

Inviting Bus Tours

by Larry Plachno



As with most travelers, bus tours tend to spend the night at hotels and motels. For many places, inviting bus tours makes a big difference to their bottom line. Bus tours can also help replace the business lost because of increasing fuel prices. HAMPTON BLACK MOUNTAIN.

Due in part to staff changes because of the pandemic, we have received requests from people who have been given responsibility for bus tour sales and are looking for information. We have also heard from others who are thinking about inviting bus tours because of reduced business caused by increased fuel prices. Hence, we will try to provide some basic information on bus tours for those newer to the industry.

NATIONAL BUS TRADER and BUS TOURS MAGAZINE may be unique because of our past practical experience with bus operations. Our management worked for bus companies in the past and we have run three different bus operations out of our office. Hence, we are in a position to say: "Been there, done that." We are always willing to help our advertisers and customers.

Timing

A good place to start with bus tours is with timing. You cannot expect to invite bus tours on Monday and have the bus show up on Tuesday. You have to work months ahead. Bus tours are planned by individuals or companies known as bus tour planners or bus tour

operators, most of which charter rather than own buses. In addition, many bus companies also plan and run tours using their own buses. In most cases the longer tours are planned from six to 12 months in advance. It takes time to plan the tours, make reservations, prepare brochures or Web sites and sell the seats. Hence, when inviting bus tours you need to plan your marketing months ahead.

Another item worth noting is that while families with children generally travel when school is not in session, bus tours tend to run all year long. This means that bus tours can be invited to improve your sales during those periods when your traffic is the lowest. A hotel with open rooms on certain days or seasons can make a special offer to bus tours. An attraction looking for more business during the shoulder seasons can offer a special deal to bus tours at these times.

Lodging and Dining

Conventional bus tours will spend the night at a hotel or motel. The normal arrangement is booking two people to a room with two beds. In most cases, if a passenger does not want to share a room they

can pay what is known as a "single supplement" to obtain a private room. With student tours, putting four students in a room with two beds is typical.

Most bus tours will provide the time or opportunity for three meals a day, but they may not be included in the price of the tour. Bus tour planners may look for meals available at hotels or attractions to avoid the time needed to travel to a restaurant. Many bus tour planners like to stop at cafeterias because their flat fee allows them to be included in the price of the tour while having food ready speeds up the meal stop.

Types of Bus Tours

While most bus tours are geared to a general audience, there are numerous types of different or specialized tours. Student tours generally involve students from the same school. The stops will be more attuned to younger people. As the students get older, the tours can be longer. Grammar school students may visit the state capitol while high school students will go to Washington, D.C. College students may have tours that coincide with their education.

There are numerous types of specialized tours. The most popular are probably gaming tours that concentrate on one or more gaming locations. Faith-based tours stop at churches, shrines and other religious locations. There are also tours geared to photographers, historians and country or racial heritage. I have seen smaller groups on antiqueing tours, quilting tours as well as shopping expeditions. During the Civil War

anniversary, there were tours concentrating on battlefield sites and reenactments.

It should be noted that tours geared to general audiences will tend to exclude certain activities. Among these are golfing, fishing, scuba diving and hunting although some tours will make a stop at a beach for swimming. While most tour groups today can deal with some steps and walking,

longer hiking would not normally be included. A tour of New York City might include a major league baseball game, but attending a minor league game would be untypical. On the other hand, there are several attractions that are popular with bus tour groups. These would include shopping, boat rides, tourist railroads, specialized museums and other interesting attractions.

Many bus tour planners will also plan “fly-drive” tours where they put passengers on an airplane to another city or country. Upon arrival, the passengers then board a bus and the tour starts from there. There are also bus tours that use Amtrak or tourist railroads for part of their trip.

Bus tour coaches can carry people in wheelchairs or mobility devices if advance notice is given. The tour planner might ask whether your facility is accessible.

Typically an escorted bus tour will have a crew of two. One is obviously the driver who is responsible for driving the coach. The second crew member is a tour guide or tour escort who works with the passengers and handles arrangements at stops. In the past, the tour escort often planned activities while the coach was rolling down the road. Many of today’s modern coaches have Wi-Fi and electrical or USB outlets. This allows passengers to bring along iPhones and laptops for entertainment or for keeping contact with family or business.

It should be noted that in many or most cases, successful bus tours are repeated. I have actually seen the same tour run two or three times annually by the same company while others will repeat a good tour annually. They will return again and again to your location but will bring different people each time.

Requirements

What does it take to satisfy bus tours? The single biggest requirement is being able to accommodate a group. While there are tours with as few as 15 to 20 people, the typical tour coach will bring as many as 50 to 60 passengers. For hotels and motels this would translate into 35-40 rooms. Most major attractions and cafeterias should be able to handle a full bus load. There have been problems with historical homes with limited capacity. The House of the Seven Gables in Salem, Massachusetts solves this problem by splitting bus groups into smaller numbers for their tour while offering both a garden on the harbor as well as a gift shop for those waiting.

You must have an entrance, roads and parking suitable for a 45-foot coach. While the group can be dropped off and picked up at your front door, the bus does need a place to park. The ideal situation is a large parking lot with a designated bus area. Some major attractions and gaming locations provide a driver’s lounge for the drivers while they are waiting for the group. Things that can cause problems

Many if not most schools plan tours for their students. While the younger students stay closer to home, high school students may travel longer distances and even to Washington, D.C. Here we see a Peter Pan coach in our nation’s capital. PETER PAN BUS LINES.



There are several advantages to inviting bus tours. They provide many customers with one sale because modern tour coaches can seat more than 50 passengers. Since bus tours generally operate most of the year, they are ideal for filling in when you most need business. MAN.



for buses are tight turns on your entrance or road, overhead obstructions including trees as well as canopies or awnings over your front door. Since there are double-deck coaches on the road, you might want to keep obstructions 14 feet above the roadway.

What helps a great deal is having an information sheet available for bus tour planners. This would include the obvious contact information for your sales staff, options you offer for bus groups, group pricing, deposits if required and types of payments accepted. If appropriate you could include hours or days of operation. It would help to include information on where to drop off the group and where to park the bus. You could also provide information on other nearby attractions suitable for groups and nearby location(s) where the bus could be washed and the restroom dumped.

In most cases, places that invite bus groups will offer lower group rates. What is typical in the industry is that restaurants will provide complimentary meals for the driver and tour escort when the group stops. Likewise, the driver and tour escort are usually provided free admission at attractions. With lodging, the availability of a complimentary room will usually be based on the number of rooms booked.

Marketing

When inviting bus tours, you need to work months ahead. While a one-day tour might be put together and sold in two or three months, the longer tours are usually planned six to 12 months ahead. Hence, a good time to start your advertising is about a year before you want to see or increase bus tours.

One trick that has worked well when inviting bus tours is to offer something spe-



This shows a very good parking arrangement for buses with designated bus parking located at the left of the main parking lot adjacent to grass and trees while remaining close to the entrance. The photo was taken at the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help in Champion, Wisconsin. As the only approved Marian Apparition Site in the United States, it is becoming increasingly popular with bus tours. SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF GOOD HELP.

cial when a caller mentions your advertisement. This can be a wine and cheese reception for their group, a gift card for the tour planner or a special facilities tour.

Bus tours need to be invited. The last thing a tour planner wants is for the bus to stop at a location where the group cannot be accommodated or is inappropriate for some reason. Hence, bus tours will not include stops on their itineraries unless they are sure that they are good for groups. This is why tour planners like to use magazines like BUS TOURS MAGAZINE and NATIONAL BUS TRADER as idea books. When looking for places to include in

their future tours, they can feel reasonably confident that the advertisers that are inviting bus tours can accommodate them.

Bus tours have been coming back nicely and many were running even when masks were required. Several of our advertisers have said that they have sold out their bus tour spots so the tour planners are looking for more locations to add to their itineraries. The magazine staff can answer your questions and help you with inviting bus tours including providing editorial, printing your photos and online options. You can reach both magazines by phoning (815) 946-2341. □



Double-deck coaches can bring a crowd to your location since they can seat as many as 80 passengers. You must have sufficient overhead clearance since these coaches are 13 feet tall. All buses require suitable roadways with gentle turns and a lack of obstructions. VENTURE TOURS.

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