

# BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WHILE GIVING BACK

ADDING VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES TO CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS CREATES  
LASTING BENEFITS FOR BOTH THE PARTICIPANTS AND THE HOST COMMUNITIES.

BY ANNIKA S. HIPPLE



**THERE'S A GROWING TREND** in the meetings and events industry to incorporate corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities into conferences and meetings that will benefit host communities and build relationships among meeting participants. ¶ “We’re getting more and more requests in terms of, ‘If we wanted to give back to the community, what could we do?’” says Michael Smith, vice president of convention sales for Travel Portland (Ore.). “It’s becoming something that associations are trying to build into their agenda.”

Opportunities can address a wide variety of social issues. Convention or meeting participants might box items for distribution to the needy, pound nails for a construction project, paint over graffiti, pick fruit on a working farm or clear noxious weeds in a city park.

“There’s been a trend toward trying to illustrate the value of meetings to the general public,” explains Amy Cabe, convention services manager for the Spokane (Wash.) Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau. “If a convention can illustrate how they’re benefitting our community—beyond the financial benefits—that sends a good message.”

Christie Blake, owner of Northwest Green Event Management, coordinated the International Ecotourism Society’s 2010 Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Conference (ESTC) in Portland, Ore. “My goal was to embrace the local community and really highlight what they have to offer and what they’re all about,” she says. “Bringing in the voluntourism aspect really created a nice balance.”

Tourism consultant Joe Staiano took part in a half-day pre-ESTC volunteer activity at the Columbia Springs Environmental Education Center, where participants restored trails and removed invasive species. He says the experience was “dirty, sweaty, physical, fun and very worthwhile” adding, “Besides being productive and fun, this was an absolutely wonderful way for conference participants from different cities, countries and various tourism professions to come together.”

“A lot of times it really is about the bonding experience,” says Smith. “The giving back is obviously very important, but you make a lot of friends at these events just by doing something weird and different together.”

Convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) can be excellent resources for identifying projects. Travel Portland has contacts with organizations throughout the metropolitan area. Tourism Vancouver (British Columbia) and Seattle’s CVB have Web pages and staff dedicated to voluntourism.

Vancouver, B.C., hosted the Meeting Professionals International (MPI) 2010 World Education Congress (WEC), which offered numerous ways to give back to the city. A group of conference registrants spent one afternoon clearing weeds from salmon-bearing streams with the nonprofit Pacific Streamkeepers Federation. Participants also filled clothing racks with women’s professional attire for Dress for Success, a nonprofit that helps prepare disadvantaged women entering the workforce.

One of the more popular WEC activities was the “puppy cuddling” sessions offered by the Pacific Assistance Dogs Society (PADS), an organization that trains assistance dogs for individuals who have physical disabilities, or are deaf or hard of hearing. PADS brought in several of their puppies-in-training for interaction with conference attendees between workshops. The project helped the dogs become comfortable with noise and crowds.

Meeting planners can tailor opportunities to fit attendees’ interests. Seattle launched its voluntourism program in 2009, and has connected groups with opportunities ranging from park maintenance to animal shelter improvements. “The compact, walkable nature of downtown and the proximity of hotels to local entities that need help really made Seattle the perfect city to inaugurate a voluntourism program,” says David Blandford, vice president of communications for Seattle’s CVB.

1. Planeterra, the 2010 Ecotourism and Sustainable Conference’s voluntourism partner, coordinated volunteer activities at the Columbia Springs Environmental Education Center. 2. Seattle’s CVB President & CEO Tom Norwalk “greeted” a PADS assistance dog at the 2010 MPI World Education Congress. 3. Through a Run Brain Run Freewheel event, volunteers can meet the children who will receive the bikes they build.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF: PLANETERRA; TERESA KENNEY; AND RUN BRAIN RUN.

The main role of CVBs and third-party meeting planners is to generate ideas, says Jonathan Buchwald, president and chief executive officer of PRIME Strategies, an event management company in Vancouver, B.C. "Often [the volunteer opportunity] will be about tying together the message the host [group] wants to get across." For example, medical associations frequently prefer activities that promote health, like building bicycles for children.

Associations can often get valuable input from local members who may already be involved in community organizations, suggests Julie Dodds, director of convention sales for the Anchorage (Alaska) CVB.

Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) will hold its triennial convention in Spokane in 2011, and is planning activities like knitting "prayer shawls" for area hospitals, agencies and ministries. "Women will be coming from all over the United States and the Caribbean," says Women of the ELCA Executive Director Linda Post Bushkofsky. "It helps them have an understanding of how they can go back into their own communities, research needs and help women living in poverty."

Planning a volunteer component can range from the simple—like asking attendees for donations—to the complex, as when author Dana Stabenow helped organize two mystery conventions in Anchorage in 2001 and 2007. Saying it would be "ridiculous not to put all this talent to good use," Stabenow coordinated sending visiting authors out to schools and libraries in scores of difficult-to-access Alaskan communities.

Many residents in the remote locations had never met a published author before. "I hope that someday some kid in Tuntutuliak or Anaktuvuk Pass publishes a novel or whatever, and when interviewed about it says, 'A writer came to my school one time. I didn't know that I could be a writer until they came,'" says Stabenow.

Although the conditions in Alaska were unique, Stabenow sees her efforts as replicable any time there is "talent of any kind collected in one place." She says, "There's no reason you can't exploit the people who come to an event in a good way for the community in which it's set."

Still, it's not just a matter of selecting a cause and letting organizations know you're ready to help. "One

of the [challenges] is to try to find a host charity that has the bandwidth to consider the donation," says Buchwald. Or as Smith puts it, "Organizations always need help, but if you call up and say 'I'm sending over a hundred volunteers' it kind of freaks them out."


One solution is to work with a middleman organization like Seattle Works, which connects groups with appropriate nonprofit partners and works with both parties to create what Program Director Jan Burell calls "a seamless experience." In Vancouver, B.C., the Canadian charity Evergreen coordinates stewardship projects in parks and public spaces, enabling volunteer groups to build on the ongoing work of local organizations. "When a group comes in with 40 or 50 or 60 people you can get a lot done. It gives a great shot in the arm to local community efforts," says Regional Project Manager Andrew Appleton.

Another alternative is to work with a company that specializes in team building like Seattle-based EverGreen Escapes which organizes activities like habitat restoration and environmental research. "One of the things that we excel at is connecting the dots:

picking up, dropping off, providing lunch, providing a well-rounded program," says Chief Outings Officer Dan Moore. "On top of that, we do a lot of combining of

programs. For example, we might do a big push to restore a riparian zone and then do a wine tasting or celebratory dinner—things that the host organization may not have the staff or expertise to do."

For team building, another option is Run Brain Run, which organizes "philanthropic games" in Portland and Seattle. "Giving back to community often does not equal fun immediately in people's minds," says Game Director David Schargel. Run Brain Run activities include competitive community-building challenge games and building bicycles for Boys and Girls Clubs.

A well-planned volunteer or CSR program creates lasting memories and relationships for meeting participants. Travel Portland incorporated a bike-building activity into a recent familiarization trip for planners. After bonding with each other to build the bikes, participants got to meet the final recipients. "Tears were flowing freely because the kids were so excited," recounts Smith. "It was a really great, feel-good thing." 

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