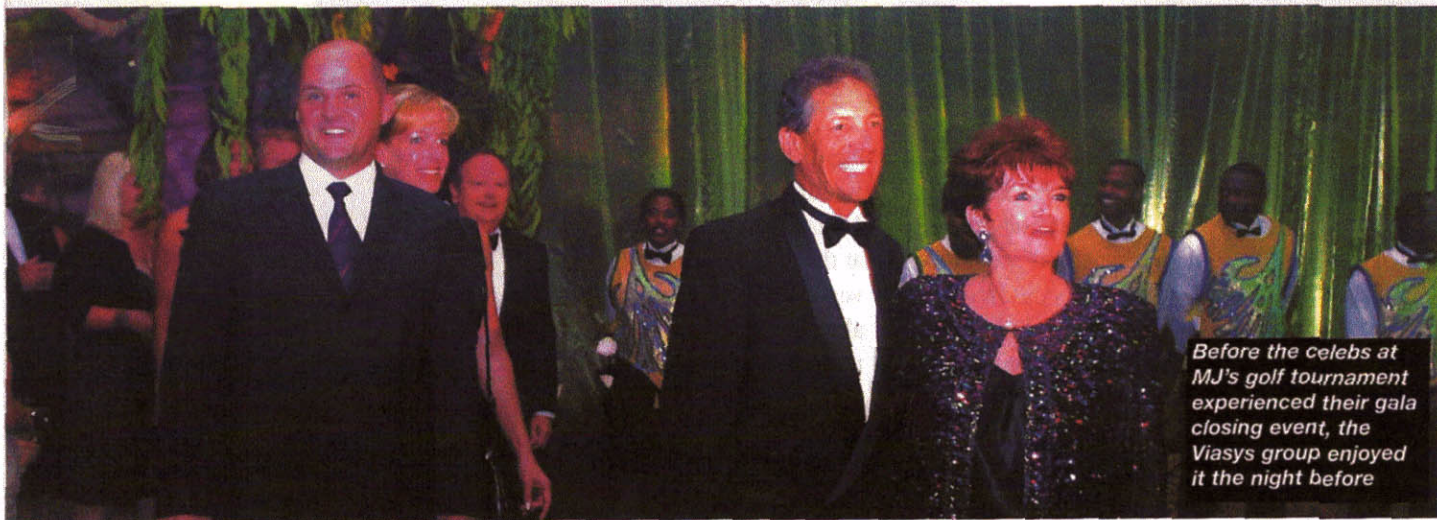
There was no way the Viasys Chairman's Club was going to get that special VIP treatment, right?

Wrong.

In fact, the key to turning this incentive program into a great event for the group turned out to be the very factors that were first seen as the main obstacles—the size of Atlantis and the larger, more high-profile event that was also at the resort. Here's how Harith Productions Ltd., the Oreland, PA-based event management company that created the program for the company, turned both of those things to Viasys' advantage.



How Viasys saved a ton—its awards ceremony was a dress rehearsal for the final night gala of Michael Jordan's celebrity golf tournament; inset, the company used public areas at the resort as the backdrop for some of its events



Before the celebs at MJ's golf tournament experienced their gala closing event, the Viasys group enjoyed it the night before

## Being Like Mike

It was going to be pretty tough for the Viasys group to feel special amidst all this celebrity hoopla. But rather than skulk in the shadows of the much larger Michael Jordan event, Harith Wickrema, founder and president of Harith Productions, devised a unique strategy to leverage its presence to his client's advantage. Wickrema agreed to create the theme, the menu, and the entertainment for the final night award banquet for the Michael Jordan event free of charge—provided that the 36-member Viasys group could also attend.

Wickrema then went about designing a first-rate awards banquet for 750 people. Once the décor and the entertainment were arranged for that event, it was no problem to duplicate both on a smaller scale for the Viasys awards banquet, which was held the night before. Since a large part of the cost for the décor and entertainment was picked up by the larger event, Viasys was able to experience a high-end awards banquet at a rock-bottom price. And they gained the added

benefit of attending the large-scale version of the event the next evening with celebrities such as athletes Wayne Gretzky, Julius Irving, and Charles Barkley, rockers such as Meat Loaf, actors like Judd Nelson, and newsman Stone Phillips.

"This is a perfect example of how you can create an almost identical event for a small group and a big group and have both events occur almost simultaneously. Viasys is a small company that didn't have a whole lot of money to spend for its Chairman's Club, but making this creative agreement made it possible for them to have a first-rate incentive itinerary—a very creative awards banquet one night followed by the same event the next night, except with a star-studded dais," says Wickrema. "It gave them more value for their buck. It's easy to put on a great event when times are good and money is no problem, but when times are tough, that's when you have to use your creativity to find synergies that will allow you to produce quality work." ■

## it's good to be a small fish in a big pond

**T**here's nothing like having a lot of room to swim around in. The Viasys Chairman's Club and Michael Jordan's Celebrity Golf Invitational each had its opening night reception on the same night at the Atlantis Paradise Island Resort. Each was planning a beach party. And each also faced the same problem—it rained.

But the Viasys group, with 36 attendees, had many more options open to them than Air Jordan's 750-attendee event. The Viasys group had no trouble

moving to an empty ballroom, then moving a second time to the Lagoon Bar when the weather cleared up enough. Jordan's group really only had one option available to them—a dine-around at the hotel. "That's one of the advantages of being a small group at a mega-resort: There are a lot of venues in which the group will fit and the chances of more than one being open at any given time is very good," says Joe Higgins, director of incentive sales at Atlantis. "But Michael Jordan's group had some options too—there are 28 different restaurants at Atlantis."