

# Bill Review Made Easy

By Deirdre Bourke, CMP

An overnight delivery with your name on it arrives at the office and you are instantly struck with a sinking feeling — the master bill for your most recent conference has just arrived. For many meeting managers, reviewing a hotel bill falls into the same category as stuffing registration packets — tedious and time-consuming. As a result, some meeting planners simply pay the bill without reviewing it thoroughly, which may lead to financial losses for the organization. (It's not uncommon for mistakes on a final bill to total \$1,000 or more.) At the opposite end of the spectrum are planners who spend hours trying to make sense of the bill, which takes them away from other important projects.

Fortunately, reviewing your final bill can be quite simple if you've spent a sufficient amount of time clearly communicating your needs to the hotel in the pre-planning stage. Read on for specific information on how to handle the entire bill review process — from pre-planning to problem-solving.

## Pre-Planning

1. Establish, in writing, deposit due dates and amounts with the hotel.
2. Complete and mail the credit application to the hotel on a timely basis; contact the property's accounting department to confirm direct-billing approval. (There is nothing more frustrating than to find out you were not approved for direct billing a week before your meeting.)
3. If applicable, turn in the tax-exempt certificate to the facility.
4. Provide the hotel with a list of people who are authorized to charge items to the master account, along with any restrictions or limitations, and be sure this information is included in the hotel résumé.
5. Provide clear instructions to the hotel about the specific charges that should be posted to the master account, such

as room and tax, food and beverage, audio-visual, electrical, telecommunications, and business center.

6. Advise the hotel in advance if different master accounts are required. Establishing multiple master accounts is a simple way to segregate your bills in advance so that you don't have to sort them out after the event.

7. If you have sponsored functions, you can establish multiple master accounts so that all charges associated with those functions remain separate from your main master account.

8. Confirm with the hotel that all charges posted to the master account must have backup, including copies of invoices, signed checks, and banquet event orders (BEO).

9. Set up a conference call with the accounts receivable contact and convention services manager to review how you need the master account to be organized. Send printed examples — actual previous bills or your own mockups — and review these examples with the accounting department.

10. Provide a detailed final rooming list, including:

- Names of people you have assigned to complimentary rooms, staff rooms, specialty suites, etc.
- Specific billing instructions for each guest such as: "Mr. John Jones — Room/Tax to master."
- Instructions that attendees are responsible for incidental expenses.

11. Review and sign the BEOs and résumé just in case they indicate any charges that you may not be aware of or have not agreed upon.

12. Be sure the hotel knows that you need to review the master account prior to departure.

## On-Site

Review all billing instructions and the master account format in person with both the accounts receivable contact and the convention services manager. (Conduct this review

before or after the pre-conference meeting, but before any charges are posted on the master account.)

1. Review and sign checks daily, writing notes on each check. For example:
  - Describe the event and actual number of attendees, note if the guarantee matches your records, and confirm that the prices on the check are correct.
  - Specify that the master account is to be billed and include any special coding the event should have.
  - Jot down any other notes that will help you back at the office.
2. Try to review the master account daily.
3. Keep copies of all signed checks together.
4. Keep a record of any changes to the rooming list, audio-visual equipment, etc.

### On-Site Bill Review

1. Review the bill for any major errors at the end of the meeting.
2. Do not sign off on the bill until you have had a chance to carefully examine it back at the office — after you have recuperated from the meeting.
3. Resolve all disputes or complaints, such as service problems, quality issues, and/or actual counts on food and beverage functions, prior to departure — while they are still fresh in your mind and you have some negotiating leverage. Try to arrive at a solution that benefits those who have been inconvenienced by the problem, and do not leave the property until a satisfactory settlement is reached. Resolving disputes after a meeting rarely results in an agreement of terms by all parties.

### Final Bill Review

1. Compare the final bill to the signed checks and any other backup material.
2. Be sure the hotel provides you with all backup material.
3. Make certain that all items posted on the master account have been authorized.
4. Compare the room and tax portion of the bill to all of your rooming lists, checking that all of the rooms you are charged for are in your block and that you are only billed for the authorized number of nights for each attendee.
5. Review all credits, including deposits, complimentary rooms, and tax-exemption.

### Addressing Discrepancies

Any mistakes found in the final bill should be addressed in writing and include:

## Do's & Don'ts

- Don't pay meeting room rental charges unless the charges were identified in your contract.
- Don't assume that you have to pay tax on any attrition or cancellation fees you may have. Some states don't consider these "sales" and therefore don't tax them.
- Don't assume that the amount of the final bill will be the same as the bill you signed on site. Discrepancies are not uncommon.
- Don't pre-pay your entire estimated bill (if at all possible). As long as there is still money on the table, you have negotiating power.
- Do ask for a 7 percent or more discount for payment on departure (after full review) as opposed to payment in 30 or more days.
- Do ask if your group gets mileage credits, hotel points, or other bonuses based on the amount of your master account or overall value of your meeting.

- Items disputed and the reasons.
- The total undisputed balance for which you have enclosed a check.
- A statement that once the hotel justifies the disputed items with proper backup, the remainder of the bill will be paid within 30 days.

### Troubleshooting

If the bill arrives in no semblance of order, even after the above precautions, try the following measures.

1. Call the hotel's accounts receivable contact and convention services manager, explain the situation, and ask them to come up with a solution. (They may be able to talk you through the organization of the bill over the phone.)
2. If the issue cannot be resolved by phone, return the master account bill to the hotel to redo and be sure to advise the hotel that you are doing so. (Note: Take this action only as a last resort. Do not use it as a stall tactic.)
3. Once you have resolved the dispute, promptly send the property a check for the balance of the bill in order to avoid getting a reputation for not paying bills on time and possibly losing direct-billing privileges in the future.

Finally, take stock of the entire bill review process — from pre-planning to troubleshooting — and decide how you might improve the procedures the next time around.

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