

Faithful Followings

WHEN EVERYTHING IS CHANGING...

- RELIGIOUS MEETING PLANNERS ADAPT.
- KNOWING GROUPS AND THE MARKETPLACE.
- ENDURING CHALLENGES AND TRENDS.

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Times, they are a'changin'. While the big three staples of meeting and event planning - dates, rates and space - still rule, the ever-evolving environment of today has added into the mix a host of new considerations and challenges for some faith-based meeting planners.

Transporting the Masses

Commanding headlines for much of the year, the downward spiral of the airline industry has affected some religious groups. Dallas Teague Snider, CMP, founder, speaker and trainer with [Make Your Best Impression](#), plans meetings and events for religious groups across the country as a national account director and recruitment manager for ConferenceDirect®. One group recently returned from the Aldersgate Renewal Ministries Annual Meeting in Columbus, OH. When Columbus-based discount carrier Skybus Airlines went out of business earlier this year, Snider's group was out of luck when it came to the rates they had expected.

"That affected us, because we really thought we were going to be able to get some discounted airfares for staff and so forth," Snider says.

Stevie Friedman is the director of conference and event planning for Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, an international organization with a presence on more than 500 campuses. She says her attendees have not yet felt the pricing pressures, but she sees issues on the horizon for a few of her larger upcoming conferences.

"Our attendees are going to be affected by baggage costs, which I'm not even sure they're aware of yet," she says. "I'm sure we'll hear about that after the conferences."

Her organization, however, has been impacted by air transportation costs. In response to rising fuel prices, many airlines increased their fares within the last year. The new price tags on travel are taking a toll on some.

"It happens that, for these conferences, we pay for the attendees to fly in," Friedman says. "So it's certainly affecting our budget, in a very meaningful way."

Across the board, it's safe to say gas prices are affecting everyone. While Snider says her groups have only recently begun to feel the squeeze, the subject is definitely on the radar. "If you bring a busload of people, it's less expensive to split the cost between the people taking the bus than it is to fly," she says. "We're feeling some challenge, but we're just tapping into that now."

Attendance Achievers

As travel from Point A to Point B continues to become more difficult, ensuring attendance at meetings and events might be a challenge for some planners.

In circumstances in which participants must often pay their own way, it is important to make attending as easy as possible. Perhaps more than ever, religious meeting planners are tasked with finding reasonable rates and convenient dates.

“There’s not a mandate for people to attend,” Snider explains. “You’re looking at families a lot of times, people who are on a budget. You also have to look at dates that don’t conflict with school. These are factors that can determine your attendance and make a big impact on the success of a conference.”

For Friedman’s groups, avoiding Jewish holidays and other religions’ observed dates is an essential element when it comes to scheduling conferences.

“Because not all of our participants are Jewish, we’re trying to be sensitive to everybody,” she says.

Careful site selection and a central location can aid in encouraging attendance to some meetings and events.

“If you’re looking at a national conference, the Midwest is often times a midpoint,” Snider says. “Where are your constituents coming from? What is the interstate accessibility, and what is the distance drive for the people who are coming to your meeting?”

“We’ve met in Chicago, in St. Louis,” Friedman says. “As long as we’re able to get kosher food - which, in many cases, we are - it’s great in the Midwest. It’s good PR for us, because people on the West Coast feel like we’re coming in their direction.”

Business in Hand

Many planners have been told, *Know your group*. However, in the case of some religious meetings, knowing your group does not necessarily mean knowing what to expect.

“Often times, religious groups are very space intensive,” Snider says. “That number, though, is not ever guaranteed. Histories can fluctuate from year to year. There are more variables than an association or a corporate meeting.”

Current market conditions have caused some faith-based meeting planners to get a little creative when looking at dates and rates. In 2008, one of Snider’s groups held a meeting over July 4th to take advantage of better rates.

“We’re still in a seller’s market,” she says. “Even though some people seem to think we’re in a recession, the rates are not going down.”

Recession talk, Snider believes, might be deceiving to some.

“Unfortunately, a lot of faith-based planners think, *Oh, well, this means we can get everything*,” she says.

“No, you really still need to know your business. When they go to a hotel, they really need to understand what they bring to the table. A lot of times, with the faith-based planner, they love G-d, they’re out there to do the work, but they don’t really have that business side of it. Everyone has a yield management department, and they want value rate.”

While the purpose of the hotel sales department is to sell the hotel, for some groups, it seems the planner must sell the meeting to the sales representative. In order to prove the

value of a group's business, a history of the meeting or event can make a world of difference.

"The planner [should know] as much information as they can: how much they spend in food and beverage, ancillary revenue, cash sales - all of those types of things help to bring around the overall impact to the hotel and to the city," Snider says.

The Entire Package

In return, faith-based meeting planners also need to know what the hotel and the city can offer their groups. Important factors for Snider's groups include low-cost air carriers, complimentary meeting space, discounted audiovisual, companion and kids' activities, and discounts or coupons through the local CVB.

"We look at the rates," she says. "We look at the entire package. What's the city going to offer us, what incentives are there, what are the rates, what are those factors? It doesn't give me any insight to have tremendous proposals, because what I really need to know are those factors."

This "snapshot," as Snider calls it, allows her to decide if a city can meet her group's basic requirements long before a site inspection.

"We look to see if it will work," she says. "We have to be careful not to abuse the site inspection process when we don't have the opportunity to ever use a city. We can't take advantage of just going, because that's not presenting those faithful characteristics that we should be known for."

For Friedman, important factors include "helpful, courteous, knowledgeable staff, good lighting, good pricing" and the #1 dealmaker or breaker: a property's ability to work with her groups' diets.

"Because our events need to be kosher, finding a hotel that's willing to give away either their whole kitchen or part of the kitchen to be kosher for us [is necessary]," she says. "It's [about] finding timing that works for a hotel and finding a hotel that's willing to be flexible in that way."

Sustainable Meetings

One major trend affecting the meetings industry in recent years fits right into the philosophy of many faith-based organizations: social responsibility. Efforts toward more environmentally friendly and philanthropic events are nothing new for many religious groups.

"Faith-based organizations have always focused on the socially responsible," Snider says. "These are the people who are going to lean toward that more, just because of the nature of what they are already doing."

Friedman agrees, saying her groups have long implemented practices such as donating leftover food and participating in linen programs. However, with recent years' increase in awareness of similar measures, her attendees now take greater interest in the organization's efforts.

"We've been doing it 'behind the scenes' because it's the right thing to do," she says, "but now our attendees want to hear about it. So we've become more forthcoming in public

about what we've been doing all along, and [we are] always looking for hotels that are making strides in being more green.”

Good Stewards

Within each planning segment, much is different while much remains the same. Everyone, it seems, is dealing with additional challenges these days. As the world turns, religious meeting planners continue to adjust and adapt to a changing industry and profession, always while keeping their participants' best interests at heart.

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