



Lake County CVB Putting Out the Welcome Mat for All

By Tom Schuman

When you're in the business of attracting visitors, whether a single family or thousands at a time through a major national event, the competition is fierce. The hours can be long and the work strenuous. The attention to detail cannot be overestimated. It takes a strong staff, from top to bottom, to achieve success. Speros Batistatos, president and CEO of the Lake County Convention & Visitors Bureau (LCCVB), says that's only possible through the entire 15-person management group and the pool of 25 part-timers.

"We empower people. "You can make a mistake, just don't make the same mistake twice," he cautions. Katie Holderby, executive vice president, adds, "We really work to help people build their confidence. Everyone feels a real sense of ownership."

Batistatos reports that two of the best sales and marketing ideas have come from his accounting manager and director of facilities.

How does an organization get such buy-in when the work hours can be long and the salaries don't always match what can be earned elsewhere? Try an in-office child care policy in which employees are encouraged and welcomed to bring their children to work as often as they need.

The industry is very heavily female, explains Holderby, who brought both her children to work with her when they were young. "Even though there were some distractions, you still get a lot of work done." At one point recently, there were as many as four babies in the office at once.

Batistatos says he can't afford to lose good people. "We tell our staff family comes first and it does. That kind of respect that you give staff you can't buy with a salary. You get that by treating people with respect."

Another non-typical benefit comes in the ability to "buy out" of the health insurance package (provided insurance is available through another means) and receive a high percentage (in cash) of what the company would have spent. That percentage increases as the employee progresses within the company. The result, according to Batistatos, is a valuable benefit for employees, some cost savings for the organization and "everyone is treated fairly."

The LCCVB has grown from a two-person operation in loaned-out office space in 1983 to a nationally competitive entity in 2007, with its home in the unique Indiana Welcome Center. The building itself is an attraction, symbolizing the people, environment and natural resources of the county.

Visitors come from all 50 states and numerous foreign countries. The facility and the feedback "motivate our staff every day. It keeps us excited, engaged," Batistatos contends.

Bonnie Kekelik, a member of the part-time Welcome Center staff since the facility opened nearly nine years ago, concurs that "once people find out we're here, they come back. The group of people here is great. It's like one, big happy family."

Batistatos says the LCCVB has always been on the "cutting edge" of technology, "creating relationships is what we excel in" and when it comes to bigger and better financed competition, "we just outwork them."

To accomplish the above, he says, "We look for the cream of the crop. We need people who will fit in culturally to what we try to do." The interview process, he adds, typically involves stops in four or five employee offices to gain a number of different perspectives – and to find that perfect fit to help the organization move forward.



The sights and essence of Lake County are on display in the scenic Indiana Welcome Center.



You Should Know

Lake County is the only one in the country to host four Professional Bowlers Association events each year. A new culinary tour, featuring visits to unique establishments in Northwest Indiana, is proving popular with motorcoach groups and other visitors. **Company summary on Page 45**

Executive Vice President Katie Holderby assists an out-of-state visitor with directions for his trip across Northern Indiana.

