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[Conferences & Meetings](#)

Capitalizing on Festivals: Five Effective Tips for Boosting Your Attendees

By [Lyan Tassler](#), President, Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM)

For hotel executives, annual festivals present unique opportunities to strengthen a company's corporate image and make a lasting impression on thousands of visitors from all over the world. Beyond the increased business, hotels should keep in mind the added value they can provide to convention groups that book over festival dates. As with any major initiative, frequent communication between convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs), hotel executives and meeting planners is an essential component of capitalizing on the festive atmosphere. With the common goal of boosting convention attendance, meeting professionals can work together in several ways to ensure success.

To find out specifically what convention services managers (CSMs) think about capitalizing on festivals, I consulted with members of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM). Speaking from experience, several CSMs first conveyed that before actively marketing annual festivals, all meeting planners involved must be sure the target groups will welcome the distraction of festivals and special events while conducting their own conventions.

"You must be careful that the festivals don't undermine attendance at the events. But festivals do offer a lot to your attendees," says Bob Desautels, Senior Manager of Convention Services for the Indianapolis CVA, whose home town plays host to the Indianapolis 500 and the regalia leading up to the formula racing event on Memorial Day weekend. Conventions booked around this time of year often incorporate a racing theme and meeting planners often plan off-site excursions to the city's parade and tours of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Tip #1: Build Awareness

While CSMs and hotel executives in Indianapolis might live and breathe car racing every day, those outside the city may not be so familiar with this "claim to fame." "Many convention attendees may have heard of these festivals but have no idea what time of year they are held or may not be aware that the festival is located in the same city every year," says Lynn McCullough, Executive Director for ACOM.

Desautels agrees. "The more your attendees know about the festival, the more of an attraction it may be for coming to the convention," he says.

A simple way to build awareness is to approach festival organizers to obtain photos that can be added to a group or hotel's website. Once awareness levels are raised, the greater chance you can draw more meeting planners to consider your city or venue over others they are considering.

Part of what helped Minneapolis make a successful pitch to the Republican National Convention last year was being able to offer a State Fair day for their itineraries. "We have the Minnesota State Fair every year which is the second largest after Texas. We try to schedule site visits around it and use it as a tool to get groups to meet the last two weeks of August," said Madonna Carr, Vice President of Destination Services at Meet Minneapolis.

Tip #2: Create a Theme

One of the easiest ways to build excitement surrounding the festival is to incorporate it as a theme throughout the convention, according to Denise Suttle, CMP, Assistant Director of Convention Services at the Albuquerque Convention and Visitors Bureau. Their signature event, the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, features more than 600 hot air balloons filling the October skies for nine days of special events.

"By simply dressing staff in balloon-related t-shirts and hats throughout the event and decorating the property in the same spirit can help get attendees excited about visiting the festival," says Suttle. She also suggests holding themed launch parties for top clients. "Hotels have done the balloonist's breakfast themed 'propane and champagne!'" adds Suttle.

"Hotel executives can especially rely on CVBs to provide necessary information to help market what makes the city stand out," says McCullough. She and Suttle recommend working together to arrange buyer education trips to showcase the city and properties during the event.

Tip #3: Look into Creative Sponsorships

For hotels, capitalizing on festivals can mean important brand reinforcement. Festival organizers are beginning to offer more creative opportunities than ever before, especially knowing that promotional budgets have been dramatically slashed in the past year. According to ACOM members, keep it simple and look for ways to expand the value of the sponsorship.

"Imagine a hot air balloon draped with a hotel logo banner launching from the 365-acre balloon field and flying over the city below," says Suttle. Sponsorships like this provide a unique photo opportunity which can be showcased on company websites, in brochures and advertisements. Also, working with event organizers to develop positive publicity angles can stretch the dollar even further. If you've sponsored this event every year, ask your staff to brainstorm ideas for what you can do differently to make yourself stand out.

Tip #4: Offer Additional Services

A group looking to hold their convention during your city's busy time of year will need to know they are going to be taken care of. Reassure them by showcasing your turnkey capabilities. CVBs and hotels can arrange for staff and transportation for clients or special groups to see the events and may see opportunities to provide themed giveaways and other memorable services that show you go above and beyond the call of duty. Room blocks are also a major concern of meeting planners booking their convention during a festival, so be sure to work together to manage the group's room block needs.

Additionally, Suttle suggests marketing “stay and play” packages. “Stay and play packages can be arranged through the CVB and encourage attendees to enjoy the events each day in addition to exploring the city’s other attractions,” she says.

Keep in mind, no event is too small. “Don’t neglect food festivals such as rib fests, Italian fests, Irish fests or October fests,” says Desautels. Showcasing a city’s exotic flavor may be just what your city needs to boost attendance across the board and spice up sales figures.

Tip #5: Leverage Group Rates

According to Desautels, city festivals present an opportunity to negotiate special rates. “Bringing a potentially large group to festival events may put you in a position to leverage ticket pricing for your attendees,” he says.

Don’t forget about professional sports teams and events, too. Being able to deliver big attendance numbers can prove valuable with local sports venues of all kinds. “NFL, NBA, MLB or even minor league baseball can attract groups as well. Let your attendees know if the ‘Home team’ is in town during your convention,” Desautels adds.

ACOM’s own 2007 Annual Conference in Toronto, Ontario took advantage of the launch of a major NCAA football event—the first ever International Bowl. Members were treated to a one-of-a-kind opening reception at the Rogers Centre’s Windows restaurant, located inside the world-renowned sports complex. The three-tiered venue offered an open-air view of the playing field where the first International Bowl football game between the Western Michigan Broncos and the Cincinnati Bearcats would take place the following day. “That year, conference attendance was one of the highest we’ve ever seen,” says McCullough. “Being able to offer an exclusive look at this major city event was definitely a contributing factor.”

Ultimately, capitalizing on city festivals is all about getting creative. Whether it is a visually stunning event like the Balloon Fiesta or an exciting sporting event like the Indy 500 or International Bowl, city festivals serve as distinguishing characteristics to help you gain a competitive advantage. Hotel CSMs can play an instrumental role by becoming a main resource on these types of local opportunities and increase their value in the eyes of their customers.

Ms. Tassler is President of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM). She previously served on ACOM’s Board of Directors, and as ACOM liaison to the PCMA Annual Meeting Program Committee (AMPC), Ms. Tassler served a two-year term (2006-2008) working to bring Convention Services education to the mix at the PCMA Annual Conferences in Toronto & Seattle. A native Miamian, Ms. Tassler has been in the industry over 25 years including stints at Norwegian Cruise Lines and Eastern Air Lines. Ms. Tassler can be contacted at 305-539-3055 or LTassler@GMCVB.com

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