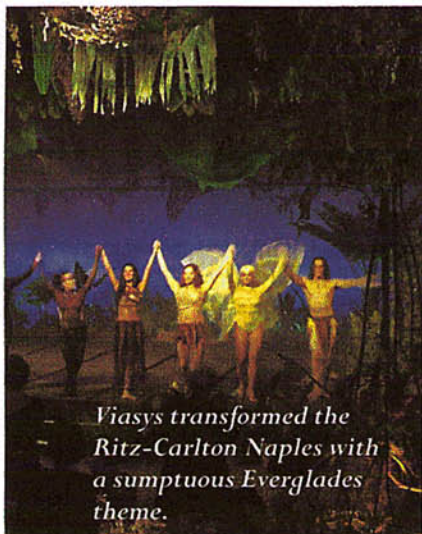


Over THE TOP

By Sue Pelletier

Just when everyone thought the previous year's incentive program couldn't be beat, Viasys took its qualifiers to a whole new level.



Viasys transformed the Ritz-Carlton Naples with a sumptuous Everglades theme.



The release of the butterflies.

WITH JUST 16 OF ITS TOP QUALIFIERS, their spouses, and the company's top brass as incentive attendees—and a budget as small as the group—one would expect that this year's Viasys Chairman's Club incentive would be a pretty low-key affair.

Not exactly.

That's because the bar was set very high at last year's inaugural Chairman's Club incentive. Top achievers of the Philadelphia-based medical technology company are still talking about how they got to rub shoulders with Julius Erving and Michael Jordan at the awards gala at Atlantis Paradise Island in the Bahamas. It was a huge production, with Neptune, dancers, extraordinary food and decoration—a one-of-a-kind experience. The planner, Harith Wickrema, president of Philadelphia-based Harith Productions, even won a Crystal Award from the Society of Incentive and Travel Executives for the event.

Viasys is a startup company that was spun out of medical device giant Thermo Electron two years ago. Since then, chairman and CEO Randy Thurman has been intent on creating a spectacular annual incentive despite his limited budget. "Our corporate values are to strive for a culture that rewards a commitment to creativity, innovation, total quality, and integrity in all that we do," he says. "We want to reward employees when they exemplify those values."

View from the Top

Unlike most companies, which tend to limit qualifiers to salespeople, Viasys opens its incentive to any employee who goes above and beyond the call of duty, both on the job and off. In addition to exceeding expectations at work, the qualifying criteria include off-the-job volunteer activities and an individual's contributions to their

community. "The Chairman's Club brings the best of the best together and rewards them, while fostering even more good ideas that happen when good minds gather together," says Thurman.

After the 2002 program, Wickrema knew he had some very high expectations to meet. For this year, he chose the Ritz-Carlton Naples, where the director of food and beverage was a longtime friend. The timing of the event also helped. Mid-September is a slow time for Florida's West Coast, so the hotel was able to give him the rates he needed, plus a hold on the ballroom for the several days he would need to set up the elaborate awards dinner.

He made the deal more attractive to the hotel by inviting the meeting and food press to observe the event, giving them a chance to strut their stuff to the industry media. It's unusual for a company to allow the press to mingle with their top performers, but Viasys

executives understood the trade-off value. The result, says Wickrema, was a program that ended up costing a fifth or less of what it was actually worth.

Making a Mark

Part of the goal of the trip was to develop a corporate identity and branding for the young company. So, at one evening event at the neighboring Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples, participants did "fish racing," where they chose a fish named after one of the company's product lines; the winning fish, of course, was the first to the finish line. The tables were lighted with graphic globes that glowed with the company logo.

The gala awards dinner on the third evening had to be a show-stopper. To start, Wickrema, who aims to make his experiential events destination-based, made up a Tarzan-like legend around which he themed the evening. In

the story, a baby, Sir Charles Ashton, is lost in the Everglades after a seaplane crash. A panther rescues him and carries him to an Indian village. One day, the boy captures an extraordinary butterfly, whispers a secret wish, and sets it free. His wish comes true: He is returned to his home, where he works the rest of his life to protect the Everglades.

To build anticipation, each participant received a copy of the story the night before, along with a *National Audubon Field Guide to Florida* imprinted with their names, the name of the event, and a quote from Thurman.

When the evening began, the actor who played Sir Charles led participants to a courtyard, where each received a package. At Sir Charles' signal, they opened the packages, releasing monarch butterflies into the twilight sky. The release served to set the mood, theme the event, and reinforce the corporate brand. Plus, it was beautiful.

Then attendees were led into a jungle ballroom, complete with dancers dressed as frogs hopping across the floor, ceilings festooned with leaves and vines, and tropical plants everywhere. Participants crossed a bridge to find tables set around the stage covered with plants, 'gator heads, and glowing pools shimmering with dry-ice fog.

As one of the attendees who had also been to the Atlantis event said, "I didn't think it would be possible to top last year. But they did." When asked what he thought they could do to make an even bigger impression next year, all he could do was laugh. "I'm just glad it's not my job!" he said.

The honor didn't end with that evening, however. Viasys adds this year's winners to its Chairman's Club Advisory Board, which meets once a year to give top execs feedback on ways to improve the company. They also take part in a special breakfast meeting during the company's national sales meeting, where they meet with the chairman.

"We don't want them to feel like the award was just winning a trip," says Thurman. "We want to encourage them to continue to be involved." □

