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Conferences & Meetings

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Successful Meetings: The Value of Working with Your CVB

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

Tough economic times and increased demand for greater return on meeting investments require meetings and conventions be planned and managed smarter, faster and more efficiently than ever before. Meeting planners and property convention services managers, who are the meeting planners' partners at hotels and convention centers, work synergistically with the third leg of the successful meetings stool - convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs). CVBs place a high priority on optimizing every aspect of meeting planning and work to enhance the opportunity for repeat bookings in a city or region. "CVBs act as meeting and convention services liaisons with meeting planners and facility convention services managers (CSMs)," says Lynn McCullough, Executive Director of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM), the professional association for CSMs. "They present facility options, coordinate pre-event services and identify specialty venues and vendors to help planners and CSMs create and implement cost-effective meetings in their cities," McCullough says. Destination evangelists

The hotel CSM and the CVB provide different client services at different phases in the meeting planning process and offer their own specialized client benefits. "Typically in a citywide event the CVB will take the lead at the outset in terms of site visits and pre-event planning," says ACOM member Marilyn Healey, CMP, Convention Services Manager at the Hyatt Regency Long Beach in California. Healey, who was previously at the Long Beach CVB, has worked both sides of the property and CVB partnership. "Once the hotel contracts are signed, the CSMs at the individual hotels take over, though of course we support any additional needs they may have in terms of the city's amenities and vendors. In my experience, the CVB is a great partner when it comes to supporting our clients in the pre-planning, promotional and management process," says Gloriann Torres, CMP, Catering and Event Services Manager at the Caribe Hilton in San Juan, Puerto Rico. "The CVB is the expert on the destination and this makes our lives as CSMs easier knowing our clients are in great hands. They will take the lead in all aspects relating to the destination and, as a hotel CSM, I take the lead in all the food and beverage requirements, logistics and meeting planning processes. They are like an extension of our staff and complement our work." "Proactive involvement by a CVB helps the meeting planner and the CSM be more efficient, save time and energy due to their special insight and knowledge of their city," says Madonna Carr, CMP, Vice President of Destination Services at Meet Minneapolis. Promotional catalysts

Most CVBs distribute an array of promotional items groups can utilize to get attendees excited about the upcoming meeting destination such as brochures, e-cards, maps and

promotional DVDs showcasing all there is to see and do in the city or region they represent.

“CVB promotional efforts benefit properties by helping to ensure blocks are met and possibly exceeded with extended stays,” says Carr. “By promoting the meeting location as a destination with specific events, festivals and attractions during the meeting, the CVB encourages attendees to bring a spouse and add an extra night or two.” Many conferences encourage spouses to attend meetings and conventions, and have specific events designed just for them. It might be a museum tour, shopping excursion or Sunday brunch. “Spousal programs may be well outside the realm of the CSM’s or meeting planner’s responsibilities, yet still expected of the event,” explains Karen Kelly, Director of Destination Services, Savannah Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. “CVB service staff are familiar with all tours, excursions, attractions and other activities available in their cities and can put together the perfect spousal program fit for each group.” “Given the economy and tight meeting budgets, sponsorships and barter are something that we get a lot of requests for from meeting planners and their trade association clients,” says Healey. “Who better than a member-based CVB to help find and arrange for a vendor to offer free services for a night in return for promotional visibility at the meeting or convention?” CVBs are also an important source for many less obvious services providing value to hoteliers and convention centers such as centralized crisis management planning or surfacing charitable community projects for corporate meetings seeking to integrate socially-responsible voluntourism activities into their agendas.

Planning for crisis

Donna Karl, CMP, Vice President of Client Relations at the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, helped spearhead development of a post-Hurricane Katrina crisis management plan in use today which integrates the crisis plans of the city, the CVB and individual hospitality properties. “Every Monday an email goes out from the Bureau to every hotel and meeting facility in the city and asks them how many guests are staying in or using their facilities for the next two weeks,” Karl explains. “By Wednesday they return the information and we calculate it so we know on any given night how many visitors are staying in the city and where they are.” “Every hotel has what’s called a ‘dark channel’ on its guest room television system that sits empty. We’re electronically able to put a video right on the tv so if you’re in your room it would give instructions and information in the event of an emergency. These are the kinds of things we’ve put in place so we can communicate not only with the properties but with the guests themselves,” she says.

Meeting for good

Volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, is increasingly part of corporate meeting agendas offering attendees the opportunity to participate in good works in the destination community. CVBs can be a resource for locating worthwhile projects from rebuilding homes and painting school yards to improving playgrounds that deliver the service experience and help meet community needs. “Community service adds a lot of emotional investment to a meeting, not only from the standpoint of organizational team-building, but also just knowing you’ve truly helped people,” observes Mary Beth Romig, Director of Communications and Public Relations at the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau. While the current and continuing economic downturn has affected CVBs as it has most other businesses, Bob Desautels, CMP, Senior Manager, Convention Services at the Indianapolis Convention and Visitors Association sees a silver lining. “Staff reductions and budget cuts may make the CVB’s job more challenging but our clients, whether it’s a hotel CSM or corporate meeting planner, are still looking for quality

and efficiency in our service,” Desautels says. “Though doing a great job in today’s economy is more demanding, it demonstrates what real value our quality and service brings to our customers. In essence, today’s challenges offer us the best opportunity to succeed—not only for our clients but ourselves as well.”

In January, 2009, Ms. Tassler was named President of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM), a professional organization dedicated to elevating the profile of the Convention Services professional in the hospitality industry. 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.