December 2011

Taking Responsibility

The following is an excerpt from the December 2011 ***Meetings Focus*** *feature article* ***written by Katie Morell***

Groups are increasingly jumping on the corporate social responsibility bandwagon

Take yourself back about 10 years and imagine sitting in an event-planning meeting where someone brings up the term 'corporate social responsibility.' Chances are, that person would have been met with a boardroom full of blank stares. Instead, team building was all the rage—the more zip lines and ropes courses the better. But as the economy went south and public scrutiny around lavish corporate meetings intensified, companies looked for activity alternatives.

It's not that socially responsible activities weren't being done in concert with meetings more than a decade ago. They were—the buzz phrase just hadn't been invented yet. Today, corporations and associations are touting their community activities and often incorporating them as mandatory components in a meeting's agenda.

Jennifer Miller, general manager of the San Diego and Los Angeles locations of Access Destination Services, a destination management company, says she saw CSR programs really bust out in 2009, after first bubbling up in 2007 and 2008.

"We almost survived as a company on CSR programs alone in 2009 and 2010," she says. "Times were tough, but we were calling groups and asking them not to cancel meetings because if they did, they wouldn't have been able to help people in need with their community programs. It got so big that we had to we add two people to specialize solely in CSR in our company, and it's been going strong ever since."

GROUPS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Corporate social responsibility programs come in all shapes and sizes. A group can set up a bike building workshop in a ballroom for inner city youth, volunteer to paint houses for Habitat for Humanity…you name it. But as Miller explains, groups more and more want to push the envelope.

"I'm seeing groups want to dive into local organizations and really get up close and personal with the people they are helping," she says.

For example, Miller and one of her client organizations recently set aside a day during a meeting to help refurbish a military family's home. About 75 meeting delegates rotated through the site and facilitated work ranging from fixing screen doors and replacing blankets to landscaping outside areas.

"The family wasn't there; we sent them away for a day," she says. "The project was really based on the television show *Extreme Home Makeover*, except that we didn't tear down the whole house. When the family came back, everything was done."

Miller has executed the same project for other military families and says meeting attendees really love to get involved.

Another project in the pipeline is with a group that wants to redo an entire pre-school.

"They are going to put in new technology supplies and it will be a big project, but this group is really passionate about it," Miller says. "I see more groups looking to make a huge impact."

CSR programs may be hot right now, but will the trend last?

"Absolutely," says Miller. "I think the offerings will be greater in the future and I think groups will be pushed to develop more programs. There will never be a shortage of people who need help, so I think these programs are here to stay."

Since 1970, ACCESS Destination Services has provided the highest caliber of full-service, professional destination management and event production services in North America, including Chicago, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Naples, Orlando, Palm Springs, San Diego, San Francisco and South Florida

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