

SPEAKING OUT

THOUGHTS FROM MPI LEADERSHIP

Multiculturalism Expands



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Issues of multiculturalism and diversity are taking on a new focus in business, impacting all aspects of corporate development. Now more than ever, multiculturalism affects business in a way that reaches from the corporate hierarchy to the bottom line and every department in between—including meetings.

According to MPI's Multicultural Initiative, the number of culturally diverse meetings worldwide is expected to increase 20 percent by 2007. With the ever-growing economic and political power wielded by historically under-represented populations, corporate America is seeing an increase in the demand for a working knowledge of and sensitivity to cultural differences. That demand is seen more and more in the meetings industry, creating a reaction on the part of CVBs, corporate event and third-party meeting planners, vendors and others to become educated on the nuances of multicultural meetings.

"There is a growing number of cities, convention bureaus, convention centers, hotels and others that are 'getting it,'" said Roy Jay, president of the Oregon Convention and Visitors Network.

Without a doubt, "getting it" means understanding the value of the multicultural marketplace and addressing audiences in the most appropriate and culturally sensitive methods possible without alienating other audiences. But how can meeting professionals "get it" and ensure that all participants and attendees have memorable experiences?

Multicultural markets make up a \$1.3 trillion industry, according to Hattie Hill, CEO of Hattie Hill Enterprises and founding chairwoman of MPI's Multicultural Initiative. Recent research indicates that the annual buying power of U.S. multicultural groups will reach \$1.5 trillion by 2009 and will collectively reign with the largest buying power of any other group in the country. Yet, meeting professionals must under-

stand that "multicultural" applies to more than just ethnicity. It encompasses religion, traditions, languages, customs and social and lifestyle concerns, making it imperative to become educated about cultural nuances.

Historically, ethnic groups have sought to utilize meeting professionals of their own cultures, but associations, corporations and organizations are now more concerned with the bottom line than with the cultural backgrounds of meeting planners. So how can meeting planners make inroads with multicultural groups and businesses to get a piece of the multicultural meetings market?

There's no single path to break into the multicultural meetings segment. However, research is a good first step.

"Have a basic knowledge of the organization and who they represent," said Joni Low, executive director of the Asian Business Association of San Diego.

Forming alliances is critical. Hire a consultant to advise on cultural nuances, language differences, dietary issues, communication concerns, cultural and religious holidays and other variables that are specific to the group you are courting. The new MPI CultureActive® Tool will help planners understand and communicate with other cultures.

Finally, develop a sincere interest in the organization and be a good listener.

For those who still don't "get it," there is a choice—ignore the research that points to change on the horizon and watch your meetings suffer a slow and costly decline or expand your business opportunities by increasing your knowledge of the lucrative and growing multicultural marketplace.

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