SANTA BARBARA MEETINGS BRAND RESEARCH
Qualitative Study of Meeting Planners—
Summary of Research Findings
December 2013

Research prepared for Visit Santa Barbara by Destination Analysts, Inc.
Research Overview

This report summarizes the findings of a qualitative study of traveling consumers on Santa Barbara’s brand as a destination for meetings and events. This research was conducted in November 2013 by Destination Analysts, Inc. on behalf of Visit Santa Barbara, the organization charged with marketing Santa Barbara for tourism.

Objectives

The goal of this research project was to explore and evaluate Santa Barbara’s meetings destination brand from the perspective of meeting planners. This included both current and potential meetings customers. The research was structured to build an understanding of:

- How meeting planners approach their destination decision, particularly in terms of their exploration of California destinations
- Ways in which meeting planners can be best marketed to in order to get them to consider destinations for their meetings
- Best practices amongst Convention & Visitors Bureaus for winning and retaining meetings business
- Impressions and perceptions of Santa Barbara as a meetings destination, and the types of meetings that Santa Barbara is viewed as an ideal fit for
- Santa Barbara’s most marketable destination attributes and assets for meetings, as well as the experience desired from holding a meeting in Santa Barbara
- Where Santa Barbara sits in the meetings destination consideration set and who meeting planners feel the destination competes with for meetings business
• How Santa Barbara compares to competing destinations and what sets the destination apart

• What Santa Barbara is communicating about its meetings assets and overall meetings destination brand through its official website (SantaBarbaraCA.com)

Methodology

Because of the complexity and of the study’s topic, a qualitative methodology—in-depth interviews of meeting planners—was selected. Destination Analysts, with Visit Santa Barbara’s input, developed a discussion guide that addressed the research objectives. Destination Analysts then recruited twelve (12) meeting planners to each participate in a 60-minute in-depth interview conducted through Destination Analysts’ online video conferencing system. The interviews were moderated by Destination Analysts’ staff and interviewees participated from their home or office at a time of their convenience.

The professional profile of those interviewed is detailed following.

Respondent Profile

The twelve persons in this study all had a professional responsibility for selecting destinations for meetings and planning them. All regularly consider California destinations for their meetings.

The meeting planners in this study represent corporate and incentive business for a range of industries including technology, medical, restaurant and financial. Over half are third-party planners who represent other types of meetings business, as well. Those whose sole professional responsibility is meeting planning all had at least 8 years of industry experience.

Meeting planners in the study represented both current and prospective Santa Barbara meetings customers.
Executive Summary

Marketing to Meeting Planners & the Destination Selection Process

- **A strong tourism brand creates a strong meetings brand.** Meeting planners interviewed estimated that anywhere from 30 to 70 percent of their clients already have a destination(s) in mind when they approach them about planning a meeting. Their clients’ inspiration—and excitement about a destination—comes from seeing features in travel media like *Conde Nast Traveler* and the *New York Times* travel section, film and television, coverage in other media, advertising as well as experience in the destination—both personal and those of their professional and personal network. Meeting planners interviewed offered several examples of sourcing—and ultimately selecting a destination—because it was a buzzed about place that a client wanted to personally visit.

- **Providing personal experience in the destination is the best way to sell it.** Meeting planners heavily rely on their own personal experience in matching a destination to a meeting. The meeting planners in this study frequently reiterated that the best way to sell a destination is to get the planner and client to personally experience it. Thus FAM tours and offers from the CVB that allow planners and clients a free/subsidized way to do so are seen as incredibly valuable. The Tucson CVB’s free flight offer to let meeting planners bring clients to experience Tucson was on the top of several planners’ minds at the time of the study. (Scottsdale has a similar program, as well.)
• **To learn about and evaluate destinations, in many ways meeting planners behave similarly to traveling consumers.** In addition to their personal past experience, meeting planners frequently rely on word-of-mouth—recommendations/input from their network of peers and industry members (such as NSOs). They also use travel magazines for ideas and inspiration, and ratings and reviews websites like TripAdvisor for research. In terms of industry specific resources, Cvent was cited most frequently as an important resource. Some meeting planners use printed trade publications, but not extensively.

• **Meeting planners like email as a sales communication medium.** The meeting planners interviewed praised email as a sales/marketing method as it gives them the flexibility to consume the content and respond at their convenience. Several meeting planners interviewed said they regularly read email newsletters—i.e. from M&C and hotel groups—to get ideas for where to hold meetings. They also like—and welcome—personal emails from CVB and/or hotel sales staff that serve as relationship “check-ins” and keep them up-to-date on current events and offerings.

• **Personal incentives are an effective sales and marketing tool.** Meeting planners interviewed joked that “we can be easily bought.” Gifts sent to them and their staff make a big impression, as do sponsored entertainment events (an example given was a private fashion show at Nordstrom). They also cited formal programs like Choose Chicago’s, in which they get a $100 giftcard for every piece of business booked that is 30+ roomnights. In terms of incentives related to a specific meeting, offers such as complimentary transportation to off-site events and complimentary on-site spa treatments for the planner and primary client were seen as attractive.

• **Personal relationships are the primary value offered by CVBs for meeting planners.** When meeting planners discussed Convention & Visitors Bureaus, the ones they cited as the best—and thus therefore regularly turn to—are those in which a sales staff member has developed and maintained a personal relationship with them. The meeting planner therefore feels they can rely on this CVB to deliver personalized recommendations to them that fit their requirements, as well as confident that there is someone in the destination advocating for them and their meeting.
Selling Santa Barbara as a Meeting Destination and Santa Barbara’s Meetings Destination Brand

• The meeting planners interviewed strongly felt that if Santa Barbara wants to grow its meetings business, not just they, but the traveling public, need to see and hear a lot more about Santa Barbara. The majority of the meeting planners interviewed said that Santa Barbara is not (or very rarely) on their clients’, and thus their own, radars. The destination simply doesn’t come up that often. One meeting planner referred to Santa Barbara as a “hidden gem,” because she felt so few other planners know about it. When asked what contributes to clients not having Santa Barbara on their radar, a number of the meeting planners interviewed again pointed to media coverage, buzz amongst peers and personal visitor experience, as what gets their clients interested in and excited about destinations for their meetings. Several planners mentioned that because of Orange County’s both earned and paid media penetration (television shows and the fact that Orange County hotels advertise extensively), it is a lot more top of mind for their clients and clients feel comfortable selecting it as their meetings destination.

• Within the meetings industry, meeting planners want to see and hear from Santa Barbara more. In particular, they asked that the CVB and its hotel partners come do in-person pitches/presentations (for example, come to their office as part of a sales roadshow and/or host an event in their city). If in-person is not feasible, they are open to online presentations, as well. The planners also suggested the CVB and its hotel partners have strong presence at important industry tradeshows like IMEX. They also said that it is critical that there is a systematic plan for keeping in touch with them regularly. For example, a personal email from a sales person once a month and/or a meetings focused destination email newsletter that highlighted any developments/events/news of interest in the destination relevant to the meetings market.

• Santa Barbara is equated with high-end, boutique luxury destinations. This is the most universal and developed perception of Santa Barbara amongst meeting planners. The upside of this reputation is that meeting planners immediately associate Santa Barbara with beautiful settings and exceptional service. However expensiveness and exclusiveness can also be front and center in thinking about Santa Barbara.
Santa Barbara’s exceptional scenic beauty, year-round reliably good weather, walkable downtown, beach proximity, quaintness, tranquility, safety, cleanliness, abundance of activities, and great dining and other options for off-site events are consistently seen as the destination’s most appealing attributes. Santa Barbara is perceived as having a lot to do but in a manageable way. The area offers a peaceful change from the hectic atmosphere of Los Angeles and San Diego. The service and offerings of properties like Bacara and Four Seasons also make it a dependable option for the most particular clients. Santa Barbara is perceived to have less traffic than other destinations in California, and thus more relaxed and easier to get around. Perhaps most importantly, meeting planners said it is a place they would never have to worry about attendees being happy to go to.

Because of its perception as a luxury destination which is “more about fun” than 24/7 business, Santa Barbara is seen as a place for corporate retreats, sales meetings, small board meetings, and incentives. It is not readily thought of for “meetings in a box” type of business or any meeting in which budget is a significant factor. “I’d never place an association there,” one planner said. Of note, some meeting planners warned of a waning incentive market, and that Santa Barbara should consider putting efforts into marketing itself as a place for product reveals and meetings from Silicon Valley (particularly since Santa Barbara is drivable for these potential attendees). They also felt Santa Barbara faces challenges with the incentive market because of a strong desire amongst clients to “go exotic” for this type of event.

Flight service into Santa Barbara is far and away the biggest challenge the destination faces for drawing in more meetings business. The lift and expense factor has made it challenging for even those planners who love Santa Barbara to sell it to their clients. Meeting planners interviewed said that their clients don’t like to travel more than 45 minutes from the airport (and don’t want employees traveling all day). Clients also prefer not to connect.

Familiarity is another challenge, although much more easily addressable. Speaking again to not seeing enough of Santa Barbara in trade or consumer media and elsewhere, even several of those meeting planners who have held meetings in Santa Barbara said they feel generally unknowledgeable about the destination. As an example, amongst the meeting planners interviewed, there was little knowledge about Santa Barbara’s wine country, hotel offerings (outside of Bacara, Four Seasons, Fess
Parker and El Encanto), alternative meeting venues and attractions. The meeting planners felt that greater knowledge about the destination strongly helps bring it more top of mind for more meetings.

- **There is opportunity to further market Santa Barbara for meetings on the official destination website.** Meeting planners spent part of their interview reviewing Visit Santa Barbara’s website, SantaBarbaraCA.com. The planners look to DMO websites like Visit Santa Barbara’s to get a general sense of the destination, what the destination offers for their attendees to see and do, and hotel and venue information. The meeting planners interviewed praised the photography on VisitSantaBarbaraCA.com and the content in the event themes section. However, they felt that the site could be improved through: 1) making the Meetings & Event section more obvious and thus easier to locate, 2) expanding the meetings hotel section to better market the properties, and not just defaulting to an alphabetical list of hotels, 3) providing more information about lift and the airport that will help planners overcome this as an objection, and 4) putting more attention to the overall look and presentation of information about meetings in Santa Barbara (i.e. adding more photos and videos, adding more testimonials, creating compelling content about why to choose Santa Barbara, presenting content in a bulleted and less text-heavy format)

**Santa Barbara Versus Competing Meetings Destinations**

- **Orange County:** Of the competitive set tested through this research, the Orange County product was seen as most competitive to Santa Barbara, as it offers a similar high-end boutique-type experience (Pelican Hill, Ritz Carlton and Montage Laguna Beach in particular). As aforementioned, the meeting planners felt that Orange County is significantly more well-known and top of mind compared to Santa Barbara. Thus, their clients feel much more familiar and comfortable with the destination. There is also a perception that their airport has better lift. Nevertheless, planners who had held meetings in Orange County felt it was cumbersome and difficult to get to the resort properties, and that Santa Barbara is actually easier from an overall getting around standpoint. Santa Barbara is therefore more peaceful feeling. Santa Barbara is also seen as having a much more robust variety of activities to offer.
• **SAN DIEGO:** This is one of the top sourced locations for many planners. It is an exciting destination that “has a lot going on,” and is seen as having more offerings for meetings with a younger crowd. San Diego is seen to be easily accessible, having great beaches, and easily navigable. Nevertheless, Santa Barbara is seen to be more peaceful and superior for smaller, high-end groups, who require first-rate service.

• **LOS ANGELES:** Many planners refused to even compare Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, saying the two are just completely different destinations that would never be in a competitive set. Los Angeles is more about the urban experience or the quick in-and-out type of meeting. However, those planners familiar with Santa Monica area of Los Angeles said that this destination offered a somewhat similar offering as Santa Barbara, but with far more craziness/busy-ness.

• **MONTEREY:** Monterey benefits from the “bucket list” factor, and thus there is a segment of clients/attendees that will be thrilled to go (and pick it over Santa Barbara). However, beyond golf, it is otherwise perceived as cold and foggy, as well as hard to get to, with a limited downtown and not an extensive amount of properties and activities. Santa Barbara’s meetings assets are generally seen as superior.

• **NAPA VALLEY:** Like Monterey, Napa Valley benefits from the bucket list factor. Meeting planners feel that “everyone wants to go to Napa Valley.” World renowned, it’s therefore “easy to start to talk about” with clients. However, Napa Valley simply does not have the capacity for any sizable meeting. If Napa Valley gets a hotel with more meeting space it may become more of a competitor for Santa Barbara. Napa Valley is also seen as difficult to get to because of its distance—and the traffic—from SFO. While the meeting planners did not feel Santa Barbara could compete with Napa Valley on the wine country experience, in comparison to Napa Valley, Santa Barbara is seen as being much more diverse in the activities available and the audiences the destination can appeal to.

• **OJAI:** Few planners interviewed had meaningful knowledge of Ojai. While it is thought of as beautiful and intriguing, it is also seen as one-dimensional and remote. Meeting planners perceive the destination as a fit only for meetings in which there is a desire to be solely on-property the entire time. Santa Barbara is seen as much more lively, with more activities and more options for attendees.