

Newport tries to woo meeting planners

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Staff Writer

Kristie Newton's job is to find the best meeting destinations for one of the largest privately owned food service distributors in the nation.

After a brief tour of the city, she put Newport on her list.

"I look for spots where the tourists wouldn't normally go - historical places that are interesting, and places that have things a spouse can do when their husbands or wives are in meetings all day," said Newton, who toured Newport to book events for her client, MBM Corp. of North Carolina.

Newton has already booked five major events in the city through Newport Hospitality Inc., which books

about 100 group meetings each year, said the destination management group President Laurie Stroll.

The Newport County Convention and Visitors Bureau and hospitality industry partners hosted 27 professional meeting planners for the ninth annual Sun, Sail, & See Familiarization Tour, Aug. 8 to 10, to impress meeting planners like Newton who hold the power to bring the lucrative corporate meeting market to Newport.

The average conference attendee spends \$750 in a destination for a three-day conference, the International Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus reports.

There are 3,000 rooms in Newport County, 90,000 square feet aggregate meeting space, mansions, and more than

100 restaurants, clubs and pubs in the downtown harbor area.

The bulk of Newport's meeting market is within driving distance - Providence, Boston, New York and Hartford - but the growth of low-fare air carriers like Independence Air and Jet Blue have expanded the meeting market far beyond, said Newport's Hotel Viking Director of Sales John Harrison.

"Southwest Airlines has really driven the meeting market. Fares are so cheap that it's easy for people from all over to get here," Harrison said.

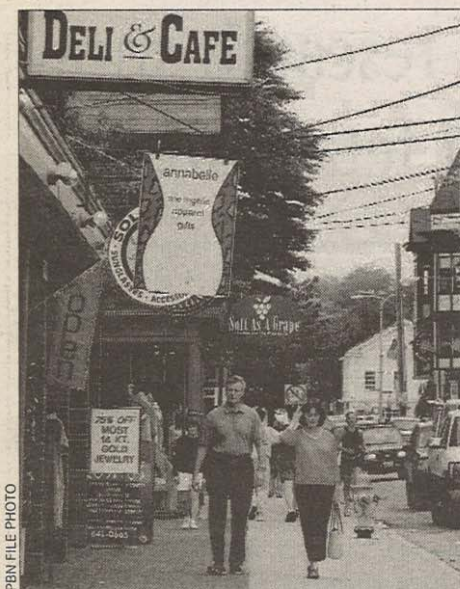
The local hospitality industry and the convention and visitors bureau started coordinating the event three months ago by inviting 800 planners from outside its traditional market area. About 75 responded and the visitors bureau whittled the list down to the 27 planners most likely to bring business to the city, said Martha Sheridan, vice president of sales for the bureau.

The tour came together through the cooperation of local venues and the event sponsor, US Airways.

The meeting planners ate fancy lunches at the city's top destinations, including the Hyatt Regency and the newly renovated Hotel Viking; ate hors d'oeuvres and sipped cocktails on harbor cruises; experienced a traditional Wampanoag clambake on Goat Island; and toured venues like the OceanCliff Mansion Hotel for corporate events. Newport's hospitality industry also showcased its sites and services at a trade show.

Tourism is Rhode Island's second-largest industry and employs more than 64,500 employees in 5,000 businesses. The industry generated \$4.8 billion in revenue in 2002, the latest figure available.

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PBN FILE PHOTO

Newport tourism sites were on display with a recent meeting planners tour to the city.