



# AARON WOLOWIEC

## MSA, CAE, CMP, CTA

### President and Founder, Event Garde

Aaron Wolowiec started “teaching” when he was in elementary school.

“I had a sister four years younger than me, and I would force her to play school with me,” Wolowiec says. “I got our parents to buy me a chalkboard, and I would ask teachers for books they were getting rid of.”

Wolowiec remains focused on education, but now, through his Grand Rapids-based company, Event Garde, he’s training subject matter experts who in turn facilitate educational programs.

Wolowiec launched Event Garde after nine years working for the Health Care Association of Michigan, most recently as education director. He also taught American Sign Language at Lansing Community College.

“Because I’ve done actual teaching day in and day out, and I’ve done meeting planning, I knew my passion lie somewhere in the middle,” Wolowiec says of his decision to start his company. “I’d been an ASAE member (since 2008) and was staying up on trends. I wanted the full freedom to do something more innovative.”

Education provides associations with significant revenue, Wolowiec says, yet most meeting planners in Michigan are certified meeting professionals, not trained educators.

“They don’t necessarily have the background in professional development,” he says. “And they’re planning year-round. It’s always the next event, the next event. There’s little emphasis on strategy.”

“With the Internet, the number of people offering education today is ridiculous—you can attend an education program every single day,” he adds. “Associations in particular have to be better at offering education. They have to really reflect on adult learning principles instead of throwing together something that isn’t meaningful.”

Wolowiec sees his job as creating

dynamic member experiences. Doing so, he says, requires rethinking an association’s entire educational program and strategy.

“That can be a lot more work, but if you’ve got a program that’s underperforming, we’re not going to make this minute adjustment,” he says. “We’re going to turn this program on its ear.”

Jean Jernigan, vice president of external affairs and community outreach for the Michigan Association of Certified Public Accountants (MACPA), hired Wolowiec this year to help sell exhibit space at the association’s annual exposition.

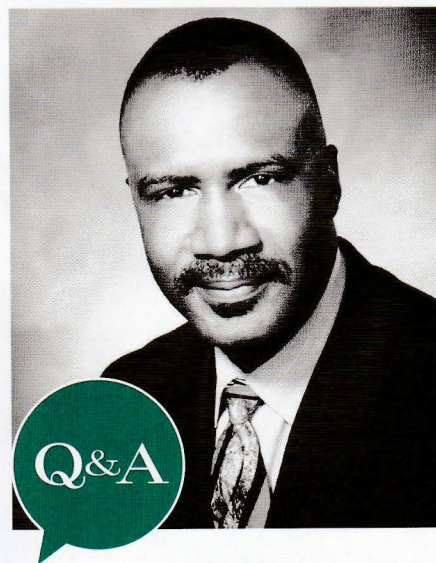
“From the first time I met him, I trusted him,” Jernigan says. “I knew I could count on his work and that he would do what he said. And he does.”

Wolowiec generated a new marketing plan for MACPA and landed new exhibitors.

“There are times when every organization needs some help or a fresh set of eyes,” Jernigan says. “Just working with Aaron can help enhance any of your meeting planning aspects. He takes what you do and puts adrenaline to it, and he’s got a real positive attitude.”

Wolowiec recently partnered with Midwest Society of Association Executives (MSAE) for its first survey focused on the meetings industry. The survey benchmarked “some pretty major findings with regards to how people are hiring and training and acclimating their speakers to their conference,” Wolowiec says. He’s committed to bringing effective national trends to his work in Michigan.

“I believe that my client is rarely the person who has hired me. In almost all cases, it’s the person who’s attending that education program,” Wolowiec says. “I think about who is sitting on the other end of this screen or reading this material and taking this quiz. It really does have an impact on how I approach my work.”



**MICHAEL FINNEY**  
PRESIDENT AND CEO  
Michigan Economic Development Corp.

Michael Finney leads the Michigan Economic Development Corp. (MEDC), a public-private partnership serving as the state’s lead agency for business and job growth, talent enhancement, tourism marketing, arts and cultural grants and overall economic growth. • Finney’s role includes oversight of many state programs affecting the meetings and events industry, from the Pure Michigan initiatives to programs designed to fuel small business growth. • Finney shared with us his insights into Michigan’s economic future and the state’s meetings and events industry:

**MIM+E: What do you see as the biggest economic development challenge facing our state?**

**MF:** Entrepreneurism made Michigan great. At one time, Michigan was the entrepreneurial capital of the world, and we have great companies in this state. But at some point we lost that focus, and as a state, didn’t spend enough of our time and resources supporting and building an entrepreneurial ecosystem. We are doing that now, with programs like Pure Michigan Business Connect, which offers access to early stage capital, tech transfer, acceleration services or venture matching programs and more. We need to continue to create an environment for entrepreneurial companies to start and grow and prosper. >>