

# A New Way to Approach Leisure Group Sales



**A Guide for Building Demand  
From Ad Hoc Travel Groups**



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**L**eisure travel groups are an important component of any successful destination's business make-up. They provide a much-needed boost to your local economy, especially during down periods when your partners need business.

While leisure group business is important, it's often misunderstood at the DMO level.

The result is a "big miss" when developing strategies towards cultivating new group business as opportunities for growth are left on the table.

To better understand the market, let's break down leisure group travel business into two components: pre-formed, large group tours and ad hoc small group trips.



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## PRE-FORMED GROUP TOURS

We've seen those motorcoaches parked outside our hotels, museums and local theaters. Where'd they come from? Most likely it's the handiwork of a professional tour planner. There are approximately 3,000 tour companies in the U.S., ranging from small "mom and pop" companies that plan a handful of trips per year, to legacy tour companies like Collette, Globus, Worldstrides and Tauck that operate thousands of tours annually.

Additionally, there are tens of thousands of organizations that promote group trips to support a cause or further their mission. A park district or senior center organizes trips for their community to keep residents active and socially engaged. Churches plan trips to build fellowship and see religious sites. Teachers use travel to enhance subject learning.

Success in the pre-formed group market requires a sales and marketing strategy that includes dedicated collateral materials and a dedicated group representative who communicates with professional tour operators, bus companies and professional group leaders. This is carried out through sales calls, brand advertising and trade show attendance at events like the American Bus Association (ABA) annual marketplace.

Success is built over time and consistency is the name of the game here. The more visible you are in pursuing pre-formed groups, the more success you'll have over time.

The good news is that pre-formed groups are like an annuity. Once you convince a professional tour operator to package your destination you'll see multiple rounds of group business that could literally last for years to come. Considering the average bus tour brings \$12,000 per day to your local economy, it takes just a few wins to recoup any investment you make in the market.



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## AD HOC GROUPS

Purely by definition, ad hoc means “created or done for a particular purpose.” Friends and families traveling together, celebration birthdays, bachelor and bachelorette parties, affinity clubs and event-inspired (concert, theater, sports) activities make up the ad hoc travel market.

Typically, these are self-managed trips, which is an important distinction in pursuing this type of business. Ad hoc groups rarely come from traditional channels, as their planning strategy is self-motivated.

Whereas the pre-formed group market is comprised of a central planning figure like a tour operator, travel advisor or group leader, oftentimes

ad hoc group business happens organically. Someone in the group has a spark of an idea based on either a specific destination (we’ve never done Charleston before!), travel type (we love to kayak!) or an event that’s coming to your area that piques interest. Once this spark catches fire, the group members rally and start piecing the trip together.

While organic is awesome for fruits and vegetables, by applying a touch of DMO marketing strategy to attract these types of groups – and help facilitate a wonderful experience – your destination’s share of ad hoc group business will soar.



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## SOLVING PAIN POINTS

Ever try to make dinner plans with 8 friends?  
Here's how that plays out:

- 1) Poll participants on a date that works for everyone
- 2) Once decided, come to a consensus on a restaurant y'all can agree on
- 3) Select a time
- 4) Call to reserve a table – if not available, go back to step 1
- 5) Gather, eat, drink, socialize
- 6) At the end of the night, practice math skills so no one is short shrifted

Now imagine doing that for a three-day vacation for 10-20 people. Booking hotels, planning lunches and dinners, buying museum tickets and deciding on what tours & activities are a good fit. While travel apps and shared responsibility lessen the impact for each individual, there are a lot of pain points in pulling together a small group trip. Because of the complexity, some of these trips fail to materialize.

This obstacle is also a unique opportunity for destinations to increase their visitor share by employing simple strategies that will facilitate ad hoc group travel.

By doing this you can:

- 1) Appeal to travelers who otherwise wouldn't have you on their radar
- 2) Steer business to your partners with group capabilities
- 3) Achieve your visitor targets – 10 rooms at a time is better than 1, right?!

## GATHER YOUR PARTNERS

Understanding that there's a lot of steps involved in orchestrating a small group trip, turn



to your partners for product and support. After all, they will be the beneficiaries of this newfound business and you need to understand what they can do to welcome small groups and how your CVB plays a role in marketing them.

**Start with hotels.** Establish a relationship with hotels that are interested in group business so you know what types of incentives they offer. This might be a monetary incentive in the form of a group booking code, maybe it's an upgrade to a higher floor or better view. Maybe one room gets upgraded to a hospitality suite or everyone gets a welcome drink at the bar. It might be a free toothbrush – but it should be something to make the group members feel welcome and want to

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brag about it. It's also a property's way of tracking, something EVERY hotel is keen on.

**Bring this same conversation to your attractions.** It's likely they have a group policy already established – maybe a group rate and one comp reservation with every 30 reservations booked. That's great for traditional tours, but what will they do for a group of 10-20? We're not necessarily talking about a price incentive and you're NOT the negotiator, just the idea incubator. In fact, we encourage attractions to NOT focus on price. Instead, what premium experiences do they have that would appeal to a small group? This can be a private docent tour, behind-the-scenes peek at the archives, skip-the-line admission – any number of things.

**Many destinations also have a burgeoning local tour & activity market.** Approach these entrepreneurs and ask them what they would recommend for a smaller group. Chances are you'll get back a list of mouthwatering curated private group experiences that will have group members bragging on their social media channels!

**Finally, approach your local restaurants.** Maybe they have a small private room that amps up the atmosphere. Perhaps they do custom group menus or can arrange a meet & greet with the chef. Maybe they have a sommelier who can give a 10-minute talk about wine

pairings. Let's stress that it's not all about saving \$2 off a chicken breast; we're looking for experiences that are as unique as your local restaurants, breweries and wineries.

As partners communicate their offerings, categorize them by business type and catalog them. This is where your ingenuity as a DMO comes in. Individually, they are just a list of stuff to do, but by pairing and packaging these businesses you're easing one of the main pain points of the organizers – showing how stuff fits together.

#### **SAMPLE ITINERARIES**

Try creating some sample itineraries built around specific themes or events. These itineraries are seldom followed to a tee, but they do serve as a guidepost for



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where groups should go, how long they should stay and what they CAN'T miss.

Your packaging and itineraries will become an indispensable resource for potential ad hoc groups and once these start taking shape, they become an incentive for those partners dragging their heels on offering group incentives (FOMO).

### PLANTING SEEDS

This may be the most important take-away yet. Once you've pulled together these group assets and tried your hand at packaging, **promote them as if you were marketing to an individual traveler.** You simply can't bury this information on a side tab, three clicks down the website hierarchy. This messaging needs to be front and center because the people you're trying to reach are principally the same folks you're coveting as individual travelers. **Don't come here alone - bring your friends too!**



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This starts by creating a NEW landing page specifically for small group offers. On this page articulate how visiting your destination is more fun in packs and that there's a host of businesses that would love to host them. Showcase your packages or itineraries as downloadable pdf files (great for sharing!). List out any places that are offering specials, indicating if they are open-ended or if they have a specific expiration date. Include the booking link/contact to facilitate quick communication!

Now, run this landing page through your marketing and communication channels.

- Create a series of press releases around packages or specific offerings.
- Encourage past customers to "bring their tribe back" in your e-newsletter.
- Reserve a couple of pages in your visitor guide to talk about groups and the incentives available.
- Social media is a great way to communicate your group friendliness and as you start planting these seeds, interested travelers will share your message with their tribe to kickstart the planning process.
- Offer a welcome gift as a way to track activity.

Finally, don't discount promoting these packages through the traditional group channels. Tour operator business models are adapting rapidly, and your trip ideas could very well find a home. Join organizations like ABA, get to know operators through live events and sales calls. By incorporating a "group readiness" message into your destination's communication cycle, you're multiplying the potential reach of any communication and it didn't cost you a dime extra!

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## KEEPING UP THE MOMENTUM

What's unique about ad hoc, small group travel is that it's the essence of what makes travel great. When you think about all the great trips you've been on, it's not necessarily the destination that you remember most, but the people you were with and how that experience made you feel. As you begin to see success with ad hoc groups, ramp up your efforts. Profile specific groups that have been to your destination as a template to build more of this business. Encourage groups to post their experiences on social and amplify that message for

others to see. Share these success stories with your partners in an effort to build more robust offerings.

This becomes a flywheel. The more success you have, the more partners will join in and promote their offerings, both through your bureau and their own channels. This will earn them more business and grow the group channel.

Done right, you'll turn your destination into a small ad hoc group travel machine.

Ready to be a rock star in your community and the envy of your peers?



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