



Buying power

Former investment banker and now principal of The Lido Group, Matthew Tyler believes the future of C&I management lies firmly in cyberspace. A real-time, fully integrated event accommodation and booking service that can even offer your delegates cheap phone calls and discount meals?

You better believe it.

Tyler spoke with Cindy Dowling.

Tell us about the Lido Group and its origins.

The Lido Group was formed by Brian Bridgeman in 1991. He had previously owned a business that attended lots of trade shows and realised that traditional travel agents focused only on flights and did not have expertise in accommodation services. I joined Lido as a principle in 2000 with the aim of developing the company's E-strategy and new business opportunities.

LIDOnline has created quite a buzz in the C&I sector. How does it differ from the plethora of on-line booking services already available?

Interest in our product has already well exceeded our initial expectations. LIDOnline allows event organisers to offer clients real-time accommodation and air-travel bookings via their website and e-marketing. We turn the client's website into a full e-commerce environment without them needing special IT knowledge. And because of our buying and negotiating power, clients can save on the cost of airfares and hotel rooms. Unlike some other services that place their brand all over the travel and airfare details, we aren't about pushing the Lido brand. Our aim is to blend our product seamlessly into the client's website. It has only their brand, their logo and so forth. We simply provide the technology and back-up. The term "real-time" is another crucial difference. Many organisations claiming to offer online booking really just provide an email service. Delegates must fill out a form that is then emailed and responded to later. With our system, the room is booked, paid for and therefore guaranteed as soon as the details have been filled in. Another important point of difference is that we have our own database of accommodation options. Most travel agents tend to simply use the venues listed on GDS. Not every venue is listed there, and clients pay a fee when they access a venue using that service. Our accommodation database has more than 7000 suppliers and we can tailor it to a client's particular needs. As we're independently owned we are not biased toward any particular hotel chain or product. It really is a one-stop shop that allows event organisers to research venues, conference travel and accommodation bookings - even manage delegate registration. Our clients

include the government, corporate and associations sectors and we work on exhibitions, trade events, meetings and conferences. Organisations that have used Lido include the Fine Foods exhibitions, the annual Summnats car-racing event in Canberra and the Australian Institute of Food Sciences & Technology.

Is delegate registration a new aspect of the service?

Yes, it will be introduced soon. We didn't originally intend to include delegate registration, but we've done it at the request of many clients. The number of extra services that can be added to LIDOnline are enormous. We already have car hire, pre- and post-event bookings, discounted rates on international SIM cards and mobile broadband, and are looking at things like pre-paid restaurant vouchers.

Do you see yourselves as being in direct competition with PCOs?

We prefer to think of it as a tool for PCOs to compliment their event organisation role. In fact, we have had several small to medium PCOs become clients. They've decided to simply concentrate on event organisation - like program planning and organising speakers - and outsource the travel and accommodation side of things to us.

You have described LIDOnline as "taking the mystery" out of travel and accommodation booking. What do you mean by that?

Many of our clients, particularly associations and corporates, had no idea that most PCOs receive undisclosed commissions from hotels, on top of the per-delegate rate they negotiate with the client. When organisations do discover that, many are unhappy about it and come to us instead. We have no hidden commissions, no smoke and mirrors. We let our technology provide the "wow" factor. We also offer a rebate service, which allows event organisers to not only reduce the cost per head, but to actually generate revenue from the event. The rebate is offered by way of cheque, not goods or services.

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