10 CITIES ON THE RISE

CAN-DO CVBs
Today's bureaus have become full-fledged planning partners

ATTRITION: THE NEW MATH

6 MUST-HAVE APPS

Katy Willis, director of convention services for Visit Seattle, helped create a music festival to coincide with a conference.
Can sightseeing be educational? That question was posed by planners of the Pure Michigan Governor’s Conference on Tourism, hosted by the Michigan Lodging & Tourism Association in March 2017. They wanted attendees to explore the city while also learning from the destination’s example.

With the aid of Visit Detroit, the city’s convention and visitors bureau, the team created “edutours,” which leveraged the city’s local business expertise and unique resources in experiential ways. Attendees visited Ponyride, an incubator for creative entrepreneurs in the city’s Corktown, and toured the $650 million development growing around the new Little Caesars Arena, where they spoke with Little Caesars’ customer-service training professionals about how to bring a consistent high level of service to their own customers.

“Detroit is changing, and we want to take groups into the community to give them this broader picture,” says Harriet Carter, director of membership and services for the bureau. “We want to help change the format of a conference in a way that complements the event.”

The Governor’s Conference was a successful test case, and Visit Detroit now offers such customized local programming for other groups. A manufactur-
COVER STORY

Visit Detroit has developed a range of educational tours that give groups a deeper sense of the city and its cultural resources.

Experts and help incorporate local expertise into event programming. "They consider their unique place in the market based on local knowledge and the creative economy — because that’s where it’s all moving to," Talley says.

Getting a green boost
Sustainability is a growing priority for many planners, but for the Unitarian Universalist Association, it’s a central mission for all events, most notably for its annual general assembly, held last year in Kansas City, Mo.

“They have one of the most rigorous sustainability programs of any convention group I’ve ever worked with,” says Esther Walker-Young, senior services manager for Visit KC. She learned about the group’s green priorities when the UUA declared its goal to divert 30 percent of the convention’s waste as possible.

The Kansas City Convention Center, as well as the Kansas City Marriott Downtown and other conference hotels that housed the 3,500 attendees, already had green programs in place. But getting a comprehensive picture of the event’s environmental impact required creating a hub between the various venues and the working parts of the program.

That’s where Visit KC offered a hand.

Walker-Young and bureau representatives accompanied UUA representatives on planning trips to area recycling facilities such as WC America, Missouri Organics Composting and Ripple Glass. They also con-
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The Association of Writers & Writing Programs' annual conference, held at the Oregon Convention Center, got help from Travel Portland.

nected planners with the sustainability organization Bridging the Gap, which helped develop an overall strategy for the conference's waste management.

"From the outset, Walker-Young really took the time to understand UUA's unique event vision, and then was able to rally tremendous support, enthusiasm and resources from the local community, venue and hotels," says Eric Wallinger, director of sustainability for MeetGreen, a third-party planning firm that specializes in green meetings and has worked with the UUA since 2005. "Having this level of advocacy and buy-in from Esther and her destination team was a true difference-maker for the event's sustainability."

Prior to the conclave, the convention center's average waste diversion rate was 12 percent — about one-third of the national average of 34.7 percent, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. "Our immediate goal for this particular conference was to beat the national average," says Walker-Young.

A green ethic pervaded every element of the conference. Not only did the UUA recycle bottles, cans and food waste, but they measured and took aggressive steps to reduce the metric tons of all types of waste that went to the landfill. The result, thanks in large part to Visit KC's efforts to connect the dots: "After all was said and done, we diverted 92 percent of the Unitarian Universalist Association event's waste," says a proud Walker-Young.

Assessing a group's impact
Negotiating for next year's meeting is easier when armed with solid economic-impact numbers from this year's event. But getting those numbers can be a challenge. CVBs can help, notes David Kliman, owner of hospitality consultancy the Kliman Group. Visit Salt Lake is one bureau that has mastered the task.

"Say an association group goes to the city and blocks 750 or 1,000 rooms, but they're going to have 3,000 people at the meeting," Kliman posits. "Salt Lake City doesn't report out on the typical room-night pickup like many destinations do. They report the economic impact of all 3,000 people, because they know those 3,000 have registered and walked into the meeting space."

The Visit Seattle conventions services team similarly uses its community relationships to provide planners with detailed data about the size and scope of their meetings — not just in terms of room nights, but the overall impact of the group's activities. For example, the bureau recently assessed the impact of the annual meeting of the International Trademark Association, including its 285 affiliated events, such as dinners and networking activities.

"We helped facilitate the approval process for these affiliated events as well as coordinating communication between the sponsors about the association's venue choices," says Kay Willis, the bureau's director of convention services. "We also helped to prepare partners for the incoming opportunities within the city during this time. In total, the"
group contributed more than $20 million in economic impact to the city over three days of meetings. We were able to garner that data from the community and share it with the client.”

The demand from planners for this type of data will only grow — and CVBs are in a unique position to provide it.

Portland supplied tips about scooter rentals, volunteer assistance services and more. The CVB also provided vouchers for Portland’s TriMet mass-transit system, so AWP members could use the city’s bus and light-rail network to get around.

“Travel Portland even came to our First Timers event to give an overview of the things attendees could do in the city, talk about transportation and give out passes,” says Sherman. “It was very well-received.”

**Making a splash**

A great way to make attendees feel special is to give them a sense that the destination has been expecting them. CVBs do this in a variety of ways, such as displaying prominent signage or logos outside the convention center, in hotel lobbies and other public areas.

For the International Trademark Association’s annual meeting in May 2018, which drew nearly 11,000 participants, Visit Seattle went so far as to light the Washington State Convention Center Arch in the organization’s signature orange color (the first time this had been done) and created the first “Visit Seattle Music on the Streets” program, featuring 20 live outdoor performances around the convention center, so attendees could experience the city’s historic and vibrant music community.

For one recent group of 1,500 that held its event at the newly expanded Boise Centre in Idaho, the Boise CVB took an even more hands-on approach. Since attendees were on their own for breakfast and lunch during the convention, the bureau saw to it that area restaurants were expecting a wave of important customers.

“Our BCVB staff hand-delivered fliers to all downtown restaurants and informed management and staff about the influx of visitors they would be seeing during the conference,” notes Terry Kopp, director of sales for the bureau. “It was a huge help as restaurants were able to be adequately staffed in advance to handle the increase.”

Adding complications was the fact that the Oregon Convention Center is in the midst of a major renovation, upgrading some features and adding a headquarters hotel. Attendees needed to understand how to get around the facility and the city.

In fact, “accessibility” was a major theme of the program, with the goal of removing barriers to entry to the conference (whether due to mobility, financial or geographic issues) and, more broadly, providing easier entry points for those aiming to break into the publishing industry.

For the logistical challenges, Travel Portland provided details on public transit, including a customized map that charted the hotels, the OCC and locations of the conference’s main venues. Any attendee visiting the event’s website could scroll through pictures of many of these locations, linked to information about accessibility. Travel