

Biz travel experts banding together

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A group of Birmingham area travel professionals is working to form a new association that would give corporate travel managers better access to educational resources and vendor contacts.

About a dozen professionals representing travel management companies, airlines and corporate travel departments have been meeting since April to organize an Alabama chapter of the National Business Travel Association.

The NBTA, headquartered in Alexandria, Va., represents roughly 2,500 corporate travel managers and travel service providers.

According to NBTA, business travel typically ranks as the second- or third-largest controllable expense in a company's budget, but often few policies and procedures are in place to regulate and monitor those expenses. The association, at the national level and through state and regional chapters, provides a venue for corporate travel managers to establish relationships with travel professionals, and vice versa, and provides educational resources to keep business travel professionals up to date on the latest trends.

It's a lot more than just an opportunity for networking. Maylena Burchfield, executive director of sales for Adtrav Travel Management, a Birmingham-based group that handles travel for government and corporate clients as well as leisure travelers, says a state chapter also can host educational seminars and bring in experts to keep travel managers up to speed on news.

Alabama is ready

Burchfield has been involved in the national association for the past three years and currently serves on the group's national technology committee. She says Alabama, with a large number of corporate headquarters, is ripe for a statewide chapter. Georgia already has a chapter; Florida has three, according to the NBTA Web site.

Dallas Teague Snider, a certified meeting planner with Conference Direct in Birmingham, says until recently travel has been loosely controlled in many companies, with individual employees left to their own devices in planning trips out of town. Now, with the increasing complexity of travel planning and closer scrutiny of travel budgets - scrutiny intensified in large part by the Sarbanes-Oxley Act - it has become more important to have rules in place governing business travel, and to be able to monitor compliance.

Haley Johnson, a regional sales manager for Continental Airlines Inc. in Georgia and Alabama and an organizer of the Alabama NBTA chapter, says businesses often purchase travel in a much different way than they buy other supplies. Companies will allow employees to make travel arrangements individually, but "you wouldn't let everyone go out and buy their own desk," she says.

Consolidating travel purchases could help maximize the company's travel dollars. If you know how much you are spending on travel company-wide, then travel managers can make deals with airlines and other vendors based on volume, Johnson says.

Paperwork issues

The steering committee began organizing the effort to establish an Alabama chapter of NBTA in April. Snider says the group wants to play host to the state association's first official meeting within the next 90 days. Currently, organizers are putting together bylaws, completing the application process through the national association and drumming up support among Alabama's corporate travel managers. The group probably will be headquartered in Birmingham, but it will be a statewide association, with regular meetings alternating among the state's metro areas. Vendors will provide vital support, but the organization will be geared toward serving corporate travel managers.

Richard Davis, another organizer of the Alabama NBTA chapter, was named director of travel management for HealthSouth Corp. about a year ago and says the company's travel expenses already have been reduced by 35 percent in that time. If managed properly, Davis says, a "tremendous amount of savings is possible."

tray@bizjournals.com - (205) 443-5630

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