

The Mommy Business Trip

Conferences Appeal to Women With a Guilt-Free, Child-Free Reason to Leave Home

By KATHERINE ROSMAN



Rodan + Fields sent members of its sales force to the Benziger winery in California's Sonoma Valley earlier this month.

Katherine Stone, a 43-year-old mother and wife from Atlanta, wants to leave her husband and children.

Just for a few days. On her trip, she will listen to panels addressing issues of concern to mothers, network with other bloggers, and stay in a hotel room that someone else will keep tidy. Ms. Stone, a former marketing director for Coca-Cola Co., KO +0.46% now stays home to raise her two young children as she operates "Postpartum Progress," a well-read blog about mental health and parenting. "I will eat junk out of the minibar," she says. "I will not watch 'SpongeBob.' "

She and other mothers who work from home —bloggers, interior decorators, crafters and the like— rarely get to travel alone to escape the daily grind. Event planners, networking organizations, travel agents and consumer-goods marketers are targeting these women by sponsoring conferences and conventions. They have figured out a simple way to make them happy: Give them a reason to go on a business trip.

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At April's Yoga Journal conference in New York, many attendees were mothers making a rare trip away from home.

Ms. Stone's husband travels a lot for work. But next week, she gets her turn. She will meet up with her online friends at the Ritz-Carlton in Laguna Niguel, Calif., where they will attend the three-day Mom 2.0 Summit, for \$250 to \$450, excluding hotel and airfare costs.

Ms. Stone and other Mom 2.0 attendees will sit in on seminars like "How to Keep Blogging After It's All Been Blogged" and "Help! My 9 Year Old Wants to Be on Instagram!"

But they also will get decked out in ornate hats as they sip mint juleps at a Kentucky Derby party and will don capri pants for a 1950s-themed barbecue on a cliff overlooking the beach. Throughout the conference, they can stroll through the expo that will be set up to let event sponsors connect with attendees. Organizers hope the expo space has the feel of a French market: chalkboard signs, fruit and flower carts, cypress trees.

"I am a serious person and seriously take care of my kids," Ms. Stone says. "A few times a year, I get to be silly."



A booming industry is providing stay-at-home moms with blogging, yoga, cosmetics and home decor conventions. Katie Rosman joins Lunch Break with a look at the trend. Photo: Proshots Event Photography.

BlogHer, a company that provides an online community for women in social media, hosted about 300 people at its first annual blogging convention eight years ago in Silicon Valley. It instantly harnessed the fervor of women wanting to escape the isolation of home and connect in real life with friends originally made online.

This July, 5,000 will descend on Chicago for BlogHer '13, where they will listen to speakers give pointers on making money through blogging and taking stylish photographs for Instagram. Ticket packages range from \$199 to \$1,100, and don't include hotel or travel costs. (Student tickets cost \$99.)

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For Linda Rabinovich of Baltimore, attending the Yoga Journal Conference in New York City earlier this month was a long-held dream but not one easy to realize. Ms. Rabinovich, 37, is training to get certified as a yoga instructor. Her husband travels frequently for business and she has two sons, ages 12 and 10. So Ms. Rabinovich could spend one night at the conference, her neighbors pitched in with baby sitting and driving the boys to school and lacrosse practice.

At the convention, which about 2,000 people attended, Ms. Rabinovich took a day-long yoga class from a well-known instructor and met other women training to become instructors. With one new friend, she strolled the city and stopped for a glass of wine. "It was a big trip for me," Ms. Rabinovich says.

Yoga enthusiasts—anyone who doesn't own a yoga business or teach in studios—comprise about 40% of attendees at events hosted by the magazine Yoga Journal, says Elana Maggal, the company's conference director. "It's a fun and educational thing to do for people who are married with children and need a legitimate reason to leave home," she says.

Yoga Journal, which is owned by Active Interest Media, produced its first such event 18 years ago. Now demand is so great, the company will host four conventions this year—in New York, San Francisco, Estes Park, Colo., and Hollywood, Fla. In 2014, a fifth conference will be added. About 40% of the publishing company's revenue now comes from events, Ms. Maggal says.

Much of the real costs of these events are absorbed by brands that are eager to have access to an important consumer group—one that both makes many household purchasing decisions and is active on social media.

The Mom 2.0 Summit has a stated goal of connecting moms who blog with marketers. For its coming event, Dove has signed on as the convention's title sponsor and the brand will announce a new marketing campaign called Let's Make Girls Unstoppable, which it hopes the attendees will blog and tweet about, says Rob Candelino, vice president of marketing for Unilever Skincare, which owns Dove.

Mr. Candelino declined to specify the cost of sponsorship. "It's not inconsequential," he says. Sponsorships for the other 24 brands taking part in the event started at \$10,000 each, says Mom 2.0 co-founder Carrie Pacini. Other sponsors include Honda7267.TO +1.27% and Jamba Juice. Whirlpool Corp.WHR -1.25% is providing hats for the Derby party it's sponsoring.

Last month, 360 people traveled to Ventura, Calif., for the second annual Craftcation Conference, a four-day DIY-bacchanal at which attendees learn to market and promote their macramé and kombucha.

Amid the seminars (including "Pickle Bootcamp" and "Accounting and Bookkeeping for the Indie Business"), attendees enjoyed yoga classes, food tours of local restaurants and a 1980s-themed dance party.

"It maybe was a little too fun," says Craftcation co-founder Nicole Stevenson.

Rodan + Fields, a San Francisco-based direct-sales skin-care company whose sales representatives and customers are mostly mothers, considers its conventions and other travel as key benefits for its sales force. The women who sell wrinkle cream and recruit others to sell it tend to be women who stay home to raise their children and are seeking an outside-the-home identity as much as income, says Lori Bush, the company's president and chief executive. "Money is not usually the primary motivator," she says, "It's being involved in a business that is very social."

To that end, Rodan + Fields provides many chances to leave home and socialize. About 5,000 sales reps attended the company's annual convention. This year's was in Dallas in February. Though the company asks its sales force to pay travel expenses and an enrollment fee, it picks up the rest of the tab for the convention. "It's a major marketing expense, a multimillion-dollar event," Ms. Bush says.

Andrika Langham, 35, hooked up with Rodan + Fields last fall because she wanted a part-time job that was forgiving of a mom's schedule. The Knoxville, Tenn., resident attended the Dallas convention. Since the arrival of her children, ages 7 and 5, she hasn't traveled without her family.

She has taken to her new gig with such gusto that she has earned a spot on a company trip in October to San Francisco and California wine country, where she will meet with her peers, learn more about new products and tour vineyards.

"I would kind of feel guilty as a mom, but this is different than someone planning a girls' trip," she says.

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