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CVBs Are the Key to Your Success

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CVBs Can Be the Key to Your Event's Success

Nobody knows a destination better than the local CVB or DMO. So it only makes sense that you would partner with one to leverage its relationships with suppliers and local players to maximize your event's success.

BY SUE SVEUM

They may not give out keys to the city, but convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) or destination management organizations (DMOs) definitely hold many of the keys to making your meeting a success. Think of them as wedding planners for organizations.

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CVBs give event planners — who like brides think they can do it all themselves, until they realize they can't — somewhere to turn. CVBs are not only there to help, but unlike a wedding planner, their services are also totally free.

CVBS ARE PREPARED TO HELP

If you've ever worked with a CVB on an event, you already know how valuable they can be. You might think they're one of the best kept secrets out there. But the truth is that CVBs don't want to be a secret. It's their job — and their passion — to welcome you to their city and make your event the best it can be.

"A lot of people don't know what we do," says Dana Maugans, director of sales at the Springfield Missouri Convention & Visitors Bureau. "But we can help in a lot of ways. We know the area, and we know what's worked here and what hasn't." And that's only the tip of the iceberg.

CVB services range from assistance with event pre-planning, to helping with grants and donations, to keeping event planners informed and up-to-date about everything from weather to local COVID-19 case rates, mandates and restrictions. And of course, they can also provide help at the actual event.

But don't worry that they're going to take over, says Alison Hutchinson, group sales manager with the Fox Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau in Appleton, Wis. Their purpose is simply to help out with whatever you need. "But since we know our area, we can often arrange to get you a perk or discount you might not know about — and wouldn't normally get on your own," she says. And who wouldn't want that?

Just ask Holstein Association USA President Corey Geiger, who worked with Hutchinson and the Fox Cities CVB on the 2019 National Holstein Convention. The event drew a robust attendance from 38 states and 19 countries, filling 400 local hotel rooms. "My wife and I were

the co-chairs," he explains, adding that while neither are professional meeting planners, they're both very organized. "We had successfully planned our own 600-person wedding by ourselves, but couldn't have done all this without the CVB. They're familiar with the location and the people — and how to make things happen."

REACH OUT EARLY IN THE PROCESS

"It all starts with preplanning and promotion — sometimes as early as four or five years in advance, depending on the size of the event," explains Hutchinson. "Many of our groups return here year after year, but we're always happy to educate new people."

Geiger says CVB help is invaluable — especially for new event planners or ones going into a new area. "When planning a convention, you need to rely on people to get things done," he says, "and the CVB was our lifeline."

Hutchinson says the CVB starts by making contact with hotels and then arranging for in-person or virtual site visits with those that fit the size and location needs for your event. "We act as a one-stop shop — as mediators between you and the hotels and other local vendors," she explains. "We also serve as your meeting concierge — before, during and even after the event."

CVBS OFFER NEW IDEAS AND IDENTIFY TRENDS

Hutchinson says in recent years the trend has moved away from organized excursions to local tourist attractions — in favor of community service projects. "It's a great bonding activity for the attendees," she says, "while giving back to the community." A win-win for everyone.

One popular activity is helping out at Appleton's non-profit Riverview Gardens, which relies on volunteers. Another option that's been well-received is donating blood. "We've brought in a portable donation van for some events," Hutchinson explains. "It doesn't take up extra space, you can do it in your

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—ALISON HUTCHINSON, GROUP SALES MANAGER, FOX CITIES CVB

free time, and you don't have to leave the premises or worry about weather."

But a CVB's role is not all about location and activities. They can also be very instrumental behind the scenes in helping event planners find the funds to make their convention a reality.

"Besides in-kind donations from local businesses and TV coverage for the event, they helped us apply for a substantial grant from the Wisconsin Department of Tourism," recalls Geiger. "We applied four years in advance and they took over the facilitation for us." The result? The National Holstein Convention was awarded a \$16,320 grant.

But don't worry — the CVB is definitely not all work and no play. Their fun side was evident in the airport welcome they planned for the National Holstein Convention attendees. They decorated with a large banner, and black and white balloons — and a cow mascot greeted incoming visitors. "You definitely knew there was a cow convention in town," laughs Geiger.

HELPING YOU NAVIGATE LOCAL REGULATIONS DURING COVID-19

There was a slightly different look to the National Street Rod Association's recent Mid-America Street Rod Nationals in Springfield, Mo., in October 2020. But the Springfield CVB was equally present — and every bit as helpful.

In addition to the fact that it featured cars rather than cows, the street rod show — with more than 1,300 attendees — was originally planned for Memorial Day, but had to be postponed until October due to the pandemic.

"We really relied on the CVB to keep in contact with us regarding COVID," says Mike Adams, special events director for the National Street Rod Association. "Luckily our event was mostly outside." Thanks to the CVB, event planners were able to plan ahead to accommodate mask-wearing, social distancing and other restrictions.

Maugans says the Springfield CVB has helped other groups hold events during these unpredictable times as well. "Some

go with a hybrid component, holding a smaller conference in person, with parts of it live-streaming. Or as in the case of the National Street Rod Association, they'll hold events outdoors when they can," she says. "Either way, we keep planners informed about the health protocols in this area and help them find ways to make it work."

While pandemic planning became an integral part of the job this year, CVBs still help event planners with plenty of other routine elements, such as bid proposals, press releases, financial incentives, sponsorships — or simply making restaurant suggestions.

"We even have a Meeting Planners Toolkit on our website," says Maugans. (You can find it at www.springfieldmo.org/meeting-planners-toolkit.)

CVBS CAN CONNECT YOU WITH LOCAL VOLUNTEERS

Many CVBs provide help on the day of the event as well — again depending on what event planners want or need. "Mostly, we depend on volunteers to help out at the site," explains Maugans. "Sometimes they'll stuff gift bags or work registration, but most often it's their job to man the information table." She says a lot of volunteers are seniors who are familiar with the area's history and attractions — and love to talk about it.

"That was the hardest part this time around," says Adams. "A lot of the volunteers were seniors who had been helping with our event for 20 years — they were devastated they couldn't be there this year because of the pandemic."

Between staff and volunteers, CVBs are an invaluable resource. "We're the local experts, the local storytellers," explains Maugans. And whether in times of sickness or in health, in past events or future ones, it's clear they know what they're doing — and love what they do. *M*

Sue Sveum is a freelance writer based in the Madison, Wis. area.



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—MIKE ADAMS, SPECIAL EVENTS DIRECTOR, NATIONAL STREET ROD ASSOCIATION