



## PlanIt Podcast Interview Transcript with Chris Lee, **DMCP**, CEO of **ACCESS** Destination Services

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**David Martin:** Hello again everybody, my name is David Martin and welcome to this edition of PlanIt Podcast. If this is your first time tuning in to our show, we are a show that is dedicated to the meeting and event professional, to anybody trying to plan, manage and run that very important special meeting or event. Our show looks at some of the leading professionals from around the country who are shaping our industry today.

I'm here with Christopher Lee, DMCP, and Chief Executive Officer of *ACCESS* Destination Services. Christopher, welcome to PlanIt Podcast.

**Christopher Lee:** Thanks David, it's nice to be here.

**David Martin:** Christopher, this is the first time you've been on our show; can you give us a little bit of history about *ACCESS* Destination Services?

**Christopher Lee:** Sure. Our company's roots go back to 1969 and my father who founded the company under the name California Leisure Consultants. We are a full service Destination Management company and we have really grown throughout Southern California. In the year 2000, with the millennium, we decided to re-brand and drop the 'Leisure' word, and go with *ACCESS* Destination Services and we really believe that the word 'Access' describes what we do, giving planners access to the best of our destinations.

**David Martin:** You have multiple locations now. Can you tell me where those are located?

**Christopher Lee:** Yes, we are based in San Diego, Orange County, Los Angeles, Palm Springs and Las Vegas, Nevada.

**David Martin:** Chris there's also something very unique; your father was quite the pioneer, can you tell me a little bit about what phrase he coined?

**Christopher Lee:** My father is credited with coining the phrase 'Destination Management', some time in the early 70s. In 1970, he started to describe the company as a Destination Management Company and began using that in our literature and our brochures and that caught on, obviously, and has now become a generic name, like refrigerator or Jacuzzi.

**David Martin:** You followed a little bit in his footsteps because you helped found ADME, right?

**Christopher Lee:** Yes, I'm very proud to say that over 10 years ago, a group of professionals in the Destination Management Industry and I got together and realized that our industry really needed to band together. As competitive as it can be, it was time to get together and form a true non-political, non-partisan association, a trade association, so we formed the Association of Destination Management Executives to bring the industry together for education and for public awareness. This was not just for education of the general public and the meeting planners, but for education of other Destination Management companies to raise the bar and set a standard of service and ethics throughout the industry. It's been a wonderful, wonderful experience to watch ADME grow from our original group of 15 or 20 members to now over 200.

**David Martin:** ADME also provides a certification program for Destination Management companies, correct?

**Christopher Lee:** Yes it does and that's something that we're very proud of as well. There is a Destination Management Certified Professional Program available through ADME and, much like a realtor or any other professional designation, CMP, CEP, this is the designation that identifies for clients that the individual has been certified, they've been tested in their book knowledge, in their practical knowledge and their direct experience. There are requirements that include number of years in the business, size and complexity of programs operated or sold and other industry involvement criteria that are quite extensive, so if you're working with a DMCP, you're really working with a professional.

**David Martin:** That's fantastic and I'll also put on my Blog a link to the ADME Website. Do you know what that is?

**Christopher Lee:** Of course. It's [www.adme.org](http://www.adme.org); it's '.org' because it's non-profit and, as I said, non-partisan. It's a great resource for Destination Management companies and for information about Destination Management for people who are interested in getting into the industry.

**David Martin:** Now can you also tell us about some of the local, regional and national awards that you've won?

**Christopher Lee:** I'm proud to say that our company has been honored with several recent awards including The Total Excellence in Management Award, presented by the Business Journal in Southern California, but one of the awards we're most proud of is the 2006 Best Places to Work in San Diego Award. Our San Diego office was considered among hundreds of companies in the area and as you know San Diego is a growing market; to be voted the Best Place to Work in the small business category, by the San Diego Business Journal is quite an accomplishment. We've also been fortunate enough to win three Finest Service awards from the Convention & Visitors Bureau and two first place Crystal Awards from the Society of Incentive Travel Executives. Our Palm Springs office and our San Diego office share that honor.

**David Martin:** During my interviews I like to pretend that I am the customer and I am coming to one of your great locations. Today we'll call it San Diego. Why do I need a Destination Management company as a corporate meeting planner?

**Christopher Lee:** Well that's a great question and I know it's one that's asked among meeting planners quite a bit. There are three areas where I think a Destination Management company makes a difference and I'll first say that not every meeting planner needs a Destination Management company and not every meeting needs a Destination Management company. Some of my peers might shoot me for saying that but the fact is that if you're doing a one time, one shot event like a golf tournament, or a reception, or a dinner, chances are you have the experience and the connections to run that program yourself. It's for the multi-day, multi-activity events where a Destination Management company really becomes your partner. First and foremost is convenience. How many meeting planners have the time and energy to be communicating with and qualifying dozens and dozens of vendors from Limousine companies to florists and caterers, decorators and lighting companies, sound companies and entertainment agencies and on down the list. There are literally hundreds of details that we all know going into a program. Really the convenience of having one general contractor or one Destination Management company to manage all those relationships is probably the most poignant reason that corporate clients and association clients will partner with a DMC. Second to that I would say that a good DMC is going to have vendor relationships that are stronger than what a client is going to be able to leverage directly. Not only does the DMC know the destination better than anybody, which is another benefit, they also have relationships with those key vendors, whether it's a restaurant, or a museum, or maybe a venue that's not really available to the general public. So a DMC is going to get you into places that you can't get into, and they're going to get deals out of places that you can't strike, because quite frankly, as a meeting planner who comes in once or twice a year, or maybe three or four times, it just doesn't measure up compared to the DMC who is working with that vendor every day of every week for 20 years like we have.

**David Martin:** Lets' talk about just how important a relationship like that can be. Say I am a meeting planner, I have come into town, I have only done one event in San Diego in my entire life, and I'm using you to help me and there is a problem with the event. What benefits will you bring to my event from your knowledge of the location and the vendors?

**Christopher Lee:** I appreciate that question. Again, like any good meeting professional, we pride ourselves in high levels of service and responsiveness but let's say you are in the trenches and something does go wrong, or there is a last minute need. One of the main benefits, again, is that the DMC is typically going to be able to get a faster response from the vendors; they are going to be able to come up with a local solution because they know the destination so well. So, in the scenario you've just described, if, all of a sudden, your numbers have increased for a group attending a dinner at a very popular restaurant in town, you can call the restaurant all you want to try to get another table or get more seats, but chances are the restaurant is not going to budge. They are not going to displace their regular customers for your group. Again, if you are a planner who is only coming into town once or twice, and the group size increased and a local DMC is managing the dinner, when they call that restaurant owner and say that the numbers have increased and we need to come up with some solutions, chances are, if there is any solution on the face of the earth, that restaurant is going to give it to the DMC, where they may not offer it to someone they hardly know, who is coming in once or twice for a program. So, I think again, relationships are key. Volume buying is another area as are discounts and price flexibility. In this day and age of procurement and yield management, venues, hotels, meeting planners, corporate America, are all looking at the bottom line so if someone's going to make a price concession, it better be justified. Again, if a planner is coming into a destination once or twice a year with 100, 200 people, that is some kind of volume, but a DMC is literally putting thousands of people through that restaurant, through that museum, through that attraction on an annual basis. That kind of leverage warrants price flexibility so your DMC is really going to help you on the bottom line as well.

**David Martin:** The other thing I want you to speak to because I know a lot of people call in to the show and say, "I've got a limited budget so I don't want to hire an outside meeting planner or Destination Management company because that's going to add costs." Can you speak a little bit to the cost value relationship that a Destination Management company brings because I hear this all the time, "I just don't have the money for a Destination Management company" when in fact, they might. Correct?

**Christopher Lee:** I like to use the analogy of the person who takes a look around their home that they've lived in for 10 or 15 years and they look at the back porch and they say, "Gosh, if we enclosed that porch it would make a great family room" and sometimes the first thought is, "We'll just go down to Home Depot or Lowe's, buy the materials and we'll do it ourselves. We'll just enclose the back porch and we'll have ourselves an extra bedroom or a family room". Well you know how that story ends, 99 times out of a 100, they get half way through the project, they've got sawdust everywhere, the dogs or kids are cutting themselves on the broken glass or the nails, the job is half finished, it's less than what they expected, it cost them more than they thought it was going to cost them, and if they are in a relationship, they are at each other's throats. So what do you do? You hire a general contractor, and I think that's really the analogy that speaks to Destination Management and the value of Destination Management. Are you going to pay more? A little bit. Are you going to get value? Are you going to save time, get a better end result and be able to focus on your main goal which is your audience, whether they are your guests or your employees? Yes. If it's a product launch, for all the reasons that you hold the meeting, you don't want to be trapped on your cell phone talking to a caterer because they have run out of food or you don't want to be in the back trying to deal with power issues because the band has blown the circuit and the generator's not working. You want that to be someone else's problem, quite frankly, when you are trying to run your meeting, but again the general contractor analogy is the one that I think speaks most to the value. You are going to hire a general contractor to put that room addition on your house, you are going to hire an architect and a contractor, really, a Destination Management company. They are your local contractor, they are going to build your program, they are going to design it, and they are going to deliver it on time, on budget, so you are going to save in the end.

**David Martin:** Chris, it's so great to hear you say that because one of the goals of the show is to remind meeting planners of all types, from beginners to the savvy meeting planners, what DMCs can really do for them and you've done it so well. I would like to open this up to you. Are there any other great things, other than that this is great place to work, that you would like to tell our listeners about *ACCESS* Destination Services?

**Christopher Lee:** I think anybody listening to this knows that we are in a fun industry, we are in a people industry, and what's unique about our company is that our team really is doing this because we love to do it. The average time with the company among our management team is over seven years and that's about triple the industry average. Among my peers here in our San Diego office, or our Orange County office, Los Angeles, Palm Springs, or Las Vegas, our people are here because they want to be here, it's an expression of their creativity. At the same time the trick in our industry is to balance logistical thinking with creativity and that's really the magic of a DMC. We've got a lot of very creative people here, but they also make sure that the ideas they come up with can actually happen. So I love the people I work with; our people are our greatest asset for sure.

**David Martin:** That's great. What is your Website?

**Christopher Lee:** [www.accessdmc.com](http://www.accessdmc.com), a-c-c-e-s-s-d-m-c.com.

**David Martin:** Well, Christopher, I thank you, and I also would like you to participate in future shows. Call us when great things are happening.

**Christopher Lee:** I will do that, thanks David, and thanks for having me.

[End of recording]