

Keep it simple when marketing meetings

25 April 2013 7:25 AM
By Patrick Mayock
Editor-in-Chief
patrick@hotelnewsnow.com

Story Highlights

Sales directors are creating simple, ready-made packages to make the booking process as easy as possible for meetings planners.

Planners are clamoring for something different, even if they're not quite sure what that "something different" might be.

Value is still king in the new normal.



The Castle Hotel & Spa offers ready-made packages to draw in more corporate events.

REPORT FROM THE U.S.—When Rosette Press set out to create the Corporate Meetings Package at the Whiteface Lodge in Lake Placid, New York, her goals were simple: Generate buzz, increase bookings and make the process as easy as possible for meetings planners.

Instead of forcing planners to build each event in a piecemeal fashion, Press included an inclusive bundle that featured the items that most often appeared on a request for proposal.

Fees for function spaces? Gone. Breakfast and Wi-Fi? Included. Complimentary valet parking? Done.

"That's basically what most of the planners are looking for," Press, the director of sales at Whiteface Lodge, said. "It was really geared for ease of planning ... just trying to make it as seamless as possible. This is a way to service all the planners, be it third party or in-house, and making their lives easier for them."

While the simplistic approach mirrors the 94-suite Whiteface Lodge's philosophy of personal service, it has become a recurring theme for hotel sales directors everywhere who find themselves struggling to lure back the meetings business that all but disappeared during the recession.

"One of the general things that we've learned is not to overcomplicate things with the meeting planner community," said Barry Goldstein, chief revenue officer at Dolce Hotels and Resorts.

Marriott International is taking a decidedly high-tech approach to the task, said Peggy Roe, VP of global operation services. The global chain is piloting its Red Coat Direct service at two hotels in the United States, with a tiered rollout throughout the rest of the portfolio planned through 2014.

The service, which alludes to the red blazers worn by Marriott's associates, provides an intuitive digital platform through which planners can directly communicate with staff. Three days before the event takes place, the planner receives a unique URL that is accessible on any device, which can be used to monitor the event, request changes or supplies and otherwise stay in constant contact with associates.

In the past, Roe explained, a meeting planner who wanted more coffee during a networking break would have to track down an associate who had to track down a food-and-beverage director who would send a request of execution to his staff. With Red Coat Direct, the request is made instantaneously from the planner's smartphone, saving time and frustration.

"We're trying to make it easier for you to make requests and connect with us without having to leave your meeting," Roe said.

What's more, Red Coat Direct stores each request and metric for up to 120

days, allowing both the meeting planner and the hotel staff to better plan events in the future.

Something new

Pleasing planners also means offering new packages and programming options, sources said.

"What we're hearing from planners is, 'We want something different,'" Goldstein said. "Attendees want a different type of event ... They're willing to spend the money, but they want it to be impactful. They want it to tie to their company values that are becoming more important."

The difficult part, he said, is trying to determine what exactly that "something different" is.

"Of course, it's fun when you hit it right, but sometimes you're just not sure what it means," Goldstein said.

His team at [Dolce](#) applied some out-of-the-box thinking to develop a ready-made community-service platform that allows event attendees to spend a day or afternoon donating time and energy to a worthy cause in the area. "It's really appealed to those communities where in their culture that's important to them, to give back. ... A lot of times they don't know where to reach out," Goldstein said.

At Dolce's Silverado resort, for example, planners can arrange for attendees to spend an afternoon building children's bicycles through an organization called Build a Bike, he said. This and similar opportunities have proven incredibly successful throughout Dolce's portfolio.

At the 98-room Aspen Meadows Resort, Doug Crawford, director of sales, saw a natural tie-in with the hotel's owners, The Aspen Institute, which runs organization seminars and training workshops in Washington, D.C. While planners might not have the time or resources to attach a multiday program onto an existing meeting at the Aspen hotel in Colorado, perhaps there was room for a concentrated, one-day teambuilding workshop.

Crawford began marketing the program a few months ago and executed it successfully for the first time earlier this month.

Value, value, value

While the "something different" might change, planners are always looking for value, sources said.

"Meeting planners are trying to get as much value as possible out of their destination. Everybody's watching their bottom line more closely, and that is not changing in terms of loosening back up," said Joseph Bates, VP of research for the Global Business Travel Association.

"People really have learned a lesson from those years of excess," he added. "And they're looking for the entire package. What can they get for the dollars they're spending? Maybe they can get free Internet access. Maybe they can get a free snack ... They're looking for concessions."

Gilbert Baeriswil, GM of the 31-room Castle Hotel & Spa in Tarrytown, New York, said the property offers a "full gamut of packages" to satisfy that need for value through the marketing of board meetings and other small gatherings.

"There's always a demand for value. More and more we also see, especially the high-end planners want to have the whole experience, the whole package," he said. "Sometimes they bring their spouses. You have to have alternative activities for the members and their spouses"

Finding the best talent

Often a hotel's best asset is the sales director or GM responsible for marketing and booking the group business in the first place, said David Brudney, a sales consultant and [HotelNewsNow.com](#) columnist.

The approach might vary based on brand affiliation, size and location, but hiring a great sales manager is crucial, he said via email.

"Hire a sales manager with solid group booking experience already well-connected within the (meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions community)," Brudney said.

And second, "align the hotel with one or two of the very best third parties for representation, lead generation and delivery capability of definite group business."