

## **Followup after Roundup is Essential**

By Kim Birrell

RMI's annual Roundup was just held last month in Rapid City, South Dakota. This annual event is held each spring in one of our four states. It is a mini trade show in which regional suppliers meet with tour operators from each of our overseas markets to discuss their products and conduct business. If you attended, now that this event is over what should you be doing to get the most benefit out of it?

First, review your notes, and you should have taken notes at each meeting with each tour operator, receptive tour operator or overseas market representative. This will help you recall which were most interested in your product or who needed more information.

Do you need to follow up with everyone? Not necessarily. During your meetings you should have determined if they were interested in your product. Try to qualify your leads and limit them to those who are a good fit for your product. Did they need more information that you should send them now? Do they need your rates? Did they ask about specific booking procedures and policies? If there is information you promised to send, you should send it right away.

You should also follow up with an email to those who may not have needed anything else right now, but who were interested in your product. This lets them know you are interested in working with them. It also reminds them who the contact is for bookings or questions. Make sure your email signature line contains all the information they will need to easily identify you for future contact. Be a bit more formal in your emails to overseas markets than you would normally be, but be friendly. Direct messages sometimes come across as rudeness in their cultures.

How much followup contact is necessary? A supplier who attended a past Roundup wrote to every tour operator who attended soon after the event. They didn't hear back from anyone. So they contacted them all again by email the following month, then the following month, then the following month. Many tour operators found this irritating and harassing. This supplier expected an acknowledgement to each and every email they sent and when they didn't receive one they were frustrated. Imagine how irritated the tour operators were to receive an email every month about a product they already knew about but had not asked for more information about. Many are so busy that they don't have time to thank you for each and every email you send. In this case, there was no polite way to tell this supplier to stop contacting them.

Keeping in touch with a tour operator is better done by contacting them a few times a year unless, of course, they make requests more often. If something new is being offered, this is a great reason to contact them. Or when the season

changes you can contact them to update them on new hours, renovations or expansions. Once you have established a closer relationship with them it's much easier to send a short email sending good wishes for their vacation, or about some personal event coming up. But it takes time to establish this kind of comfort level in a relationship and usually involves meeting with them several times over several years.

When they meet you at two or three Roundups they begin to remember you and your product and they will trust you. So develop these relationships over time. Tour operators tell us they would prefer to book with someone they have met and know and trust, instead of an anonymous person they have never met and don't know if they can trust.

You may not see an immediate return on investment when you meet with a tour operator at Roundup. It may take several years for a tour operator to develop a new tour that will include your product. Be patient and keep communication lines open. Be ready to respond when the time comes. Don't expect results overnight. International marketing takes time and patience.

Be responsive to requests. Follow up immediately. If a tour operator does not receive a response from you they will find someone else to work with. Be mindful of the fact that these tour operators are very busy. They are helping clients arrange their vacation and many provide a tailor made service which involves a lot of work. When a tour operator contacts you with an availability request you must respond immediately. If that tour operator doesn't hear from you within a day or two they will look elsewhere to book. Their client can't wait weeks for a confirmation and will go to another tour operator if they don't receive immediate service. So they need to hear from you right away.

Make it easy to book your product. Update your website. More tour operators are foregoing printed brochures in favor of online marketing. An online brochure can be updated much more quickly to reflect new products. Include details in your website about booking procedures, cancellation policies and opening/closing dates so the tour operator has as much information as possible available to him without having to contact you. Don't make it difficult for them to sell your product. Be honest about what you offer.

Consider working with a receptive tour operator. This provides you with much exposure overseas that would be expensive for you to get yourself. The exposure you gain is well worth the discounted rate you offer. Receptives work with a wide range of tour operators and save you time and effort acting as a central booking company who promotes you. It is easier for the tour operator to pay the receptive in one check instead of cutting many checks to each hotel along the route of a client's itinerary. There are several excellent receptives who specialize in our region and know it well. If you work with them realize this is a partnership where you both will benefit.

Learn about the market you want to enter. Attend Roundup to meet the overseas representatives and learn about trends. Meet the players operating in that market, learn what their needs are and tell them about your product. Consider attending overseas trade shows to meet the important players in each market.

The next Roundup will be held in Wyoming in 2012. Usually pre and post fairs are held in conjunction with this event so there are additional opportunities for tour operators to learn about our gateway cities and other states in our region. This event also focuses only on our region and only tour operators who specifically want to do business in our region are invited to attend.

Whether you want to focus your international marketing efforts on all of our European markets or just one, you can benefit by becoming involved with RMI. It is a cost effective way to get the word out about what you offer and is effective in helping you meet overseas tour operators who want to work with our region. See RMI's supplier website – [www.rockymtnintl.com](http://www.rockymtnintl.com) - for more useful information for suppliers.