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EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

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DCVB in new global tourism push

Mexico City event kicks off drive to attract international visitors

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A reception and fashion show in Mexico City last week marked the beginning of a new push by the Dallas Convention & Visitors Bureau to attract international tourists to Big D.

The event, for which the DCVB partnered with Dallas' NorthPark Center, was co-hosted by DCVB President and CEO Phillip Jones. It was attended by representatives from the Mexican tourism industry and media, and featured a marketing video touting the city's new "Live Large. Think Big" brand identity, Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport's international flight services and upscale Dallas shopping from Armani to Kate Spade.

The event marked the beginning of DCVB's renewed focus on international markets from Europe to Mexico in an effort to pocket a piece of the \$87 billion, inbound global tourism and travel market.

After 9/11, the DCVB let its focus on international markets slip. But Jones says the city now is armed with a growing arsenal of selling points.

In July, D/FW Airport is set to unveil International Terminal D, a 2 million-square-foot facility that will accommodate 37,000 passengers per day. The passenger point of entry, which is designed to post-9/11 security specifications, will make it more efficient for international and regional travelers to get in and out, Jones said.

For the time being, the DCVB is stepping up efforts to sell the attractions of the Dallas area in Mexico and Latin America -- a lucrative market that some say has been ignored by North Texas for too long.

"It's time for Dallas to step up to the plate," Jones said.

Houston and San Antonio have long been more aggressive in going after the Hispanic market and more vocal about their Tex-Mex heritage and, consequently, have reaped the rewards.

"Both San Antonio and Houston have an edge," Jones said. But "at the end of the day, we are much more attractive to visitors. With the presence of American Airlines and the finest shopping in the Southwest, we want to break into the market and gain our fair share."

Dallas has never had a "sustained effort" targeting Hispanic tourists, Jones said, but the DCVB is exploring a variety of efforts, including keeping representatives in Mexico on a full-time basis. It also is looking for more private-sector partnerships, as well as opportunities to align itself with the state tourism department on international programs.

Besides Mexico City, DCVB efforts will focus on smaller cities like Guadalajara and Monterrey where Dallas has strong business ties, as well as South American countries like Argentina, with which American Airlines has direct flight connections, Jones said.

The focus on Mexican and Latin American tourism is a logical one, according to Christine Szalay, director of marketing for NorthPark mall.

"There is huge pent-up demand (from Mexican tourists)," Szalay said. "There is a high level of interest in Dallas. If there is one thing about the Mexican market, it is that they are very trendy. Look at the women in Mexico City; they are very chic."

Substantial market

NorthPark will soon be launching new programs to track and encourage spending by international tourists at the mall, she said.

The Dallas Galleria also is exploring ways to reach out to international shoppers. Angie Freed, senior marketing manager for the mall, said a recent poll revealed that international shoppers at the mall come mainly from Mexico, Canada and Australia.

Dallas organizations like the DCVB have largely overlooked the Hispanic market in their marketing plans, said Edward Rincón, adjunct professor of Hispanic marketing at Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business and president of Rincón & Associates, a Hispanic marketing and research firm.

Cities like Houston and San Antonio have put out a larger "welcome mat", Rincón said, and have done a better job tailoring their message to the Hispanic community.

The size and clout of the Hispanic travel and tourism market is substantial. It now accounts for 7% of the total \$552 billion travel and tourism market in the United States, according to the Minority Travelers Report 2003, published by the Travel Industry Association of America.

According to the report, Hispanic travelers typically spend \$500 on each visit.

"Once we lay out a larger welcome mat, the DCVB is going to start seeing the benefits, and it's going to surprise them," Rincón said.

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