

Arizona Republic, The (Phoenix, AZ)

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March 22, 2007

MEETING? THEY'LL HELP PLAN IT

Author: Jane Larson, The Arizona Republic

Edition: Final Chaser

Section: Business

Page: D5

Estimated printed pages: 3

Article Text:

If you've ever planned a meeting or convention, you know the countless moving parts of the process.

You've got to choose the right hotel, negotiate good rates, arrange for equipment and services, and cross your fingers that everybody goes home happy.

It's enough to drive a lot of people straight to a third-party planning service like Scottsdale-based HelmsBriscoe Inc.

The company represents clients ranging from fraternal organizations holding reunions to large corporations launching new products, or as founder and Chief Executive Officer Roger Helms described it, "anybody that plans meetings."

Clients may book as few as 10 room-nights or as many as 40,000.

A balancing act

In practice, it's a balancing act. Sometimes, clients need to be told that booking rooms for a New York City convention cannot be done for \$100 a night. Other times, it's the hotel that needs to be shown that food and beverage sales and conventiongoers' extra-night stays will make an event profitable.

HelmsBriscoe is now considered the industry's largest third-party service, but in the early years, it kept a low profile.

"I knew that we were walking a very fine line about how we were going to inject what we do in the marketplace," Helms said. "I realized clients were going to question the value proposition, and the hotel community said, 'Gosh, do I really want them to be here?'"

"Now, we know where we reside in this space. Both our clients and the hotel community, I think, see great value, and we really live in harmony."

Helms started the company in 1992 after five years of working for a Scottsdale hotel booking meetings. The hotel also used outside firms to drum up business, but not all of them were effective, he said.

"The aha was, as I was going through the process ... I realized that no one's out there actually representing the customer," he said. "They're all representing the hotels."

Despite having his first child on the way, he took the family savings and decided to work the client-centric idea as hard as he could until he ran out of money.

He landed his first client when he caught a meeting planner for a major pharmaceutical company in a moment of desperation. He found her a meeting location, the company loved it, and he was on his way to booking 25,000 room-nights his first year.

He persuaded Bill Briscoe, a former co-worker, to join him and go after markets beyond Arizona.

They timed the market well. The hotel industry, battling the effects of a recession and oversupply, was eager for business.

"(By 2000) we were a large enough customer that they had to pay attention to us," Helms said. Today, privately held Helms Briscoe has 815 associates covering 31 countries and, last year, booked 3.2 million room-nights worth \$567 million, Helms said. International bookings accounted for 10 percent of the business, nearly twice that of the year before.

Associates average 12 clients each, and they check out about 12 hotels per search. They share details and feedback with each other through HelmsBriscoe's proprietary database.

The company itself has just 15 employees. The associates are independent contractors, a business model that allowed HelmsBriscoe to scale quickly at low cost and tap industry veterans with entrepreneurial spirit.

Valuable insights

The business has grown, in large part, because of the role that relationships and anecdotal information play in the industry.

The Scottsdale Convention & Visitors Bureau, which advises meeting planners about all properties Scottsdale, estimates that 21 percent of the convention business it books comes through third-party planning companies.

Dan Tavrytzky, vice president of sales and services at the bureau, said third-party companies often have a hotel or resort background, so they can provide the knowledge of contracts and insights into properties.

At the same time, the hotels appreciate their business, he said, because often they bring in organizations that the hotels couldn't reach.

"We're in a relationship industry," Tavrytzky said. "They found an opportunity and a need."

CAPTION: CEO Roger Helms of HelmsBriscoe says it started when he realized no one was truly representing planning-event customers.

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Record Number: pho165861596