

FINANCIAL & INSURANCE MEETINGS

Creative Meetings Happen in Creative Spaces

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The Polka Room at Catalyst Ranch

We all know that it takes more than a timely topic or even an inspiring speaker to get creative juices flowing at a meeting. For Chicago-based Eva Niewiadomski, owner of a quirky and colorful event space called [Catalyst Ranch](#), the key to creativity is an engaging environment. “It’s incredibly important to how individuals feel, to the caliber of work they create, and to the outcome of meetings,” she says.

Niewiadomski opened Catalyst Ranch in a downtown Chicago loft in 2002 after 15 years of working at Quaker Oats, where she converted a large closet into a popular “creativity room” for staff meetings. She also became known for her personalized cubicle. “The typical cubicle and the typical meeting room siphons off personality,” she says. “My concept was to create meeting space that helps people start new kinds of conversations.”



The Jitterbug Room at Catalyst Ranch

The space grabs attention from the minute people walk into the corridor, painted in Mexican hacienda colors—tomato red, fuchsia, lime-green. A total of 10,000 square feet of space is divided into seven rooms, each named after a ballroom dance: Polka (above left), Cha Cha, Jitterbug (below left), Mambo, Tango, Samba, and Foxtrot. “The music themes reflect my personal passion,” she notes.

In addition to the usual meeting tools (from flipcharts to Wi-Fi) each room has an eclectic mix of vintage furniture, ethnic artwork, and toys on the tables—design that engages all five senses. “The vintage furniture taps into a sense of nostalgia for people,” she says. “It helps people to remember what it felt like when they were kids and had unlimited imaginations.” Meeting attendees like the experiential nature of the space, she says. “They love the stimuli and the whimsy.” Some design elements change annually, so that there’s a different feel to each room from one year to the next.

The atmosphere sparks innovation. One corporate client used foam core and existing furniture to create a replica of a supermarket, for example. And the return on investment is not just the huge rolls of flipchart paper filled with ideas, but attendees bringing creativity to their everyday work lives. “I’m never happier,” she says, “than when attendees go back and paint their cubicle walls in Catalyst Ranch colors.”