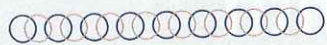


Cover Story



By Marshall Krantz

Photography by David Yellen

OUR CVB WISH

These are unsettled times for convention and visitor bureaus, for reasons both old and new. On one hand, third-party meeting-planning companies that provide site-selection services have long posed a stiff challenge to bureaus that primarily measure their worth by a traditional benchmark: the number of leads they provide to hotels or rooms they book directly. But in recent years this competition has become more intense as business for third parties has grown significantly, due largely to companies and some associations downsizing their staffs and outsourcing their meetings management.

CVBs also have been beset by the same force that has disrupted numerous other business models—namely, the proliferation of information on the Internet.

“Today, anybody can be a spokesman for a region,” notes Brian John Riggs, an assistant vice president at Association Headquarters, an association management firm in Mt. Laurel, NJ.

Indeed, today’s bureaus have to strive to distinguish themselves from a host of digitally empowered competitors. Online travel agencies like Expedia, hotel review services like TripAdvisor, travel guide publishers like Fodor’s, and indi-

LIST

PLANNERS AND OTHER INDUSTRY INSIDERS OFFER FOUR WAYS FOR BUREAUS TO STAY MEANINGFUL

Brian John Riggs of Association Headquarters says a CVB should be the curator of a destination

READER ROI



- Planners continue to benefit from site visits coordinated by CVBs
- CVBs are most useful as curators of information about destinations



OUR CVB WISH LIST

vidual travelers who post their impressions in words and pictures on myriad social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Yelp, YouTube, and Picasa all make it harder for a CVB to maintain its visibility and position as an authoritative source for its destination.

And when it comes to event management, the Internet has enabled planners to send requests for proposals (RFP) quickly and easily online, either directly through hotel websites or through meeting site-selection services like StarCite and Cvent.

So CVBs face an increasingly noisy, confused, and evolving marketplace—one in which their roles are less and less uniquely defined. What follows are four issues some planners and industry insiders say CVBs need to address in order to stay relevant to the meetings industry in this new landscape.

1 Find a New Meetings Niche

When it comes to lead generation for meetings, David Scypinski, senior vice president for site-selection company ConferenceDirect, says, "Bureaus are like lost sheep. They're trying to figure out what to do."

Steve Goodling, president and CEO of the Long Beach CVB, says bureaus do have effective strategies for serving the needs of planners. "Site-selection companies aggregate a lot of information that helps planners in the negotiation process, and that's very useful," he says. "CVBs offer a depth of knowledge that helps planners sell the destination to their attendees, and we have the relationships within the community that can resolve problems when they arise."

For his part, Michael Gehrisch, chief executive of Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI), the



"We don't care if a lead goes through us or directly to the hotel. As long as they're coming to Orlando."

Gary Sain, President and CEO, Visit Orlando

trade group for CVBs, asserts that most bureaus "have the best relationship with the hotel community they're representing. I wouldn't say they are less relevant, but rather there's more competition. It's just gotten a lot more competitive out there."

And that competition often results in a blizzard of leads that obscures the role of the CVB. Hotels often receive duplicate or even triplicate RFPs for the same piece of business—from the local bureau, third-party planners, and the hotel's national sales office.

Gary Sain, president and CEO of Visit Orlando, estimates that third-party planners send about half the meeting leads that hotels receive.

"Companies like ConferenceDirect control a huge volume of business, so it's important for us to partner with them to make sure the planner gets the best impression of our destination when going through a third party," says John Cychol, vice president of meeting sales for the Fort Worth CVB.

Sain is less concerned about his bureau generating leads and more concerned about booked business, however that is accomplished. "We believe our first job is to brand the destination," says Sain. "We don't care if a lead goes through us or directly to the hotel. As long as they're coming to Orlando, we don't care."

2 Focus On the Total Package

Whatever the debate is about how much value CVBs provide in meetings sourcing, bureaus are the undisputed kings in marketing destinations to groups holding city-wide conventions.

"CVBs are built to play that role," says Richard Scharf, CEO of Visit Denver.

WHAT PLANNERS NEED FROM A CVB

Recently the Association of Convention Operations Management hosted a webcast, "The Planners Answer Your Questions," in which three meeting planners addressed, among other topics, the top things planners need from CVBs. Here's what Heidi Longton, director of client operations and lead trainer for Meeting Industry Experts Inc.; Arvella Murff, special events conference director for Aglow International; and Yolanda Simmons, meeting services manager for the American Dietetic Association, had to say.

1 SITE VISITS

Hosting a site visit is an excellent way for a CVB to build a planner's confidence that a destination will work. "Planners need the CVB to be very visible," Simmons says. "A site visit provides CVBs the opportunity to demonstrate that they will be the connection for the hotels we are using."

2 CLIENT ADVOCACY

"Any assistance we can get in negotiating good rates will help us in the decision process," says Murff.

Longton likes to have the CVB involved throughout the event. "Representation from the CVB on the site inspection, pre-con, and during the event is a great help," she says.

3 DESTINATION INFORMATION

Longton relies on the CVB for off-site venue and attraction recommendations. "I like to offer attendees top 10 lists of things to do and restaurants. When the CVBs pick what goes on the lists, they certainly do a much better job than I do," she says.

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