

Iris Himert's Passion Is Selling Long Beach – She And Her Team At The CVB Are Very Good At It

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Every morning on the way to her 19th floor office in Downtown Long Beach, Iris Himert is talking with people from throughout the country. She's hearing reports, strategizing, making decisions and responding to questions from people in Sacramento, Chicago, Atlanta, Houston, Denver and Washington, D.C.

These are her people. She's positioned them in places she refers to as remotes. Their calls are important to her, her boss and the thousands of people in the local hospitality industry who rely on her expertise.

Himert is the senior vice president of sales for the Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB). She and her "remotes" sell groups and associations on booking Long Beach for their meetings and conventions.

If Himert and her team of 19 are not good at what they do, hotel beds are unused, meeting rooms are quiet, restaurants and attractions are empty, and city coffers are lighter. Luckily for all, they are very good at what they do and they have the numbers to back that up.

"We are not just responsible for our own success and the success of the CVB, but we really have to look at it in a broader way," Himert says. "If we do our job right, this employs hundreds of people in restaurants and in hotels. Taxicabs will be busy because we have big conventions coming in. I take that very seriously."

For the past 25 years, the German-born Himert has put her focus, energy and passion into selling the city.

Her commitment to her work and to Long Beach is supported by her personal drive to support herself and her family, she says. Himert came to the United States in 1968 after completing Gymnasium – Germany's university preparatory school system – for a year-long visit with her two older sisters living in Chicago. She never left. She got her first U.S. job in the hospitality industry working as a catering typist for her brother-in-law at the Drake Hotel in downtown Chicago. She soon married and moved to California to start a family. In the mid 1970s, she became a single mother to her two sons, then ages 4 and 5, and decided that she needed to get into sales to be able to provide for them.

When a sales position opened up, Himert says she had to push her way into an interview. Himert got the job, and worked her way through various promotions. She worked group sales, international sales and eventually got a job with a hotel in Anaheim. In 1983, she arrived in Long Beach to take over the California market with the CVB, but left in 1986 to take a position as assistant director of sales with the Disneyland Hotel. Himert eventually became director of sales for the hotel, but had decided early on that she wanted to be back in Long Beach. "I would call monthly to my old boss and say, 'Please take me back, I did a good job.' I didn't have to leave [the Disneyland Hotel]. I wanted to leave." Eventually she took a title change and came back to Long Beach as a national sales manager.

The market she came back to was growing, she says. In 1994, the convention center was expanded in part because of the vision of then-City Manager Jim Hankla. "We went ahead, even

though it was tough economic times, and we expanded the center," she says, "allowing us to attract national association business."

Since the expansion of the center, Himert also notes the emergence of Long Beach as an "urban waterfront playground," from the restaurants and nightclubs to shops and new boutique hotels, the renovated Downtown Transit Mall and the Promenade. "This is such an incredible place to sell," she says.

Himert's job varies from day to day, from meetings with potential clients to working with local and remote sales directors on issues with proposals or contracts. Once a year, Himert goes to one of the out-of-state offices to make calls and meet with potential national clients. "That really energizes me when I do that because I love to go and hear what customers have to say and go in for the hunt of the business," she says.

The majority of the time she is helping sales directors develop leads, which includes a lot of phone solicitation. Each sales director has his or her own goals that are generally reviewed on a monthly basis. Other avenues for leads include industry events, trade shows and conventions.

Himert says a lengthy process, sometimes years, is involved in establishing a client. The business is evaluated and leads are given to local hotels. A proposal is drafted and then the sales director follows up on the lead to see if they can discover what the competition is offering. If Long Beach isn't as competitive, the sales director goes back to the hotels or convention center to revisit the proposal. The goal is to slate a site inspection with the potential client, which can take two or three days.

During that time, Himert, sales directors and other representatives from the CVB have the opportunity to get to know their guests.

"The whole city comes together as a team and it's a collaborative effort," she says. "It's a great partnership, very positive partnership." Representatives from the hotels, directors of sales, oftentimes CVB boardmembers and occasionally even the mayor come out for these events to entice an association, group or company to bring their event to Long Beach.

Himert shares an example: Long Beach Vice Mayor Suja Lowenthal attended a dinner with the site selection committee of the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin. She credits Lowenthal for helping close the deal for a meeting now scheduled for summer 2012. Himert said the event should bring 2,000 total room nights, roughly \$36,000 in transient occupancy tax and an approximate economic impact for Long Beach of more than \$1.8 million.

The CVB has doubled the number of groups and room nights for the year versus 2010. "Everything seems to be more short term,



much more short term than I've ever seen before," Himert says.

Her biggest challenge these days is getting a client to look at the landscape of Long Beach hotels and the convention center differently. Cities like Los Angeles and Phoenix put in big box hotels that provide 1,200 rooms, which make it so associations can have a one-headquarters hotel. "What we try to tell them is that the convention center is their headquarters hotel and the sidewalks are their hallways to individual hotels with no walls and ceilings," she says. "You can be out in the fresh air and enjoy this. But also, you have to understand that this client may have to sign maybe four or five different contracts [with hotels] instead of one."

The other challenge, Himert notes, is making sure the remote sales directors feel connected and get as much time to connect with her as the local, in-house staff does.

Although Himert acknowledges there isn't a cookie-cutter approach to motivating employees, she also realizes that motivation starts from the top. Himert recognizes CVB President Steve Goodling as a "visionary" and "exemplary leader" who motivates staff with his own energy and passion for the city. In addition, sales team members each have an average of about 20 years of experience. "They are highly motivated themselves," Himert says.

A self-described free spirit, Himert says the community in Long Beach allows for her passion and creativity to shine. "After 25 years, to me, this is not just a job. It's part of my heart. I've given it a lot of my energy, a lot of my passion, and so this truly has part of my heart." ■