

# Location, Location, Location

By Jeff Sacks, CMP

**T**his has always been the guiding principle of real estate, but it could also be the first critical step in making your meeting a rousing success or a complete disappointment. Certainly we know that education and networking are the two main attractions for most convention attendees, but all of the terrific sessions and social functions in the world won't mean a thing (and your organization won't make nearly as much revenue) if you can't get them there first.

Consider the following factors when selecting your meeting site.

## Rotation

A smart organization will rotate its annual convention across the map. This strategy not only allows you to meet in all regions where your membership is based, but it also benefits membership growth and recruitment in addition to keeping the meeting fresh in terms of climate, attractions, time zones, and cost of attending.

## Member Input

Ask your members — both actively attending members as well as those who don't attend often — where they'd like the convention to be held. They may bring to your attention destinations that you haven't considered. Be sure, however,

to give more weight to sites recommended by actively attending members since their attendance is the foundation of your meeting's success.

## First Tier vs. Second Tier vs. Third Tier

While many organizations will always meet in first-tier destinations, many others should be looking more closely at second- and third-tier cities, where they can enjoy being the big fish in the pond and receiving added attention. There's an abundance of great smaller destinations — with first-rate convention facilities — that might be a better fit for your organization.

However, if your group has a history of maximizing attendance and revenues while convening in first-tier markets, you should probably stay where you can sustain or continue this growth.

### Lift

If you anticipate an attendance of 10,000, it's probably not in your best interest to select a meeting site whose airport can't handle the large number of daily arrivals and departures that your group will need. Simply put, if people can't get there, you're in trouble. Make certain you obtain information on the total number of daily nonstop flights, seats, and feeder cities prior to finalizing a destination with questionable lift. In addition, be cautious of cities where one carrier dominates the lift; some of these cities can be very expensive to fly into.

### Climate

Do your delegates expect warm weather? Is high humidity a problem? How about rain or snow? Don't make the mistake of meeting in the wrong destination at the wrong time of year. Find out the average daily high and low temperatures for each of the cities you're considering. Also obtain the average number of days with .01" or more of rain in the month you're thinking about. This information is available in 40-year averages and is collected by most airport authorities. If outdoor activities aren't on the agenda, however, then weather becomes less of a deciding factor.

### Competition

Too often, organizations wear rose-colored glasses and assume that their meeting is the only one of its kind that their members will be interested in attending. But that's not

always the case. If there are organizations in a field similar to yours, or you simply have a number of true competitors, take the time to check when and where their meetings are scheduled. Sometimes delegates and exhibitors have to draw the line as to how many meetings they can afford or take the time to attend in a given year. And if your convention conflicts by date or location with a competing convention, you're running the unnecessary risk of losing your attendees and exhibitors to another event.

### Keep Options Open

Your chances of orchestrating a successful site selection can usually be improved substantially by creating competition in the marketplace. Whenever possible, strive to find two to three facilities or destinations that you're willing to contract with and that want your business. (Groups often make the mistake of deciding on one particular facility or destination and then trying to negotiate.) It's also very important to show date and room block pattern flexibility wherever possible.

As you can see, selecting a meeting site isn't as simple as throwing a dart at a map. But it can be quite an enjoyable and educational experience. By doing your homework, you will put yourself in the best situation to select the destination that will help give you record attendance, revenues, and reviews.

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# Inspecting the Site

By Teri Tonioli, CMP

**F**or a site inspection to be successful, both the meeting manager and the hotel representative must be thoroughly prepared. Have you ever walked into a hotel and felt there was no way your meeting would fit in the property? Or, as a salesperson, have you ever found yourself reading the lead for the first time when your assistant announces that your appointment is waiting in the lobby? It's frustrating that something so simple has become so challenging.

As a meeting planner, do you know your true space requirements or the number of rooms you need when your convention rotates to the East Coast? Do you know your attendees' hot buttons and priorities, and do you design your site inspection accordingly?

As a salesperson, how much time do you spend preparing for your third site inspection of the day? What would be the true return on investment if you were to calculate the preparation time versus the value of the business?

### Consider this sample calculation:

750 room nights at \$185 a night = \$138,750  
Food and Beverage = \$45,000  
Total = \$183,750 divided by 10 minutes prep time =  
\$18,375 dollars per minute

Does your approach to each site inspection reflect its value to your property? And what can we — planners and suppliers — do to create the ideal site inspection? For starters, consider these suggestions:

# Off-Site Inspections

In reality, few associations or corporations can afford to send their planners on a site inspection for every meeting they hold. While there is no replacement for an in-person visit, it is still possible to select the right site without actually seeing it. Simply follow these guidelines:

- Network with fellow members of the Professional Convention Management Association, American

Society of Association Executives, or Meeting Professionals International whose opinions you respect. Chat rooms at industry Web sites are ok, but unless you know the planner offering the opinion, you could be seriously misled.

- The Internet is an ever-improving solution. A number of Web sites like [www.plansoft.com](http://www.plansoft.com) offer virtual tours and specific information on thousands of hotels.

- Many individual properties are upgrading their own Web sites to the point where you'll soon be able to check out hotels by hopping from site to site.

- Just remember to be cautious when using Web sites since, like hotel brochures, they sometimes don't show all sides of the property. Only being on site or talking to someone who has been on site will enable you to learn the ins and outs of the hotel.

## Planner

- Before setting up a site inspection, do your homework on the destination and the property. Do they both appear to meet your requirements?
- If the answer is yes, create a document that accurately outlines all of your needs and send it to the hotel.
- Be sure the space is available before you commit to the site inspection.
- Do not change your needs as you walk in the front door of the property; communicate any changes prior to your trip.
- Share with the salesperson what is most important for you to see — meeting space, sleeping rooms, suites, or other areas.
- Express to the hotelier what you may not need to see, such as the health club, business center, or restaurants.
- Bring along a checklist of the information that you will later use as a reference back at the office.
- Know your meeting. Know when you need to be (or can be) creative with the hotel on meeting space.
- Remember that while space is critical, the personality of a property can have a major impact on how well received it will be by your attendees.
- Be sure to let the salesperson know what your service and quality expectations are.

## Supplier

- Review the information about the prospective client's meeting well in advance of the site inspection. Not only "read the lead," but also make sure that you completely understand it. If you aren't certain about something, ask for clarification.

- Pay attention to all details, including ceiling height requirements and setup time needed.
- Look at the client's Web page. Know what the group stands for and the purpose of its convention.
- If the meeting is a citywide, always start with a city overview. Then explain where you are located in relationship to the convention center or headquarters hotel, keeping in mind that it's often hard for planners to understand proximity to other venues when they're in an unfamiliar destination.
- Show the client how you envision the event fitting into your property rather than simply taking him or her on a standard tour of the hotel.
- Know your property. Have you used any outlets or other space in a creative way for another group that may be attractive to this new potential client?
- Ask the meeting planner what you can show her that will help her remember your hotel after she's visited 15 others that day.

Remember, a site inspection is not about how long you can keep a client in your hotel. It's about making sure the meeting planner feels that you know what his or her needs are and how you can help the organization stage a successful convention.

From a meeting planner's perspective, on the other hand, you should walk away from a site inspection feeling you can confidently communicate all of the correct answers to your board of directors. If you can meet this objective, congratulations — you've conducted the ideal site inspection.

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