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SERVING SOUTHWEST MISSOURI

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Having a Ball

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The Executive Conference Center and its signature ballroom fill a small-event niche

by Jan Peterson · Contributing Writer

The Executive Conference Center may not be able to compete with the likes of University Plaza Hotel and Convention Center in terms of size, but general manager Renae Acord says that's just fine. They're not trying to.

The Executive Conference Center, 910 W. Battlefield Road, was built with smaller groups in mind. It can accommodate up to 300 people at a banquet in its 910 Ballroom, or as few as two in its boardroom.

"We are different in a sense because we don't have in-house banquet facilities," Acord says. "We don't cater to groups of 500. We are really focused in on that group of business individuals where they have less than 100 or 200."

Acord says about 75 percent of the conference center's business comes from area companies that need a room for training, conferences and awards banquets. Wedding receptions and miscellaneous other gatherings make up the remainder of business.

"We have roughly 800 events a year," says owner Larry Holder. "It's really turned into – I guess you would call it – a huge success. We really think it is."

Without disclosing revenues, executives say 2008 was a banner year. "And we're already 22 percent this year ahead of last year," Acord adds.

Catering, décor and more

When Holder built the conference

center in 1996, he designed it as a multi-purpose building for rentals with space for permanent tenants. Holder began leasing meeting rooms in 1999 and added the 910 Ballroom in 2000.

"That's really when business started taking off," says Acord, who has worked for Holder in a variety of roles for 16 years and has run the conference center the last two years.

The building is now home to eight full-time tenants, including Appraisal Express, AHM Financial Group and an Aflac Training Center.

There are five spaces of varying sizes available for rent, ranging from \$100 to \$1,995, depending on size and duration. Regular customers also receive discounts. It's part of Holder's and Acord's goal of cultivating repeat business.

Customers also have access to wireless or secured Internet service, phone lines, audio/visual systems and in-ceiling surround sound. For an extra fee, center staff members arrange for catering, bartending and décor services.

"I take care of as much as they want us to take care of," Acord says. "When we do a booking, I find out what their needs are. If there's any load I can take from them, that's what I'm here for."

While customers may secure their own caterers, the center contracts with Simply Delicious Catering to handle anything from coffee and desserts for a small gathering to plated entrees for up to 250 people.

Patty Lynch, owner of Simply Delicious, says her contract with Executive Conference Center – signed in February

Owner Larry Holder and General Manager Renae Acord, in the 910 Ballroom, give smaller corporate groups, weddings and banquets a venue tailored to their needs at the Executive Conference Center on West Battlefield Road.

– accounts for nearly 20 percent of her business.

Shannon's Custom Florals, owned by Shannon Johnson and her husband, Jeff, provides décor services at the center.

Shannon Johnson says she's been doing business with the center since opening nine years ago. She and her crew decorate with everything from floral centerpieces to rented chandeliers and elaborate silk swags.

"We love to work at the conference center," Johnson says, noting that traditionally wedding receptions were held on site, and now ceremonies are becoming popular at the center.

"A lot of times, guests come in from out of town for weddings and it's like, 'OK, I found the chapel. How the heck do I get to the reception site?' When it's all right there, they love it," Johnson says.

Expansion possibilities

In order to keep up with event demand, Acord says they've talked about expanding the ballroom. She'd like to double it – to a 500-person capacity – but unless additional parking can be secured, that won't happen at the current site.

Another location is a possibility, Holder says.

"I've been approached by a lot of people over the last five, six years saying, 'Hey, we need something like this in another city.' I've looked at some other sites like in Joplin ... but I really haven't done anything," he says.

Acord believes another option would be worthwhile.

"We only have so many Saturdays or so many events we can do on a Saturday," she says.



Executive Conference Center

Owner: Larry Holder

Founded: 1996

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Phone: (417) 882-1776

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Services: Hosts events ranging from small meetings to banquets with 300 guests.

Employees: 7