

Student recruits get red carpet

Here's what the city's doing to attract and retain students

LAUREN MAYK
SPECIAL TO THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Todd Hoffman doesn't teach or run a school but is nonetheless in the business of education.

More specifically, Hoffman is in the business that higher education creates in cities such as Boston and Philadelphia, dealing in hotel room bookings, dinner reservations and souvenirs -- the stuff of which college visits are made.

Hoffman has teamed with 17 colleges, the Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corp., an airline and Amtrak to kick off Campus Visit Philadelphia. The initiative, launched last spring, includes a Web site (onebigcampus.com), a magazine and an 800-number that patches callers into a system of hotel, airline and campus tour reservations. The goal: Lure prospective college students and their parents to the Philadelphia area and get them to stick around long enough to see the sights and spend some money.

Hoffman, a former director of marketing for the Boston-based Saunders Hotel Group, says he has found a niche market largely untapped before he launched his first Campus Visit program in Boston in 1995. Back then, business was slow and the hotels and tourism bureaus in the region were looking for a boost. On a Saturday afternoon in February, Hoffman met with colleges and tourism representatives to figure out how to market Boston as "America's College Town."

"People began talking about it," recalled Pat Moscaritolo, president and CEO of the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau. "(Now) it's almost a subsector of our marketing."

The Boston experiment has grown from eight

to 15 colleges and Moscaritolo said the program has exceeded its goals in the region.

The average stay for a campus visit in Boston is just over three days - about a day more than it was before Hoffman's initiative began there. With the average per person spending almost \$300 per day, that's a good chunk of money. By tracking calls through the 800-number, Hoffman estimates that campus visitors spent more than \$80 million at hotels and other Boston businesses last year.

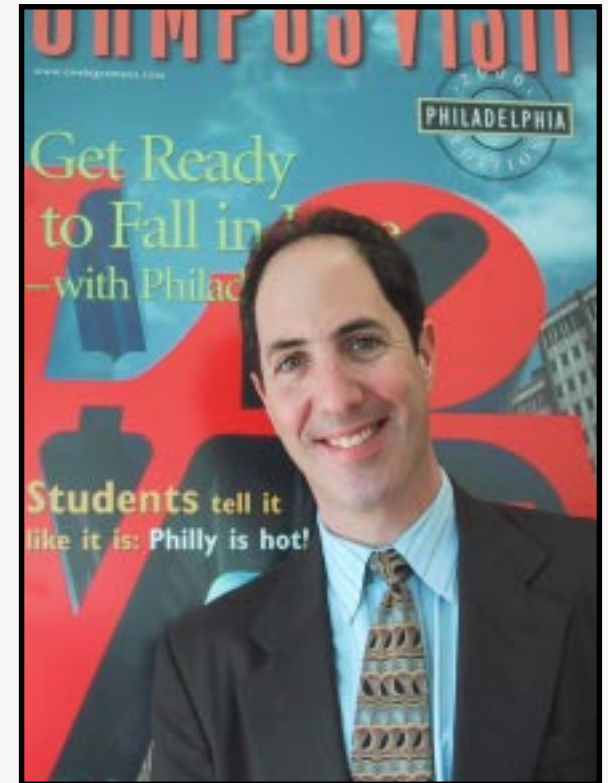
"It packs a significant economic wallop for us," said Moscaritolo said.

In Philadelphia, the average college stay is 1.6 days with the average per person spending \$163 per day. Hoffman and GPTMC hope that by pitching the college visit as a family vacation and Philadelphia as "One Big Campus," they can extend that stay to three days and two nights.

GPTMC has made a financial commitment of at least \$100,000 per year for three years. This year, the bill is \$160,000 because of a special advertising campaign.

"It's just difficult to get Philadelphia on the radar screen of people who don't know about it," said Veronica Wentz, project manager for Campus Visit and GPTMC interactive director.

Hoffman's company is comprised of his wife (executive director of the Boston program), an account manager with a writing background and a designer for the magazine. Other services, including the telephone system based in Boston, are outsourced. Hoffman himself serves as the Webmaster, the telecommunications specialist, a writer for the magazine and the bridge between the schools, the tourism bureaus and other contributors.



Beyond experimenting: Campus Visit's Todd Hoffman

He flies from Boston, where he lives with his wife and two children, to Philadelphia for campus visits on U.S. Airways, which provides his tickets and those used for special giveaways as part of its sponsorship. The airline offers a 5-percent discount to families who book tickets through the Campus Visit. Amtrak, also listed in the magazine and on the Web site, offers a 50-percent discount.

In the 1970s, a group of local colleges joined forces for a similar "grass-roots" initiative called Campus Philadelphia, but the coalition was short-lived, said Barbara Elliott, director of admissions

See RETENTION Page 19

Retention: A 'wake-up call

FROM PAGE 17

for Philadelphia University of the Arts.

"It sort of fell apart because there was really no one person involved in (heading) it," she said.

University of the Arts expects to benefit from the new program because the small school (with about 2,000 students) couldn't afford to publish the glossy magazine on its own and because its prospective students are particularly interested in the kind of cultural environment they will be living in for four years, Elliott said.

But despite draws in the arts and in the nightlife, there are challenges to selling the idea of college in Philadelphia to students and -- perhaps more importantly -- to their parents. Pockets of the city have reputations for being unsafe, the layout is "choppy" and the public transportation system is not immediately visible because it's under ground, Hoffman said. It has many positives, but it doesn't show itself well, he said.

"Philadelphia, for better or worse, is the real world," Hoffman said.

On the other hand, the area also has one of the highest per capita concentrations of higher education institutions in the United States, according to the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce.

Fifteen of them pay between \$10,000 and \$60,000 to participate in the new initiative.

Hoffman's Campus Visit magazine lists the colleges, profiles them and even offers a grid that lists distance from campus to campus in mileage and minutes. "If we can get people to see more than one college, they're more likely to park here for That's good news for restaurants, taxi drivers and hotels -- including the three hotels owned by Penn in University City.

Ken Kapikian, general manager of the Sheraton University Hotel, said the hotel is tracking Campus Visit-spurred guests by who makes reservations with a special rate. The discount for those guests is about 25-30 percent off the regular corporate room rate, Kapikian said.

The magazine includes articles by local writers, students and educators about the city, about planning trips and applying to college. It also touts the city as a place where companies spawn internships and internships spawn jobs for graduates of the local universities.

Marketing not just a college but a city and a college experience to young people is also a way to combat the disappointing trend of exodus from Philadelphia over the past few years, said Meryl Levitz, president and

CEO of GPTMC.

"I think that's been a real wake-up call," she said.

Hoffman calls the college student "the visitor with staying power" and is convinced that young people will fall in love with the city once they give it a try.

The initiative focuses mainly on incoming undergraduates, but Penn is preparing a special wrap for the magazine that targets the graduate student population. In some ways, that population is even more critical because those people often bring families and professional careers to the city they choose for graduate school, said Larry Moneta, associate vice president for campus services at Penn.

"They are the brains that we would not like to see drained from Philadelphia," Moneta said.

●
The region's student exodus 'has been a real wake-up call.'

Meryl Levitz
CEO, GPTMC
●