

The business of soft tourism

It's no surprise that the Canadian tourism industry generates a great deal of employment. In fact, in 2001 the sector created 561,000 jobs and reported a GDP of \$22.4 billion, making tourism responsible for 2.3% of the total national economy. Much of those numbers can be attributed to conventions, conferences, and the business clientele who travel to attend them. And according to Charlotte Comrie, the general manager of Meetings P.E.I., a not-for-profit, subscriber-based organization in Charlottetown, when there's a convention in the city, it's a great opportunity to extend the tourist season.

While the physical and cultural beauty of Atlantic Canadian communities attract tourists throughout the year, meetings and conventions also have a tremendous impact on the areas hosting them. For example, The International Association of Convention and Visitors Bureau reports that delegates spend an average of \$814 per day over an average three-and-a-half-day stay, which includes accommodations and local transportation such as taxis and buses. Multiply that figure by 1,000 delegates over the course of a few days, and that translates into big revenues.

There's a lot of room for small- and medium-size businesses to tap into this market. Not only do convention participants need a place to stay or hold a meeting or a post-conference debriefing, but they also need a variety of activities for spouses and guests, entertainment, souvenirs, delegate kits, and gifts for conference speakers that will remind them of their host community. There are some other less obvious things businesses can do to ensure they get the maximum benefit from hosting a convention. "When you get a large convention coming in, businesses should staff up," says Comrie. "That way you can still service the influx of business, and local patrons are not annoyed." Sunday shopping is also an advantage for those who stay over the weekend in places such as Moncton, N.B.

But how do you get access to this market? One route is to approach organizations such as Meetings P.E.I. and Destination

Halifax, which have experience servicing about 1,500 attendants. "We have 150 members already, and they include restaurants, art-framing companies, hotels, audiovisual-service companies, destination-management-service companies, and escorted touring programs," says Pat Lyall, the CEO of Destination Halifax.

Groups such as these will match your product or service with a specific convention's needs. Their fees vary depending on the size of your company, the type of service you provide, your location, and how many people you can accommodate. For example, a restaurant or club with a seating capacity of up to 50 could cost \$300, while 200 or more seats will run you about \$600. If you use these kinds of organizations, you don't have to do the legwork, although you should investigate what kinds of things the groups offer their members. "Talk to the staff," says Comrie. "Let them know what you're looking for and find out what services they provide. That way you'll understand what to expect."

You can also go directly to the market by getting to know the local representatives of national companies and associations in your area. According to Judith Cabrita, the managing director of the Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia (TIANS), you should "invite them to dinner and show them your property, taste your food, and do a little PR. Find out who looks after meetings and do a little direct mail to that person." If you haven't yet become a member of your local tourism association, it is a solid business practice to consider. It's also a good idea to subscribe to a few reputable convention-planning magazines, and the Canadian Tourism Commission also offers resources for meeting planners.

All businesses, regardless of size, can profit from a convention; the key is to work together with various community members to find ways to increase the impact while maintaining enough friendly hospitality to entice the clients to come back next year when vacation time rolls around. ACJ

by Carol Johnstone

