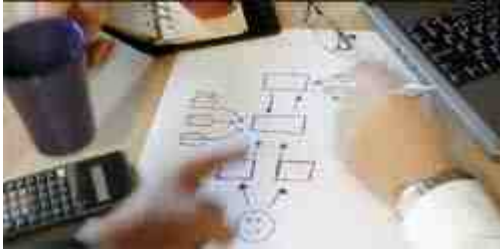


Planning a Conference? (Apr 07)

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Whether you are a seasoned operations manager or a once-a-year meeting planner, *Training* offers some tips of the trade.



By Karen Stewart

If planning a conference or once-a-year meeting seems a daunting task...well, it is. That's because it's all in the details. Here, *Training* magazine provides insight into the process and must-haves that should be on your checklist.

Selecting the Right Time

What may be the perfect time for you may not be the perfect time for your attendees or the city/hotel you want to use. Do the following research before you contact the hotel:

Attendees

What is the best time of the week for your attendees to be out of the office or away from home?

Identify any holidays or important personal events during the timeframe that may affect attendance such as religious holidays, school starting, or spring break.

What other industry-related events may be taking place at the same time that would prohibit travel?

City/Hotel

Visit the city's convention and visitors bureau (CVB) Web site. There, you can usually find information about other conventions, meetings or sporting events taking place during the same time. Large conventions may make it difficult and expensive for your potential attendees because flights will be booked and hotels will have higher rates. The local CVB also can assist you in finding the right hotel for your event. They will send your lead out to all their member hotels so you don't have to contact each individually. Be sure to identify what type of hotel property you are interested in (i.e., four-star, close to the airport).

Selecting the Right Location

The right location, coupled with convenience, is key in making an event attractive to potential attendees.

Are attendees local? If so, review parking accessibility and, if possible, look for a hotel with free parking.

If attendees are flying in, how will they get to the hotel? Hotel shuttle, rent-a-car, taxi? If by taxi, ask for an estimated cost from the airport(s). Some taxi rides might cost \$75 one way.



Is the location in a first-tier or second-/third-tier city? Second- and third-tier cities often require multiple plane changes thus adding additional travel time for the attendee.

If your attendees are coming from a certain city, check to see how many airlines service the final destination; what an average connection situation might be; and get a sample of the airfare.

Selecting the Right Hotel

Before you start researching availability, create an RFP (request for proposal) that lists the following items:

Overview:

Name of the event and the type of attendee that will be coming;

First, second, and third option dates (provide your date flexibility)

Your contact information

Deadline to receive RFP

Request a link to the property's Web site and sample catering menus. When contracting, state that the catering pricing you receive will be guaranteed for your event.

Sleeping Rooms:

List number of sleeping rooms needed each day from check-in to check-out. Keep in mind that not all attendees will stay the entire time.

List how many single and double rooms and suites you may need.

Program:

Include the program schedule, even if it is tentative.

List the number of meeting rooms needed; seating set-up, including number of seats; AV requirements; the hours needed for each room, including set-up and tear-down. Include food and beverage rooms, offices, and/or storage.

Try to request 24-hour holds on your room to avoid resetting the seating and AV every day.

If space is tight and you need multiple meeting rooms, try scheduling the main session in the morning or afternoon and use the same meeting room for lunch. Depending on the number of people, the hotel will need at least one to two hours in between each session to reset the room.

Miscellaneous:

Ask the hotel to list amenities that might be important to your group (i.e., free wireless, health club, room service).

Find out what food and beverage venues the hotel offers or are within walking distance, especially if you are not providing breakfast, lunch and/or dinner.

Negotiating with the Hotel

Hotel contracts can be very daunting even to the seasoned professional. There are many potential pitfalls, so if possible, have a lawyer review it before signing. Keep the following in mind during negotiations:

The more flexible you are with your dates, the more likely the hotel will be able to offer you a better room rate.

If you have any history with this event, such as the number of rooms picked-up and food and beverage spend, share it with the hotel. They'll be much more comfortable with your piece of business.

Be realistic with your sleeping room block and meeting room requirements.

Many hotels have an attrition clause in their contracts that states you will be charged per room per night if they are not sold to attendees. Try to negotiate that "there will be no attrition or other penalty or cost should 'group' utilize less than the contract room block." If the hotel insists on an attrition clause, be sure they allow you to negotiate your block at 90, 60, and 30 days before your event and you can reduce your block up to 15 percent without penalty.

Some comp items that you may be able to negotiate depending on your room block size include: one comp sleeping room per 50 picked up; upgrades to concierge level; suites; a site visit room; round-trip car transfers from the airport; health club passes; wine and fruit baskets; waive of telephone surcharges; and waive of fax charges.

Receiving complimentary meeting space will depend on the size of your event, food and beverage spend, and whether or not you need rooms for 24 hours. A 24-hour hold denies the hotel the ability to sell the room in the evening for dinner.

Try to negotiate a three-week cut-off for room reservations before your block is released for general sale at the going rate. As the date approaches, request an extension through your hotel contact.

Request one comp microphone per meeting room.

Make sure you have a "Hold Harmless" clause in your contract with the hotel. Each should agree to save, defend, and hold each other harmless from any claims.

Include an indemnification clause that is mutual.

Include a "Force Majeure" clause, which allows for cancellation in the event of an Act of God, disaster, civil disorder, curtailment of transportation, etc.

Include a clause that states each of you will carry adequate insurance.

Even if you are certain you won't cancel the event, include a cancellation clause that is mutual. Some hotels may want 100 percent of sleeping room revenue, meeting room rental, and food and beverage spend. Try to negotiate cancellation based on your peak sleeping room night and ask for a sliding scale based on the number of days out.

Pre-Event

Details, details, details! Communicating your details is the best way to ensure your event's success.

Two weeks prior to your event, send your specifications to your hotel and audio/visual contact. Include: date, time, set-time, name of function, rehearsal times, room set-ups, microphone and audio/visual requirements, and any special needs you may have. The hotel will send you confirmations back for each function called a BEO (Banquet Event Order). A day or two before your event meet with your contacts and communicate changes.

Before your event, the hotel will send you a resume that will include details such as: signature authority, VIPs, room block actuals, function dates and times. Review this carefully and

communicate changes at least three days before your arrival. Group resumes are sent to all hotel departments.

Catering



It is amazing how much catering costs, largely due to labor costs. In New York City, a gallon of coffee (serves 20) can cost as much as \$120 plus 20 percent service charge and 8.375 percent tax, which equals \$154.00 per gallon or \$7.70 per cup! Keep these tips in mind when ordering catering:

Be sure to review the catering menus and prepare an estimated budget. Don't forget to include the service charge, which can be 20 percent or higher, and add in the local tax. Also, ask if the service charge is taxed.

Depending on the size of your event, catering prices can be negotiated. Try to get them listed in your hotel contract so there are no surprises later.

Give the catering manager your budget and ask for two to three options.

Request to have your events set 15 minutes prior to your actual start time.

Most hotels will set a number of plates over your guarantee. Factor that in when giving your guarantee and maybe guarantee a little less. If less people attend than your guarantee, you will still be charged. If more people attend than your guarantee, you will be charged the actual number.

AV, Sound, and Technology

Most hotels have an audio/visual department, and most times this department also controls the sound.

If your presentation is on a computer, make sure you back-up your presentation to a jump drive.

If there are multiple presentations, save time by loading them all onto one computer at least one hour before the session starts.



Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse, particularly if you are speaking with others. Don't try to do this 15 minutes before the session starts.

All presenters should be in their session room at least 30 minutes before the session begins in order to test the audio/visual equipment and the microphone.

Podium microphones and wired lavalier microphones are the least expensive. Wireless lavalier microphones can cost as much as four times the cost of other microphones.

Hotel audio/visual and sound technicians service other groups in the hotel as well. If you have the money, "order" a technician to be in your room (or around a group of rooms) at all times.

Consider providing wireless access to attendees in the lobby of your meeting space.

Room Setup



Theater or classroom setup is very common for events. If space allows, consider setting the room in rounds, with only five to six chairs set in a crescent moon shape facing the front. Attendees will be more engaged and appreciate the networking opportunities.

Check your meeting room setup as soon as you can, either the night before or first thing in the morning, before doing anything else. If the setup is not correct, it may take an hour or more to get the labor to reset it correctly.

Request the hotel provide complimentary water either on the tables or in the back of the room. Don't forget the speaker's head table/podium.

Request the room to be set for 25 percent more than you anticipate since some people will place their personal items on chairs.

On-site

Need help with registration, packet stuffing, and monitoring rooms? Contact the local CVB. They have staff trained in these functions at a reasonable cost.

Schedule a daily meeting with everyone that is involved with your event including the catering manager, convention services manager, AV and sound technicians. Review the requirements and changes for the next day. Schedule the meeting for mid-afternoon so the staff still has time to implement any pop-up requests (i.e., increase in guarantee, audio/visual requirements, room set-up changes).

Post-Show

Even though you are exhausted and want to get home, take time to review your entire hotel bill before leaving the property. This will save you a tremendous amount of time in the future. Items to watch out for include:

- Individuals charged to your account that were not on your housing list;
- Incorrect arrival and departure dates for your guests;
- Incidentals posted to your account instead of the individual;
- Other hotel group's catering functions posted to your account;
- Non-approved business center charges posted to your account.

Most hotels will require you to pay up front for all estimated charges. Try to negotiate so that they will invoice you for the remaining charges. If they require a credit card, your card may be charged the day the event is done and incorrect charges will then be credited back, sometimes one at a time, as you dispute them.

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