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**BUSINESS PERSON OF THE YEAR**



OC over there: Fuller with members of OC delegation on China sales mission

**Hospitality: Ed Fuller**

OCVA Takes Lead on Marketing Sum of OC's Parts

By KARI HAMANAKA

2013 was the year *xie xie* entered OC tourism officials' vernacular.

The Chinese phrase for thank you came in handy as the tourism industry made a big push into China last year to market Orange County as a destination to the country's growing middle class. It's an effort orchestrated by Orange County Visitors Association Chief Executive Ed Fuller, who stepped into the top spot in July.

Fuller, who spent 40 years with Marriott International Inc., most recently as its president of International Lodging, is credited with bringing the industry together and strengthening relationships across city boundaries.



New perspective: former boss of Marriott's international business pitching OC to world

**"Catalyst, Leader"**

"We needed to bring resources together, and I am really excited about the people that I'm working with," Fuller said. "My job was to convince them that working together, we could do more than working as individuals, and I've just tried to be a catalyst."

He's succeeded at that, according to peers. "Ed has been a transformational leader," said OCVA Chairman Gary Sherwin, president and chief executive of Newport Beach and Company, which handles promotions for the city's hospitality trade. "In the last year, we opened offices in Beijing and Shanghai, conducted our first OC sales mission to the market, and we are now expanding to the Middle East in 2014. Few leaders bring the kind of seasoned experience that Ed possesses, especially internationally. The OC tourism industry has never been so united and strong as it is now."

The work last year in China helped make Orange County competitive with Los Angeles, San Francisco and other markets that already had sales muscle on the ground in the country.

"Once we put together a plan, we started to see results—and faster than we had hoped," Fuller said of the industry's strides in China.

The visitors association opened a sales office in Shanghai and Beijing in 2012 and organized a group of about 15 representatives from the local tourism and meetings industries for a 10-day sales mission in October. It also brought about 300 Chinese travel industry executives to Orange County throughout last year on familiarization trips.

"It's a burgeoning market, and we think these other markets we're exploring can also help the county have a diversity and bring in

some really good money, because the key story is that tourism is an export," Fuller said. "Most people don't think about it like that, but when someone comes here and spends money from another country, it's an export. And that's also true from another state. And it's not just about the hotels. It's the cab driver, the little restaurateur, the beach, the parks. They all get a chunk of this international market."

The results of the sales mission are already measurable: The association confirmed 30,000 hotel room nights have been booked in the Anaheim area.

It's working on bringing two major conventions from China to OC. The association also received word last month that a Chinese celebrity plans to have a wedding here sometime this year, the details of which are still under wraps from even the association.

A Chinese-language website is expected to launch this quarter, following similar Visit OC sites for markets in Canada and Great Britain.

"We said it would take us three years to get the China initiative to work," Fuller said. "We're only one year into it, and we're seeing a huge wholesale movement. We've started to open up the market. ... We're just scratching the surface, but we're getting indications far earlier than we thought."

**Road Map**

And the work has given the association a road map on future international marketing programs, Fuller said.

It plans to start similar initiatives in Mexico and the Middle East in March and is evaluating pushes into Australia and New Zealand.

There's more intensive work to be done behind the scenes to better understand the market through research.

"We understand that we got 43 million guests last year," Fuller said. "We want to understand them better, and we want to be able to talk to our county about what demographics we're chasing. We understand that probably 60% of our customers come from California, but it would help our [direct marketing organizations] to understand where that business is coming from so they might position their advertising, marketing efforts and sales more effectively. What we can do as a group is get better data to all of them than they maybe could afford individually. Our strategy is really leveraging on behalf of our membership."

The organization is also looking at advertising opportunities. The most recent example appears in the December issue of Delta Air Lines Inc.'s Delta Sky inflight magazine, for which Fuller helped bring together local advertisers to support a package of stories in the publication highlighting the county's tourism industry.

The association is looking at similar opportunities with other airlines next year.

A smiling Fuller said, "Other than that, we're not doing much." ■