Event Transportation: Meeting the Needs of the Association Market

Don't be fooled. Transportation is about more than just getting people from Point A to Point B.

Or at least it can be.

Don't take this key component of meeting, convention and event organization for granted. By making the right choices before, during, and after an association function, transportation can make a huge difference in how an event is both perceived and remembered.

Just ask Eric Hotard, president and CEO of Event Transportation Systems (ETS), and he will tell you that a transportation company can do much more for you than simply provide cars and motorcoaches for your event. They can be a true partner that can help to generate revenue, aid in tour planning, provide advice and destination assistance, work with local authorities to make sure events run smoothly, and even act as an extension of the planner's own staff - providing directions and recommendations for local dining and nearby activities.

"We provide citywide shuttle bussing service, on site management, and executive private vehicle airport transportation. We have a division that assists with sponsorship and promotional opportunities, which we can produce and sell for the client. Visual graphics can be created both on the outside and within the interiors of our vehicles, such as custom vinyl wraps on buses and custom headrest covers," notes Hotard.

"In these instances," explains Martha Dowd, director of sales for ETS, "we're talking to exhibitors who want to promote their products or services. For example, as part of a medical conference, a pharmaceutical company may have a new product that they want to promote to doctors who are attending. We help in creating the promotional material that is then used on the vehicles transporting these doctors to and from the conference. The revenue from this paid promotion helps the event organizer to offset the cost of putting on the show."

The options don't stop there, adds Dowd. Another promotional opportunity could include a video production shown on the tour bus. "The sponsor might show a video to attendees on the tour bus that uses a 'news interview' format where a spokesperson, doctor or other representative discusses the benefits of their product that plays during the transport of the event attendees and targeted audience. This is a service we offer to the event organizer at no cost. Exhibitors are solicited to buy into this opportunity, and a percentage of the revenue generated from it goes back toward paying for the costs of the conference."

She further notes that ETS can offer solutions for planners that they might not have thought of otherwise. "We have had years of experience doing this. Many of our groups come back to us again and again because of the assistance and solutions that we can provide."

Word of their good work gets around. Hotard says that his company has built a strong reputation as being very honest and respectful with its clients. Some of the company's clients have been working with ETS for 30 years. That's a rare kind of loyalty in any industry these days.

Such relationships can really benefit the client, notes Hotard. "When we're working with a company from year to year and moving their people, we do a post-ridership report that really helps to narrow costs and services down for them. We can use this to help them save money in transport from one year to the next."

"Whether they are seasoned meeting planners or novices," observes Dowd, "we work with them and help them by getting things off their desk. Eric can offer advice and recommendations for planners who are moving their function from one city to another. He can help to show them how they can plan for their transportation services in ways that are most cost effective."

Hotard says that quoting a good price and staying within budget is an important part of working with a client and earning their trust as a partner. "I have a lot of personal driving experience," notes Hotard. "I have driven in every major city in North America. I started out working for my father's bus company in New Orleans,

Louisiana. I began driving at age 19 and gained a lot of experience on the road. As the business grew, my role expanded into other aspects of it. Over time, I worked on areas like safety, training, and eventually sales and marketing... One result of all this experience has been my ability to offer more than just transportation - we've become an all-encompassing destination management company, too."

Once on site, Hotard notes, ETS educates its staff on various aspects of the client's meeting. They also become well versed in the offerings of the destination where the function is being held. In this way, the ETS staff is able to provide attendees with services like directions and assistance in finding local restaurants and attractions, etc.

Event Transportation Systems works with a significant number of associations. In fact, Dowd notes, they work with so many different association clients that they have an office in Washington, DC, where many association headquarters reside.

And, despite being a transportation services company, ETS doesn't always have to provide the vehicles in order to help out a client. For those who are transporting groups from one destination to another, Hotard says that ETS can facilitate such a move for the client by setting up the charter buses and managing the logistics along the way.

"Sometimes people don't immediately think of who can help them to get from one destination to another," observes Dowd, "such as a day trip from Baltimore to New York City. But we're a unique transportation source, and we can provide them with solutions that are the right fit for their needs."

ETS can even help in setting up destination tours, and they will transport attendees from one off-site function to another, as needed.

For those concerned about safety, ETS goes above and beyond in this area, too. Hotard notes, "Our transportation vendors get a safety rating from the Department of Defense, and use their guidelines to maintain a safe fleet. These are the same standards that our government uses to transport military personnel. These guidelines have higher standards than those that others follow as set forth by the Federal Transit Administration."

In addition, none of the vehicles used by Event Transportation Services are more than seven years old, and all receive a service and maintenance check every 5,000 miles, insists Dowd. In addition, all drivers are properly trained and screened, and the company is fully insured - on top of which, "we have a flawless safety record," she adds.

In addition to making sure that the transportation they provide is safe, ETS is conscious about the environment, as well. In fact, taking a motorcoach is a very "green" way to travel, says Hotard.

"First, we use the most modern vehicles available," asserts Hotard. "Second, using a bus is the greenest way to move people. It is the most efficient and produces the lowest emissions. Third, we participate in the Carbon Fund. Also, we are conscious of how we operate the vehicles we use. For example, we don't let buses idle when waiting for passengers or during the boarding process."

In addition, Dowd offers, "Carbon Fund will provide a report to our client not only about offsetting emissions from transport, but also with regard to all aspects of their conference. The report provides the planner with the information they need to offset the carbon footprint of their event. They can use the suggestions in the report to make their event as green as they want it to be."

ETS also can help with the logistics of transporting large groups of people in big cities by obtaining the necessary permits and police assistance to keep parking clear in front of the host sites where attendees will be boarding and exiting buses.

They also help clients in preparing for changes that can occur suddenly as the result of roadwork and detours, inclement weather, airport delays and cancellations, and other challenges that might arise.

By working with association clients in true partnerships, Event Transportation Systems has forged strong relationships and helped make a real difference in keeping their meetings, conventions and events running smoothly and seamlessly from start to finish.