

Volunteering + Tourism: A New Formula for Service

By Tina Stark, President, Association for Convention Operations Management



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Volunteer tourism, or voluntourism as it is increasingly known in the hospitality and travel industries, is a component of a vacation itinerary or a corporate meeting agenda that mixes socially responsible activities into travelers' schedules that further a charitable cause or good works in the destination community.

Data gathered through the website Travelocity indicates that the percentage of travelers volunteering in 2007 nearly doubled from the previous year, rising from 6% to 11%. A Conde Nast Traveler poll revealed that of those travelers who have volunteered while on vacation, 95% say they are likely to do it again.

Such altruism is increasingly a truism of corporate and association meeting and conference agendas as groups seek the good will generated by socially responsible goals. Many convention attendees are volunteering to help out at a children's hospital or paint rooms in a homeless shelter instead of taking in the sites or lounging poolside on those afternoons off from meetings and seminars, according to a recent University of Florida study. For example, members of the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons have built a playground in every city that has hosted their annual meeting since 2000, according to the study.

Community service and room service

Originally most volunteer excursions were undertaken by people with a direct philosophical or religious connection to a particular cause and were considered more as short term volunteer service projects, such as the social cause work camps of the 1960s, rather than vacations.

These early volunteers typically shared the same living conditions as those they were assisting and today's voluntourist continues to have that option, particularly in ongoing projects and assistance missions in developing areas in Africa, South America, and Asia.

Domestically however, the vacationing or corporate voluntourist can also choose to work at a community development project during the day and return to a plush hotel room in the evening. For example, the Fairmont Hotel in Winnipeg, Manitoba has partnered with Habitat for Humanity to develop a package for travelers who want to perform community service helping to build a home while returning at day's end to the comfort of their Fairmont room at night.

Participatory corporate philanthropy

Some point to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the rebuilding of New Orleans as the magnet which began to pull corporate voluntourism into the mainstream. Soon after the first anniversary of the disaster, companies and associations like the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) and the Association for Convention Operation Management (ACOM) moved meetings and conventions to the city in a show of support for rebuilding the city's economy, according to Mary Beth Romig, Director of Communications and Public Relations at the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau.

An important part of voluntourism in any city is identifying community projects that will enhance the service experience of corporate meeting attendees. "We keep our ear to the ground and try to hear the needs in the community. Whether it's rebuilding homes, cleaning up and painting school yards or building playgrounds, we have a lot of needs here."

Romig has helped numerous meetings link up with worthwhile projects. American College of Surgeons meeting attendees put in a day of labor to help a health clinic reopen. An association of automobile dealers rebuilt an athletic field. Coca Cola reported to the New Orleans CVB that their meeting in the city was one of the most moving they've ever had because of the way attendees became emotionally involved in the community through public service participation.

"Community service adds a lot of emotional investment to a meeting, not only from the standpoint of organizational team building, but just knowing that you've truly helped people," Romig observes.

As a case in point, a 2006 Konica Minolta meeting in search of a New Orleans community project was introduced to a small French Quarter middle school damaged by the hurricane. Several years and meetings later, the company has made a significant investment of time and money in the school's physical plant and the education and success of its students.

"This is a company that's headquartered in New Jersey, but they have developed a long term relationship with this little school. They not only bring a meeting to the city once a year, but they've decided that this school is their story. I call it a love connection," says Romig.

"People just come away feeling like they've really made a difference, and they have." she says, noting that New Orleans is not the exception and that corporate voluntourism is growing nationally.

Traveling for good

Located 70 miles from New Orleans, Baton Rouge has seen an influx of volunteer groups as well. Katie Guasco, Destination Services Manager for the Baton Rouge Area Convention & Visitors Bureau says, "I've worked with a number of groups that volunteered with Katrina relief in New Orleans but stayed here in Baton Rouge."

Most groups she has assisted have been associated with a convention, a religious or school group and have worked in conjunction with Habitat for Humanity, City Year, the Red Cross and various local aid organizations.

"With our short commute to New Orleans, groups are able to aid in the recovery but return to Baton Rouge to explore our eclectic mix of museums, delicious cuisine, unique shopping venues, and family friendly attractions during their free time," says Guasco, who serves as newsletter editor for ACOM. "With continued recovery efforts, voluntourism is an excellent way for groups to rebuild the New Orleans community while also enjoying our great state and positively impacting the economy."

Bob Desautels, Senior Manager of Convention Services for the Indianapolis Convention and Visitors Association reports a growing number of groups participating in voluntourism, from religious organization conventions to the Indiana Black Expo and Rotary International.

"We work with them to incorporate a community service project into the conference agenda which they promote to their constituents," explains Desautels, who is an ACOM board member. Activities have included working in neighborhoods fixing up residences and schools. "It's a way for people participating in a special event to do something special for the host community."

With many corporations striving to be more socially responsible and convention and meeting planners struggling with budget constraints as travel prices continue to climb, voluntourism is an economical and memorable corporate event experience that continues to capture attention as a solution with something for most everyone.

For many corporate and vacationing voluntourists, helping out and fixing up can be a transformational emotional fix as well. Says Romig of the New Orleans CVB: "When you walk onto a schoolyard that is a complete shambles and you leave at the end of the day having had a picnic with the students in the new picnic area you and your colleagues built and the kids are dancing on a little stage platform that you built for them, how can you not be moved by that and take it home with you?"

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