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Technology Update

New Web Products Target Broad Swath Of Needs

By Marshall Krantz

A few years ago, a slew of entrepreneurs rode the dot-com wave with web-based solutions for the meetings industry, and many failed when the wave receded. Since then, though, new products and services continue to enter the market, albeit at a slower pace. Here are three new offerings that give an idea of the wide range of capabilities becoming available for planners as a result of the Internet revolution.

New Rival For Site-Search Powerhouses

Gaithersburg, Md. — A new player has entered the business of meetings site-search web portals — a David taking on the Goliaths of StarCite and PlanSoft.

Conventionplanit.com was launched last month with about 2,000 properties and a handful of suppliers in its searchable database. While that's a mere fraction of the approximately 55,000 facilities and suppliers combined in

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New Site-Search Portal Takes On Heavyweights

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StarCite's database and 73,000 listings in PlanSoft's, hotel companies in the Conventionplanit database already include Disney, Gaylord and Adam's Mark, and the company expects that shortly it will sign up Hyatt, Benchmark and Le Meridien, for a total of 1,000 more properties, according to company president and co-founder Katherine Markham.

She said other big hotel companies, such as Marriott and Hilton, are taking a wait-and-see approach.

Despite the current paucity of its supplier listings, Markham claimed she's found value propositions that will have both planners and suppliers flocking to her website.

"The design of the site is to make a complex industry simple," said Markham. "We're trying to put everything planners need at their fingertips and make the website easy to use."

For starters, Conventionplanit.com requires no registration. Websites that require registration often drive away potential users. People are afraid site owners will sell their names and email addresses to marketers. Even if that's not the case, it's often too much trouble to fill in registration forms and then remember user names and passwords.

Secondly, the site's request-for-proposals form requires only that planners supply their contact information. Planners additionally can choose to specify dates, number of guestrooms, meeting space, food and beverage, and service providers such as audiovisual. Planners alternatively can choose to attach their own RFPs to an email, which they can send to facilities and suppliers from the site. Some planners have felt befuddled by the more detailed RFP forms on other portals.

Conventionplanit.com also provides other resources such as sample requests for proposals, proposed best practices from the Convention Industry Council's Accepted Practices Exchange (APEX), an industry calendar, and links to industry organizations and publications.

Like other such web portals, all services and access to information are free to planners.

Aside from Conventionplanit.com's ease of use, an especially appealing aspect to planners is that the company takes no commission or fee from venues and suppliers for business resulting from RFPs. Planners have been reluctant to send RFPs through web portals for fear they will end up paying hotels higher room rates to cover commissions or other fees

While PlanSoft takes no commission or fee for pieces of business resulting from RFPs sent through its websites, StarCite charges hotels \$2.90 to \$4.90 per occupied room night.

For suppliers, Conventionplanit.com offers a much less expensive marketing package than StarCite and PlanSoft. Suppliers pay \$450 annually for a basic listing and \$550 for an enhanced listing.



Katherine Markham

By comparison, StarCite and PlanSoft provide basic listings for free but charge a minimum annual fee of \$1,900 and \$4,000, respectively, for enhanced electronic marketing packages. A smaller site-search engine, MadSearch, charges hotels \$4,500 annually for a marketing package, plus a \$750 one-time set-up fee.

On Conventionplanit.com, basic listings contain sales contact information along with links for email and the supplier's website. Enhanced listings additionally contain a couple of pictures and receive higher placement in search returns. Enhanced listings contain no detailed meeting-space specifications or diagrams.

Keeping It Simple

"Planners don't want to wait for anything to download, and venues want planners to go to their websites," said Markham, about the slim content in Conventionplanit.com listings compared with other portals.

"We are trying to keep our site concise and quick. This is the place where planners can do an initial search."

Markham has served in sales and marketing positions with Renaissance Hotels, Radisson Hotels International, Associated Luxury Hotels and Resorts, and the Greater Milwaukee Convention & Visitors Bureau, among others.

She and the company's co-founder, David Markham, who is her husband and Conventionplanit.com's chief operating officer, also own the Alliance Service Network, a marketing and sales consortium of meetings services providers.

Markham acknowledged that she has taken on some formidable competition in StarCite and PlanSoft, calling Conventionplanit.com "the little engine that could."

"If we make this website valuable to the user, we will build traffic," she said.

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