



Conferences & Meetings

Five Ways to Utilize Bureau CSMs for Your Hotel Conventions

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

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As current economic conditions continue to affect the meetings industry, it is important now more than ever for meeting professionals to come together and effectively utilize all resources in order to produce a successful and cost-effective event. Convention services managers (CSMs) from convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) can act as valuable resources for meeting planners and hotel executives in the planning and execution of an event.

The experience and knowledge CSMs possess can assist the meeting planner in choosing the best programs and services that fit their corporate and association client's needs. CSMs help lay the event's foundation while offering direct on-site support to the meeting planner and serve as a reliable source and partner in the overall success of the event.

Members of ACOM recently shared their perspectives on the many roles a good CSM must play in today's meetings industry.

What is an ideal CSM?

"There are many characteristics that CSMs must have," says Megan Dougherty, Convention Services Manager at the Westin Arlington Gateway. "First and most important is to find a common bond with their client. This bond will set the tone for the next few months in the working relationship."

Establishing a connection with the meeting planner is critical for the CSM, as it will make for a strong working relationship as challenges arise, responsibilities increase and

crucial deadlines near. This also holds true for future opportunities. By forming this relationship, the CSM has created a bond which may help generate new opportunities as the meeting planner reaches out to reliable contacts for future engagements.

“An ideal CSM is also attuned to the needs of the meeting planner, especially in regard to how they would like to receive communication,” says Denise Suttle, Assistant Director of Convention Services at the Albuquerque Convention and Visitors Bureau.

“They should respond to clients within 24 hours of an email or phone call to show them they are the number one priority on their list. I am so diligent about getting back to the client that at any one time, I never have more than about 15-20 emails in my inbox,” adds Dougherty.

Finding the best way to communicate, and responding to that form of communication in a timely manner further illustrates to the meeting planner how quickly the CSM is able to respond and react to any situation and truly showcases their ability to manage a variety of clients. It also indicates the organized and efficient nature of the CSM in helping to keep the overall structure of the event on-task.

So how exactly can bureau CSMs be utilized for your hotel conventions? Consider these ways:

1. CSMs know their city

“We know about the city’s attractions, its benefits and how the convention can take advantage of them,” says Suttle. “We also have an understanding of the inner workings of city politics or government.”

Dougherty adds, “We are able to give advice about area restaurants, transportation and activities and even better, give examples of past groups and what they have done.”

CSMs have a wealth of knowledge about their city as well as strong connections with organizations and individuals throughout their community. Meeting planners can utilize CSMs to help select the best attractions, programs and services that match their client’s needs and help them reach their goals. As a direct extension of their city and the meeting staff, the CSM can also use their resources to help identify and solve problems critical to the success of the event.

2. CSMs are skilled in handling crisis communication

“Most cities have a crisis plan already in place and CSMs will know exactly what to do and how to address the crisis,” says Madonna Carr, Vice President of Destination Services at Meet Minneapolis.

Dealing with a crisis can be overwhelming, but CSMs have the training needed to handle difficult situations and can act as a calm voice of reason in the midst of the chaos. They can use their problem-solving skills and valuable resources to help meeting planners take immediate action quickly and efficiently. CSMs have experienced all types of crises and understand the do’s and don’ts of weathering a storm, tragedy or PR nightmare.

“Chances are this isn’t the first time this issue has occurred—someone in their department has probably had to solve the same problem before, so they know what works and what doesn’t work,” adds Carr.

3. CSMs understand the green movement

As the economic crisis continues to affect the industry, meeting professionals are being forced to reevaluate their meetings and develop new ways to hold an event that will save them time and money, but will also bring value to their clients. Because of their resources and industry knowledge, CSMs remain constantly in-tune with the green movement and offer meeting planners a variety of activities to develop a sustainable and cost-effective event.

“Of course we are all aware of the green movement,” says Carr. “We at Meet Minneapolis have information on our website and have developed brochures that we distribute to clients. The first thing that clients ask these days is “What green initiatives do we have in place?, So it is important for us to understand the movement and be prepared.”

4. CSMs are experts at venue selection

Choosing the right venue for an event is one of the most challenging tasks a meeting professional faces in their line of work. The meeting space sets the tone for the overall feel of the event and can make or break the attendees’ experience. CSMs can effectively guide meeting planners in choosing the best and most affordable meeting space for their event.

“We are experts on venues,” says Carr. “Whatever the client is looking for, whether they want a ballroom, a restaurant or they are searching for something interesting that their attendees can do outside the hotel, we are the first ones a client should look to for options and utilize our resources to find our client the perfect space.”

Dougherty adds, “It is so important to know your space and how it can be used to meet your clients’ needs.”

5. CSMs are dedicated to servicing you

As a customer service-oriented industry, CSMs strive to fulfill their client’s needs and provide them with quality service. CSMs welcome the opportunity to work with seasoned meeting planners who will challenge their abilities. CSMs work hard to offer the best variety of programs and services to their clients while acting as the meeting planner’s full partner in the success of the event.

“I worked with an educational conference that used one hotel and needed resources for local speakers, giveaways for each attendee, raffle items, a welcome letter from our mayor for their program, dining maps of the area of the city where their conference was located, on-site registration assistance, volunteers to help staff conference bags, an RFP for tours and transportation and a staffed visitor information table at the hotel,” says Suttle. “This was for a conference for approximately 500 people and these services are very similar to what we would provide for other groups of different sizes.”

Suttle adds, “Our CVB is always trying to get the message out to meeting planners that we work with single hotel conventions not just city-wide and we encourage them to use us from the very beginning of the process of site selection up until the conclusion of the event.”

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.