

**“Huddle Up”: The Big Show Demands Big Preparation**

By Tina Stark, President, Association for Convention Operations Management



Ms. Tina Stark

The Super Bowl, the Olympic Games, the national political conventions and other mega events: They're big...and important. Many cities crave the attention and economic benefits they bring. Important decision makers are drawn toward these cities and they're also looking critically at them. Can the city perform? Does it have the infrastructure and volunteer base? Will they handle the details effectively? It may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a city and being ready means vision, creativity and planning. Both the client and the supplier have the spotlight shining brightly on them. Preparation by the cities is crucial to making the dream event a great one for a city.

As a convention services manager based in Salt Lake City, the most populated area to have ever hosted a Winter Olympics in 2002, I believe our entire team benefited from consulting with fellow members of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM) and other professional organizations to plan efficiently. In this article, we'll hear from planning experts who have shared their advice on surviving the flood of tourists, celebrities, media and other visitors and capitalizing on this opportunity. To aid those in the industry looking to pull off an impressive event of this magnitude, it is

important to evaluate the roles that CVBs, hotels, cities and other major partners play in order to help involved parties delegate responsibility accordingly.

First, let's examine just how impactful these events are and who attends them. The Super Bowl has particularly built a reputation for bringing in a desirable corporate demographic to each host city. According to the Arizona Super Bowl Host Committee, the organizers of the most recent NFL Super Bowl held at University of Phoenix Stadium, the average Super Bowl attendee spends four nights in a hotel. Of the attendees, 85 percent are from another state, 70-90 percent arrive by plane and the average fan spends \$1,500 - \$2,000 during his/her stay. Of these visitors:

- 60 percent classify their occupation as managerial or professional.
- 65 percent are key decision-makers in their company.
- 60 percent of the above key decision-makers work at companies who host meetings outside of their corporate headquarters.
- 70 percent of these decision-makers would consider holding a meeting in the host city after visiting because of their positive Super Bowl experience.
- 29 percent would consider establishing business operations in the host city area.

So, the city selection process is over and the spotlight is now cast on your city to perform at its highest level. Here are some ways to plan for a positive outcome.

### **Use CVBs as Communications Conduits**

Since major events like political conventions take months of intense planning, it seems obvious that good communication is the cornerstone of creating a successful event experience. However, imagine this type of large-scale event planning as a jigsaw puzzle with many different pieces that must interlock. Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs) serve as main conduits for city information and can increase the ease of plans falling into place by utilizing their existing relationships and standard practices.

To gain some perspective on just how many different groups and entities must communicate to pull off a major event we consulted Vikki Kelly, Director of Convention Services for the Denver Metro CVB and ACOM member. According to Kelly, the CVB is involved at multiple levels regarding the planning needs for the Democratic National Convention (DNC), to be held this August. "In preparation for the DNC, we started by

meeting with key partners, coordinators and planners that would be involved,” said Kelly. “The CVB serves as a main liaison to all three entities involved, including the City of Denver, the DNCC and the Denver 2008 Local Host Committee.”

Regarding housing, Kelly says meetings are particularly important to track the city’s housing capabilities. “The DNCC has contracted over 90 hotels for this event,” said Kelly. “In partnership with the DNCC, we hold quarterly cluster meetings to take hotels through the different management processes involved with accommodating the VIPs, delegates, media and other attendees and track the progress of their assignments. Communication in this aspect is very important to the success of the event overall,” she added.

Kelly’s counterpart planning the Republican National Convention (RNC) this September, Madonna Carr, Director of Convention Services at Meet Minneapolis and ACOM board member, expressed a similar concern for an optimal level of communication. “Not only do we have different committees set up to handle different responsibilities, but we are actually communicating with an even greater amount of involved entities since the Twin Cities and the surrounding areas all have a say in the planning process,” said Carr. “We work with the 2008 Minneapolis-St. Paul Host Committee, three area CVBs, and the cities of Minneapolis, St. Paul and Bloomington. Each city has its own communications manager and regular meetings play an important role in keeping up-to-date on new developments.”

Regarding housing, Carr says that their CVB played an important role in securing hotel rooms for the predicted amount of visitors within the 101 contracted hotels in the area, as well as venues for the side events associated with the Convention.

Working with the Salt Lake Organizing Committee and other CVBs in the surrounding area, Salt Lake CVB held meetings and maintained communication throughout the many years of planning prior to the 2002 Olympics. Over 200 hotels, condos, bed and breakfasts as well as private homes were used during the Olympics. Now used as model program that other host cities have followed, the CVB actually managed the booking process for the spectators for the Olympics as well as working with the corporate sponsors who because of the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>, had extra rooms available. The CVB turned extra inventory into an opportunity for both the spectators who needed the

rooms as well as the sponsors who wanted to resell these rooms. A first time “buy back” program was developed and carried out – an indication that CVBs are often able to think quickly and communicate appropriately when unexpected events arise.

### **Keep the Public Informed**

Not only does your city’s selection for a major event draw revenue and positive publicity, it also instills a sense of pride in your city’s residents. CVBs, hotels and meeting planners must help keep the hometown crowd informed and educated about the event’s significance and to engage the community in such a significant event. More importantly, let them know what to expect as the date approaches. “Communication to the public at large is something we also make sure we focus on,” said Kelly. “Several community forums have been planned in order to keep everyone informed and involved. We’re expecting between 10,000 and 15,000 volunteers in Denver.”

According to a recent article in the *Tampa Bay Tribune*, the newspaper of the 2009 Super Bowl host city, event organizers of past Super Bowls recalled the public’s perception and dramatizations. “Traffic is a problem in every community that hosts the game,” said Jim Steeg, a former Super Bowl organizer. Steeg remembered driving around Tampa the Monday before the game and hearing a radio announcer complain about Super Bowl visitors clogging the roadways. “There wasn’t anybody here yet,” he said. “In Tampa, it’s almost mythological.” Steeg’s account underscores the need for positive communication to residents through the media or any other grassroots means.

### **Collaborate to Avoid Panic Situations**

The city’s public will also play an important role in the development of crisis communications plans. Convention host city CVBs work closely with high level security officials, including the Secret Service, by sharing information to keep protestors and other possible crisis situations under control. Although each CVB involved is thorough in their threat assessment, the sharing of plans and protocols with hotels and other venues allows for more efficient work and collaboration – a necessity should an unexpected event arise.

Also, to avoid panic situations, ensure that local hotel managers are prepared for the flurry of last-minute bookings. In the Tampa area, many managers will brace themselves

around the time that the two competing Super Bowl teams emerge from the playoffs. “Between 35,000 to 45,000 visitors have made plans for the Super Bowl here in the past with about two weeks’ notice,” said Reid Sigmon, executive director of the host committee.

Executing these plans for a major city event efficiently is no easy task and cannot be accomplished by one entity alone. Through communication and collaboration, the many CVBs, hotels, cultural centers, municipalities, host committees and political groups can showcase their best work and service and capitalize on the opportunities presented.

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