

PORTFOLIO

Tammi Runzler

Vice President of Convention Sales and Services, Visit Orlando

By Lisa Plummer

Many destination marketing professionals spend their well-earned vacation time unwinding with family or traveling, but not Tammi Runzler. When the senior vice president of convention sales and services at Visit Orlando isn't working, she's in Haiti, giving back to children there. She runs My Neighbor's Children, a charitable organization she helped found two years ago to help underprivileged and orphaned children around the world, including victims of the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Runzler also is an advocate for incorporating corporate social responsibility projects into meetings and events. Here's what Runzler has to say about her cause and why the meetings industry should lead the charge in CSR.

When did you become interested in CSR?

I have always understood the importance of volunteer activities and tried to incorporate them into my life. But over the past decade I started wanting to become much more engaged in a cause and put a significant amount of my personal resources toward helping those in need. Professionally, I have watched the CSR movement become more and more relevant over the years and have seen the multi-pronged benefits of groups incorporating CSR activities into their events. It elevates what we do as an industry to a much higher level.

Why has Haiti been a focus for you?

Early on in my career in Orlando, I had the benefit of working with a diverse workforce, many of whom were Haitians. They were very focused, hardworking and gracious, and took great pride in their jobs. Most of them had come to the United States to find a better life and get themselves out of deep-rooted poverty, yet they sent a large portion of their paychecks home to other family members in Haiti. I developed such respect for these people, for the difficult lives they led and how they never complained. When the earthquake hit two and a half years ago, something clicked. I knew this earthquake was going to devastate a country that already had so little to start with, so in my mind, there was no choice. I had to go and do something.

What was your experience like there?

The need was overwhelming and it was very difficult to even begin to think of how I could make any difference at all. One day, driving down a crumbling street, rubble everywhere and in terrible traffic, I noticed a three-story house that had caved in. There was this Haitian man standing on top of a big pile of rubble, patiently picking up one piece of concrete at a time and removing it. At that moment I realized every little bit helps, that whatever I choose to do will matter. That helped me put things into perspective, to focus and commit to helping.

How has your work in Haiti changed your perspective personally and professionally?

It has balanced my life and I believe I am a better employee and a better person. I have always loved my career and this industry and perhaps focused on work more than I should have. To maintain a healthy life, you have to balance body, mind and spirit, and that has not always been easy for me. But my volunteer work, which includes about eight trips a year to Haiti and other work that helps bolster our resources with MNC, has balanced things out for me. I feel happier, more energetic and more focused, whether at work or while taking care of babies in Haiti.

How has your volunteering influenced the work you do with groups?

You can only sell what you truly believe in and have personal experience with, so I am able to speak to planners much more clearly about the overall benefits of CSR. I can work with planners to identify what their attendees will connect with and benefit from most, then put together a plan for either one event or for the long-term.

Why should planners consider including CSR events in their programming?

Benefits, benefits, benefits—for the organization, those on the receiving end and the people who actually do the CSR activity. It allows the attendees to have a more positive, well-rounded meeting experience and be more

engaged at the conference. They can stop, interact with others in a more human way, and refresh their minds, bodies and spirits by doing something that is good and helpful to others or the environment.

What steps should planners take when choosing a CSR program?

They should consider their existing culture and what their attendees or employees will emotionally connect with. Planners also need to pay attention to logistical details, such as if attendees are limited in some of their activities and can physically perform what is required of them. Also, make sure to market your CSR activity well in advance so attendees know the impact they will make [and] who will benefit, and will get excited about participating.

How does CSR become an event staple rather than a periodic feel-good activity?

CSR really needs to be integrated as a non-negotiable part of each and every organization's culture. Once an organization understands the spider web of benefits, including to its bottom line and attendee or employee satisfaction, it needs to become part of their business plans. It also needs to be part of the budget—which can be scary—but the ROI will always outweigh the investment. I challenge our own industry leaders and organizations to take the lead by looking at how our legacy can include CSR and incorporate those elements into the overall worth of our meetings and conventions business.

Where do you see the future of CSR?

It's a movement, but it must evolve. We must talk about how we take what we are doing as individual organizations, how we measure our impact both as individuals and as an industry, and grow our efforts. I truly believe we need to incorporate CSR as a year-round effort. It's fun, impactful and it enhances the culture of each and every organization that adopts it. I am convinced the meeting and hospitality industries can and should be the industries known as the leaders in CSR. We have all of the resources we need to make it happen. ■

