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But the degree of attention paid to this controversial corner of the industry has heightened recently. There seems to be growing animosity toward abusers - among both trip sponsors and non-abusing planners - because of the negative image and effect they create for the industry.

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Wolff, Carolyn

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Sharon Wellman, manager of costing and planning for the San Francisco-based western region office of Carlson Marketing Group, echoed this note of caution.

"I have seen some transitions over the last couple of years, and I think they're a good thing. Number one, almost all FAM invitations are definitely non-transferable; every single one comes in addressed to a specific individual. Number two, most suppliers now are qualifying people even before they send the invitation out - they want to make sure there is some real interest."

Mason agreed: "Non-transferable invitations and suppliers doing better advance qualifying are the two largest trends I see happening. The suppliers are really doing what they should."

Quid Pro Quo Behind Invites

Some FAM sponsors are being more aggressive than others. Mostly that's dictated by an attitude toward what is expected to be gained from the event. Increasingly, that expectation is solid business pick-up, not just making relationships.

Said Michele Saran, manager of corporate and incentive travel sales for the Canadian Tourism Commission, "Some hotels just invite people with the thought, 'Oh, maybe we can get some future business out of them.' But I am making sure my clients are very, very qualified and that the end user is actually considering Canada.

"I don't want to be in the business of giving out vacations."

It's a wake-up call for planners: If you accept a FAM, your host might expect you to go home and sell the destination.

"That's really the name of the game: We want planners to feel pressure to book," said Saran.

Added Eldridge Mayor-Perry, director of incentive and corporate sales for Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts, "Once a planner accepts the invitation, there should be some reciprocal responsibility. Planners should try to expose the destination anytime there is opportunity to do so."

Pressure to sell or not, there are strong, opposing views among planners regarding FAMs that underscore their increasingly controversial nature. Some planners feel that accepting FAMs paves the way for a compromising payola, as it were — an obligation situation. For them the option is obvious: Don't accept the invitation.

Pros & Cons Clash

"I think that often there becomes a really awkward issue with FAMs," said meetings management consultant Joan Eisenstodt, president of Washington based Eisenstodt Associates. "We have enough trouble in this business with the friendships we develop, which can make it
difficult to negotiate. But if I know I am obligated because someone has paid for my airfare and my hotel room, and they have wined and dined me, that makes me really uncomfortable."

Ellen Michaels, president and CEO of Ellen Michaels Presents, an event management and production company in San Jose, Calif., agreed.

"There are too many negative things that go along with FAMs," she said. "Our general policy is that if we have someone seriously interested in a destination, then we do a site inspection. I know too many people who just go on FAMs as vacations. Running a meeting planning company, I feel ethics are very important, and I don't want to open that door."

However, many planners do believe that, when used appropriately, FAMs are a valuable asset producing the firsthand experience necessary to consider an unfamiliar destination.

"I think FAMs are an excellent way to introduce people to a destination," said Teri Hollowell, principal and president of San Francisco-based One World Incentives. "There's a big difference between saying to a client, 'I haven't been there, but I hear it is really nice,' and telling them after your FAM trip, 'It was the most incredible experience I've had, the most beautiful resort I've ever seen.'"

And Mason pointed out that FAMs allow her to evaluate upcoming meeting destinations and still remain within budget.

"Our chairman does not like to spend a lot of money on site inspections, so if a FAM trip happens to come along for a site that we are either researching or considering for an incentive or business trip, it helps because your expenses are paid for," Mason said.

Even Eisenstodt and Michaels acknowledged there could be some redeeming value in FAMs if an appropriate situation presented itself.

"Say a client, whose business I definitely have, says to me, 'Next year I'm thinking of going to XYZ exotic destination,' which we have never used before," Michaels said. "Then if someone happens to call with a FAM to that destination, I might consider it."

For Eisenstodt it is the FAMs' content and itinerary that needs improvement, to provide more value to the meeting planner.

"The key would be if they did something where there was some educational value that would benefit the work I do," Eisenstodt said. "It could be a forum for conversation with people from the city where you get to ask questions about the city. To me, that would be interesting as opposed to having just the bureau, the hotels and the fluff."

The Front Line Of Vigilance
Among those planners who do utilize FAMs, many worry that the negative impact of FAM abuse may limit the future offerings of trips.

Of abusers, Mason said, "It is frustrating when you are on the FAM and talk to people who you know are just there on a vacation. And it's unfair to those of us who need the educational experience of the FAM, because the vendors are starting to get discouraged from offering them because of these people."

That thought underscores the tougher qualifying standards suppliers are employing.

"For new prospective clients, we're getting history on their past programs to ensure that the business really does exist, as well as checking on their reputation within the industry," said Canada's Saran. "We have a really tight group in Canada, and if word gets out that someone is a FAM abuser, everyone knows it in no time."

Additionally, the Canadian Tourism Commission hopes its non-transferable policy will curb what Saran said is a recent surge of planners passing FAM invitations around within their companies.

"I see that more and more, particularly in the case of meeting and incentive houses, because they are so busy and so inundated with invitations, but they want someone to see the destination," said Saran. "I'm getting a lot of people who want to send their air buyers and operations people on FAMs. How valuable that person is all depends on that particular company."

Exclusive Destinations Inc. (EDI) is another vendor that is making FAM invitations non-transferable.

"If that particular person can't attend, they have to consult with us to determine if there is an alternative person who is viable," said Carmen Pinto, director of Exclusive Destinations, which represents destinations in Africa, Asia and the South Pacific. "We want them to take the invitation very seriously because we are investing quite a bit in the program."

For EDI and other vendors that represent destinations that are off the beaten path, qualifying attendees can be a more difficult process.

"We look at where they have traveled in the past as well as their budgets," said Pinto. "We have to make sure they have the potential for the destinations we represent. We ask for references for the hotels and airlines they have used in the past, and contact these folks to confirm that their programs have materialized."

Despite the potential problems, vendors surely will continue to offer FAMs, which are believed to pay off if they're well operated and the attendees are sufficiently qualified.

"When I was with Tourism Toronto, we did a study showing that
80 percent of clients who saw the destination ended up booking it," said Saran. "It is all in how the FAM is done, the partners you pick to put forth the program, and the fact that the clients are very qualified."

But in some cases it can be quite a while before a FAM host sees a return on its investment. "Sometimes it takes three to four years before you get something out of it," said Shangri-La's Mayor-Perry.

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