

# Volunteer opportunities raising New Orleans' convention clout

*POSTED: 03:54 PM Wednesday, August 10, 2011*

*BY: Jennifer Larino, Staff Writer*

New Orleans City Business

Crowded hotel lobbies and packed French Quarter restaurants may be the traditional hallmarks of the local convention industry, but Cathy Pruett, executive director at HandsOn New Orleans, says rows of pre-cut lumber, water bottles and T-shirts her staff prepares are just as telling. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America volunteers help out at Musician's Village during their New Orleans conference in July 2009. (photo courtesy New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau)

For Pruett and her staff, a national convention means volunteers. Last year, HandsOn staff members shoveled and drove nails for more than 5,800 hours with 1,451 conventioners. That was a slow year.

This year, Pruett said calls from meeting planners who want to incorporate a volunteer project into their convention agenda are picking up. The HandsOn staff cuts lumber for park benches and prepares tool belts weeks before conventioners hit the ground.

“We also get a lot of calls for bringing the project to them,” Pruett said. “We’ll go to hotels and we’ll put together school kits and put together backpacks for school children in need.”

Nonprofits such as HandsOn have had years to marshal thousands of volunteers in rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The result is a local network of organizations that have project planning down to a science.

As more meeting planners prioritize social initiatives, local business tourism leaders say that network will play a large role in setting New Orleans apart as a convention and meeting destination.

Tara Letort, director of group public relations for the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau, said the type of 200-person convention volunteer projects that emerged after Katrina are now typical in the meeting planning process.

“A lot of our groups are saying that they never did a community service project until they came here. Now they are making it standard,” said Letort, who joined the bureau in 2007 to lead a new team tasked in part with connecting meeting planners and local nonprofits.

Convention markets nationwide saw a similar trend emerge three years after national housing and financial markets crashed, the recession took hold and trust in corporate institutions nosedived.

Lauren Jarrell, spokeswoman for the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, said meeting planners started asking all cities to lay out their green initiatives and volunteer opportunities.

“You saw a lot of associations taking a look at the locally driven community investment as a way to say this industry as a whole is building trust,” Jarrell said.

Tammi Runzler, senior vice president of convention sales and services at Visit Orlando, said faith-based groups meeting in her city were among the few looking for volunteer opportunities before 2008.

“We have seen a tremendous escalation from almost all groups, all market types,” Runzler said. Michelle Stoddard, who oversees corporate social responsibility initiatives at the Professional Convention Management Association in Chicago, said factors such as pricing, available flights and hotel rooms are still deciding factors for meeting planners.

“If you need 10,000 rooms per night and the city doesn’t have it, it’s not necessarily an option — no matter how green it is,” Stoddard said.

Even so, Stoddard said recycling and service programs increase a city’s visibility as a convention host. She noted a growing effort to plan ways for attendees to move outside of meeting rooms and into the community.

“(Conventions) want to leave something in the community that’s not just their meeting having taken place,” Stoddard said, adding that destinations with strong ties to local nonprofits make that easier.

Letort said that’s where New Orleans had a jumpstart. Katrina and levee failures left behind devastation but also an efficient volunteer infrastructure. Letort and her team meet regularly with local nonprofits that can usher a project from shovels to T-shirts.

“There are so many groups here that really get it, so many organizations that know how to put together a turnkey project,” Letort said.

In many cases, corporate meeting planners pay nonprofits for project management. At HandsOn, the cost ranges from \$3,000 to \$20,000 depending on the size of the group.

Other convention markets say that infrastructure is growing nationwide. In Las Vegas, exhibit and equipment donations from conventions such as the International Consumer Electronics Show are routine, said Jeremy Handel, spokesman for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority. “Then you have the obvious connections, when the homebuilders come into town they’ll do a Habitat for Humanity project, for example,” Handel said.

Runzler said Orlando is stepping up its efforts to connect planners with diverse volunteer groups. She said more are planning national and local volunteer projects. “In the past, organizations would pick one organization to gear all their (social responsibility) activity toward,” Runzler said. “Now a lot of them want options.”

In Atlanta, Jarrell said the presence of major nonprofit headquarters such as the Boys and Girls Clubs of America provide immediate partners.

“Often groups want to find a community service they can initiate here, that can be local and then that they can take with them no matter where they go,” Jarrell said.

In New Orleans, Letort said the CVB wants to focus on seeking more local opportunities in partnership with the city of New Orleans.

Liz McCartney, director of the St. Bernard Project in Chalmette, thinks that’s the right direction. Her nonprofit builds affordable housing.

McCartney said she saw convention projects spike in late 2009 as planners focused on hyper-local volunteer opportunities. She expects that interest to increase.

“When they come down here they really want to get their hands dirty,” McCartney said.

“(Afterward) visitors want to stay engaged with New Orleans, they want to keep coming back,” she said. “Whether that means bringing their meeting back here or coming back with groups of family or friends, they want to come back.”