

# Butterflies, Bobcats, and Fish— Oh My!

Viasys' incentive fulfills big expectations for a bargain price. *By Sue Pelletier*

WITH JUST 16 of its top qualifiers, their spouses, and the company's top brass as incentive attendees—and a budget to match the group size—one would expect that this year's Viasys Chairman's Club would be a rather low-key affair. One would be wrong.

That's because the bar was set awfully high at last year's inaugural Chairman's Club incentive, where top achievers of the Philadelphia-based medical technology firm got to rub shoulders with the likes of Julius Erving and Michael Jordan at an awards gala at Atlantis Paradise Island in the Bahamas. Harith Wickrema, president of Harith Productions, Philadelphia, even won a Crystal Award from the Society of Incentive & Travel Executives for that one. Pretty good for a new, non-pharma company with a non-pharma budget.

Viasys, which just spun out of medical device giant Thermo Electron two years ago, is a conglomerate of companies that develop high-technology medical devices used in respiratory care, neurology, vascular medicine, critical care, and other areas. Why is this start-up company so intent on creating such a spectacular incentive, especially when

the challenges are multiplied by its limited budget, and it could run the risk of drawing criticism from corporate governance or shareholders? "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," says Viasys Chairman and CEO Randy Thurman. "We want to reward employees when they exemplify our values."

Unlike most companies, which tend to limit qualifiers to sales, Viasys opens its incentives 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 his or her community. The qualifications reflect the corporate values, and, says Thurman, "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." In other words, the incentive is an important piece of the overall corporate identity and culture that Viasys is building, and they want to be sure to give it a solid foundation.

## Of Friends and Flexibility

Wickrema wanted this year's event to be held at the Ritz-Carlton, Naples, a Mobil Five-Star, AAA five-diamond resort perched at the edge of Florida's Gulf of Mexico. The director of food and beverage was a longtime friend of his, and Wickrema knew that the property would be an excellent partner for this incentive event. Since Viasys was flexible on its dates, Wickrema was able to book the incentive during mid-September, a slow time for Florida's west coast, at affordable rates. During that time, the hotel also could give him the ballroom for the several days he needed to set up the awards dinner.

He also made the deal more attractive to the property by inviting the meeting and food press to observe the Viasys incentive, which gave the hotel the opportunity to strut its stuff to the industry media. It's unusual for a corporation to be willing to allow the press to mingle with its top performers, but Viasys executives understood the trade-off value that would bring to their supplier partners. The result was a program that ended up costing a fifth or less of what it was actually worth.

## Making a Myth

Part of developing a corporate identity through the program, of course, involved branding for the young company. For example, at one evening event at the neighboring Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples, the biggest hit was fish racing supplied by Absolute Amusements, at which participants got to choose a fish named after the company's product lines and compete to see whose fish swam past the finish line first.

Then there was the gala awards dinner on the third evening, which had to be a real show-stopper. To start, Wickrema studied the flora and fauna of the Everglades for theme ideas. He invented a Tarzan-like legend of Sir Charles Ashton, an English society baby lost in the Everglades after his parents died in a seaplane crash. He is rescued by a Florida panther who carries him to an Indian village, where the people take him in as one of their own. 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 the anticipation, each participant received a copy of the story the night before the gala, along with a *National Audubon Field Guide to Florida* with a customized dust jacket printed with the name of the participant, the name of the event, and a quote from Chairman and CEO Thurman.

When the evening began, actor/comedian Wes Heywood, dressed as Sir Charles, led the group to a courtyard, where a dancer in a butterfly costume was perched on the fountain, fluttering her wings. Heywood reminded them of the story, and "nymphs" handed out packages to each participant. Wishes were made for each of the company's divisions, and then everyone opened their package and released monarch butterflies into the twilight sky. The release served a triple purpose of setting the mood, theming the event, and reinforcing corporate branding. In the court-



as frogs hopping across the floor, the ceiling festooned with leaves and vines, and tropical plants everywhere. Participants crossed a bridge into the main area, where the tables set around the stage were covered with plants, 'gator heads, and glowing pools shimmering with dry-ice fog.

One attendee, who had also been to the previous event at the Atlantis, 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 at the event next year, all he could do was laugh and say, "I can't even imagine. I'm just glad it's not my job!"

## Winning More Than a Trip

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

"We don't want them to feel like the award was just winning a trip," says Thurman. "We want to encourage the innovators who exemplify what our company stands for to continue to be involved in the process of keeping our company a global market leader in healthcare technology." □

yard, in addition to the butterflies, were alligators, a bobcat, and a Florida panther from Close up Creatures, Ngala Naples, all adding to the pre-dinner reception excitement.

## It's a Jungle in There

Then attendees walked into a different world. Jaws dropped and heads swiveled to take in what had been, just days ago, a ballroom. Now it was a self-contained jungle, complete with dancers dressed



(From left) Harith Wickrema meets up with the wood nymphs; attendees marvel at the butterfly release; the waiters, seen here synchronizing the serving of the first course, were an integral part of the production.