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ROCK STAR

SUPPLIER SERIES

Music to Your Ears for Getting More Groups

My 25-year journey...

Welcome to the White Paper that's been twenty-five years in the making. That may be a stretch, though over that time the tour & travel path I've travelled has been broad.

It began as a simple project exploring the growth of senior travel habits, grew to working with clients on a motorcoach co- op program. That morphed into publishing four individual state publications directed to the packaged group travel segment. Seventeen years later my magazine business was sold and I had what I thought was a brilliant idea.

Having written so many "itinerary articles" why not get into the tour business? What I

quickly realized was running tours was quite different than writing about them.

This White Paper is really about the mistakes I've made over those twenty-five years and the lessons learned. I've attempted to translate my experiences into sound advice for suppliers new to the group business, as well as the grizzled veterans who need a slight tune-up.

It's my hope that you'll find a few tidbits of knowledge that will aid in your journey to becoming a Rock Star supplier.

Enjoy!



Dave Bodle

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How to hire the right group sales person for your travel business

If you're going to make an impact in the group tour market, a good sales manager is a key component to your strategy. Tour companies like to work with someone they know. Let's be realistic. They may be placing 40 or so of their customers in your hands. There's a good chance that operator has never visited your business. They want to know and be comfortable working with not only the company, but have confidence in the group sales manager to deliver a great experience. So, how do we go about becoming "someone they know?"

For a company that's new to the group travel segment, it begins with a commitment to group business. An owner cannot go into tour & travel with the attitude "Sure, getting some bus business would be nice." Talk to your local DMO, attend a governor's conference and learn what it takes to be successful with group business. Success will not come overnight. While the industry is in the midst of change towards shorter booking windows, some groups are still booking up to 18 months in advance. This is a long-term commitment to your business and you must have the stomach for it.

Once in it for the long run, here are a few things to look for in a potential employee.

If fortunate enough to attract an industry veteran, check their references closely. There's a reason they are leaving/have left their current employment. Take with a grain of salt the promise of immediate business from their contacts. It just doesn't work that way. This is a close-knit industry, so search beyond their standard three references to get a feel for how they operate. Talk to tour companies that bring business to your area – they will often shoot straight. Check their LinkedIn profile – do they switch jobs every two years? If that's their track record, you have little chance of sustained success with this individual. With the employment situation being as it is, there are a lot of newbies entering the field of travel and some of them may make excellent candidates for your business. What they lack in contacts, they make up for in enthusiasm and technical aptitude. Social media and computer skills are second nature to this generation. A quick scan of the major association trade shows and conferences indicates that many employers are "going young."

When looking at candidates new to group sales, look for previous business-to-business service-oriented sales experience. Personality is perhaps the best trait –

outgoing, wants to meet and can travel. This is not telesales or email blitzes! If you are talking with a millennial, are they mature beyond their age? This is important, as many customers are in their 50s and 60s. If they're not comfortable working with an older generation, they likely won't stick. They also need to be patient, something that isn't a characteristic of this generation.

A good sales manager is a key component to your strategy

Do they play nice with others? There are numerous calls for partnerships in your community. Do they have any travel restrictions? Sales blitzes and marketplace attendance are necessary, and if they don't have the ability to pick up and go, you won't be represented at these key events.

If you hire the right person for your group sales efforts, the next step is to arm them with the right tools.

Laying the foundation of your group sales strategy

Fifteen years ago a dear friend and respected tour professional told me, “The group industry is high-touch, not high-tech.” Fast forward to today and it’s obvious things have drastically changed. We’re no longer “dialing up” our Internet, and social media has replaced phone calls for status updates. All of these tools have had a significant impact on the industry. However, the importance of one-on-one business relationships is still the critical factor to sales success.

As stated previously, tour operators tend to do business with people they know and trust. Would you entrust 40 of your customers with someone you did not know? Understanding this, the next question you should be asking yourself is “How do I develop relationships in the tour & travel industry?”

*The importance of one-on-one business relationships is still **the** critical factor to sales success*

Start with an assessment of your attraction, restaurant or property so you can formulate an idea of the group market segment your business should be targeting. Are you looking for the traditional senior tour market, or are you better suited for affinity groups? The point here is you can certainly service students and sports along with motorcoach tours and reunions, but do you have the marketing budget and time to pursue each? In the beginning, focus on what you can accomplish efficiently.

Hook Into Your CVB

If you’re going to be in the group business, it’s essential you be an active member of your area’s Destination Marketing Organization (DMO), also commonly referred to as a Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB). These are the people that are selling the area’s group product and ultimately your business. Don’t just show up for CVB meetings, offer to host one! If you expect to be included in their pitch to group buyers, make sure they know you are ready, willing and able to host their valuable customers.

Be FAM Friendly

When called upon to host a tour operator, group leader, teacher or sports planner

familiarization (FAM) tour, do not hesitate to say YES. That prospective customer has already been vetted by your DMO. Consider it a promotional cost of doing business. A potential customer needs to see your business before they can sell your business, so plan on being available along with your manager-on-duty to meet and greet the prospects.

The professional courtesy extended to the DMO and FAM tour needs to be shown by all the group-friendly businesses in your destination. Whether they’re hosted as a joint hospitality night or individual site inspections, it’s critical that “who you are” and “what you do” be put on display. These partners will be important elements of your success. From itineraries and packaging to sales blitzes and trade shows, you’ll be selling the destination, not just your property, restaurant or attraction.

Beyond your rack brochure, there’s one essential piece of promotional literature that needs to join the smartphone and laptop in your briefcase. A Profile Sheet is critical to your sales effort, it’s your specific message to the group travel planner.

How you deliver that message will especially make up your 8.5 x 11, 2-sided,

4-color (I'd hope) Profile Sheet. You do not have to show prices, if you have tiered pricing for groups. You'll have separate rate sheets for your professional tour operators, and other group opportunities.

The next step in the process is dependent on your type of business. For restaurants, attractions, retailers and some service providers, it's wise to take a day trip to make sales calls on prospects within 3.5 hours of your locale. For hoteliers and other services, extending the sales call area to 6-7 hours travel is appropriate, though obviously more time-consuming and expensive. In those geographic circles are planner prospects in your targeted markets. National, regional and state association directories can certainly help identify those prospects. If offered, consider a regional sales blitz with your partners or sponsored by your DMO.

Trade Shows and Marketplaces

Continuing to expand your target geography, look at state motorcoach association trade shows. Understand their purpose. Although the annual conference may attract member tour operators, the majority of attendees are motorcoach operators that DO NOT offer tours. They may be helpful in passing your information along to their group customers, but this is a weak selling proposition.

Talk with your peers and see what they know about state bus associations and their conferences. Is the conference a

marketplace, or exhibit format? Are there networking opportunities that are open and inviting? Do any breakout sessions deal with tour & travel subjects? Would it be more efficient to make sales calls vs. a trade show? Choose wisely.

Make absolutely certain you plan well and target the appointments that fit your capabilities

The premier tour marketplaces, exchanges and showcases are on a regional, national and international level. Are they right for you? Should you take that step with only a few years' sales experience? Unfortunately, there are no set answers. Simply remember that the primary mission of your sales effort is to develop relationships that will bring you business now and in the future.

If you believe you've accomplished that goal in your initial geographic sphere and your budget permits, then move forward and test the waters of a regional or national show. Make absolutely certain you plan well and target the appointments that fit your capabilities. Follow-up is so very important. You've come this far in the sales process –don't fail to show your professionalism. Tour planners you meet may have over 100 appointments during the show, and remembering whom they

met at 10:42 a.m. on a Tuesday morning is often forgotten by 3:42 that afternoon. This is human nature, and it's why follow-up from shows is so critical.

If the conference offers a session for new attendees, make sure you go. If you do not, your "deer in the headlights" look will be obvious. Plus, you'll probably miss something important. Also, please do not become a supplier who never met a trade show they didn't like. They're the ones that laugh among themselves at how hard they're working, but seeing the same clients and prospects over and over. While relationship building is important, seeing the same book of buyers at overlapping shows is a waste of time and money.

Finally and possibly most importantly, do not forget your sales objective. Consider every new trade show on its individual merit. Instead of returning to the same shows over and over, consider some of the regional shows that are now finding favor, or look at re-allocating dollars towards new collateral materials or reaching new buyers with print advertising or online marketing.

Your mission is to keep the group sales funnel full and you simply won't if you keep going to the same dry well.

Who's buying and what?

There really is a difference.

The group travel market is constantly evolving. To enjoy success it's important for suppliers to understand and adjust to those changes.

Traditionally, receptive operators sold packaged travel to tour operators who sold to group leaders. Suppliers looked to each of those tiers to sell their product. With the advent of special interest groups or affinity segments, the market has expanded. Now more than ever, suppliers have new opportunities to package and market their product.

We're seeing more narrowly focused tours such as adventure, faith-based and girlfriend getaways. Operators are adjusting to smaller groups that display a more vertical interest. You should be doing the same.

Let's review the three types of players in the packaged travel industry.

Receptive Operators and Destination Management Companies (DMCs)

An inbound receptive operator, or DMC markets, books and services complete packages for a given destination.

There are advantages to working with them. There is reasonable access to these area experts and other than direct sales, little additional marketing is required. A receptive has access to and works with many tour operators and group leaders, which augurs well for repeat business.

Operators are adjusting to smaller groups that display a more vertical interest

In addition to their small numbers and most being located in major destinations, there are disadvantages working with a receptive. They have no end user or consumer access and rely totally on others' marketing and sales skills. A receptive is very price-sensitive and requires your absolute net (Never Ever Tell) price. Do your research. Is your receptive an established business? Did your colleagues have a good experience in working with them?

Tour Operators

Over the years tour operators have accounted for the bulk of the traditional packaged tour business. Tour companies provide and market multiple-destination packaged travels. As our nation's "Greatest Generation" retired and hungered to see their country, packaged travel offered by tour operators exploded. At the height of prosperity there were approximately 3,500 professional tour operators.

Because of merger, consolidation and economic challenges, today there are fewer than 3,000 tour operators. Those that remain are adapting to the change in consumer demographics. Where the traditional traveler wanted to see the manatees, today's customer wants to swim with them. Special interest groups and experiential tourism are driving the industry.

The professional operator has a keen awareness of the competitive market. Their distribution network is wide, consisting of consumers, group leaders and travel agents (many travel agencies also have tour divisions). That translates to an opportunity for repeat business, or even a series of tours over consecutive years. Access is relatively easy through marketplaces, travel exchanges,

trade magazines and e-newsletters. It's easier to qualify tour operators. Do they attend marketplaces? Are they members of a professional organization? Do they have a modern website?

Although there is ease of access, tour operators are creatures of habit, having built trust with their existing suppliers. They do not like to be sold and are price-sensitive.

NOTE: There is a difference between independent tour operators, charter bus companies and wholesalers

- Independent tour operators create tour packages for retail and/or group consumers. They do not own buses.
- Charter bus companies provide coaches and drivers to independent operators and group leaders for packages created by these customers. They do not offer packages. Some charter bus companies also have tour divisions, but it's an important distinction to make, as the two don't go hand-in-hand.
- Wholesalers generally offer packaged economy tours to tour operators, bus companies and group leaders. They work in volume.

Group Leaders

Under the umbrella of group leaders you'll find a diverse market. From garden clubs to bank clubs, churches to chambers of commerce, senior centers to ski clubs, we're all part of some special interest, or affinity group. Think of the clubs and organizations you, your friends and extended families are involved with; these are preformed groups that may or may not have an organized group travel component.

There are two types of group leaders you should know:

1. There is the group leader of an organization who functions as an agent of the professional tour company. They promote that operator's packaged travel to their group and are compensated with a commission, per head fee or free travel.
2. Some group leaders represent large groups and even multiple groups. Generally speaking, the majority of group leaders plan their own day trips, but when it comes to extended or overseas travel, they solicit the help of a tour operator. The golden rule: the more complicated the trip, the more likely they are to use a tour operator.

On the surface the advantages of working directly with group leaders seems

compelling. It's a large and growing market segment – over 40,000 recognized group leaders exist.. As a supplier you have direct access to the group and you're dealing directly with the decision maker. They control the passengers and have a good feel for the end user. It's also the quickest turnaround from sales contact to visit. While tour operators book up to two years in advance, group leaders can turn around a trip in 90 days or less if they have motivated travelers.

Does it sound too good to be true? Weigh the disadvantages of selling to group leaders. Although large in numbers, they are difficult to identify by name and any company's group leader list is considered proprietary data so access is limited. This translates to expensive access. Group leaders are the least likely to produce and when they do are questionable repeaters – they will visit a destination once and they move on to the next trip.

What do tour buyers really need?

Today's tour & travel segment is not your grandparents' group tour anymore. Sure, there are still a significant number of traditional tours being taken today. However, like any industry, change is inevitable. It just makes sense that grizzled veterans and newbie suppliers regularly review policies and procedures to keep in step with the needs of the professional packaged travel buyer.

Before you hang out the Groups Welcome shingle, ensure the 5 needs of the tour & travel buyer are met.

1. Study for the group-friendly test

For hoteliers, you need a minimum of 25 double-double beds with in-room coffee. Well-lighted public space, baggage handlers, elevators and indoor corridors are must-haves. An on-site or adjacent restaurant is certainly a plus, especially for breakfast, as tour planners (and their customers) have grown accustomed to an included breakfast in their packages.

Restaurants should have a reliable, knowledgeable reservation system along with all-inclusive pricing (food + tax + gratuity). The group menu needs to offer choices on the spot (nobody is calling in

menu counts 7 days in advance so your kitchen can order the exact number of chicken breasts) and include healthy offerings and portion control. Dessert specials are always appreciated. The ability to seat groups near each other and adequate restrooms are a must. Finally, remember to take care of the escort and the driver – they make or break the tour. If they are happy, so are their passengers. It's how you get repeat customers.

Attractions and, in fact, all suppliers need a clear group policy. Along with lenient deposit/cancellation policies and procedures, a written confirmation system is mandatory. Easy bus loading and unloading zones and fair, tiered pricing are absolute musts.

2. Informed and reliable sales and service personnel

It is imperative that staff be prepared to answer questions. What time does that museum open? Do you know what time the local transit stops here? How long will it take my coach to get to the theater? Can I walk to the nearest drug store? In a perfect world your entire staff would be able to enthusiastically answer these questions. In reality if the staff is simply aware that the

sales department, hostesses, and front desk have the answers, that's certainly acceptable.

It should go without saying that the sales staff must visit other group-friendly businesses in your area. There's a good chance that the tour planner has never visited your destination and may have only limited familiarity. Your insight and local knowledge will often make the difference between a sale and a "thanks for your time." You can certainly help yourself by helping the buyer.

Your insight & knowledge will often make the difference between a sale & a "thanks for your time"

3. Flexibility above all else

We are not proposing that you hire a yoga instructor or start offering stretching exercises in the pool area for groups. In the "group-friendly dictionary" flexibility means policies and procedures in place that help, not hinder tour business.

Most tours are planned on spec, meaning the operator thinks they will have a desirable turnout for the trip. Until they get it to market nobody truly knows. Operators work on tight margins and can't be shipping non-refundable deposits or agree to harsh attrition clauses that put them on the hook for a tour that doesn't sell.

Policies are needed, of course, but be prepared to make last-minute decisions that vary from your standard rule(s) of operation. An extra comp at an area attraction may be needed for the local step-on guide. Will you honor the group rate if only 18 rooms are sold? Will you provide the comp dinner with only 19 paid when the policy states 20?

It is important to remember the tour buyer has invested time and money in promoting your destination. Even when a package is not as successful as hoped, there is a positive side to being flexible. You're building a new customer relationship or strengthening an established one. The ownership and management of your business must empower you to make the decisions that are beneficial to the long-term growth of your business, not just short-term financial gain.

4. Tiered pricing

One of the major reasons why people take a tour is value. To some, that value is a low price. To others, value may be doing something that would not be available if they traveled by themselves. Regardless how the tour customer sees value, the

reality is the professional tour operator is in business to make money. Therefore, they need a price that can be marked up to cover their marketing and operational expenses and allow for some profit.

This price should be less than your standard group rate. The reasoning is straightforward – volume. Volume is one of the determining factors that defines the difference between a professional tour buyer and a group leader buyer. A professional buyer has the propensity to bring multiple groups year-in and year-out, versus a group leader who may bring you a single group in their lifetime.

5. Ignore the niches and forgo the riches

One of the emerging changes in the tour & travel segment is the growth of niche and affinity markets. In many cases these interest-based groups are smaller than the traditional tour – and that's by design. If you're serious about the group business, be prepared to look at your group policies in response to this shifting effect in the market.

Is it important that the "Kayak Club From Someplace Else" arrives at your hotel at the same time for check-in? Are you going to hold them to the group minimum of 20 tickets when they only have 18 in their entire club? Do they need to come to your restaurant for single seating? Is there an attraction in your destination that can provide a "for their group only" experience?

If you're worried about the impact of smaller group sizes, ask yourself, would you rather

have 8 rooms or 0, 15 admission tickets or 0? Today's travel landscape presents many choices, and if yours is not perceived as inviting and accommodating, you're merely a speed bump in the parking lot.

Policies are needed, but be prepared to make last-minute decisions that vary from your standard rule(s) of operations

6 tips for building the ideal profile sheet

Your research is done. The appointments are set. You've packed clean clothes. Your group sales superhero cape is pressed. Your out-of-office email "thingamajiggie" is fully activated. You are locked and loaded, let's hit the road.

Wait!

Whether you're heading out on a sales mission or attending a travel marketplace, here's how to be ready with your most important sales tool.

Having a Profile Sheet for your business is essential when venturing into the group market. Your brochure isn't enough, and your iPad slide flip-chart is forgotten even before you shut the case. Furthermore, more and more shows place restrictions on what you can hand out with the baseline collateral piece being a Profile Sheet, and even if they didn't, what chance does your glossy brochure have of actually making it in someone's suitcase?

*Having a **profile sheet** for your business is essential when venturing into the group market*

If you're prospecting for groups, you need a marketing piece that talks to the group planner and anticipates their needs and questions. Remember, if you don't anticipate and answer the tour planners' questions, your best hope is they'll ask the questions.

This printed piece should be 8.5" x 11", four color with photographs and printed both sides. Your profile sheet should also be saved as a PDF for follow-up and responding to telephone and e-mail inquiries as well as pertinent follow-up to trade show appointments.

The Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) and supplier Profile Sheet have the same purpose, but will vary slightly. We'll address those differences as we go. Keep in mind the DMO sells the destination. Suppliers are certainly promoting the destination, but their Profile Sheet is selling their business.

There are 6 components of a good Profile Sheet.

1. Who are you?

For all suppliers a message from the owner/manager or executive director is a good way to show management's commitment to your group program. Planners need to feel

comfortable. One of the better messages I've seen is a restaurant owner's message that shared his pledge to servicing groups.

2. What are you?

Here's your opportunity to tell planners what's special about your destination, or property. Give serious thought to the group market(s) you're targeting. All groups are special interest, but often differ in their needs. They may be a senior center group, a sports team or an adventure group. How you highlight yourself to a traditional senior market, or religious travel group may differ from a student group, or sports planner presentation.

3. Where are you?

Location information for the DMO's Profile Sheet deals with how a group gets there. What are the distances from your popular points of origination? Showing a map, or mileage and drive times, adds personalization. The larger the destination, the further your points of origination will be, maybe even in fly times from other gateway airports.

What Interstate highways, U.S. highways are servicing your destination? If you're an hour off a major Interstate, assure the

planner you're "conveniently located, or just a scenic" hour drive from the interchange. Is Amtrak servicing your destination? What are the nearest airport(s) and airlines servicing your destination?

For small suppliers, location information is just as important. Terminology like, "Conveniently located near..." doesn't work. Accommodations need to be specific with drive time and mileage to the area's major attractions and shopping. However, on the hotelier's Profile Sheet it's permissible to state, "Within 20 minutes of a dozen group-friendly restaurants."

*The information conveyed
on a Profile Sheet takes
precedence over design*

For attractions and shopping suppliers, it's perfectly acceptable to state, "Within 20 minutes of all area, group-friendly hotels and restaurants." Restaurants need to be as detailed as possible. Mileage and drive times from major attractions and shopping venues should be included on the Profile Sheet.

4. Why would a group visit you?

Here's where you cover the nuts and bolts of your group policy. What constitutes a group rate – 10, 25 guests/ 15 or 20 rooms? What's your complimentary (COMP) policy

– at what numbers of paid guests/rooms do you COMP the escort, the driver and local guide? What are your deposit, refund and cancellation policies? Do you provide an on- coach welcome, or welcome reception and baggage service? Are you a member of a national, regional or state professional tour operator/motorcoach association? If so, use their logo(s.)

5. When are you open?

This sounds pretty obvious, but your hours of operation need a home. An attraction opening at 10 a.m. doesn't need a group on their doorstep at 9:30. If a restaurant that opens for dinner at 4 p.m. will do lunch at noon for groups of 25 or more, state that offer and time.

If your group sales hours differ from your hours of operation, spell it out. Your telephone number, e-mail address, website and social media links are must-haves. Consider a headshot of your group sales person. Planners like to do business with people they know and a seven-minute encounter with you across an eight-foot foot table is hardly something they'll remember six months down the road.

6. Let words tell your story

With all due respect to my art director friends, the information conveyed on a Profile Sheet takes precedence over design. Let's get your COPY together first and have the designer do his magic around the message. With that said, images do tell a story.

A destination's iconic photographs should be part of the Profile Sheet. A hotel property's concrete and steel exterior works in a scenic setting. A restaurant's image of its well-plated meal is well served. Attraction and shopping images that tell a story in dramatic fashion certainly support their message.

No two Profile Sheets will look and sound the same. The outline presented here is a good place to begin. The challenge that awaits you is blending the required business-to-business information with a creative selling message.

Your guide to successful partnering & packaging

At the risk of oversimplification, buyers are interested in destinations and themes. To sell both you need to experience both. Early in this white paper we encouraged you to develop relationships with like-minded businesses in your community. We suggest visiting and experiencing what other suppliers are offering to the market. Likewise, we encourage you to make certain that other suppliers in your destination experience your product or service.

Having the nuts and bolts knowledge that assists a planner in putting together a workable itinerary is priceless. It's a great beginning for any supplier on the road to becoming a Rock Star. The next step is to open your imagination and let your creative juices flow!

This might be a little difficult to sell the boss at first, but you're not just in the business of selling hotel rooms, plated dinners, museum visits or whatever your business might be. Your customer is selling packaged travel while creating memories – you should, too.

The solution is to partner with other suppliers in your destination to create unforgettable options that fill an itinerary. Remember to keep it local and unique to your destination.

Here are just a few examples to kick-start your thinking.

Dinner & Show

There are two mainstays in packaged travel. Groups need to eat and evening entertainment is a necessity. Theater destinations have a history of putting this option together. However, you don't need to be a theater destination to make this work.

Dinner & Show will just take a little creativity between the restaurant and theater partners. Look at the theater's schedule and plan themed dinners around each performance. Is there a dinner scene in the production? Does the production have a time period theme? Are there characters from the production that can make a brief appearance at the restaurant?

You need not abandon Dinner & Show when your local theater is dark. What's better than setting up rounds on the stage and having a local restaurant cater the meal? The theater's general manager tells the theater's story and a local dance troupe and/or music ensemble provides entertainment. Multiple local suppliers are coming together to provide a truly extraordinary tour experience.

Museum Marvels

The October 2014 issue of Leisure Group Travel shared a story of three Mobile, Alabama museums that came together for a major exhibit of Mardi Gras art. Along with the Mobile Museum of Art, the History Museum of Mobile and Mobile Carnival Museum packaged for the complete experience. A destination's museums should be well aware of each other's special exhibits and be ready to work together whenever a suitable theme is identified.

*Partner with other suppliers to
create unforgettable options
that fill an itinerary*

Your destination certainly doesn't need huge museums. For this suggested option all you need is someplace where photography is displayed and a garden. Consider an art museum or gallery partnering with a local historic home and garden for a unique tour option. The day begins at the garden with a professional photographer sharing insights regarding lighting and composition. A visit

to the gallery or museum gives them an opportunity to see how it all comes together. Add a fun lunch stop and you have a unique itinerary option with multiple partners packaging.

Another possibility is a visit to a local farmers market with tonight's restaurant chef for a look at what's in season

Farm to Fork

Destinations are rightfully proud of locally grown and locally prepared foods, but when it comes to creating group experiences from them, most fall short. Let's package a farm, winery and restaurant for a true local experience. Start the day with a visit to a local farm or ranch for a look at agritourism and meet the proprietor. Be ready to get dirty. Take a hayride, milk a cow, or pick your own fruit and vegetables.

Another possibility is a visit to a local farmers market with tonight's restaurant chef for a look at what's in season. If there's a winery, brewery or distillery in the area, bring them into the package. Finish your day with a meal that features locally grown, in-season ingredients. Make sure your chef or owner spends a few minutes at each table.

An interesting twist to Farm to Fork is a trip to the local fish market with the chef providing insight into how he selects fresh fish. Today's catch will certainly be one of the menu options this evening. Of course, adding a winery visit and its pairings to the dinner enhances the experience.

Drop a Line, Drop a Dollar

Earlier we referenced dining and evening entertainment as important to any tour. Let's add a third option to that itinerary – shopping. It might be more aptly stated that ladies like to shop. In my experience the men attend the shopping at the ladies' pleasure. I know you've seen those gentlemen on mall benches. They're there to drive and carry bags. Let's see if we can help the guys out.

Let's partner a shopping destination with a fishing outfitter. The coach drops the guys off for a fly-fishing demonstration in the mountains, or some pier fishing pointers on the coast. This works wherever there's a body of water and a local guide. The ladies proceed to their shopping destination. We solved who's driving, but wondering who will carry the ladies' shopping bags.

Don't Forget These 3 Items

Partners creating and packaging exciting tour options is certainly a good thing. However, like personal and business relationships, how the money is handled is critical to their success. Before starting your marketing be certain to know these three things:

1. Partners need to be on the same page with group policies. Determine the number needed to be considered a group and when reservations and deposits are required. What's the price for your packaged option? Will the pricing be tiered?
2. Which partner will be responsible for collecting the money? How and when will funds be distributed among partners?
3. What's your budget and marketing strategy? Which partner will be responsible for placements and payments?

Suppliers in the tour & travel business get great pleasure from both selling their product or service and helping to create lasting memories for their visitors. Partnering and Packaging opens the door to experience both.

Is there an industry show that's right for you?

A popular question at just about every workshop I've ever conducted: "What shows do you recommend I attend?" It's a good question and there are lots of choices. The strategy you employ in deciding which industry shows and events must fit seamlessly into your business plan. Here are a few thoughts to get you going in the right direction.

5 Factors to Consider When Choosing Group Tour Trade Shows

1. Where are you in your professional development? Having seen many newbies with that "deer in the headlights look" attending their first major association conference, we advise against attending a major industry trade show right out of the gate.
2. Are you in an established major destination, small market or one that's up and coming? If the destination isn't ready for prime time, it's probable that their suppliers aren't either.
3. How are you marketing to groups? Are you reaching out and enjoying any success with tour operators

in adjoining states, regionally or nationally? This will dictate where your trade show plans should be.

4. What's your travel & entertainment budget? Major national and regional shows present new business opportunities. However, it might be more economical and effective to load up the van with a few partners and do a good old-fashioned sales blitz.
5. What do your partners say? We continuously talk about networking and partnering with like-minded suppliers.

Suppliers must balance the opportunity each show provides with limited travel and budgets available for such endeavors. Let's take a look at a few shows that are out there and decide what's the best fit for your group marketing.

Group Leader Shows

When working within the traditional tour & travel market, there are two types of group leader shows you can attend. The first type is attending a tour operator's group leader show. If that operator has a series of tours coming to your destination, it certainly

benefits you to help sell that tour to the groups that are pulling the trigger on where they are traveling.

The second type of group leader shows, we'll simply call "others." These are primarily commercial shows, which often have an abundance of group leaders that are primarily interested in day trips. Remember, even the prospects that will travel overnight are not your best opportunity for repeat business. This makes the cost of obtaining a new customer very expensive.

Which niche market show(s) to attend is pretty straightforward. A Midwest ski resort should plan to attend the Windy City Ski & Snowboard Show. Likewise, if your museum has an educational program that meets the state's academic standards, why would you miss the statewide eighth grade teachers or state band directors convention?

We advise against attending a major industry show right out of the gate

Virtually all group leader shows are exhibit booths, not one-on-one appointment format. You'll depend on the buyers stopping by your space, so you'll need collateral, giveaways and profile sheets ready. The best advice when considering group leader shows is to know the local market, ask for references, and be certain there are qualified buyers in attendance.

State Motorcoach Associations

This type of show can be beneficial if you are marketing to your home state or neighboring states. Often state bus associations will join together for their annual conference; this practice is common in the Midwest and the South. The good news is these meetings are less costly to attend. An associate membership will be required, but the expense for exhibit space is not out of line.

There are downsides to state motorcoach association conferences. Like group leader shows, these gatherings are typically exhibit and not marketplace appointment formats. Not every tour operator will find your booth. The majority of attendees are charter operators that don't book tours.

*An up-and-comer in this market
is Spotlight Travel Network*

Regional Showcases

The major events are Midwest Marketplace, Heartland Travel Showcase and Travel South Showcase, all held in the first quarter of the year. They feature appointments with pre-qualified North American tour planners. An up-and-comer in this market is Spotlight Travel Network who's hosting regional shows across the country.

The upside is you'll be dealing directly with buyers that have an interest in bringing tours to your region. The bad news is the price to play is at a level above the previous opportunities.

National Marketplaces and Exchanges

The American Bus Association (ABA) Marketplace in early January attracts approximately 900 pre-qualified North American bus companies and tour operators for more than 140,000 appointments with attending suppliers. Educational seminars, city tours as well as networking and social events are part of the registration fee. ABA membership is necessary for suppliers to attend. The appointment-taking buyers are seated and have 174 openings during the three days. Appointments are done online prior to the conference, but there are opportunities to add additional ones throughout the marketplace.

The National Tour Association (NTA) Travel Exchange, also held in January, includes their new Faith Travel Association (FTA). NTA membership includes more

than 700 tour operators with average sales exceeding \$12 million. Appointments are pre-scheduled online prior to the Travel Exchange. Operators and suppliers have the opportunity to experience the host through city tours, attend educational seminars and participate in networking sessions. FTA invites suppliers with faith-based product to exhibit and take appointments the first day of Travel Exchange in the FTA Pavilion.

International

IPW is a premier international marketplace taking place in late spring or early summer. Travel South USA's International Showcase takes place in late November/early December marketing Southern destinations to international operators. RSAA is an association of receptive tour operators. They hold a convention each February. Ontario Motorcoach Association's November conference is important to doing Canadian business.

Face-time with your customer is important and shows are an ideal venue for that exposure. There are many more shows than space allows us to explore here. Choose the opportunities that best fit your sales plan.

3 things you need to know about your consumer travel advertising

Advertising? That's not my responsibility. I'm not sure what they're doing; better see Margaret down the hall. We'll probably be doing what we did last year. These are all familiar responses from group tour suppliers if we were to ask the question, "Can you tell me about your consumer advertising?"

Whether you're the group salesperson at a small attraction or the director of sales at a large DMO, understanding your consumer advertising message and schedules are very important in your journey to becoming a Rock Star supplier. We'll talk about trade advertising at a later date. For now here are three reasons why having knowledge about your consumer advertising as well as your local and state DMO's advertising, makes you a better group salesperson.

Understanding your consumer advertising message & schedules is very important

I cannot tell you how many times I've sat at governor's conferences' closing luncheons, or local chamber and CVB membership meetings where the "new" consumer advertising campaign creative and schedule were unveiled. Like everyone in the room, I had an opinion on what was being shown. Sometimes I applauded and other times I was quite cynical. Honestly, I was missing the boat.

1. It pays for group sales to know what's being said to consumers

You may be part of the church choir; perhaps you're active in the local garden club or a regular at the Saturday morning golf scramble. Each of your activities or clubs has a group leader. It just stands to reason that the group leaders in other markets are attracted to your destination through consumer advertising. They may visit your website and make the inquiry directly to you, or ask their preferred tour operator if there's packaged travel to your destination. Here's where you shine.

Be certain that your group sales message is consistent with your consumer advertising message. If your marketing folks are promoting the destination as a shopping mecca, you must have a shopping itinerary

ready even if it's just an option. Maybe your destination's branding is outdoor adventure, or entertainment. You get the picture. When advertising talks to consumers, groups are listening.

Be ready to update your Profile Sheet and website's group page(s) to reflect how consumer advertising is positioning your destination, or supplier business. If they're talking about antique shopping, it better be featured as a premier option on your group literature and website.

2. You'll need to know where the consumer advertising is being seen

It just makes sense when planning that you are aware of your business, or destination consumer advertising. If the Carolinas is being targeted with a consumer advertising campaign, make sales calls in the Carolinas. Likewise if your local or state DMO is running a radio campaign in the Chicago market, know when it's happening and get a sales trip planned.

It's imperative for every supplier to know what your local and state DMOs are saying and where they're placing their messages. If they're talking about gardens and spring flower shows, find your place on the

itinerary and make those sales calls. There are tour operators and garden clubs in your sales territory!

3. Should timing of my sales trip have anything to do with consumer advertising placements?

It should for the most part, but be aware of the timing tour operators need to gather a group. Granted the period between your sales calls and groups arriving at your destination is shrinking. There appear to be two major causes to quicker turnaround in the group business.

First, within both our business and personal lives, information is now available to us quicker than ever. Put that in perspective of how tour operators worked traditionally. Gather the information, produce a catalog, schedule group leader meetings and follow up. Today, digital marketing and social media have become timesavers. Operators are communicating with their existing customers in real time and finding new customers with these tools.

Secondly, the tour market is shifting from the traditional senior-oriented groups to niche and special interest groups. Whether they're quilters, skiers or any other niche, they are in tune with their interest throughout the year. Quilters know where the major shows are being held, and skiers are impacted daily with destination messages. The point being that special interest travelers know where they want

to go and can often plan (or ask a tour operator for a package) with a six-week lead prior to arrival.

In relationship to your destination's consumer advertising, we haven't aided your decision of "when to make a sales trip" any easier for you. There is a hidden message, though. Understand your buyer's digital marketing strength. How quickly can they respond to new opportunities? Be prepared with itineraries, packaging information and support materials, including images and verbiage. When the local museum brings in a special display and it's promoted regionally to consumers, you'll be ready to help your tour operator partners reach out to their travelers.

*Understand your buyer's
digital marketing strength*

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Summary

Often a journey is described in terms of distance, or time traveled. My father-in-law a professional truck driver often defined a trip by gas prices and miles-per-gallon. My personal journey in tour & travel seems to parallel exactly what the industry is about, experiences.

Those experiences were impacted by many of the people I met over the years. Some very special tour operators, receptive operators and suppliers have greatly influenced me. For their contributions to my journey I am eternally grateful. Enough about me, it's your journey that's important.

For those that remain in the business past a few years, you will meet some great influencers. They will impact how you do business. Times they are a changing and your network of contacts within the industry will keep you abreast of what's hot and what's not. However, regardless of the knowledge gained and the changes in how you market there is one constant. We are in the experience business.

As a supplier everything you do should be based on your customer's positive experience. Whether it's being prepared when facing an operator at marketplace, or partnering and participating with your DMO in a sales blitz, those positive business-to-business experiences will significantly contribute to you becoming a Rock Star Supplier.