



When Goody Bags Are Not So Good

By Shebby Lee

Everybody likes presents, so on the surface, the idea of welcoming guests to your community with a goody bag or other amenity is a good idea. But I would submit that giving more thought to possible repercussions of some gifts might be in order.

For example, years ago, the National Tour Association (NTA) held a very successful spring meeting in the beautiful city of Victoria, B.C. I have lovely memories of the friends I made, the business conducted, and great sightseeing opportunities I experienced there. However, I have one lingering memory of that convention—the departure. The year was 2003, which is important, because the world had had time to recover from 9/11 and absorb how much our lives had been changed. One of the biggest changes, of course, was airline travel.

This was back in the day when sponsored gifts liberally flowed in the direction of tour operators. We were pleasantly surprised to find a darling little green and yellow ripstop bag with side pouches filled with matching garden tools at each place setting at one of the luncheons. The well-intentioned sponsor of the event had invested quite a bit of money in these favors, and most everyone was delighted to receive them. I carefully tucked my bag into my suitcase and looked forward to using the tools upon returning home.

A couple of days later, however, I was chagrined to see scores of these little bags and their contents stacked up behind the TSA checkpoint at the airport. They had been confiscated when my fellow tour operators tried to “smuggle” them through security. Today someone would have plastered a photo of that

mountain of garden tools all over the internet before some of us even arrived for our flights. Money was wasted. A good impression became a bad one, and, what’s more, today someone would have worsened this faux pas by broadcasting it on the internet.

A different and more common practice involves giving “gift packets” to every passenger including, but not necessarily limited to, the local visitor’s guide. These are left at the group’s hotel by the friendly local CVB. Again, this is a well-intentioned gesture, but it is misguided since it promotes activities, restaurants, and hotels in that community even though the planning, decision-making, and marketing for this particular tour were conducted a good year earlier.

In this case, the material was distributed too late and to the wrong party! Tours are planned by professional tour planners, not individual passengers, and no one can possibly include every listing in a visitor’s guide. We have a hard-and-fast rule in my company: “Never tell ’em what they are missing.” This habit, sadly, is the very personification of that slogan.

Another popular gift to group tour participants is the goody bag, which can make everyone feel warm and fuzzy, but opening them in the privacy of a hotel room may have a different effect than what was intended. What did you put in the bag? Was it tacky? Useful? Is it representative of your attraction or something that your gift shop couldn’t get rid of? Will it get past airport security? Too often the gift is all of the above. I have heard participants weighing the dilemma of what to pack and what to pitch, and I was



informed in at least one case that the goody bag “didn’t make the cut.”

My advice to travel providers who wish to make a good impression? Make it memorable. If you can’t do that, make it edible, especially if it’s a local specialty, such as huckleberry taffy in Montana or Idaho. Such gifts are almost always welcome and likely to be consumed long before reaching the TSA checkpoint.

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