

Nevada tourism conference focuses on international traveler

By Richard N. Velotta, Las Vegas Sun

SPARKS – Increasing international visitation and taking advantage of technological innovations to increase the number of tourists visiting the state dominated the conversation at the opening day of the lightly attended Governor's Conference on Tourism on Tuesday.

Nearly every presentation referenced strategies to use technology to do more with less and mining new markets for more visitors – strategies that run parallel to Gov. Brian Sandoval's economic development program.

Even the Nevada Tourism Commission meeting that preceded the opening of the conference at John Ascuaga's Nugget was filled with presentations from the state's newest representatives working in foreign countries to get tourists to visit Nevada.

About 150 people are attending the event, which routinely drew nearly 1,000 people in its pre-recession heyday. While the state's tourism conferences generally attract more people when they're in Las Vegas, the 2010 event in Reno – the first one in three years after the stagnant economy forced cancellations in 2008 and 2009 – had more than 200 people present.

Claudia Vecchio, director of the Nevada Department of Cultural Affairs, which oversees the Tourism Commission, said she felt the two-year void of not having the event probably has hurt turnout. She said she expects to appeal to large resort operators to be more supportive next year.

But for those attending, the day was filled with updates on

the state of the state's most important industry.

In his opening address, Sandoval applauded the work of the state's tourism innovators, listing Ascuaga, Steve Wynn, and Reno's Carano family among them, and explained how events like Elko's Cowboy Poetry Gathering have been transformed into a world-renowned attractions.

"And our work, of course, is not yet finished," Sandoval said. "Nevada will continue to be a nationwide leader in innovation by creating more experiences that enhance the quality of life for Nevadans and the quality of tourist visits. Innovation does not have to be grandiose campaigns and programs. It can be small steps that doing something better, more efficiently and more creatively can make a difference."

Sandoval noted that tourism generates more than \$56.5 billion in traveler spending and employs more than 447,000 Nevadans – 30 percent of the state's work force. The industry accounts for 26 percent of the state's tax revenue and 12.5 percent of the state's gross domestic product.

Sandoval also referenced the state's efforts to establish a brand, a project that has been delayed and is now expected to be unveiled in the spring.

"We talked about this effort at last year's tourism conference, but we still have a ways to go. But I know you will appreciate and embrace that brand once it's completed. Good things take time, so please be patient."

Lt. Gov. Brian Krolicki followed up with a summary of the Tourism Commission's international efforts.

In a strategy shared by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, the state pays representatives in prospective markets to sell Nevada as a destination. The state's representatives in Australia, Brazil, France, South Korea and Mexico are attending the conference and addressed Tuesday

morning's commission meeting.

While the marketers have found niches that will bring visitors to the state's rural attractions, they acknowledge that Las Vegas is a major draw for foreign tourists.

Zelie Breval, the state's representative in France, said Death Valley National Park and Nevada's gateway town of Beatty have strong appeal to her customers.

Benjamin Diaz, the representative in Mexico, has helped position Lake Tahoe to be a stronger attraction for his customers than Aspen and Vail, according to online surveys. Visits from Brazil have been buoyed by a vast improvement in the visa application process.

Ana Beatriz Di Pietro, who represents the state in Brazil, said improved air service to Las Vegas should expand that market.

South Korea's Amy Lee and the agencies she works with have created customized tours that will take visitors to Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, Death Valley and Lake Tahoe in one trip.

Panama-based Copa Airlines now offers one-stop service from several Brazilian cities to Las Vegas through Panama City.

U.S. Travel Association President Roger Dow told the conference that the wait time for visa applications has shrunk from more than 90 days in June 2011 to less than five days in September, thanks to efforts by the U.S. State Department.

Ultimately, Dow said, he hopes Brazil joins Taiwan and South Korea in visa waiver programs that result in citizens not having to apply for a visa to visit the United States. He said he expects approval of new waiver programs for Brazil and Poland to be forthcoming.

The international marketing component also has been enhanced by the development of Brand USA, the nonprofit operation that

has begun marketing the United States in foreign countries.

Amir Eylon, vice president of partnership development for Brand USA, said the enactment of the Travel Promotion Act has started to pay off, as the organization has begun distributing ads in countries regarded as “low-hanging fruit.”

The first campaigns were launched in May in Japan, the United Kingdom and Canada using catchy theme music – “Land of Dreams” by Roseanne Cash – and quick-hitting images of destinations and people from across the country to carry the message. A one-minute version of the ad, which has a tagline of “Discover this land, like never before,” is a slice of a music video Cash produced for Brand USA.

Eylon said it’s still too early to quantify the effectiveness of the ads, but anecdotally, he said, the campaign has been a hit overseas and with American tourism leaders who have seen them.