

Rob Smith, President and CEO

Aruba Hotel & Tourism Association
and Aruba Convention Bureau
Keeping Stakeholders Focused Ranks
Among Top DMO Challenges

What makes Aruba a top meeting/convention destination?

Aruba is easily accessible from almost anywhere in the world and has six convention-ready properties, all of which fly the flags of major hotel chains. Communication is easy — all Arubans must speak English, Spanish, Dutch, and Papiamentu before they can graduate from junior high school.

U.S. Customs & Immigration clearance for visitors is handled right at the airport, a major convenience. Under the Tax Information Exchange Agreement, expenses from meetings held in Aruba are tax-deductible as in the United States. Aruba is safe, friendly, and geared entirely to visitors. Wi-Fi is widely available; our meeting facility technology exceeds that of nearby destinations and is comparable to that found in the United States and Europe. Aruba also has a low average rainfall and an average year-round temperature of 82 degrees Fahrenheit.

Tell us about a meeting you're thrilled to have just signed, or a recent meeting you're pleased with.

The Caribbean Hotel Association held a meeting here in January of 2007, with about 900 delegates.

What is your perspective on destination leadership?

An effective destination leader must engage all sectors of a destination — from hotels and airports to transportation providers and in between — to ensure that they “click.” If every entity operates in its own sphere, the lack of cohesiveness will have a negative impact on the visitor experience. A destination leader must also ensure that the destination is not just a great place to visit, but a great place to live. You can't have the first without the second.

What green initiatives have been undertaken in Aruba?

There are many, but at the top of the list, nine of our 25 hotels and resorts have received Green Globe certification under the Green Globe benchmarking and certification program for the travel and tourism industry. That count should increase to



FOCUSSED ON RELATIONSHIPS: Rob Smith says that DMOs must realize that 90 percent of their business comes from relationships rather than marketing.

20 in 2008 and to all 25 by the end of 2009, as all properties have committed to work toward the certification goal.

How have destination marketing organizations (DMOs) evolved over the past 10 years, and how will the role of the bureau change in the future?

While most DMOs were once public sector organizations, they're now in the fully private domain or, as is the case in Aruba, public/private hybrids.

As governments continue to acknowledge the need of DMOs as far as contributing to the success and tax revenues of destinations, they will pour more money into advertising, rather than payroll. But unless DMOs also realize that 90 percent of business stems from relationships rather than marketing, this could backfire.

What is your biggest challenge as a DMO?

Keeping all stakeholders focused on the goal of destination marketing. There are so many opinions DMOs must consider on a day-to-day basis.

How did you get into this career? Where were you before, and how long have you been there?

I was a general manager on the hotel side for many years, but when my predecessor approached me about this job, I decided it would be a wonderful way to expand my horizons. ■