

Hospitality



The Puerto Rico Advantage



An Interview with Milton Segarra,
President and Chief Executive Officer, Meet Puerto Rico

A waterfall in Puerto Rico's El Yunque National Forest (left);
The Puerto Rico Convention Center (above)

EDITORS' NOTE In addition to directing the efforts of the Meet Puerto Rico staff and implementing policies set by the organization's board of directors, Milton Segarra works to maintain strong relationships with the organization's 270-plus member-suppliers, local business leaders, and elected officials. Segarra also served as the Executive Director of the Puerto Rico Tourism Company and as the Secretary of the Department of Economic Development & Commerce, and held top management positions with Puerto Rico's top international hotel brands.



Milton Segarra

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Meet Puerto Rico (meetpuertorico.com) is a nonprofit organization established in 1962 to drive meetings, conventions, trade shows, and incentive groups to Puerto Rico. With headquarters in San Juan and representatives in New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Dallas, and Orlando, Meet Puerto Rico strengthens Puerto Rico's competitive position in the Americas and abroad by increasing awareness of the island's outstanding meeting facilities and services, and produces approximately \$110 million for the local economy.

What is the focus of the mission for Meet Puerto Rico?

This organization has been in place for more than 52 years. Since day one, it has been the organization in charge of promoting and positioning Puerto Rico as the preferred meeting destination in the Americas.

We have always had the best intellectual and human capital available for this highly competitive segment of the industry. They have been instrumental in ensuring we remain relevant and deliver consistent results.

We are adapting the mission and vision of our organization to incorporate the promise of delivering a service. We're making sure that even though we have to keep ourselves and our organization relevant and effective in the marketplace today, at the same time, we have to create an organization that can quickly adapt and react, and proactively seek out opportunities to succeed.

We have had significant challenges to our core business from political sources, competition, and internal situations that happen in our organization. But the way we have been able to connect the network internally has given us the strength to

adapt, identify the opportunity, and immediately create the conditions to move forward.

Is it tough to differentiate in the space? What makes Puerto Rico unique?

Perhaps 10 years ago, the most important offering to connect with clients was a convention center and the best hotels.

Today, these are secondary. Now, we're putting every dollar behind the experience and the brand.

It's about how we can effectively and responsibly describe the benefits and type of experience that a person will have when they come to Puerto Rico. It's important to make sure our brand stretches across assets and attributes, and into emotional benefits. Once we get that into the brand and people respond to it, then we will maintain a loyal clientele.

How important is engaging the travel leaders in Puerto Rico to the success of your efforts?

We have had good support, but we're not where we want to be yet. Addressing this is part of the process of leadership.

The industry understands that we need to move forward and position Puerto Rico differently, keeping in mind that the assets we have – from hotels to beaches to rainforests to the convention center – are extremely important, but the experience visitors can enjoy while in Puerto Rico is what will define how they feel about us.

How broad is the focus of your messaging?

We have a limited budget, so we have decided to pinpoint opportunities in the market that we know will respond to our offerings. We match that market's needs with specific initiatives so we can efficiently generate new business.

We have transitioned from a broad global message to specific, pinpointed, and dedicated efforts by market segments for which we combine all of our resources.

Even though our message is consistent, it's crafted for the specific marketplace we're talking to.

How important has social media been in working to spread your message?

Extremely important. We have approached it in two ways: Because it's so trendy to talk about social media, we have to make sure that our organization's team is savvy and knowledgeable about the discipline. In other words, we need to know

how to talk the language to maximize its effect. We do internal training on social media channels, what they mean, and what possibilities they offer. We have a certain baseline of knowledge in social media. Once we know we have an organization that can talk about social media and can act upon it, then we take it to specific markets. We target the three top channels that the meeting planners and association executives are using: LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.

At day's end, however, content strategy is the most important. We can have all the social media in the world, but if we don't manage the content, it's like having nothing. So we have become experts in content management to make sure we can maintain our message in an effective way.

How critical is accessibility in traveling to Puerto Rico?

Our distribution is good. Search engines rank Puerto Rico quite favorably.

Accessibility to the product is key to success today. If we're not available at a specific time or if we don't have an easy way for people to connect with us, we will disappear.

Is it important to have metrics in place to track these areas?

Yes. We need to do this. This year, we redesigned all the metrics we use to evaluate our organization. Typically, organizations like ours are primarily measured by how many room nights we were able to book, which means how much business will translate into hotel space.

But even though we have been measured by how many room nights we booked, we don't run the hotels – we don't determine the price of our product; we don't decide how much we can give to a food and beverage opportunity, or what type of concessions we're going to provide in a contract. So our role is to be a demand generator.

At the end of the day, we do evaluate our ROI on our marketing dollars and the metrics for our social media efforts, as well as the rates of increase and retention of our membership.

We're expanding metrics to make sure that we take a balanced scorecard approach, which pinpoints several key performance indexes that ensure that we're competitive, relevant, and effective.

In addition, we created a Customer Advisory Board to help look at us objectively and provide some strategic insights that can help us as we move our organization forward. ●