



# MAKING INTERCITY VISITS PROFITABLE

By Joan L. Mobley



One of the best opportunities to give visibility, credibility and sustainability to your organization is through strong program offerings that meet individual, organizational and community needs. The InterCity Leadership Visit is one such program. And it can be an excellent way to raise funds for your organization beyond the direct costs of the program.

What is an InterCity Leadership Visit? The January/February 2005 issue of *Chamber Executive* magazine (available on ACCE's website) provides a more detailed discussion, but briefly, this annual program brings a leadership delegation, by invitation, from one city to another to explore best practices and lessons learned specific to identified community, economic, regional and urban issues. The delegation usually represents the top leadership from the public, private and nonprofit sectors. These visits are done on both an international and domestic basis.

The size of the delegation and the length of the trip will affect the potential for net revenue. It is important to establish the goals of the program that will guide your marketing efforts and frame the scope of the program. If it is intended to be a by-invitation-only event to the top leadership of your region, you will develop a very specific invitation list and build the delegation over time. If it is intended to be an added value of membership, then you may use your Chamber newsletter to announce the program and call for registrations in a more public way. Being clear from the beginning as to your desired outcomes will allow you to create the best program for your Chamber.

The goal is to build a program that will, in time, cover all its costs and generate additional funds for your bottom line. Chambers have several options for generating net revenue: delegate fees, sponsorships, in-kind donations, grants, and underwriting.

## DELEGATE FEES

Each delegate pays a fee to participate—this is where the non-dues revenue opportunity begins. However, in most

cases, the initial year of the program will require additional funding beyond the participation fees.

Setting the delegate fee for the trip is based on two key factors—what your direct costs will be and what your market will support. As the program gains visibility and credibility, the participation fee can be increased, but for the initial year, you want to set it at a price point that will support diverse participation. We'll discuss scholarship opportunities a bit further in this article.

## GRANTS

In addition to participation fees, your InterCity Visit can be supported by grants. Sometimes, a community or cor-

**“The goal is to build a program that will, in time, cover all its costs and generate additional funds for your bottom line.”**

porate foundation will provide a grant of seed money for the initial year of this program. These funds will need to be received by a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, which many chambers establish for just this kind of opportunity. There also may be local government funding through grants from specific agencies that have unique interest in specific parts of your program; i.e., transportation, library development, regional planning, and housing.

## SPONSORSHIPS

Sponsorships provide the opportunity for the business community to show increased support for this initiative and to receive higher visibility in front of the leadership delegation. Very often there is a direct link between the business and the content of the trip; for example, the opportunity for a transportation company to host a luncheon focused on multi-modal transportation in the host city places it in a unique position to market itself and demonstrate community support for local initiatives.

An even stronger tie is when you have a company with a presence in both cities. Wendy Helgeson, co-founder of Civic Source and producer of the Twin Cities InterCity Leadership Visit, comments, “Often organizations struggle to provide long-term value in sponsorship packages. For companies with a presence in the host city, it is an opportunity to have their local leadership meet and mingle with the trip delegation. In addition, organizations can highlight work they are doing on a specific community issue in their hometown and in the visiting city. In these cases, long-term connections are formed which last beyond having their logo on trip materials.”

### Underwriting specific items

As a complement to sponsorships, you can provide value and recognition to sponsors by offering the ability to underwrite any item used during the trip. For example, one or more companies can print the trip communication pieces,

provide a nightly gift to delegates, or host a session at the local headquarters. Underwriting will save on your expenses, while still allowing you to share your services, products or local leadership. Hosting organizations usually provide recognition for underwriters through a listing in all printed materials associated with the program, on-site signage during the event, as well as the opportunity to briefly speak to the full delegation at the component of the program they are sponsoring. As you develop the detailed budget for this program, you will identify these opportunities and the associated levels of underwriting needed.

You know your membership better than anyone and how this program will fit within the context of your Chamber's



total program of work. How you frame the sponsorship program needs to be sensitive to the capacity of your business, foundation and municipal leadership. You may choose to bring many to the table with smaller amounts, combining sponsors for each single component of the program.

Another fundraising opportunity comes in the form of securing underwriting from companies in the destination city that are eager to have a special level of visibility and access to your delegation. They may be looking to expand into your marketplace or have interest in a development project that you see in your future—a stadium, a new hotel, specific retail development, etc. All of these become opportunities for additional support.

Over its seventeen years of hosting InterCity Visits, the **Nashville (TN) Area Chamber of Commerce** has evolved its sponsorship program to include both general underwriting—Title and Presenting Sponsors—and individual event underwriting—less than \$5,000. **Wendy Stoneberger, director of events**, says, “Our initial thought with shifting to overall sponsors was two-fold. First, it gave sponsors more broad recognition across the entire experience, and second, it allowed the staff to better manage the sponsorship relationship—knowing every general sponsor was recognized on all collateral. We added the Event Sponsors for each particular meal session because some past sponsors wanted to return, but at a lower investment than the Presenting level.”

### In-kind donations

Another avenue for support is from in-kind donations. Within the production of your trip, you will identify elements that require products or services that can be provided by your members—design work, printing, baggage tags, specialty items, speaker gifts, and signage. This is another opportunity for membership recognition as well as budget relief.

“Companies in the destination city may be eager to have a special level of visibility and access to your delegation—providing an opportunity for non-dues revenue.”



#### THINK THINGS THROUGH BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Issues that can impact your revenue need to be thought through before the program is launched. Scholarships are one that always surfaces—who and how much? Organizations have taken different approaches to structuring this part of the program, but one thing is clear: whatever you do the first year will set the stage for future year's offerings. Often a local foundation will provide grant dollars specifically for scholarships to ensure diverse representation within the delegation. For its initial year, the **Greater Mankato (MN) Chamber of Commerce** creatively approached its top 50 business leaders and asked each to pay one-and-a-half times the participation fee, thereby creating a scholarship fund. Fund requests were handled on an individual, as-needed basis.

Other special segments of your delegation need to be considered in advance as well. You'll need to decide how to handle elected officials, the media, and Chamber staff, for starters—will your trip be invitation-only or open to these groups? And, will you consider a trade of business services for the registration fee? It is much easier to handle these types of issues if you have developed policies before you take the program public.

Within the context of these types of programs, the **Long Beach (CA) Area Chamber of Commerce** participates in an international “Mission to China,” produced by CitsLinc International, Inc. (CitsLinc), an international travel company specializing in relationship-building between China and the U.S. **Randy Gordon, president and CEO**, sees this program as an introduction to China. “Many of our mem-

bers would not have the opportunity to travel to China and explore the possibilities of doing business with this country. Through this very affordable program, they are introduced to the people, culture, and business climate of four cities in China. This has resulted in new business opportunities and better cultural understanding and appreciation. We had 525 people on our trip this spring—quite amazing.” The program is totally produced by CitsLinc. The Chamber markets the program to its members and handles the registration process. All fees are paid directly to CitsLinc, and the Chamber receives \$100 for each participant. As Gordon shares, “This relationship has provided a strong program offering for our members and non-dues revenue to our bottom line.”

#### USE YOUR CHAMBER CONNECTIONS

The value and success of offering an InterCity Visit program is proven by those chambers that do them—successfully and profitably—year after year. There are many lessons to be learned from these programs, and you'll find that most hosting organizers are eager to share their insights. Just give a fellow colleague a call! ☑

---

*Joan L. Mobley is president of JTM Consulting, Inc., located in Bluffton, SC. JTM is a leadership-training firm specializing in leadership development for communities and non-profit organizations. She has over 20 years experience and special expertise in the design and implementation of The InterCity Leadership Visit. She can be reached at (843) 705-5476 or [jtmconsult@aol.com](mailto:jtmconsult@aol.com).*



Executive Search Consultants

Jorgenson Consulting is a leading executive consulting firm specializing in the recruitment and placement of executives for chamber of commerce and economic development organizations nationwide. Jorgenson Consulting is an influential contributor in the rapidly changing economic development field.

866.564.3138    [info@jci-inc.net](mailto:info@jci-inc.net)    [www.jci-inc.net](http://www.jci-inc.net)

### Community Visioning

with a proven implementation process!  
Visit our 60 client community list at  
[www.lukevision.com](http://www.lukevision.com).

Henry Luke  
Luke Planning, Inc.  
904-725-4668 Office  
904-318-5266 Cell  
[mail@lukevision.com](mailto:mail@lukevision.com)