

Destination management firms adjust to new clients

by Thomas Leggett
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Fewer corporate conventions in New Orleans are changing the staffing, productivity and public relations for destination management companies.

Destination management companies help groups and convention planners with lodging, transportation, entertainment, staffing and other planning needs.

"Because of the overwhelming job of planning events, national conventions usually employ a localized third party to assist with booking," said Shelley Rote of Signature Events. "The success of our industry is directly related to convention business."

Rote said destination management companies were cut from 14 pre-Katrina to seven today.

Those who remain face staffing problems similar to many other local businesses. "We lost a lot of staff after Katrina, people who relocated and didn't come back," said Mary Vega of the Vega Group. "We hired almost an entirely new staff."

Surviving destination management companies were also forced to relocate convention clients to other cities in order to maintain business. For some, relocation strategies to fill gaps in local business allowed them to keep employees.

"The National School Board Association was scheduled to meet in New Orleans in March of this year," said Diane Lyons, owner of Accent on Arrangements. "We were able to relocate them to Chicago and still handle their opening reception, event speakers and transportation."

National corporation employees are beginning to familiarize themselves with post-Katrina New Orleans through community giveback programs called "voluntourism" by Lyons. She defines "voluntourism" as employees from outside New Orleans traveling to the Gulf Coast for volunteer rebuilding work and fun.

"Companies from outside New Orleans will come here, do board meetings, volunteer to rebuild homes, and then hold a crawfish boil or boat cruise for their employees," said Lyons.

Credit Suisse, a global investment banking firm based in New York, held a crawfish boil for its employees May 21 at Audubon Park. International executives from the Buy-Side Insights Group, a division of Credit Suisse, were in town for a board meeting. They took a destruction tour and volunteered to rebuild homes for a day in New Orleans.

Lyons said her company has put on 28 corporate events since Hurricane Katrina, an average of three a month, with about half in Louisiana. Before Katrina, it handled about five events a month.

Accent, headquartered in New Orleans, provides programs for companies throughout the United States.



Diane Lyons, owner of Accent on Arrangements, visits with Michelle Visel, deputy director of conference services for the American Library Association. The ALA will bring about 22,000 attendees to its convention in New Orleans June 22.

Canada and the Caribbean.

“Because of our national presence, we were working in New York five days after Katrina,” said Lyons. “For this reason we were able to hire five new employees and did not have to lay off anyone.”

Other companies also relocated clients and staff to keep business going.

“As part of an international group called Global Event Partners, we were able to take our clients booked between September and March and offer them an alternative city for their event,” said Bonnie Boyd, owner of Bonnie Boyd & Co.

Boyd said more corporations are sending executives for community-specific giveback programs.

Boyd coordinated meetings for Phillip Morris and AstraZeneca employees who rebuilt playgrounds and facilities at several charter schools and university clinics.

“In January, we worked with Motorola to rebuild a children’s playground in Bay St. Louis, (Miss.) and the company rewarded their employees’ work with a crawfish boil and a live Cajun band,” she said.

Boyd’s company put on more than 200 events in 2005. Post-Katrina, the company has performed 38 events, including the first corporate gathering in New Orleans Oct. 14 when Fort Worth, Texas-based Alcon Pharmaceuticals brought 35 doctors and medical executives together at the Royal Sonesta Hotel. For dinner, Chef Paul Prudhomme opened K-Paul’s Louisiana Kitchen restaurant for the first time in six weeks. The Royal Sonesta Hotel accommodated Alcon executives overnight in suites next to those occupied by local and Federal Emergency Management Agency officials.

Rote said destination management companies are also dealing with labor problems.

“Many of our musicians who provide entertainment for our clients have moved away,” she said. “Transportation companies are struggling to find drivers and equipment, and many restaurants are still not open or are offering limited menus.”

Company owners say destination management will depend on how successful public relations strategies are in assuring convention planners New Orleans remains a viable meeting destination.

“Many people outside New Orleans think we’re still under water,” Boyd said. “We need to show the rest of the world that the core of what the city has to offer is still alive and that we can make it happen.”

The success of the first major post-Katrina convention, the annual American Library Association conference expected to bring as many as 22,000 convention attendees to the city June 25, will go a long way in convincing the public the Crescent City is OK.

“For the sake of public relations and to attract conventions back to the city, we’re flying a number of meeting planners to the city during the American Library Association conference to show that New Orleans can handle it,” Rote said. “We call this a familiarization trip.”•