

THE MEETING PROFESSIONAL™

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Tapping into a New Market

How the **XSITE 2013 trade show** paired planners and suppliers to increase ROI and what you can learn from it.

BY ROWLAND STITELER



IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE, the phrase “win-win situation” has almost become a corporate-speak cliché, except in those rare cases when it happens to be a spot-on depiction of the situation it describes. Such a case was the first annual meeting of XSITE 2013, a February meeting industry conference and trade show held in Florida’s capital city, Tallahassee.

In fact, the event went beyond “win-win,” according to XSITE’s creator and planner, as well as a broad array

of partners, exhibitors, planners and other stakeholders, all of whom came together for an event that was a first-ever in Tallahassee—a by-appointment-only, qualified-attendee trade show in which statewide association representatives got together with hotel and convention bureau representatives from across the state.

“This is more than just win-win,” says Richard Miseyko, CMP, CMM (MPI Tampa Bay Area Chapter), president of St. Petersburg, Fla.-based Site Search Inc., parent company of XSITE. “There were so many different partnerships, collaborations and groups of stakeholders involved in this—

all of whom benefited—that it’s more like win-win-win-win-win.”

Miseyko, a 30-year veteran of the industry, had 21 years of hotel sales experience before founding Site Search, a site selection company with 35 clients and more than US\$3 million in annual room bookings. One of the greatest challenges over the years, not just for Miseyko but also for hotels and destinations, was to find just the right way to connect with the meetings-intensive, statewide associations market.

“Being the state capital, of course, Tallahassee is the headquarters for something



ALL PHOTOS: MAMARAZZI PHOTO

"There were so many different partnerships, collaborations and groups of stakeholders involved in this—all of whom benefited.

This is more than just win-win."

like 400 statewide associations doing literally billions of dollars' worth of meetings across the state every year," Miseyko says. "Everybody wants to tap into the market, and there have been all kinds of trade shows up there, but there has always been disappointment for a lot of suppliers in finding just the right forum for making connections with those groups."

The hoteliers around the state have not been the only group that wanted to find a way to break into the big Tallahassee statewide association market. The MPI North Florida Chapter has also been seeking to establish relationships

with Tallahassee-based planners for a long time.

"Because of the logistics alone, it's been difficult," says Melissa Milione, CMP, CPCE, immediate past president of the MPI North Florida Chapter and senior director of catering and convention services at the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront. "Our chapter's territory is so large; the face-to-face interaction with members around the Florida Panhandle becomes a challenge."

Jacksonville, which is north Florida's most populous city and a major tourism

destination, is where the vast majority of MPI North Florida Chapter members live and work. And Tallahassee, which is 163 miles from Jacksonville, is where the vast majority of statewide association planners live and work. And the third-largest city in north Florida, Pensacola, which is also a major tourism destination, is 197 miles from Tallahassee and a grueling 357-mile drive from Jacksonville. MPI's North Florida geographical territory is larger than many countries.

It was this amalgam of logistics and marketing strategy challenges, swirling around in Miseyko's head one day, that spurred an idea chapter members, hoteliers around the state and Tallahassee association planners would all soon regard as a stroke of genius.

"There have been all kinds of supplier trade shows in Tallahassee, but none that involved specific appointments between

Going the Distance

It's not easy for many members of the **MPI North Florida Chapter** to meet face-to-face. Blame geography: *The major cities in the region are very far apart.*

But Richard Miseyko had a great idea for bringing everyone together, and Tallahassee's first trade show with specific appointments between suppliers and pre-qualified buyers was born.





"WHAT I LEARNED"

We conducted focus groups several months in advance of the event to make sure we had the top speakers in our industry for our educational sessions.

the suppliers and pre-qualified buyers," Miseyko says. "And I got to wondering why. And I also thought, 'Why not partner with the MPI North Florida Chapter?' because they would have something to gain from it as well."

With those thoughts, the XSITE show concept was born, and it was not difficult to get the North Florida Chapter excited about XSITE.

"When Richard contacted us and asked us to partner with him, we were very excited," Milione says. "And I must say, even though we were excited and filled with anticipation about the opportunities the show could offer us to reach out to planners in Tallahassee, XSITE exceeded our already-high expectations. The educational sessions we put on at XSITE were attend-

ed by about 65 Tallahassee area planners, many of whom did not know about MPI before then."

Miseyko says the engine that drove participation by both suppliers around the state and Tallahassee-based association planners was what he called a "speed-dating" session between the suppliers and pre-qualified planners.

Planners, who were invited to the show, were required to fill out questionnaires about meetings' requirements, including room nights used, food and beverage consumption and other parameters.

"Essentially, if their answers to our questionnaires did not demonstrate that they had business potential that was a good match for our exhibitors, they were not allowed to come," Miseyko says. "We were actually turning away attendees for this show."

And conversely, exhibitors at the show were not given appointments with planners who did not have the capacities to meet the planner's requirements.

"If your big event has a peak night need of 1,000 guest rooms, we didn't match you up with any hotels that only had 800 rooms, for instance," Miseyko says.

To accomplish this, XSITE used a software system by ITM Mobile, a Swedish company with staff in Florida.

"They have one of the best appoint-

ment-matching software systems I have ever seen," Miseyko says.

The software was used to match up the 65 exhibitors with the 75 planners who attended the show, yielding a schedule in which every exhibitor had 12, 10-minute appointments with qualified association planners over a three-hour period.

The success of the trade show component of XSITE can also be measured by the who's who nature of both the exhibitors and the attendees from around Florida, including hotels such as The Renaissance Vinoy, The Peabody Orlando and The Breakers, Palm Beach; CVBs from Miami, Orlando and Tampa, to name a few; and statewide agencies such as the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and the Florida Department of Health.

Both exhibitors and planners were pleased with the efficiency of the system, as their comments reflect.

"I just attended the first XSITE event and believe it was a great success. The speed-dating method was a fantastic way to visit many properties in a short, but effective way. I look forward to XSITE 2014."

—Deanna Menesses, CAE, president and CEO of the Florida Society of Association Executives

70%

of MPI members buy from suppliers affiliated with MPI.

61%

of hosted buyers at IMEX America 2012 control meeting and event budgets greater than US\$1 million.

98.6%

of planners who participated in the hosted buyer program at WEC 2012 said they planned on doing business with the suppliers they met.

97.9%

of planners who participated in the hosted buyer program at WEC 2012 said the program connected them with suppliers whose products or services matched their business needs.



MPI Tampa Bay Area Chapter members Richard Miseyko, CMP, CMM, and Tara Liaschenko, CMM, at XSITE 2013.



"Excellent show! Being an appointment-based show made all the difference, especially with the planners being so well qualified. I went home with some good leads and I definitely will be back next year!"

—Lisa Murphy, convention sales manager for the Greater Miami CVB and a member of the MPI South Florida Chapter

"What I really liked about this event was the collaboration on so many levels," says T.J. Worrell, president of the MPI North Florida Chapter and manager of business development for AVI-SPL Inc. "We held the event at Florida State University's (FSU) Turnbull Conference Center and we were able to engage the university and some of its students at the Dedman School of Hospitality as volunteers—it was just a lot of collaborative efforts and it was very inspiring."

Mandie McKenzie (MPI North Florida Chapter), executive director of Friday Musi-cale in Jacksonville, a concert venue that also serves as an event venue, gravitated to the Dedman School of Hospitality students at FSU who served as volunteers for the XSITE event because she is a graduate of the Rosen School of Hospitality at the University of Central Florida.

"I know, as a student in hospitality school, I was always eager to meet working professionals and hear about their careers," she says. "So I made a point at XSITE of taking all of our student volunteers around and introducing them to all of our chapter members. I think we built a lot of good relationships with future meeting professionals that day."

McKenzie says as part of the MPI North Florida Chapter's plan to reach out to the entirety of the region, four educational meetings will be held per year in Tallahassee, and one of them will be the annual XSITE show.

"All of us are enthusiastic about XSITE 2014 and can't wait for February to roll around," she says. ■

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