

Bob Gilbert (00:08):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tales, a podcast series that explores with travel and tourism leaders their take on key issues of the day. My name is Bob Gilbert, general manager for the tourism and Destination marketing practice at the award-winning strategic marketing agency, Eddy Alexander, who are bringing you this podcast series. I have had the privilege to have worked with iconic global brands, including Disney Choice Hotels, Yosemite and Shenandoah National Parks, Kennedy Space Center, visitor Center, and Best Western International. Plus, served on the boards of the US Travel Association National Tour Association, and an elected commissioner for Visit California. Looking forward, I will be chatting with those that are helping shape the travel and tourism industry, all with unique tales to share that I know you will find both interesting and educational. So without further ado, let's get started. Welcome to a Garden Fresh edition of Tourism Heads and Their Tales. If you haven't been following the meetings industry recently, you have may have missed the acquisition of Sea Cvent by Blackstone and the phenomenal growth of my next guest company groups 360. Tim Floors is the senior vice president and chief customer Officer for Groups 360 and has been quoted as saying his company is changing the very nature of group transactions. So welcome Tim.

Tim Flors (01:43):

Thanks Bob. Thanks for having me.

Bob Gilbert (01:45):

Our pleasure. So let's kick off with you sharing with our audience your career path so far,

Tim Flors (01:52):

Bob, even though I'm now in technology, my whole career path has actually been on the hotel side, whether that was working for smaller focus service hotels back in the day, all the way to large convention resorts, including national and global sales for larger brands.

Bob Gilbert (02:06):

So let's talk about the genesis and thinking behind Groups 360. So you said that it was born, uh, was it 2014 you said?

Tim Flors (02:16):

Uh, that's right.

Bob Gilbert (02:16):

So explain how you are changing the very nature of group transactions.

Tim Flors (02:22):

We look at group transactions, our goal from a consumer standpoint is how do we make it simple and easy for them to book meetings? We believe that a lot of that is providing better information to them during the buying journey. Some of that could just be providing better property content could be providing market driven rates. Some of that could be even providing inventory, whether that be rooms, inventory, meeting space inventory, catering equipment, and all of that. So a user and a meeting planner can make a better and more educated buying decision for their actual event. When we talk about changing that and changing how meetings are gonna be booked, that's really where the whole, whole

breadth of it, where it comes from is how do we take this experience and make it a super easy process for a meeting planner? Something that has been super cumbersome and something that really hasn't changed in probably at least a decade or so. Again, there's, you know, the legacy platforms that took what we used to do via fax and made it electronic. That was an advancement, but it wasn't really an innovative change. So what we're really doing is taking it and really putting all the firepower behind the information data around that. And a lot of that lately has, has been more about the direct booking of inventory and, and how we use that, uh, during that shopping and buying experience.

Bob Gilbert (03:34):

So what is, what is your business model? Where do you make money as a, as a SaaS-based business?

Tim Flors (03:41):

Yeah, absolutely. So we are actually free to the meeting planner and consumer today. So as a meeting planner, you can utilize group sync completely complimentary for your RFPs as well as for your instant bookings where we typically monetizes on the hotel set. It's a small transaction fee that occurs at the time of booking. We also do offer hotels and we just announce a partnership with Destinations International a few weeks ago and soon to be offering marketing opportunities to CVBs and DMO as well.

Bob Gilbert (04:06):

I'd be interested to hear how that works. I mean, what we're hearing is that free to the organizer to the planner, and That's right. The, the kind of group that you cater to are across the board from a, a wedding planner all the way to a citywide. Right. So, and everything else in between. That's, and you, you are, I guess from my perspective, you are trying to remove that friction that existed or that still exists in some legacy systems that are out there. I mean, you came through some tough times when nobody was traveling, let alone meet, and then everybody got accustomed to virtual meetings through, you know, 2021. I think 22 we were kind of through it. Are you seeing a shift away from virtual or hybrid meetings through in-person only meetings?

Tim Flors (05:00):

I mean, listen, even pre pandemic, I think there was a virtual component prior to covid right. Of any meeting, right. There'd be a virtual stream of the general session and things like that. Yeah, I think you can hear the pain points of meeting planners talking about the cost of hosting a hybrid meeting. Like literally I've heard oftentimes doubles just due to the AV cost associated with general session streaming to breakouts and, uh, and the like, the pandemic was really interesting for us. We, we didn't really ever look at the concept of not looking at live meetings and event. We didn't do any investment at all in a virtual platform, a partnership with a virtual platform. Our goals has always been about in-person meetings and I think that coming outta the pandemic, those of us who had to live in the virtual world, in the virtual meeting experience, some of those first meetings that we were all attending late 21, 22, it was a really exciting time and I think people really understood the value of meeting in person.

Tim Flors (05:56):

Yep. And what we learned in the pandemic and what we went through is meeting planners obviously suffered a loss of folks in the meeting planning department. Our hotel and the community there also experienced a loss of a lot of different personnel, right? Folks who went on to sort of selling hotel rooms, they were selling real estate and they moved on to different ventures. And so when the world

did come back, there was a lot of people who were just short staffed and we were in a unique position where we took the time in the pandemic to really build our architecture and prepare for the instant booking of rooms and meeting space. And so that's exactly what we did. And right, coming out of the pandemic, we had launched with Hilton for direct booking of rooms at 7,000 properties globally. And then we worked with other major brands.

Tim Flors (06:36):

And again, we just announced Wyndham just last week, just last January, we announced the partnership with Marriott where we're now live in group sync at just over 2000 properties in US and Canada that offered the ability for meeting space for guest rooms, catering and equipment, all completely booked online. And that's where we believe there's a different area that we can focus on for that meeting planner who doesn't have a lot of resource on their own. Again, they're constrained just as much as the hotels are, where a meeting planner can now go in 24 7, 365 and book their rooms only groups, space only groups or rooms in space groups completely online and not having to worry about going back and forth to the hotel or unfortunately oftentimes trying to track that hotel to even get a response on an R F P. And so we believe we're fighting not only the value from the meeting planner side, but also from the hotel side who just doesn't have that manpower to respond to the quantity of leads, especially the smaller leads that are coming in. They just don't have the, the resources available to them.

Bob Gilbert (07:35):

Yeah. You know, it's interesting, one of the, my buck bears way back working for, I won't mention the name of the brand, but it was in the top five and you know, I headed up the sales and intermediary marketing, so that meant group sales and it was so frustrating to send out the leads and hearing back from maybe one outta 20 properties and then the complaint will be, you don't send us any business. Well, <laugh>

Bob Gilbert (08:02):

You don't respond. But you know, that, that, that was one of the challenges way back. And actually we at that particular time were the first hotel company that actually had instant group reservations, but it was all, it was manual. So the properties would give us inventory and then it would have a cutoff date of, I dunno, maybe 60 days or whatever, 45. Uh, so we could book that. They would give us the inventory, we can book it, you know, they'd have to then negotiate all the others. That was early nineties. So, you know, I enjoyed like yourself, you enjoy that technology platform to help facilitate. So let's have a, let's play a scenario. I am, I'm a hotel. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I got meeting space for sport hotel, a hundred room property, 75 people. What do I do to get the attention of the meeting organizers, meeting planners within groups 360 within group sync, you know, and bottom line, as a hotelier, I wanna receive more qualified leads at the end of the day. So what, what steps, what, what do I do?

Tim Flors (09:08):

Yep. By design, ideally the goals for us as a highly qualified leads just by your property being on group sync. And so I think the first thing that would be to do if I'm the general manager of their director of sales and marketing of that 400 room property is ensure that your property is on groupy. I feel very confident, um, that it would be, um, we have over 200,000 properties in our database in 225 ter, uh, countries and territories. But that's step one is ensure that your property is in the group sync database

and available for planners. I mentioned one of the ways, Bob, that we monetize is the marketing components that we have within group sync.

Bob Gilbert (09:45):

So like a listing, I would buy a listing basically.

Tim Flors (09:48):

Uh, what again, you get a free basic listing. Uhhuh <affirmative>. So just by telling us your 400 room, you, I've got Bob's 400 room hotel in Wisconsin. You tell us that, that's great. We'll go ahead and put that in group sync so you can receive RFPs from group sync. However, if you're saying how do I make myself stand out against other hotels in my marketplace? We offer what we call group sync marketing, which allows you to update your profile as well as offer different need dates and promotions. Very different than other legacy platforms where you're essentially buying placement, you know, obvious here in Nashville, but every time I'm eating planner source Nashville that my hotel here in Nashville will show up first. That's not the way that we look at marketing and we look at our platform and the whole reason behind that is our goal is to get the trust and confidence of a meeting planner while they're shopping and booking.

Tim Flors (10:40):

And we don't believe you gain the trust and confidence of any user many meeting planner by throwing ads at them of things that really aren't relevant. Right. You know, if I'm a 400 room group, I don't really wanna see the hotel that's 300 rooms total. Right. Doesn't make any sense for me. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, our goal is to provide the best match for that meeting planner in their booking experience. So think of our groupy marketing tool as more of like a Google SEO search that the more you tell us about your property, the better we could match you with the preferences of the meeting planner. Whether they're saying they're looking for particular onset amenities, maybe they're looking for particular weather in the marketplace, maybe they're a particular distance from the airport. All those things come in to how we match our meeting planners with the best fit market and the best fit hotel within that marketplace. And so the marketing component allows them to populate that property profile as well as add any incentives and things like that. So if they wanna offer double points to their brand points program, they could, they have the opportunity to do that. Um, and any other promotion or incentive they might wanna offer.

Bob Gilbert (11:43):

Okay. So we'll use Nashville. You know, let's say there's 200 properties that are part of group sync

Tim Flors (11:50):

Mm-hmm.

Bob Gilbert (11:51):

<affirmative> then based upon the criteria selected by the organizer, by the meeting planner, not every one of those properties are gonna receive that lead. Right. It's based upon the criteria. So there's more of a right fit. There's a perfect match. Is is that what happens?

Tim Flors (12:07):

That's right. So let's say, I think it's the 400 hotels in Nashville, right? The foreigner tells in Nashville, let's say you're a 500 person group, we're going to already eliminate properties that can't physically accommodate you. Right? So if you're looking for 500 rooms and a 50,000 square foot ballroom for those guest rooms, no problem at all. We'll eliminate any hotel that doesn't have at least that amount of rooms and a ballroom that can physically accommodate you. The next step of how we sort the remaining properties is based on the preferences of the user. So even if, you know Tim's hotel in Nashville paid for a marketing program with Groups 360, we will not guarantee even top listing or even the first page placement because it may not be the best fit for the meeting planner, which also likely isn't gonna be either a good lead or a good booking for that hotel. And so that's the difference around what we do and how we look at it. We wanna provide the most relevant data to the meeting planner at the exact right time of looking for that information.

Bob Gilbert ([13:01](#)):

Right, I understand. So if I'm a meeting planner, then it's, you know, basically you are making sure that I receive the best responses from those particular hotels that Matt, the attributes that I'm looking for with my, with the size of my group and the timing and all of that fun stuff.

Tim Flors ([13:22](#)):

Um, you're exactly right.

Bob Gilbert ([13:23](#)):

So then let's say it filters down to the mythical 400 to 10 that that meet, then how does the meeting session go on between those 10 properties and the meeting planner?

Tim Flors ([13:37](#)):

Well, really interesting. So it depends on what level of integration we have with those 10 remaining properties. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, so meaning from the instant booking side of things, let's say it's a smaller group. Yep. From a smaller group outta those 10 hotels, let's just say five of them have instant booking capability, meaning that we have an integration with the sales and catering system for space. We've got integration likely with the CRS for the guest rooms. So do I have the ability to instant book five of the 10 properties today? So that's one side of it that kind of helps the meeting planner with back to better information so I can make a better decision right here, right now. The other component of it is the way that we use our inventory is also for the RFP standpoint. So again, back to our 500 person group, and let's say these are remaining 10 hotels, Bob or all a thousand room properties mm-hmm.

Tim Flors ([14:21](#)):

<affirmative>, likely those properties aren't gonna say that I'm gonna let a property or a meeting planner instant book, a 500 room group. Right. Probably not gonna allow that. Yeah. However, with our availability connection, we can at least advise a meeting planner at the point of shopping to say, out of those five hotels that we do have access to inventory, three of those are showing availability over the set of dates that you're looking at right now, feel free to send an RFP because today we're just sending out blind leads. Right. Fingers crossed, hoping for availability. And right now our planners on average are seeing responses come back from hotels saying two-thirds of the time they just don't have availability. And that's been the same since you and I have been in the hotel industry. Right. They just, you just don't know if it's available and you wait. So we even wanna take that availability integration that we have and even make the larger RFPs more streamlined, but yet you still gotta wait for the price, but at least you as

the planner known, all right, I got better information, it should reduce the amount of time I'm receiving a turned off from the hotel.

Bob Gilbert (15:18):

So once that perfect match has been made, how far within your platform can I go with the legal stuff, minimums, cutoff dates, B'S, attrition? I mean, there's a lot of detail in that. Right? And that, that is where probably the, the lengthier process is, you know, the devil is in the detail. Is is that all managed on your platform

Tim Flors (15:42):

For the smaller groups? Typically it is for the larger groups, again, for our fully integrated partners that we have, that is a completely online transaction. So there's not really any back and forth negotiation that exists. There's standard contractual terms that a brand would have Yeah. That would apply to all users.

Bob Gilbert (15:59):

So the things like room block management, attrition. That's right. That kind of thing. So if I'm a hotel or if I'm the planner, is there a clear line of site into things like pickup that I can see how, what pace looks like with folks that are part of an association as an example and they're booking individually? Um, how, how does that work?

Tim Flors (16:21):

Yeah, we do. So we have a, an attendee management platform, Uhhuh <affirmative> with what the industry typically calls housing. Yeah. That can manage that pickup relationship as well. So if the planner and or the hotel utilize that, we can absolutely provide that level of visibility to say, Bob booked the group, but is Tim and others booking their individual reservations within that block that Bob booked online or RFP and booked.

Bob Gilbert (16:44):

Thanks for listening to part one of this episode. Tune in next time for part two. Please like thumbs up, subscribe and leave a review. You can also visit [eddyalexander.com](http://eddyalexander.com) To learn more about our tourism, marketing, and destination management services and read some of our recent case studies. Finally, if you'd like to suggest future guests or podcast discussion topics or to sign up to get an email alert when we drop new episodes, please do so at [eddyalexander.com/thatt](http://eddyalexander.com/thatt).