

Destination Boston

National event planners explain why the city's allure is now cresting

BY ROBERT CELASCHI
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

The most important convention to hit Boston this year may have been one of the smallest ones. The **National Business Travel Association's** international convention drew about 6,200 attendees — about one-fourth the size of the big BIO International Convention in July. But the NBTA's attendees carry a lot of clout in deciding where businesspeople meet in the future.

And they loved Boston.

"They said that it was one of the most successful events they've ever had," said **Alan Krensky**, president and CEO of **Meeting Partners**, a Dedham meeting management company. The **Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau** figures the NBTA convention generated only \$13.6 million in area revenue, but is likely to trigger more than \$425 million in future corporate bookings.

"It's the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow," said **Patrick Moscaritolo**, CEO

of the bureau.

With the Big Dig behind it and a new convention center to tout, Boston has ramped up its marketing. Last year it joined with the **Cambridge Office for Tourism** in a three-year campaign.

The effort's paying off. The Boston-Cambridge area shot up from ninth place to first among destination cities and countries ranked by the **International Congress and Convention Association**. That's a far cry from the years just following the 2001 recession and the 9/11 attacks, when some convention sites were supplying space rent free just to bring business their way.

Boston has also reportedly scored high on the latest edition of the renowned **Metropol** report, issued every two years by **Gerard Murphy & Associates** of Overland Park, Kan. Moscaritolo would not divulge details from a preliminary draft, but said Boston did well among the 40 cities covered.

"We're not No. 1, I'll tell you that. We are definitely in the top 10. We would be closer to the first grouping of the top 10," he said.

Not all types of meetings make the same demands on a city, so competition varies.

For trade shows, Boston butts heads



often with Orlando, Las Vegas and Atlanta, said Moscaritolo. For conventions, it's primarily San Francisco, Philadelphia, San Diego and Washington, D.C. In the fast-growing market for international conventions, Boston vies most often with San Francisco, Atlanta, Chicago and Washington.

Boston does well for international gatherings in part because of geography, said Krensky. Just as Chicago is central within the continental United States, Boston is a central point for meetings that draw from both California and Europe. Also, **Logan Interna-**

tional Airport is the closest airport to a major city.

"Boston is a very easy sell. It's large enough that you are in a world-class city, but you are not in a Manhattan, which to many people can be overwhelming," he said.

The dynamics differ a bit for trade shows. Industries tend to stay closer to their membership, with Houston a natural spot for oil and gas shows, Chicago for manufacturing and Boston for technology and medicine.

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Alan Krensky, CEO of Meeting Partners in Dedham, said recent visits by national convention planners are likely to draw hundreds of millions of dollars in future bookings to Boston.

DESTINATION: How Boston became a top site among convention planning set

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Boston ranked 15th nationally in 2005 convention bookings, the last measure taken by the Dallas-based **Center for Exhibition Industry Research**. That year Boston booked only eight trade shows using more than 100,000 square feet of exhibit space, compared with 25 for San Francisco, which ranked 14th.

However, the recently completed **Boston Convention & Exhibition Center** in South Boston should have a big impact when the 2007 rankings come out, said **Douglas Ducate**, CEIR's CEO.

"My bet is you'll see some significant changes there. Hynes just couldn't handle those events," said Ducate.

While the **John B. Hynes Veterans Memorial Convention Center** has 175,000 square feet of exhibit and auditorium space, 41 meeting rooms and a 25,000-square-foot ballroom, the new **Convention & Exhibition Center** boasts 516,000

square feet of contiguous exhibit space, 84 configurable meeting rooms and a 40,020-square-foot ballroom.

Though it opened in 2004, the new convention center is only now having a big impact, as large events typically are booked years in advance. Indeed, the NBTA hadn't gathered in Boston in 19 years because the facilities weren't large enough, says **Caleb Tiller**, an NBTA spokesman.

Boston should also benefit from last year's convention of the **American Society of Association Executives**, said Ducate.

That group controls most trade shows in the country.

"That meeting got high rankings," Ducate said. "The important thing about handling an event like that is that it demonstrated their capability. I can tell you New York considers Boston main competition now. They never did before."