

# City's Positive Reputation Continues To Grow, Even In Slower Times

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There is an inexplicable something about Long Beach that keeps the local hospitality and tourism industry slightly ahead of the competition, even though experts anticipate another difficult year in 2010.

Steve Goodling, president and CEO of the Long Beach Area Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB), uses the French phrase "je ne sais quoi" (I don't know what) because clients can't quite describe why they like what they see in Long Beach.

"We have a great product, we have a great city and that reputation continues to grow," Goodling says. "Planners are coming out and they're discovering Long Beach. There's that certain something – they aren't quite sure what it is, but they know . . . they like it."

However, no matter how smitten those planners are with the city, economic indicators reveal that recovery won't begin until leisure travel picks up, company downsizing tapers and uncertainty isn't a driving force. PKF Consulting, a national firm that serves the hospitality, real estate and tourism industries, estimates another 5.4 percent drop in RevPAR (revenue per available room) for Long Beach, according to Goodling.

"As we conclude the calendar year, Long Beach is down roughly 16 percent in RevPAR," he says, compared with a 24.5 percent decrease in Los Angeles and 24 percent slide in Pasadena. "We fared better than many in the surrounding area."

"We know that next year is still going to be challenging."

Goodling credits several large conventions in 2009 that offset greater declines, including the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference, the Chick-fil-A Operators Seminar, the National Square Dance Convention and the Fraternal Order of Police National Conference.

Iris Himert, senior vice president of sales, says TED is confirmed through 2020 with contracts for the convention center and local hotels.

"We still have to continue to re-earn that relationship year after year," Goodling adds. "The organization really wants to maintain its intimacy. We haven't been told of any growth, but its influence . . . continues to grow year after year."

This marked the first year Chick-fil-A used a convention center for its annual event held in cities throughout the U.S., and the CVB is meeting with the company this month to discuss future partnerships.

The CVB team typically books events years in advance, and the convention center staff books those less than 18 months out, but Goodling says the biggest challenge today is getting clients to commit, especially association boards.

"They aren't signing contracts as readily or as quickly as they've done in the past," he says. "There's more discussion, more dialogue between the membership, the boardmembers [and] the staff. They just want to make sure that they're being fiscally responsible."

This tendency is also trickling down to hotels, where short-term bookings have become the norm, even for the holiday season.

"They're really waiting to see if they can afford to do a special party or a meeting," Goodling says. "That's just one segment of our business – corporate meetings – but it's the icing on the cake for us. Our convention business is, of course, our core business."

The CVB is on pace with previous years for reserved room nights through 2012 and is 55 percent ahead for 2013, according to Goodling.

With representatives stationed in five major cities, including Sacramento, Chicago, Atlanta, Houston and Washington, D.C., the CVB staff can forge relationships with decision-makers for association business and trade shows. Since Washington, D.C., houses the greatest number of national associations, the representatives there are key to attracting future clients who might otherwise overlook Long Beach.

"We have positioned a person in Washington, D.C., to specifically solicit the federal and the government market,"

Goodling says. "Because the government has so many new programs that are being created, we started to directly solicit this. We actually just finished booking a program called Westat – it's a group that has a contract with the federal government to do weights and measurements and other statistical analysis. They booked approximately 1,400 room nights; that was a very short-term booking."

"We're after the government market because it is very short-term," he adds. "There's a lot of government business."

In October, the CVB hosted 23 clients at The California Governor and First Lady's Conference on Women and six representatives from Experient, a company that sources cities for more than 700 associations and corporate accounts. They also held numerous site inspections for



Photograph of the Queen Mary by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville

meeting planners who scout potential cities, allowing staff to boost future sales.

USA Jump Rope representatives verbally committed to a three-year contract following the conference – a deal that could total 12,000 room nights once signed.

"All of our special receptions that we host for planners and boardmembers when they come out have been very successful," Goodling says. "The general managers join us, the mayor normally joins us [and] our directors of sales join us – in other cities, they aren't getting that same reception."

These planners are leaving with a renewed sense of the city's offerings, such as AVIA's rooftop pool, Hotel Maya's coastal views and long-term-stay options at the Residence Inn Long Beach Downtown, as well as numerous accommodations of all price points throughout the city.

"We're able to capture more business, and we're getting great response on what's been developed," Goodling says, noting that plans to modernize LAX and the Tom Bradley International Terminal will improve efforts to draw associations with international clientele and membership. "It's key to have a first-class gateway and a very easy experience getting into our country," he says.

The Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industry (AWCI) recently booked a four-day convention and trade show for 2015 after Karen Bilak, a certified meeting professional, visited Long Beach to see what all the buzz was about.

"I was very impressed," Bilak says. "On paper, Long Beach isn't necessarily the most attractive city, but there are [many] intangibles that you just have to experience. The hotel and convention community work well as a team."

For the past 70 years, ACWI has hosted the annual event in various cities. Bilak, who expects 2,500 to 3,000 commercial drywall and ceiling contractors to attend, booked space at the convention center and rooms at the Hyatt Regency, Westin and Renaissance.

"Long Beach is very affordable," she says. "You've got the weather, easy prox-

imity to other cities in Southern California, the Aquarium – there's just a lot to do."

To promote the coastal urban city, its hotels, attractions, local hot spots and popular eateries, the CVB turned to social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook.

"We're still doing traditional PR efforts, but just to complement that, we 'Tweet' daily," Marketing Manager Patricia Paige says. "It's pretty cost-effective, and we're able to share our message and share the exciting things that are happening in Long Beach."

"Print and online advertisements come with a price tag," she adds.

The CVB will run 60 ads in major industry publications this year, compared with 66 in 2009, while several 20-page inserts will publish as two-page spreads.

"We'll still have a good frequency in the group market, but where we probably won't have enough money is in pleasure travel," Goodling explains. "[We] have been talking with social media companies to try to promote our offers this summer via the Web and in packaging."

Half of the CVB's 30 employees work in direct sales, Goodling says. "In times like this, the deals are happening so quickly that every salesperson needs to stay on top of their group," he says. "We review those on a monthly basis with each sales director."

The city collected \$14.6 million in transit occupancy tax for fiscal year 2008-2009, which ended in September. Meanwhile, the CVB ended the fiscal year with the same number of room nights as last year.

"The entire industry will be down probably for another 12 months," Goodling says. "The good news is we haven't been hit as hard." ■