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**Business Review**

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**Adam Goodman**, president of Tampa-based The Victory Group, and Chief Operating Officer **Renee Dabbs**, partnered with Washington D.C.-based GOP Convention Strategies to coordinate local planning and logistics for events tied to the 2012 GOP Convention. Mark Wemple



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## Tampa's The Victory Group partners with a Washington, D.C. firm to plan and organize events for the 2012 Republican National Convention.

By JAY BRADY

**F**or companies who want more than just a presence at the 2012 Republican National Convention in Tampa, they'll need venues, hotel rooms, transportation, security, media production, communications, staffing needs and more.

GOP Convention Strategies, a Washington, D.C.-based firm, knows this, and is looking to capitalize by creating a one-stop shop to fulfill companies' needs for the convention.

Though the company organized in 2008 for the Minneapolis-St. Paul convention, members of the GOPCS team have convention event planning experience dating back to 1980.

But it was the 2008 experience, when GOPCS co-founder Darrell Henry partnered with Minnesotan Scott Cottingham to bring local knowledge to national convention planning, that encouraged the company to do it again for 2012.

The convention runs from Aug. 27-30, 2012 at the St. Pete Times Forum,

where delegates will gather, but many events will also happen at the nearby Tampa Convention Center and other venues throughout the region.

"A lot of our clients come out of D.C.," notes Cottingham. "Minnesota's a little more off the beaten path. We guessed there would be people who would want to know what's going on locally. It turned out we were right," he says.

That's why the company has partnered with The Victory Group, a south Tampa firm known best in state political circles as multi-media savvy campaign strategists for Republican candidates.

But to run all those campaigns simultaneously requires strong time management and logistical skills to get all those candidates in the right places at the right times and on message. Those talents are key to VGI's role as the middleman between big-name clients and local meeting planners.

Headed by its president, Adam Goodman, VGI's list of winning clients

## *'This is really a Florida convention, we really want Florida firms to play a major role in this.'*

**RENEE DABBS**, COO of The Victory Group, Inc., Tampa

includes former Gov. Jeb Bush, State Attorney General Pam Bondi, and Florida House Speaker Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park.

Goodman, a Gulf Coast Business Review Power 50 member, says VGI will now also handle event planning logistics for mostly corporate and association clients looking to mingle with politicians and delegates while all eyes are trained on Tampa.

"This is the Super Bowl of politics at a time when politics matters greatly to the nation," Goodman says. "It's critical that Florida measure up."

Goodman may be a household name among Florida's political elite, but the name Renee Dabbs may become one to know for meeting planners who want their convention-related event to go right.

Consider Dabbs (pronounced Dobbs) the wizard behind the curtain operating "a six-dimensional war room." A Procter & Gamble alumnae, she served as associate director of business development running a \$220 million enterprise for the consumer products behemoth. Dabbs describes her background as "managing complex business situations."

Now, as chief operating officer of VGI she's in charge of knowing what venues are available when, for how much, how to get your people from place to place, and what other firms to partner with to ensure it all goes smoothly. "I know how to bring the best people together and identify talent and anyone who wants to come work with us," she says. "I am not a meeting planner; we'll hire meeting planners."

Says Cottingham: "I've worked with them over the years in a lot of political campaigns. I also know they're relentless about logistics." He adds, "Amateurs talk strategy and experts talk logistics. They're very strong on logistics."

To put it all together Dabbs relies on technology, including Constant Contact to stay in touch with customers, and Google Docs to share files across team members so everyone has the latest information.

The numbers explain why systems expertise becomes critical. According to Cottingham, among the 35,000 to 40,000 off-season visitors expected by the 2012 Tampa Bay Host Committee to swarm the region, are 5,000 delegates and alternates, 15,000 general attendees, and up to 15,000 media.

Cottingham and Dabbs plan to tap into that market by providing event planning and logistics at roughly 35 venues throughout the region — everything from rooftops to beaches. "We're in the planning phase of helping companies figure out what it means to them," Dabbs says.

Dabbs and Goodman say the convention's not just going to benefit Tampa Bay companies. "This is really a Florida convention," says Dabbs. "We really want Florida firms to play a major role in this." And that includes Florida meeting planners. "It's not hard to find extremely strong event planners," says Dabbs, who refers to the industry as "a core competency" in the state.

Asked what makes a good event planner, Dabbs rattles off her list: the ability to listen to clients, work through bureaucracy, optimize client resources, and understand business, all while showing a creative twist.

Meeting planners can expect plenty of work. In 2008, Cottingham recalls, GOPCS helped clients with 24 separate events, and next year he thinks it will handle two or three times that number.

He says they're in contact with their 2008 clients, including Amgen, Oracle, Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer, and others, and Cottingham thinks half his clients this time will be new.

"I think the Tampa convention will be a lot larger than the Minnesota convention was," Cottingham predicts.

Asked what advice he might offer, Cottingham replies with his own question: "Other than to call us?," he jokes. "If you're doing a small event, you can pretty much do it yourself. The more moving parts you have the trickier it gets. There are events you should do professionally; there's a point at which you should farm it out."

A national political convention brings additional concerns, such as security. "Our clients don't want to spend all convention week worrying about their event," says Cottingham. "They want to enjoy the event."

Dabbs agrees. "We want to have fun like everyone else." And she also understands what it means economically and politically to the region. "Here's the bottom line," she says, "... having a Tampa firm is imperative to success in this arena. We're definitely excited about this. We get to showcase our hometown."



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