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HeBSdigital

Convention and Visitors Bureaus: Ten Action Steps to Soften the Impact

Ten Action Steps To Soften the Impact | By Max Starkov

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1. Coordinate Joint Marketing Initiatives of Your Members

Convince your members that you are all in this together. The economic downturn and the terrorist attacks have created problems for everyone. All travel suppliers, providers and intermediaries from your destination, city, state, region and area are seriously affected by the current situation. Therefore developing joint marketing initiatives that offer shared costs and shared benefits among the participants makes excellent sense, especially now. These could be initiatives of as little as two-three members or as many as all hotel members. These joint marketing initiatives could take the form of industry-wide, state-wide, city-wide and destination-wide efforts and use direct mail, fax broadcasts and precision e-mail marketing, as well as print, TV, radio and other media channels.

2. Embrace eDistribution

Technology can be your best ally--your eDistribution strategy can play a major role in softening the disastrous effects of the terrorist attacks and the economic slump and will, over longer-term, define the winner destinations in these trying times. The average Internet travel buyer comes from a household that earns \$72,000 (Forrester Research) and can afford to travel even in the current situation. Over 162 million Americans are active Internet users (Nielsen/NetRatings) and 37 million of them have already purchased travel online. The CVB website is a good starting point for any eDistribution strategy, but CVBs should remember that this is only a small part of what eDistribution is all about. CVBs should turn their websites into 24/7 sales offices and make sure that all of their members' services are bookable on their websites. For example more than half of the New York City hotels are not bookable on the NY State CVB website (ILoveNY.com). Unfortunately, many CVBs, including New York and Company, do not offer online reservations for their member services.

3. Initiate Destination-Focused Promotional Campaigns

Become the initiator and coordinator of a much-needed destination-focused promotional campaign, aimed to help your members promote their special products, packages and services to the destination. One example is "America Loves New York" shared fax and e-mail broadcast campaign, initiated by Adval Communications. This campaign may use weekly broadcasts to travel agencies (rotating fax and e-mail) and consumers (e-mail) nationwide. Each broadcast "real estate" should be shared among the paid participants. Participants should be required to make commitments for a minimum of 3-6 months. This campaign could generate significant new business for your members.

4. Focus on Your Drive-In Traffic

Think regional--focus on your drive-in traffic, on your "neighborhood" markets, on those in the 200-mile radius area that could become your "feeder" markets. Encourage your members to offer reimbursements of gas receipts to their guests and offer special weekend, culinary and family packages and Web-only, inexpensive packages. Promote these packages on your CVB website and through your other marketing channels. Help your members negotiate barter deals with local newspapers in your feeder markets to promote their specials.

5. Seek Strategic Partnerships with Major Travel Players

CVBs should aim to develop joint programs, product offerings and marketing with major players with nationwide reach. Delta Airlines and NYC & Company recently joined forces in "Delta Loves NY", a six-month promotional campaign aimed to bring 10,000 visitors to New York for free. Crowne Plaza and Inter-Continental Hotels will provide accommodations. CVBs, small and large, should identify potential partners with interests in their destinations (e.g. Delta and Atlanta; Dallas and American Airlines). Joint "Safety Concerns" initiatives could be another form of partnering with airlines, transportation and travel companies.

6. Coordinate the Efforts of Your Travel Packager Members

Your members with travel packaging experience: tour operators, incoming operators and travel agency groups can play a very important role as coordinators and packagers of various destination-focused travel services. These entities know how to develop and sell packaged travel. Building a coalition that relies on unique strengths of each partner will result in the development of various destination-focused packages and negotiate special deals and cost-sharing arrangements with airlines, hotels, car rental companies, and rail and theater companies. These may include air + hotel city packages (e.g. JetBlue and Hilton, Continental and Sheraton), car + hotel (Avis and Ramada), rail +hotel (Amtrak and Hyatt), theater + hotel (Disney Broadway performance and Marriott), etc.

7. Work With Your Members' Major Corporate Clients

Coordinate the efforts of your members to lure back their important Fortune 500 corporate customers. Initiate a joint, destination-focused "Travel Stimulus Package" that includes relaxed contract terms for the next 3-6 months, free room upgrades, special perks and incentives provided by interested members, such as free/discounted breakfast and two-for-one restaurant vouchers, free limo services, free gift certificates from local stores. Develop special "Bring Your Spouse Along" programs to lure business travelers extend their stay over the weekend by offering free services, such as free second weekend room night, free restaurant and store certificates, museum and theater tickets, etc.

8. Work With Your Members' Association Clients and Meetings Planners

Coordinate the efforts of your members to convince their clients to hold their meetings as scheduled. Every convention/meeting uses services that are provided by not one, but a number of your members. Help your members create and offer a special stimulus package: free/discounted conference rooms, videoconferencing, stays for spouses, Broadway performances, restaurant and store certificates, museum and theater tickets, etc. In the worst scenario, provide incentives to the meeting organizers to postpone, not cancel their meetings.

9. Partner with Other Travel Trade and Professional Associations

Working with other travel-related organizations makes perfect sense. Their members are suffering immensely. For example, a joint nationwide campaign of ASTA, which moved its 2001 World Congress to New York City, with New York & Company and the NYS Department of Economic Development can benefit the destination and all parties involved. ARTA and Best Western teamed to offer a nationwide "Common-Sense Strategies in Uncommon Times" for travel agency owners. Partnering with the local or state hotel association, travel agency chapter, travel guide or transportation association will reward all parties involved.

10. Partner with Governmental and Private Organizations

Another direction is to partner with non-travel organizations that are equally interested in the rebound of the tourist traffic and economic activity. These are governmental (e.g. economic development offices) and private (e.g. chambers of commerce, bank associations, etc) organizations, as well as cultural and entertainment institutions (museums, opera, Broadway theaters), event vendors, and other special interest organizations, non-profits and charities.