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Destination Sundance reservations a success

Festival-coordinated program gets praise from visitors, hoteliers
 by Andrew Kirk, OF THE RECORD STAFF
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The Sundance Institute has always fielded questions about lodging in preparation for the festival. They used to send out an email with 12 links to local lodging companies, explained Kenzie Coulson, manager of festival accommodations and transportation.

Then it occurred to the staff that several benefits could come from helping people find a room or condo themselves so Destination Sundance was born.

New this year, a Web site managed by All Seasons Resorts is fed directly by the ticket-purchasing site. Once people choose their movies, the Sundance page invites them to book their accommodations. The site allows shoppers to sort by location, size, price range and other factors. In return, the festival gets a reservation commission that supports its operation.

According to Coulson, the commission is less than other sites and services charge, so local hotels love it.

Hoping to double what was done last year, the new Destination Sundance service actually saw a four-fold increase in transactions, said Jason Linder, director of sales and marketing for All Seasons.

"We've sold 3,000 room nights," he said.

Because it is tailored specifically to the festival and is designed to help tourists and film-industry professionals alike find what they need, the service is superior to that offered by higher-profile booking sites, he said.

Smaller inns, bed & breakfasts and condo-hotel managers also love the exposure Destination Sundance provides that they normally don't get

from nation-wide reservation sites, Linder added.

Because they know people are looking for value this year, and are willing to drive a little farther to get it, one of the options on the site is to shop outside of Park City in Kamas, the Heber Valley, the Sundance Resort and even Salt Lake City. Probably 95 percent of attendees

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want to sleep in Park City, but these outlying areas are getting more exposure with festival-goers than ever before, he said.

Like the rest of the lodging industry, Sundance Destination experienced shorter booking windows this year, making it hard to predict pillow counts.

"Things really picked up in December," Linder said. "People are still booking I thought we'd be done by now, but yesterday we had 10 reservations."

And there's still inventory available, he added. People are scouring for the low-cost options making certain properties more popular that didn't used to see a lot of Sundance traffic.

The big names appear to be using the site as well. He thought celebrities would use acronyms, but his paperwork is coming through showing A-listers have used it to book rooms as well.

Coulson said she's already looking forward to the summer months when she can gather feedback from everyone about how things went and how to improve. Linder said more feedback is something he's really looking forward to, also.

Already he knows the lodges would like more access to their postings to change rates, specials and packages any time, in real time.

Linder said there's also a plan to work more closely with condominium managers to help them post properties in a way that showcases the unique benefits to each property while still making them easy to search.

Maxine Jensen, director of sales and marketing for the Park City Peaks Hotel, said this year was the first time they've worked with the service and said it went smoothly.

"We were pleasantly surprised with how it worked," she said. "They sent us a lot of bookings. We'll be happy to continue next year."



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