

Convention Bureau ambassadors bring big business

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Puerto Rico is the beneficiary of a little-known team of promoters who help bring about the injection of some \$125 million a year to the island's economy. The Puerto Rico Convention Bureau



Rafael Babilonia

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Ambassador Program is so successful it is now credited with 20 percent of the bureau's annual sales.

Word of mouth has always been the most powerful form of promotion and the Ambassador Program has evolved as a result of the success of individual efforts to attract business. A decade ago, the PRCB ambassadors numbered 16 people. Today they are 50 and growing. The Convention Bureau wants more. It is investing \$600,000 this year to grow and fortify the program that is proving hugely successful at attracting meetings and convention business to the island.

The goal is to sign on 250 ambassadors who want to promote the island as a great place for business meetings.

"There are 18,000 associations in the U.S.," said Puerto Rico Convention Bureau President Ana María Viscasilas. "That is huge business potential for the island." She says anyone with contacts and an interest in the island is welcome aboard.

Several PRCB ambassadors visited The STAR recently to share their experiences in the program.

Rafael Babilonia, a public relations professional by trade, has been nearly 16 years with the Ambassador Program. He fell into it when his former boss, who was a member of the program, was working to have the Council of Boy Scouts hold a meeting here. His boss was tied up with other things so it was Babilonia who made contact



Blanca Arrieta

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with the Convention Bureau and set things up.

PRCB made sure the scouts were met at the airport by bus and shuttled to La Princesa in Old San Juan for a welcome party including the Le Lo Lai entertainment group.

"They made it easy," he said.

It went so well that Babilonia and his dad, who were members of Make A Wish Foundation Puerto Rico, decided to promote the island for a national meeting of Make A Wish Foundation. The first meeting brought 200 people, the kids and their families, to the Caribe Hilton and El San Juan Hotel in the early 90s. The bureau estimates a total value to the economy of more than \$100,000 back then. It was such a popular success that it was later followed by the larger Make A Wish Foundation international group.

"While promoting the island is a natural, we couldn't pull it off without the help of the Convention Bureau staff," Babilonia said. Especially in the case of nonprofit groups where individuals pay their own way, the PRCB assistance is invaluable. They helped

to coordinate the venues, seeking the best possible room rates for the group.

Trickle down

A typical group meeting in Puerto Rico brings 500 people for four

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Martha Vélez

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nights. A group that size has a direct economic impact of \$1.2 million according to industry formulas based on years of experience.

"We figure the basic meeting cost as transportation, rooms, transportation, meeting space and catering," Viscasillas said. The multipliers include add-on stays before and after the meetings, taxis, shopping, dinner and day trips.

All in all, the meetings and conventions industry represents an impact of \$900 million to the economy of Puerto Rico.

"What we need is the support of every Puerto Rican or friend of Puerto Rico that has the contacts to bring these associations to the island," Viscasillas said.

It started just that way for Blanca

Arrieta, an independent insurance agent. Twenty years ago she was an agent with Nationwide Insurance and was working on agent incentives. Her success with in that field lead to bringing a convention to the island when she was first introduced to what was then the San Juan Convention Bureau.

As a member of the National Association of Insurance Women, her next convention stateside set her in motion to bring that organization to the island.

She knew she had the backing of Convention Bureau professionals who provided full assistance. The NAIW regional convention brought 300 women to Puerto Rico for the first time in 1992.

"The next one was easy," Arrieta said. "They were asking for it." The NAIW regional wanted to come back and met here again in 2001.

Bring one, bring all

This past June, Arrieta was the proud ambassador responsible for bringing the NAIW international convention of 600 people to the island. The association's trade magazine dedicated 13 pages to boast about their 66th annual convention here, replete with photos. The event had a \$2 million impact locally.

In his current job as an administrator for Mora Development Group, Rafael Babilonia became aware of the Southern Housing Affordable Management Association's annual meeting which was held in Texas this year.

"We will bring these 600-700 management companies and housing developers to Puerto Rico in 2008," he announced proudly.

Martha Vélez is the president of the Puerto Rico Ostomy Association. The association holds both regional and international meetings. She brought

the first regional meeting to the island in the final days of the Condado Trio 10 years ago.

"They were excited. The bureau arranged for a party at La Princesa, we had a reception at La Terraza at the *alcaldia*, they loved it," Vélez said.

The success of that group prompted her to begin the process of enticing the organization's World Congress to the island, a process that starts years in advance.

She enlisted the help of the bureau which had its Madrid agent meet her in Portugal for the Ostomy Association's World Congress three years ago.

"We set up a colorful booth with five different products from the island," she recalled.

They were competing against Italy for the next World Congress and they had to work for it. The organization's president, from Egypt, took it as a foregone conclusion that the next Con-

gress would also be held in Europe.

"We had music, *coquis*, flags," Vélez said. They also reminded Europeans that the rate of exchange would be in their favor in Puerto Rico. The delegates voted in favor of the island and 165 people from 35 countries came to the island for the first time in August.

"I think we lose a lot of business meetings because of lack of knowledge about the destination among decision makers," Vélez said.

Viscasillas could not agree more. "Seven out of 10 people who come for site visits sign a contract before they leave the island," she said.

"We need more ambassadors to get the message out there." The more meetings professionals who visit, the more groups they bring. And if each person who comes for a meeting tells four more about their positive experience here, the economy can't help but turn the corner.