The Expert's Opinion

An interview with
Coral R. Snodgrass, PhD., President
Buffalo-Niagara Region Council for International Visitors

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IRMJ: What is the Buffalo-Niagara Region Council for International Visitors?

Snodgrass: The CIV, as we call it, is a not-for-profit, community-based organization which provides programs and hospitality for international visitors who come to our region for specific professional development and study projects. We are members of the National Council for International Visitors (NCIV), a professional association of 99 nonprofit organizations throughout the United States that coordinate these visitor programs for the US Information Agency’s (USIA) Office of International Visitors. Along with their many activities in support of US foreign policy, the USIA sponsors emerging foreign leaders to come to the United States for short periods in order to fulfill their goals of furthering international understanding through citizen exchanges. Most of your readers will be more familiar with the USIA’s Fulbright program which supports American students and scholars who want to study abroad and foreign scholars who study in the United States. In our related program, we support international visitors coming to the United States for meetings with their professional counterparts. Some of the “up-and-coming” political figures who visited the United States under this program include Margaret Thatcher, Anwar Sadat, and F.W. de Klerk. Clearly, ours is a very important task undertaken to build friendships between the United States and the world.

The local CIVs are volunteer organizations whose task is to develop the detailed programs for international visitors who are invited to come to the United States by the US ambassador in their home country. The “citizen diplomats” of the CIV provide professional meetings, informational support and home hospitality for the visitors. As an example, we recently hosted Risto Penov, the mayor of Skopje, Macedonia and his wife, Mayoress Nada Penov, who were in the United States to study economic revitalization. They visited Buffalo for four days during their three-week stay in the United States. As part of their program, they met with the mayor of Buffalo, members of the Buffalo City Common Council, and members of local revitalization organizations. Volunteer members of the CIV took the mayor and his wife to Niagara Falls. We provided dinners in the homes of our members. We also visited a local elementary school. The visit was organized by the three paid professionals in our office. All of the meetings, meals and transportation were freely provided by our volunteer members — including our mayor!

IRMJ: What role does information play in the CIV’s activities?

Snodgrass: Let’s take the example of our visiting mayor. A trip such as his is initiated through the US embassy and US Information Service (the name for the USIA outside the US) system operating throughout the world. The mayor was identified as a candidate for a sponsored trip because of the US government’s priority for assisting the economic and political revitalization of his country. A call for proposals was sent out through the NCIV network for local CIVs to propose programs which would fulfill the objectives of the proposed visit. Our CIV in Buffalo was invited to develop a program for him and we were given the assignment. Up to this point, the information content of the task is fairly simple. We receive a call for proposals or an invitation to participate over the Internet or fax, we make a quick assessment of our resources, and, if they seem to match the visitor’s needs, we propose a program.

After we receive the assignment, the information management task becomes quite complex. We have three things to consider. The first is the time constraint under which we work. When the field officer in the foreign post sends out the original request, there may be only a few weeks for the whole package to be finalized. The request first goes back to Washington and is distributed into the USIA’s network of programming agencies. The agency coordinating the visit sends out the call to the NCIV network. That means when we get a call for proposals in the local office, we may have just a few days to decide whether or not we have the resources to undertake such a
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