

'Sales' team pitches for Provincetown

N.Y. expo features music, marriage & mechanical bulls

By **Mary Ann Bragg**

BANNER STAFF

Provincetown's booth last weekend at the gay and lesbian expo in New York wasn't exactly wedding central.

Several aisles away, satin-draped booths in a special "Loveland" section of the expo advertised champagne and good-looking deejays, tasteful tuxedos and klezmer music, floral design and custom wedding cake toppers.

In comparison the town's exhibit, with its white and gold balloons and muted purple backdrop, was almost unnaturally understated.

Still, Provincetown's all-volunteer sales team, as it were, exuded magnetism. They gave out more than 5,000 packets of information about Provincetown, primarily about where tourists should eat, drink, sleep, play and get hitched.

"You really can't beat direct selling," Boston Harbor Cruises group sales manager Doug Hall said on Saturday at the Provincetown booth. "You can send all the information you want in the mail but if it's not being read and it's not getting to the right people it's no good. So, there's nothing like standing across, or sitting across, from somebody and telling them about your product."

Hall and about 15 other Provincetown business people, town government representatives and clergy spent last Saturday and Sunday at the Jacob Javits Convention Center, inviting entwined same-sex couples,

muscled young men, jean-clad lesbians and nearly everyone else to Provincetown.

Questions received at the booth, by one estimate, were more about the town itself than about gay marriage per-se. Assistant Town Clerk Aaron Leventman said on Saturday that he'd answered only half-a-dozen questions about obtaining a marriage license in Massachusetts.

More than 21,000 people attended the expo, which is essentially a huge sales and marketing event for any business wanting to attract gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender customers. Traditionally, about 50 percent of the attendees are "life-long New Yorkers."

Throughout the expo, a lineup of musical guests, including local singer Ptah Brown, performed on a platform stage.

"I really didn't have any expectations because I'd never been to one before," Provincetown's Secret Garden Inn co-owner Erin Atwood said. Atwood opened his Provincetown guesthouse last May and said he may use the 600 or so leads generated at the booth in future direct mailings. "This looks busy but everyone tells me it's been really slow."

Veteran Provincetown expo attendees said the "traffic" at the town's booth seemed slower than usual, on Saturday in particular, possibly attributable to abnormally sunny weather and a midtown anti-war protest.

Out of 240 exhibits, Provincetown's double-sized booth stood at an intersection of aisles in the middle of the expo, in what is reportedly the traditional "Provincetown" location. A larger, more vibrant Key West booth

was just down the aisle. Around the corner, stray dogs barked inside an animal shelter van, and one aisle over crowds roared as a "mechanical bull" bucked this way and that with amateur cowboys.

"It's a good location," Provincetown's Rick Murray said. "It's on a corner. There's good exposure. My suggestion [is to have] a DVD loop like we do at the Crown & Anchor [resort], show-

ing all the activities of Provincetown. We could draw people to stop and look at a video screen. Nobody else has that here, and that's something that would be a great idea to do. I'd just do it a little bit more colorful and a little bit more gay."

Unbeknownst to town Tourism Director Patricia Fitzpatrick, a special "Loveland" section was planned for this year's 11th annual expo, resplendent in red draperies, with 30 booths

selling wedding goods and services. On Saturday morning, in particular, "Loveland" was clogged with news cameras and reporters, leaving the Provincetown booth somewhat bereft for a few hours.

"In other years, people really saw us right away," Boston Harbor Cruises' Doug Hall said. "I would probably change that, so you have a big sign that says Provincetown, and maybe a map to show exactly where it is. Because some people ask me, well, where is Provincetown? Where's Boston? Where's Plymouth?"

In the world of expos, passers-by must be "drawn" into the booth with free goods, whether it's hard candy, sips of Budweiser beer, a neck rub or a big orange chamois cloth. For the Provincetown booth, it was free Cape Air airline tickets, where booth visitors were encouraged to sign up for a drawing that occurred at the end of each day. The visitors' addresses were also entered into the town's "leads" database, which is available in Town Hall to any Provincetown resident or businessperson.

"I definitely have a plan to use [the leads] this time," Michael Van Belle of the Pilgrim Monument and Provincetown Museum said. "We haven't used them before because most of the profit that we generate for grounds rental has just been through word of mouth. ... I think we're really on the brink of making a decision about whether or not we really want to focus on this, renting the grounds out, for revenue potential."

Most of the business owners manning Provincetown's expo booth said they haven't used the leads generated from previous expos but may in the future, particularly since the computerized list is available right away.

"I spoke with press today from New Jersey, New York, many parts of New York, Great Britain, and that's just who I personally spoke with," town Visitor Service Board chair Steve Melamed said on Saturday, explaining the value of the town's booth. "We get

some very good mileage out of this [expo]. I think that, as you know, there's no way to really judge how well a travel writer is going to treat us. We believe if you treat them right while they're in town [then they may] give you good play."

And Provincetown Art Commission chair Stephen Borkowski said his first visit to the expo was more beneficial than he might have imagined. "I'm actually here as an individual, but I was very interested to

see how we might integrate art into the next one, how we can kind of [alter] the profile of the town," Borkowski said. "I always say, come for the sex, stay for the art. ... It's not a factor in the way the town is promoted. We are the oldest, continuous art colony in the United States. ... It isn't exclusive of gay tourism. It's an adjunct to gay tourism, particularly in the off-season I think culturally we're very strong and we need to take advantage of that also." □