

Destinations

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MYSTERY TOURS

HOW TO ORGANIZE AND RUN A BEST-KEPT SECRET



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AMERICAN BUS ASSOCIATION

IN THIS TOGETHER

Rebuild your operations and drive revenue through strategic partnerships

BY PAMELA BROSSMAN



We've all been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic," said Marc Hofmann, CEO of CheckMyBus, addressing attendees at Busworld Academy's Dec. 10 webinar entitled, "The Future of Bus and Coach: Survive Today, Grow Tomorrow." But if there's something good that has come out of the crisis, it's that "the pandemic has forced us to rethink the way we do business and reimagine the future of mobility," said Hofmann, whose Germany-based company is a leading global metasearch engine for intercity bus transportation.

With the latest statistics showing the number of small businesses that are open in the U.S. down by 29.7 percent between Jan. 1 and Dec. 31, 2020—and tourism spending down a whopping 48 percent—the motorcoach, travel, and tourism industry faces a long road to recovery.

"Once the COVID-19 crisis is over, we will see consolidation in the marketplace and likely a recession," said Hofmann. "But that will be followed by an increased need for sustainable mobility."

Partnerships, Hofmann explained, are a valuable alternative to consolidation and critical to the survival of the industry. "By partnering with other operators, all profitable online distribution channels, and the various sectors of our industry—including cruise lines, airports, hotels, attractions, and destinations—you will reach more customers faster while also reducing your costs."

Think of distribution, technology, and network as the three key areas in which shared resources and strategic partnerships can help you weather the immediate storm and position you for future resiliency and profitability.

According to Hofmann, nothing is off limits. "Partnering with former competitors on certain routes can both optimize passenger load and reach and engage new customers, while combining efforts to develop technologies, use pay-as-you-earn solutions, and implement online platforms that come at no set-up cost [e.g. CheckMyBus], will keep your network flexible, optimize dynamic pricing, and build customer retention and loyalty."



While millions of small business owners across the country faced extinction as a result of the pandemic, Kris Hoff, president and CEO of Happy Times Tours, was busy starting a new business—with CDC health and safety guidelines in place.



Don't Worry, Be Happy

When Kris Hoff suddenly found herself unemployed last April, the 21-year travel industry veteran refused to go down without a fight. She talked to friends, she consulted colleagues, and after being assured she was doing the right thing, she started Happy Times Tours and Experiences in July—right smack in the middle of a pandemic.

Based in Wisconsin, the new tour operator is built on partnerships, thinking outside the box—and lots and lots of cheese.

“From the very beginning, I knew partnerships would be a key ingredient to Happy Times Tours’ success during the COVID-19 pandemic,” says Hoff, who pulled together her resources and began asking other Wisconsin travel and tourism businesses, “How can we help each other?” and “How can we share the work so that each of us can succeed?”

Putting all competition aside, Happy Times Tours began cross-promoting tours with other tour operators on its social media pages. “We paid each other commissions on day trips, casino trips, and

extended tours that we promoted for one another,” says Hoff. “Our theory was that some income is better than no income—and we wanted customers to know that traveling was safe and we were taking the proper precautions.”

Motorcoach companies, such as Personalized Tours & Coaches, granted flexibility on pricing when passenger counts were low, allowing both tours and buses to keep running. But it is Hoff’s unique virtual experience packages that got everyone talking.

At first a bit skeptical of Hoff’s idea, most of the local, small businesses that Hoff reached out to quickly jumped on board. Her goal? To create virtual tours that would increase revenue for the businesses as well as for Happy Times Tours, while also engaging customers who aren’t traveling because of pandemic. “This is a whole new tour world,” says Hoff, “and you have to be ready to shift your focus when necessary.”

Hoff sought out Wisconsin bakeries, farms, stores, confectioneries, visitor centers, bars, and more to tell their story via

exclusive, original video and gift packages of their products sometimes delivered right to customers’ doors or through fun and safe drive-thru area pickups. Virtual experiences to businesses like Poppin’ Z’s Gourmet Popcorn, whose mission of providing opportunities for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities inspired Hoff to add them to her in-person tours, and Mars Cheese Castle, whose homemade cheese bread continues to get rave reviews, have been so popular that Hoff plans to continue to offer virtual experiences packages even when the pandemic is over. “It is a lot of work to pull together the virtual experiences,” says Hoff, referring to learning the video recording and editing technology, picking up the products, and more, “but seeing how much joy they bring to people makes it worth it.”

Looking ahead, Hoff plans to create a series of “Destination Virtual Experiences” with tour operators, CVBs, attractions, and businesses throughout the country. And she’s expecting enough demand that instead of businesses shipping products, she’ll enlist the help of motorcoach



Happy Times Tours partnered with local businesses for its first virtual experience package—a drive-thru Halloween-themed tour—and December’s “Holiday Stocking Stuffer” virtual experience.



During the past five years, Celebrity Cruises President and CEO Lisa Lutoff-Perlo has strategically placed women in some of the highest leadership positions on Celebrity ships.

operators to pick up the product from the other destinations. “There are a lot of ways to partner with others in the industry so that everyone gets a piece of the pie,” Hoff says. “And after the pandemic is over, I want to be sure that all the great local, small businesses and attractions are still standing and available to visit in person.”

One for the Win in Iowa

The team at the Iowa Group Travel Association takes its job very seriously. “We are the one unified voice for group travel in Iowa,” says Nicki Brus, IGTA president. With a strong network of attractions, lodging, restaurants, destination marketing organizations, and tour services, the state-wide association provides resources and itineraries that invite travelers to explore a range of Iowa experiences. In addition, it offers educational, networking, and collaboration opportunities for its members.

So when group travel came to a standstill last spring, Brus, who is also business growth and service manager at Visit Quad Cities, knew IGTA needed to tap into its strengths in order to help its members

survive the crisis. “Partnering together is always essential, but particularly during times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic,” she says. “When we combine our joint assets, we can fulfill our individual missions while also making our industry stronger.”

To keep Iowa attractions and destinations top of mind with tour planners and customers during the pandemic, IGTA pivoted its in-person FAM tours to virtual FAM tours. “After the success of our 2020 ABA Marketplace and Travel Iowa Marketplace FAM tours, we wanted to keep that momentum going,” says Ginger Williams, IGTA board member and tourism coordinator at Charles City Area Chamber of Commerce. “We did a lot of brainstorming, and the virtual FAM tour idea was born.”

The team began by collecting video content from members across the state. The response was overwhelming, and when they realized they would need help putting the submissions into a logically sequenced tour, they knew just who to contact. “We reached out to Kim Grzywacz at CIT

Signature Transportation,” says Williams. “As a motorcoach operator, she helped us create an exciting five-night, six-day tour,” says Williams.

Grzywacz, who also served as the step-on guide for the virtual tour (which can be viewed at iowagrouptravel.com and YouTube), planned a route based on hours of service for the driver, bus parking, passenger pick-up and drop-off, restroom availability, and the various other needs of a group tour.

“By working collaboratively, we found that we had better reach and a better end product,” says Grzywacz, who is also vice president and treasurer of IGTA. “From our wine and cheese Zoom launch party to the positive responses of tour planners, the virtual FAM tour has been a win-win for individual businesses, the state of Iowa, and the entire motorcoach, travel, and tourism industry.”

Staying Afloat During COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has certainly led to a greater appreciation and understanding of the challenges our competitors and other