

# No Red Ink in the Convention Business

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When the Chicago Convention Bureau announced recently that it was establishing a program of semiannual cash awards to policemen outstanding in their courteous treatment to visitors to the Illinois metropolis, it was not just staging another publicity stunt. Rather, it was making a sound investment in good business.

Out-of-towners, particularly those coming to conventions and trade shows in Chicago, have long been among the city's most valuable economic assets. In lean years the "extra money" spent by visiting delegates frequently meant the difference between profit and loss for many a Chicago concern. Over the past generation it has meant comfortable livelihood for thousands of Chicago workers, eased the tax load on countless Chicago natives, filled the void when other cities not as well equipped to draw good-spending outsiders were experiencing depression-year nose dives.

In World War II, Chicago, because of its location and facilities, rivaled even Washington itself in its hustling traffic. When the ban was placed on ordinary conventions, Chicago, because it would be reached more easily and by more people from any other spot on the national map, was chosen for hundreds of Government-sponsored sessions.

It is the convention business, however, with its large, organized groups and set sojourn instead of the hit-or-miss business of casual visitors, that has been Chicago's pet goal as a hospitality center. Because of their very character, with delegates invariably prepared long in advance to make a real time of their gatherings, conventions have not only been big business, but extremely profitable.

In 1948 convention guests of Chicago spent approximately \$123,778,973. This covered only out-of-pocket expenditures by delegates while actually in the city, did not include their travel costs to and from the conventions, nor their registration fees and other regular organizational assessments. Neither did it take in the

approximately \$50 million spent in Chicago for the erection of trade-show exhibits and booths, for flowers, printing, publicity, insurance, and the office expenses of the 1,056 conventions held in the city, and for other essentials not charged directly to the delegates.

While at first guess it might seem that the hotels and exposition halls reaped the biggest harvest, actually there were few categories in the Chicago business world that did not participate.

Department stores and other retail outlets got 17.2 percent of the delegate's dollar. Taxicabs and other transit lines took 3.3 percent. Garages and parking lots received 1.5 percent. Theaters and movie houses accounted for 2.7 percent. Ten percent went for night club entertainment, sporting events, and other extracurricular activities. Sight-seeing jaunts accounted for 1.4 percent. Purchases of beverages totaled 7.7 percent. And 7 percent was spent miscellaneously for dress-suit rentals, phone calls, newspapers, cigarettes, and the like. In the housing of the delegates, hotels received 24.1 percent for room charges and 12.6 percent in their restaurants; while outside restaurants garnered the remaining 12.5 percent.

It is not so much with this direct return from its convention activity but more with its indirect effect on the city's day-to-day prosperity that Chicago is chiefly concerned. Busy hotels mean employment for thousands of bellhops, waiters, cooks, and chambermaids. Crowded streetcars require large shifts of transit workers. Well-patronized stores must keep big forces of sales people, delivery staffs, models, and advertising men. All of these second-layer beneficiaries pay rent, buy groceries, go to church, support doctors, lawyers, barbers, and hairdressers. There is not a nook into which the convention dollar does not make its beneficial appearance.

Under such conditions it can readily be seen why Chicago is leaving little undone to protect the position as the world's busiest convention city. When, following the drop in war travel, hotel occupancy started to drop, the Chicago Convention Bureau launched the campaign to sell the "week-end" convention. Groups experiencing difficulty in squeezing their dates into already long-reserved housing schedules were shown how they could enjoy the best in facilities by starting their sessions on Friday instead of insisting on dates earlier in the week.

In like fashion, there was aggressive direct-mail selling to major executives who decide where their organizations will meet; nationally distributed movies produced by leading Hollywood experts; publication of such aids as the Chicago Fact Folder, most informative medium of a big city's convention facilities offered by any community in the country.

In selling its wares a city is no more than a wholesaler, responsible for the best possible merchandising of its various, individual facilities. Convention business, bringing to a city valuable income from sources it might never otherwise tap, can never prove a "red ink" item on any civic ledger. It deserves the best in constant community attention.



Michigan Boulevard, seen by a million convention and trade visitors to Chicago yearly.