

Visitors Bureau Offers Social Media Promotion Opportunities

Social Media Team Works To Create Buzz With Twitter, Facebook

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In the past year, the Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) has not only been ramping up its social media presence to promote the city – from its Facebook fan page to its Web site to its increasingly popular Twitter page – but also working to develop social media promotions options as a means to help meeting planners and convention organizers create buzz around an event.

According to Jeff Forney, vice president of marketing, this past year the CVB has really stepped up to help these planners by providing options to connect their event and the city with potential guests. The bureau's new Web site launch, originally scheduled for this summer, has been rescheduled for fall 2011 in conjunction with the bureau's customized, in-house content management system, which is currently being coded. The goal of the new site is to allow the CVB to provide planners with free tweet, e-mail blast and custom site templates – all of which directly link back to the CVB site – to assist clients in fulfilling their attendance needs.

"The goal is to be the one-stop shop for everybody: where you're going to stay, what you're going to do, where you're going to eat and more information," he said. The bureau is going to manage the site structure, however, Forney said the bureau is looking at including blog content from neighborhoods, business districts and large attractions like the Aquarium of the Pacific – many of which already maintain blogs.

The CVB is working with Nostrum, a local advertising and marketing agency, to build the content management system for not only the Web site but also as a database for sales numbers, occupancy numbers and the like. Nostrum plans to sell the system to other bureaus once the bureau's launches this fall, which Forney said would help keep cost down for the CVB.

Meanwhile, the bureau has already used existing tools to help conventions boost attendance. The first successful example of the bureau holding a contest for a convention was in 2009. According to Forney, the bureau came up with a contest for the National Square Dance Convention to offer free admission and accommodations for the event. All square dancing membership clubs were notified, who then passed along the contest information to its members. The winner not only got to go to the convention for free, but also won \$1,000 to give to a square dancing club of his or her choice.

"It was great exposure for them and really helped with their attendance," Forney said. "We offer this to other groups as an opportunity that they can extend to the people in their industry." The contest, lasting only a couple of weeks, was the first of many contests the bureau hopes to market for future conventions, Forney said.

The bureau's social media team – consisting of Sue Frye, social media marketing manager; Patricia Paige, web marketing manager; Megan Rodriguez, public relations manager; and Forney – tries to organize weekly "tweet-ups" to discuss how to best utilize Facebook and Twitter to generate response and create buzz. "It's all about service here," Forney said. "If it helps the client out, if it's within our power, we'll do it. We won't say no. If we don't know [how], we find out what it will take."

"I serve as a point of contact for all social media channels and liaise with our clients when they seek Long Beach information to share with their followers," Frye said. "It's also a wonderful avenue to promote our hospitality partners and member offerings that are available in the city." According to Forney, Twitter and Facebook are used as platforms for calls to action or anecdotes about the Long Beach experience, both of which generate responses. Tweets range from how to celebrate holidays in Long Beach and re-tweets from local businesses, to upcoming theater per-



The social media marketing team with the Long Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau uses online tools to help conventions boost attendance, such as hosting a Web-based contest for the National Square Dance Convention held in Long Beach in 2009. Pictured, from left, are: Megan Rodriguez, public relations manager; Sue Frye, social media marketing manager; and Jeff Forney, vice president of marketing. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

formances and contests for followers.

The CVB currently posts four to five tweets per day and has Twitter contests twice a week. "Twitter is working out better than Facebook right now," he said, noting nearly 5,000 followers to the bureau's Twitter page. Aside from promoting the city, Twitter trivia contests are an option offered to clients as another means to create buzz around their convention or special event in Long Beach, with prizes from local restaurant discounts to a DVD copy of a movie filmed in Long Beach with popcorn. Tweets also help entice association members to sign up for a booked convention

early. "We even have a sheet of general tweets that we can provide to the client, and they can tweet it out," Forney said. "Tweets point back to the CVB Web site, which has helped increase traffic to the site."

On Facebook, photos are big for responses, Forney said. The majority of the posts on the bureau's Facebook page are photos of the Long Beach Harbor, the skyline and city landmarks. The page provides a venue for commentary, which should be positive and member-focused, Forney said. Noting that the page is for promoting the city, negative and unrelated comments of any kind are addressed di-

rectly then deleted, as well as non-member business self-promoting comments, he said. There is a disclaimer on the page found under the "Info" section.

In addition to photos and fun posts, the CVB also has trivia contests via the Facebook page, where winners can get a Long Beach t-shirt, ball cap, tickets to local museums and other prizes. Other social media platforms, such as YouTube, are to be utilized once the new Web site launches, Forney said.

Unlike with Facebook and Twitter, the bureau uses e-mail blasts to directly connect with clients for meetings. The three

templates for the e-mail blast are also available for clients to customize and use as a marketing tool. The CVB has the ability to send out the e-mail blasts for clients, but typically clients like to keep their contact lists and send out the messages themselves, Forney said.

The success of the bureau's social media marketing can be looked at in two ways – from a meeting planner perspective and a consumer perspective. From the meeting planner side, the CVB can monitor the e-mail blasts sent to those clients to see if the messages have been opened, deleted or replied to. That is a more obvious indicator of success, Forney said, whereas the success with consumers isn't as quantifiable through Twitter and Facebook unless it's a call to action.

Through consumer advertising, it's a little bit easier, Forney said. The CVB tends to advertise with publications from April through June, some in Arizona and some in California, specifically in the Inland Empire, to come to the water. The online publication ads and newspaper e-mail blasts can be tracked by number of clicks and responses. The CVB also advertises with Westways Magazine, Travelocity and is getting involved with JetBlue to create package deals on its site.

Though the social media marketing team seems to be very busy, Forney said they could always do more as the world of social media keeps moving and growing. "It's a moving target," he said. "But we're fairly focused on our target. We don't have a tremendous amount of followers on Facebook, and that's something we're going to be discussing with Nostrum, and with our new site launching, we'll talk about what's our new goal on the Web." ■