In the Game Together

As the economy makes marketing more complicated, destinations are working together in creative ways to sell themselves as packages.

By Lisa Plummer -- Tradeshow Week, 3/29/2010

In an economy that has convention and visitors bureaus competing harder than ever for group business while, at the same time, working with tighter marketing budgets, some cities are realizing it makes good sense to align their efforts.

As a result, several second- and third-tier destinations have formed multicity marketing partnerships in recent years to expand their sales outreach, promote themselves, share sales leads and go after multicity group bookings.

These collaborations not only are allowing cities to stretch marketing dollars, generate more business and increase their economic impact, but also share the cost of participating in industry events and funding programs they couldn't afford on their own. And, according to CVB officials in some of these cities, teaming up is paying off.

Of course, before a destination is able to benefit from such a group effort, finding the right partnership is crucial. Many second-tier destinations have found that selecting similar-sized cities in different geographic regions of the country with compatible features, including target markets, convention center size, hotel room inventory, air access and price centers, is a strategy that works.

The three-year partnership between Baltimore and Fort Worth, Texas, that added Salt Lake City earlier this year, is an example of an East Coast-Midwest-West Coast package, according to David DuBois, president and CEO of the Fort Worth Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"Baltimore, Forth Worth and Salt Lake City are similar cities in terms of their convention package and what they can offer groups," DuBois said. "However, each city is unique enough on its own that we are not considered competition for one another. By adding Salt Lake City, we are rounding out a three-city partnership that appeals to groups on a geographic rotation."

According to Tom Noonan, president and CEO of Visit Baltimore, the successful partnership is based on a national hotel model that incentivizes groups to sign multiyear contracts at similar properties located around the country. By joining forces and co-selling each destination, the three sales teams are able to be more competitive and offer possible discounts to groups who book the cities in multiyear deals, Noonan said. If one of the destinations isn't a good fit for a group, salespeople are able to push the other two, he added.

“A lot of times we're working that same piece of business together, so there are times when two or three cities are partnering together for a piece of business in different years, and there are times we're walking in and getting leads for each other, even if we're not getting leads for ourselves,” Noonan said. “It's enlarged the size of our sales team, we're helping each other out and we're not competing with each other. That's the beauty of it.”

As a result of the partnership, Baltimore and Salt Lake recently booked the **Society of American Gastrointestinal and Endoscopic Surgeons' World Congress of Endoscopic Surgery** for 2013 and 2014, respectively, with Fort Worth instrumental in helping Baltimore land the inaugural **Americas Incentive, Business Travel and Meetings Exhibition**, scheduled June 21-23, 2011, at the Baltimore Convention Center.

Making its marketing dollars go further was one of the main reasons Hartford, Conn., formed an alliance three years ago with Madison, Wis., and Spokane, Wash., according to Scott Phelps, president and CEO of the Greater Hartford Convention & Visitors Bureau. The successful partnership has helped Hartford receive a host of financial benefits, including approximately $5 million in economic impact of either realized or future business potential, Phelps said.

“We're really pleased with the bookings and the leads we've generated through it,” he added. “We estimate we've saved over $250,000 in marketing, and, in doing so, have expanded our recognition. It's been a real win-win-win for all three cities.”

Thanks to pooled resources, the cities are able to share advertising and attend industry tradeshows and conduct sales missions together, Phelps said. Besides saving marketing dollars, the partnership's primary objective is to book rotating groups into a multicity, multiple-year package, which offers planners a $20,000 incentive if they book two of the three cities and $30,000 for booking all three, he added.

“The only criteria is that the group has to use at least two hotels, numbering at least 300 room nights put together and rent the city's convention center,” Phelps said. “Planners can use those dollars for whatever they see fit.”

Unlike partnerships that involve cities located in separate parts of the country, the eastern waterfront cities of Newport, R.I., and Annapolis, Md., are not only situated in the same region, but also share a strong sailing and nautical focus. However, according to Connie Del Signore, president and CEO of the Annapolis and Anne Arundel County Conference & Visitors Bureau, the one-year-old alliance has allowed the destinations to work together, rather than compete for business.

"Many times planners have clients who prefer certain similar-type destinations, so we think we have enough to show both the sameness and the distinction of the two cities," Del Signore said. "Our hope is that meeting planners see an advantage of booking both places and having a couple of years worth of meetings already determined."

Joining forces also has allowed the cities to share the expense of additional marketing efforts, including promotional events within their region, Del Signore said. In its first joint effort, the cities will co-host two invitation-only luncheons for more than 100 meeting planners in Washington, D.C., and Alexandria, Va., at the end of March, she added.

According to Tim Walsh, vice president of sales at the Newport and Bristol County Convention & Visitors Bureau, multicity partnerships are not only a benefit to the cities themselves, but also to meeting planners, who can enjoy the convenience of booking several meetings in advance while taking advantage of customized incentives.

"Everyone in the meetings industry is under pressure to do more with less," Walsh said. "Pooling our resources allows us to maintain a high level of marketing and programming, while saving money, and saving meeting planners time."

Other successful multicity partnerships include a six-year alliance between Portland, Ore., Milwaukee and Pittsburgh, and the "Capital Cities Collection," a two-year partnership between Providence, R.I.; St. Paul, Minn.; Raleigh, N.C.; and Baton Rouge, La.

As cities are forced to do more with less, one might wonder if these kinds of multicity marketing partnerships could begin to mushroom. Sharing resources makes good business sense, according to Dan Fenton, chairman of Destination Marketing Assn. Intl. and CEO of Team San Jose, a CVB that has had a five-year sales partnership with Virginia Beach, Va.

"Joint marketing partnerships are great for the industry and for clients," Fenton said.

“During challenging economic times, more cities should explore this as a way of offering more meeting options and value for planners, while enabling DMOs to pool resources so they can create a higher profile.”