

COURIER

DELIVERING BUSINESS ESSENTIALS TO NTA MEMBERS

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AFTERWORDS

Do you have a special off-the-beaten-track destination or a memorable moment from the road that you'd like to share with other NTA members? To contribute to our AfterWords department, contact Penny Whitman, Courier editor in chief, at penny@hitman@ntaservicesinc.com.

Time to Start Looking Under New Rocks

BY MARK HOFFMANN, CTP



Larry Friedman (second from left), acting director of the Nevada Commission on Tourism and NTA member, gets the rural Nevada gang going in Mesquite.

AFTER 32 YEARS IN THE TOUR business, perhaps the greatest challenge of my (and many other tour operators) career lies ahead. Immediately ahead. How do we shift our product line to accommodate younger, more active travelers? The 70-year-old of today is nothing like the 70-year-old of yesterday.

I'm not a student operator, but I suspect the same is true there. Age no longer defines where you travel and what you do when you get there. And there is no doubt people prefer to travel in smaller groups than the traditional 50-passenger motorcoach accommodates.

At the NTA Convention, a typical appointment starts out (after formalities) with the tour operator asking the DMO or supplier, "What's new?" That should come as a surprise. We are all scouring the land, in fact, the planet, looking for that special experience for our clients. While Convention remains my launching pad for ideas, I'm finding more success not by asking "What's new?" but by asking "How can I find some new ideas?"

The answer is to dig deeper, to populate places where I wouldn't have thought of spending time only a few years ago. One of my recent discoveries has been state and regional tourism shows. These are not your typical marketplace-oriented programs. They are where tour suppliers and DMOs come together to strategize, to learn about all segments of the

marketplace and to deal with the day-to-day realities of their world.

Recently, I attended the Nevada Rural Roundup Tourism Conference in Mesquite. It was the 21st time the event was held, and it rotates among smaller Nevada communities. What's out there in the high desert, in the Great Basin, along lonely U.S. Highway 50, in between Tonopah, Eureka, Pioche and Winnemucca. I had begun to wonder. Ghost towns? Unfound natural treasures? The ultimate off-the-beaten-track experience? For two days, I mingled with folks I mostly didn't know, shaking hands and passing out business cards. With the help of NTA members Sue Barton, Ed Spear and Larry Friedman, among others, I was able to make a lot of new contacts. Some of them will undoubtedly help me string together my new Nevada Ghost Towns tour in 2012.

Last year, I attended the Oregon Governor's Conference on Tourism. Lisa Itef, another NTA friend, had invited a half dozen tour operators to the event and even created a mini-marketplace. I came away from the event with a four-day mystery tour in central Oregon that will more than pay for my time and effort in attending the conference. That's the beauty of finding and attending these non-traditional events. You often are the biggest tour operator fish, or better yet, the *only* fish, in the pond. You meet

suppliers and DMO representatives you never would have met at NTA, because their budgets don't allow them to attend the larger shows. You have a shot at finding those gems that make your tour-takers ask the ultimate question, "How did you find this place?"

At Convention, I ask DMOs about their state and regional shows and use those appointments in part to decide the areas on which I want to concentrate over the next year. For our supplier and DMO members, there is an opportunity here. Invite a few of the operators who already do business in your area to come and mingle at one of these events. Create an ask-the-operator panel. Show the smaller players in the industry a slice of what you do when you attend NTA. It's my experience that tourism people excel when they are given a chance to come together and be creative. I've found these smaller shows to be a gold mine of ideas—ideas that are critical as my company moves forward with this new, challenging demographic.

Thanks to the folks from rural (and not so rural) Nevada for their hospitality and more importantly, their ideas. There's future business there, which is the name of the game for everyone. ☺

Mark Hoffmann, CTP is owner of Sacramento, California-based Sports Leisure Vacations. He can be reached at mark@slvac.com.