

## Selling To the Convention, Meeting and Special Events Industry

Once you're sold on the importance of marketing your product or service to the convention, meeting and special events industry, how can you make sure they get sold on you? Let the CVB help you get to know your customer! Following these simple sales tips will set you apart as a professional who understands and is equipped to meet their unique needs. Some ideas, as noted, relate to specific business types, while others can be used by just about anyone.

1. How do you determine in advance whether a meeting planner needs your particular product or service? How do you qualify your prospects?
  - Review the CVB's Convention Calendar to see which organizations are booking business in Spokane. Look for additional information on those organizations in industry directories, such as "The Encyclopedia of Associations." Industry directories often give information such as staff size, budget, membership profile, key contacts, meeting history, dates, etc.
  - Once you've identified a meeting you're interested in doing business with, ask the CVB about the organization's specific meeting or convention needs.
  - Do an Internet search to see if there is a Web site or other online resources with information about the organization.
  - Call the association directly. They may be willing to send you information such as past meeting programs, meeting profiles, or current publications, which can help you assess their needs prior to contacting the planner.
  - Go on a fact-finding mission. If you know where an organization's previous meetings were held, try to contact a peer in that city to find out what the meeting planner looked for and eventually did in their community.
  - Network with other industry organizations. By informing them of your services and learning about theirs, you can both benefit from reciprocal referrals. CVB member events are great opportunities to network!
  - Send a survey or sample questionnaire to the planner with a return, self-addressed, stamped envelope.
  - Consider joining a professional organization such as the American Society of Association Executives or Meeting Professionals International. They will give you an opportunity to develop relationships and learn from meeting planners as well as fellow suppliers who service the convention market.
2. How can you find out if a convention has an optional tour program for attendees or a separate spouse (also becoming known as "significant other" or "accompanying person") program?

For destination management companies, special event consultants, restaurants, attractions, bus companies, souvenir companies, retail establishments:

- Ask the CVB's Convention Services Manager for information about upcoming meetings and events.
- Contact the meeting planner or a representative from the organization and ask if they are planning any tours or spouse programs. You may also request a program from a past convention to see what type of program, if any, was planned. If there is a local contact for the organization, he or she may be able to provide this information as well.
- If the planner is open to an optional tour but is still researching ideas, offer a sample itinerary and submit it for consideration. The easier you make it for your customer, the easier it is for them to choose to do business with your company!

3. When should you initially contact the meeting planner?

- With few exceptions, one year prior to the meeting offers adequate lead-time. Depending upon when you call, however, the meeting planner may be in the midst of last minute details for their current year's meeting. If that is the case, simply ask when it will be best for you to make contact again.

4. How should you contact the planner?

- It is best to make your initial contact in writing and follow up with a phone call. Cold calls are usually not welcomed.
- Advertising in one of the CVB's many quality publications is a great way to initiate contact with meeting planners. When preparing your advertisement, remember to keep their needs in mind and let your ad reflect how your product or service can meet their needs.

5. What kind of information should your promotional brochure and/or cover letter include? How can you make it effective?

- Consider the main message you wish to convey and come to your point quickly. Additional information can be listed as bullet points after you have the reader's interest. Think about how rapidly *you* scan the unsolicited mail you receive.
- Use only designs and graphics that convey a professional image. When in doubt, simple is best.
- Whenever possible, personalize your message. A letter beginning with "Dear Convention Planner" is not as effective as a personal letter.
- Include an association client list to show the planner you have worked successfully with similar groups. Emphasize your convention experience.
- Print your information in a size that can be easily filed and saved for later reference.
- Explain why your service or product is useful, unique and beneficial to the planner. Describe how it is different or better than your competition. In some cases, you must convince the planner on why they need your type of service or product before you can begin to sell your company.

Restaurants, shops, nightlife, transportation, sightseeing, museums and attractions:

- Let the CVB's convention services department know if you can offer delegates a coupon, discount or some other special offer. Meeting planners may be more willing to work with you if your offer will contribute to their delegates' positive experience at the convention.

Restaurants and off-site party facilities:

- State price ranges and realistic room capacities for both seated events and/or standing receptions.

6. What are the differences between "independent meeting planning" companies and "destination management" organizations? What is their relationship to the corporate and association meetings market?

- Because some associations only meet every two to four years, it is more cost effective for them to hire an outside, independent meeting planner when needed. Many independent meeting planners organize and plan all types and facets of meetings from program and speaker development to hotel negotiations and delegate registration. Independent planners target corporations or associations that do not have a meeting planner on staff as their prospective clients.
- A destination management company is a local company that handles arrangements for tours, meetings, transportation, and so forth. While destination management companies target the same customers as independent planners, they generally specialize in planning just one or two types of services and they do not organize an entire convention from start to finish. They may be hired by either an association planner or an independent meeting planner to organize one or more of the following facets of a meeting: site selection, shuttle bus coordination, special event production, hotel negotiations, exhibit coordination, conference promotion, printing, design and production, organization of tours, or receptions. Destination management firms often market their services to other clients such as incentive houses, and government accounts as well. Independent meeting planners and destination management firms are both big buyers of convention-related products and services.

7. Where can you find lists of independent meeting planners and destination management firms?

- Check the CVB's Membership Directory under "Convention/Meeting & Event Services."
- Look for listings in other trade publications under "Destination Management Companies" or "Association Management."
- Look up similar categories on the Internet or in the Yellow Pages.
- Check industry directories published by other organizations such as the American Society of Association Executives, and Meeting Professionals International.

8. Should you market your products and services differently to the independent meeting planner and destination management firm versus an association's meeting planner?
- Yes. Independent meeting planners and destination management companies are usually working on several meetings for different organizations simultaneously. They need to be kept aware of any products or services you may be able to offer their clients.
  - It is wise to develop an on-going relationship with independent planners and management companies that can use your products or services.
9. What are some of the sales techniques that invite potential clients to buy your products and/or services?
- First and foremost, get to know your customer and listen carefully to their specific needs. Present your products or services as the solution to their needs.
  - Be knowledgeable about your company's products and/or services.
  - Be honest about what you can offer or accommodate. If your restaurant has a private dining room that seats 40 comfortably for lunch, do not offer to book a group of 50.
  - Know your city and your fellow CVB members. If you cannot meet the needs of a potential client, please refer them to the CVB staff or another CVB partner.
  - Be timely in your initial solicitation and follow-up response to a client's request for information or proposals. Work within the deadlines requested by the client.
  - Let the planner know that you have worked with other clients whose needs and budgets were similar. If that is not the case, be honest about your experience and concerns. Your candor and professionalism will surely win their respect.
10. How can you sell your product or service to individual exhibitors at a convention with a trade show?
- To reach these exhibitors, you must go through the meeting planner since planners rarely release their exhibitor list. Sometimes, you may obtain a program from the preceding year's trade show, which should have an exhibitor list included. Ask the CVB if it has previous exhibitor lists from the conventions of greatest interest to you.
  - Network with the tradeshow decorator who has the contract for the convention. They typically send out service kits to each exhibitor with information on how to order amenities like plants, tables, chairs, signs, etc., and they can be a source of referrals for you.
11. How can you get a meeting planner to distribute your brochure to all the attendees at their convention or meeting?
- Make sure you're on the CVB's packet stuffer list. This means you have an item of special interest to convention attendees that a meeting planner can place, at no charge, in their delegates' registration materials.

- If you're a Convention Marketing Partner, ask the CVB's convention services manager to place your materials at the CVB's information booth. The CVB sets up information stations at dozens of conventions each year!

Restaurants, retail stores, souvenir companies, shops, attractions, and on-site services:

- This really depends upon the meeting planner and the meeting. Some planners like to include a variety of information and even premium items in their registration packets. For these folks, simply sending a sample of your brochure, coupon, etc. and offering to make the appropriate number available is all it takes. Others, particularly those with many attendees, prefer to limit the information in their packets to save on labor and make their packets more manageable for delegates. Planners in this camp may still be willing to include a copy of the CVB's Spokane Regional Visitors Guide in their packet. Make sure your business is appropriately represented with an advertisement in the magazine.
- You may also ask if the planner will have an information booth available at the meeting and offer to make your brochures available for the booth.

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