

How Does A City Attract Bus Tours? 7 Minutes At A Time

By [Richard Quinn](#)
The Virginian-Pilot
© February 5, 2008



VIRGINIA BEACH

Please begin appointment No. 12.

The loudspeaker announcement doesn't help Kelli Norman, because the guy in front of her – probably a rookie – is running late.

And he's eating into her seven minutes.

It's Monday morning at the 2008 American Bus Association Marketplace in the Virginia Beach Convention Center.

Norman, director of tourism marketing and sales with the Virginia Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau, is one in a sea of marketers roaming the floor, each extolling the virtues of (insert city name here).

The dance is a bit different at this trade show, though.

Instead of group tour operators selling themselves to interested cities, it's the other way around. Sales people from across the country get seven minutes to convince bus tours why they should come to their cities.

There will be about 105,000 of these time-sensitive meet-and-greets. Each ends the same, when the voice from above says it's time to start again.

Minute one.

Evie Smith of Maximum Tours is no stranger to Virginia Beach.

She's finalizing a three-night itinerary for some seniors spending Labor Day weekend here.

Norman uses that as her in.

“So,” she begins, “Labor Day.”

“But before then,” Smith interrupts, “I have groups coming through that need family-friendly hotels with good rates. Nothing directly on the beach.”

Norman shifts tactics.

In a seven-minute pitch, the broker tells tour operators what they want to hear, not what the sales staff wants to sell.

Norman asks people for trends in their businesses and molds her spiel to their answers.

When a group travel coordinator from Missouri says money is tight, Norman starts talking about free attractions at First Landing State Park.

When a tour agent from New York state talks about needing nice hotel space, Norman touts the new rooms at a SpringHill Suites on Atlantic Avenue.

Smith, a Long Island businesswoman, needs good lodging for an incoming group of students. No balconies, please, so youths don't get tempted to stunt-jump off of them.

“La Quinta Inn,” Norman responds. “I know the sales rep. I will find her and let her know.”

Minutes two and three.

Like the devil, salesmanship is in the details. And Norman uses particulars to her advantage.

If an agent tells a story about her fiance, Norman scribbles a note to ask in a follow-up call how the ceremony went.

If an operator mentions children, Norman remembers to jot down family as a talking point.

“Touch on the highlights,” Norman says during a break. “Remember if they're getting married. Remember their kids. Try to develop that spark with them.”

Norman asks what Smith did last night. Turns out, Smith was a guest at a private party at the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame in Portsmouth. Food, fun and a really big screen on which to enjoy the Super Bowl.

“I watched the game on a 60-inch TV,” Smith says. “It was great.”

“What about tonight?” Norman asks. She’s schmoozing, building a relationship in 30-second bites.

Smith is talking about what to do in Town Center. Norman is telling her about shuttles. She name drops the new Sandler Center for the Performing Arts.

Worth seeing, Norman says.

Minutes four and five.

Back to business.

Her group of students coming this summer needs some stuff to do.

“What do you want to see at the aquarium?” Norman wonders aloud, plugging the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center.

“I’ve never been,” Smith concedes. “Whatever it is.”

Ask for a behind-the-scenes tour, Norman suggests. No extra charge, just a good way to get a different experience.

The tidbit also builds trust.

“I try to get as much info out of them as I can,” Norman says. “I have a captive audience.”

Smith wants to see the Association for Research and Enlightenment, a North End institution founded by a psychic.

Maybe her tours would like the place. She’ll decide for herself.

Norman says she’ll organize a ride out there. She’ll be the chauffeur if need be.

There is one minute remaining in appointment No. 12.

Newcomers to this convention can be flustered by the ticking countdown to make money. The show is usually a success, with anywhere from \$30 million to \$50 million of travel business booked through this series of seven-minute dances.

“That’s just what happens here,” said Peter J. Pantuso, the bus association’s president and chief executive officer. “That doesn’t count what happens when they go home.”

That’s the real coup.

These appointments are introductions. A foundation is laid for future business.

The 60-second warning – accompanied by chimes – tells Norman to sum up the conversation in a flurry.

A hotel for the students . Enjoy Town Center tonight. My assistant or I will get you to the North End.

Then it's over.

The loudspeaker is about to go off.

Please begin appointment No. 13.

Richard Quinn, (757) 222-5119, richard.quinn@pilotonline.com