



## The Rainbow Connection

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By Corrie Dosh

When the United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY) in 2006 looked for a destination for its 1,000-attendee, five-day summer event, the key factors of rates, dates, and space were definitely in play. But once those needs were taken care of, the group could make a decision based on other factors rooted in their identity as a nonprofit organization to support Native American youth.

"Our first preference was to look at the Northeast because we had never been there," says J.R. Cook, executive director of Oklahoma City-based UNITY. "We had a lot of interest in Buffalo, but the convention and visitors bureau sort of sealed the deal, you might say."

While most CVBs would offer the provision of local information on hotels, conference centers, and restaurants, the Buffalo Niagara CVB had a designated salesperson for multicultural groups, Cook says, and the personal touch convinced him that UNITY would be most welcome in that city.

"[The CVB sales representative] personally took us to meet with the Seneca Nation, which was a pretty good drive. Not only did [the rep] assist us in making a decision in working with the hotels and convention center, she also stayed there through the conference and was always ready to assist," he says.

A growing number of convention and visitors bureaus around the country are now designating dedicated sales staff toward multicultural and minority market segments to attract their large conferences and events. In addition to regular CVB services, such as making arrangements with area hotels and restaurants, these dedicated sales representatives also are able to anticipate needs and concerns, streamline partnerships with similar associations and groups in the area, and work to promote their cities as a friendly, welcoming destination for minority groups. Not only are these efforts "the right thing to do" ethically, CVB executives say they make sense financially.

### The Color of Money

The UNITY event, which brought an estimated \$800,000 in business to Buffalo, featured workshops, teambuilding exercises, keynote speakers, a visit to Niagara Falls, and other activities. Having a dedicated salesperson for multicultural groups "helps," Cook says, adding that the group has "never worked as closely with a convention and visitors bureau as we did that year."

"We just hadn't seen the personal interest before," he says.

Dionne Williamson, the multicultural sales manager for the Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau who worked with the UNITY event, for the past four years has worked to promote the area's rich history in Native American cultures and its past as a stop on the Underground Railroad. While the CVB has designated a multicultural sales position for the past decade, Williamson says she is working on a new initiative to target groups and meetings business from multicultural groups, not just leisure travelers.

"There are still different markets that we haven't tapped into yet, and so we're trying to pursue more of the meeting planners and those minority groups that do a lot of event planning; we're trying to reach out to them a little more. For the most part, the market has been the same, but we've improved on our approach to going after that market," Williamson says.

Multicultural group and event sales make up about 20 percent of overall group business at the CVB, Williamson says. The CVB offers an African American Heritage Guide to groups that highlights minority-owned businesses, and the area's cultural history, and includes recommendations from past residents.

"There are stories from individuals who used to live here in Buffalo, who have moved on to successful careers, who can reach back and share their stories and thoughts on Buffalo," she says. "We want to showcase what we have, so that when individuals come in they know they can get rich culture, good food, and maybe partake in an Underground Railroad tour—something very cultural."

Attendees of multicultural group events, in particular, are likely to arrive in town a couple of days early to take advantage of cultural tours, shopping, and leisure activities, in addition to their conference activities, making them of particular interest to CVBs. These groups also tend to have a strong preference to use minority-owned, local businesses and services, for everything from transportation to shopping.

"We're usually able to provide them with suggestions or at least provide them with resources so that they can do some research on their own," she says.

The efforts to market Buffalo to minority groups are paying off, Williamson says.

"We're definitely booking more, because we have a stronger product to promote, and the way we're advertising our features is helping us to increase the number of minority groups we can bring in," she says.

### **On the Radar**

**Janice Thom, director of special events for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, says she has noticed many CVBs putting more efforts into marketing toward Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender/Transsexual (LGBT) groups. The Washington, DC-based task force has worked extensively with the Miami Beach CVB and the local gay and lesbian chamber of commerce on its annual events, she says.**

**"One of the things they've helped us out with this year is on overseas contacts. The city of Miami and Miami Beach have offices in places like Brazil and London. And Miami is very accessible to people in Central, Latin, and South America geographically, culturally, and linguistically, so we expect our incoming foreign travel to pick up. We are trying, with their help, to establish a partnership with TAM Airlines, which is the national airline in Brazil."**

**The only way those partnerships would be possible is through the CVB, Thom says, as "cold-calling some of these businesses would be tough."**

**Most of the Task Force events are local, but the group also holds its national conference in cities on the front lines of the LGBT civil rights movement. The event must also be held in a union-friendly hotel, Thom says, and so CVBs become very helpful in coordinating logistics.**

A number of CVBs around the country also have a designated sales representative for the LGBT community—a feature that Thom says is appreciated and helpful. Even smaller cities and destinations not traditionally thought of as "gay-friendly" are getting into the act, she says.

"It is something we have not made enough hay out of, and we certainly will next year," Thom says. "It's getting to the point where Cleveland, OH, has a LGBT arm to their CVB. It makes our lives much easier. You don't have to go in and explain what you're doing and why it's important. They are already educated about specific issues for gay tourists, for example. They know there are places in town where you might not be welcome, and they can tell you where those are."

Three years ago, the Dallas CVB launched an effort to promote the city to gay and lesbian travelers and groups, says President and CEO Phillip J. Jones. The CVB has a dedicated LGBT sales representative and a dedicated page on its website with resources for this market segment, [www.glbtdallas.com](http://www.glbtdallas.com).

"It was somewhat of a surprise to many groups that Dallas was going after this market. There has traditionally been the perception that Dallas was not a 'gay-friendly' destination," Jones says. "The reality is that we have one of the largest GLBT communities in the country."

To launch the initiative, the CVB participated in a number of research projects, and focus groups, and built partnerships with local gay and lesbian groups and organizations.

"The results have been impressive. We've booked 33 meetings and conventions since we launched the program, and we have a strong partnership with the Greater Dallas GLBT Chamber of Commerce and other similar organizations in the city," he says.

The CVB also works with LGBT programs of corporations located in Dallas, such as American Airlines' Rainbow program, to bring in their meetings and conferences, Jones says. The efforts have made Dallas the 10th most popular destination for LGBT meetings and events, according to LGBT market research firm Community Marketing.

"It's a very loyal market," he says. "If you show that you're committed to this market and invest in it and assign staff to attend the trade shows and industry-specific meetings, and if you show that you're committed by partnering with other GLBT organizations in the community, it shows your commitment is sincere and that you are truly focused on this market as a growth market."

Any doubt that Dallas would make an effort to attract more groups and events from LGBT organizations has evaporated with the success of the program. Gay and lesbian travelers spend more than \$64 billion a year in the United States alone, garnering them about 10 percent of the total travel industry, according to Community Marketing.

"After two or three years of focusing on this market, we're being used as an example to other cities in how to do it. It's not about being politically correct, it's about being economically correct," Jones says.

In addition to the LGBT designated sales representative, the CVB has representatives for the African American, Latino, and Asian market segments.

"In these niche markets, it's very relationship-based," he says. "You really have to take the time to attend the meetings and do the networking and show that you're truly committed to this effort and market. We have a limited staff and a limited budget, but we felt it was the best investment worth making."