Creating a Request for Proposal is as Easy as ABCD

By Wanda Kovacs, CMP

In creating a request for proposal (RFP), the more information you can give a vendor about your meeting, attendees, and specific needs, the more complete the final proposal will be and the more accurate it will be for budget purposes. For example, do you require individual pick-ups or group pick-ups at the airport? Are full-day or half-day tours more popular? Do you need an LCD projector in every meeting room? Quality input definitely yields quality output. High-quality information will help enable your organization to generate positive revenue since your expense projections will be accurate.

If you're uncertain about what to include in your RFP — or simply want to make sure you're covering all the bases — review the four steps necessary for writing a detailed request for proposal.

STEP ONE

Begin by giving the selected vendors basic information about your group:

- Organization name
- Name of meeting
- Your name, address, telephone and fax numbers, and e-mail address
- Location of meeting (city and facility or facilities)
- Headquarters hotel, if applicable
- Dates of meeting. Be sure to point out if any of the dates are a holiday. Even if your organization doesn't celebrate a certain holiday, a union might . . . and overtime and double-time can have a huge impact on your budget. It's equally essential to check for holidays when planning meetings outside the United States.
- Number of attendees
- Attendee profile. The attendee profile is extremely important when putting together an RFP for services such as tours, entertainment, and theme parties. Knowing the degree to which your delegates have "been there, done that" will help the vendor come up with the most appropriate events for your group.
- Previous locations (city and facility)
- Deadline for proposals. Allow vendors at least 10 business days to help ensure that the proposals you receive will be as complete as possible.

STEP TWO

List the items for which you require pricing, and remember to be as specific as possible. Let the vendors know, for example, if you would like the audio-visual equipment priced a particular way (a la carte vs. package price per meeting room). We suggest that you provide a template for the suppliers to make their job, and yours, easier. A simple spreadsheet document will help keep all bids in a common format, enabling you to make comparisons more efficiently.

The following is a rundown of major items to include in your RFP:

Airport Transportation

- Major arrival date
- Major departure date
- Number of attendees
- Specify whether you require individual pick-ups or group pick-ups upon arrival or departure.
- Do you want the meet and greet staff stationed at the gate or in the baggage claim area?
- Type of vehicle requested (van vs. sedan)
- Is a restroom on the bus required?
- Age and capacity of buses
- Do you want driver gratuities included in the price?
- Do the vehicles meet ADA standards?
- Specify the maximum "wait time" for any individual. The shorter the wait, the higher the price since this usually requires more vehicles.
- Do you require a dispatcher at both the airport and the staging area?
- Where will the company stage the transportation?

Tours/Entertainment

- Date and time frame available for tours. Are some days unavailable for tours due to meeting activities? Do you want full-day or half-day tours on specific days during the conference?
- Profile of attendees for any specific tour or all tours (spouses or companions only, children, couples, age, etc.)
- Specific thoughts or preferences on tour options. Have museum tours been very successful with your group in the past? Do your attendees prefer more physical activities like biking or snorkeling or even city walking tours?
- Provide actual attendance figures from previous tours to illustrate the type of activities that generally do and don't go over well with your delegates.
- Minimum number of attendees required to conduct a tour. If you want a lower minimum than most destination management companies normally require, specify this in your RFP. It will increase your per-person cost, but it may spare you from canceling a tour at the last minute due to lower participation.
- Maximum number of attendees allowed on tour
- Lunch, dinner, or snacks to be provided during tour
- What type of transportation will be provided? If buses, do they have restrooms?
- Specify whether you want all taxes and gratuities included in the pricing.
- Indicate the types of themes and entertainment you have used in recent years so that history is not repeated.

Audio-Visual

- Provide the entire conference program including:

1. Number and location of concurrent sessions. Indicate whether you have a 24-hour hold on any or all of these rooms since setup and teardown could have a major impact on your labor costs.
2. General session. Include move in, move out, and actual session times.
3. Equipment needs. If you already know your needs for this year, spell them out. If you're going out to bid before knowing your exact requirements, however, you could use last year's equipment list (just be sure to alert the suppliers that this is the case) or estimate what you will require this year. The latter strategy works well if you provide the same equipment in each breakout room such as an LCD projector, screen, and lavalier microphone.
4. The cost of tear-down and setup time required to move equipment from one room to another.
5. Are projectionists required?
6. Exhibitor rentals. If your conference includes a trade show and the AV vendor will have an opportunity to provide equipment to exhibitors and generate additional revenue, your overall piece of business becomes more attractive, which could result in a deeper discount. So be certain to include some history on exhibitor rentals from previous years.
7. Obtain standard printed price sheets and explanations of the discount you will receive.

General Service Contractor

- Number of booths
- Size of booths or booth packages
- "Extras" about your show such as the size aisles you desire, number and location of any lounge areas, etc. A copy of last year's floor plan may prove helpful.
- Number of registration counters
- Signage needs. This includes not only signs inside the exhibit hall, but also any other signs you may require for meeting rooms, sponsor acknowledgements, banners, etc.
- Drayage requirements. General service contractors (GSC) make most of their money from drayage. As a result, if you know how heavy your show is, you may be able to negotiate more complimentary items such as moving freight from the dock to the registration area, entrance units, etc.

Beyond the Yellow Pages

By Susan Murphy

You've booked a meeting in a destination that you've never used before — you may not have even done a site inspection if it's a small event — and you need to find vendors that can provide various services for the meeting. Who do you call? Who do you send your RFP to? Following are a few ideas to get you started:

Call the local convention and visitors bureau, check out its Web site or thumb through its meeting planner's guide. Many bureau Web sites now have pages specifically geared toward meeting planners that list all the vendors in the city . . . or at least all the vendors that are members of the organization.

Contact the convention services manager or catering manager at the hotel or convention center and ask for his or her recommendations. Keep in mind, however, that many facilities have exclusive or preferred vendors and are only authorized to recommend those. The property may even have its own in-house suppliers or a financial arrangement with certain local suppliers whereby the facility receives a commission based on booked business. As a result, you may not necessarily get an unbiased opinion.

Talk to your peers. Ask fellow members of the Professional Convention Management Association, American Society of Association Executives, or Meeting Professionals International if they've been to the city, what suppliers they used and how they performed. Remember, networking is one of the major reasons that we all belong to industry organizations.

Surf the Web. Virtual tours of properties as well as databases containing thousands of suppliers are just a mouse click away. Some meeting planning-oriented Web sites, such as www.plansoft.com, even have the capability of assembling an RFP for you.

Read industry magazines. Virtually all of the meetings magazines publish special sections or supplements on various destinations throughout the year. Several also publish a year-end directory filled with hundreds of supplier listings.

Tap last year's supplier. This strategy works particularly well with general service contractors and audio-visual companies, many of which are national, if not international. Even if they don't have an office in the destination or can't travel to the location of your event, they can probably recommend a vendor in the area.

It's also a good idea to tap the destination management company (DMC) that you used last year, even though it may be limited to doing business in its particular city or region. The company may be able to suggest a fellow member of an industry organization such as the DMC Network, which has specific criteria for membership.

Now, with all of these options, who needs the Yellow Pages?

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- Labor requirements
- Exhibitor revenue. Specify how much revenue your exhibitors generated for the GSC in previous years. If the GSC can't provide you with exact amounts, ask for usage figures on items such as carpet, tables and chairs, upgraded furniture, prefabricated booths, assisted labor, etc. Armed with this information, you may be able to negotiate a deeper discount or additional complimentary items.

STEP THREE

Compile a wish list. Let the suppliers know what complimentary or discounted items you would like to receive based on the value of your piece of business. You may not get everything you ask for — the vendor has to turn a profit, after all — but if you don't ask, you may not get anything.

An audio-visual vendor, for example, may be able to provide complimentary walkie-talkies, speaker ready room equipment, or even one microphone per day per room. A DMC may be able to supply complimentary tour desk staffing or site visit transportation. A general service contractor may be able to pick up the tab for all or some of your show management shipping needs or furniture or equipment for your show office. It's almost always possible to obtain a discount off the full price. Be sure to find out how great a discount you will receive.

STEP FOUR

Finally, ask the vendor to provide a list of references… and be sure to check them before making your final decision.

Wanda Kovacs is an account planner at Conferon, Inc. in Twinsburg, Ohio.

Comparing Apples to Apples

By Marlene Burle, CMP, and Gina Golde, LES

What do you do when you have oranges and you want to make apple juice? Comparing supplier proposals when each company presents the information in a different format can be a bit like trying to squeeze apple juice out of an orange — and in order to properly analyze multiple supplier proposals, you need to compare apples to apples.

The best way to ensure a line-by-line comparison is to clearly state in your request for proposal (RFP) how you require the information to be presented. Better yet, provide your RFP on a spreadsheet that has been designed so that suppliers can drop in the answers.

Just in case all of the vendors don't follow your instructions, however, here are a few examples of how bids can differ:

Audio-visual. Equipment prices can either be quoted per piece of equipment or as a package. First, check to see that all of the suppliers quoted similar types of equipment (i.e., same lumens for each LCD). Then make sure all accessory equipment is included in the price. For example, did one company separately quote a 35mm slide projector, zoom lens, remote control, and safe-lock stand, while another company offered a package price for the same equipment? Be certain your apples match.

Destination management. Destination management companies (DMC) can quote shuttle service prices several different ways. One supplier may quote $200 per coach with a four-hour minimum and an additional $50 per hour after the minimum is reached, for example, and another supplier may quote $250 per coach with a five-hour minimum and an additional $50 per hour after the minimum is reached.

Which company would you choose, based on the bottom line alone, if you needed one coach for six hours? At first glance, it might look like an apples-to-oranges comparison, but if you do the math, you'll be able to compare apples to apples. Also make sure your minimums are "garage to garage" — meaning the clock starts ticking when the coach leaves the garage and stops when it returns to the garage — so that you're not unexpectedly charged for overtime on site.

Tour prices also can be quoted a few different ways. DMCs tend to price tours based on the number of participants — the higher the number of participants, the lower the per-person price. A tour with a 40-person minimum, for example, would have a lower per-person price tag than the same tour with a 30-person minimum. So be certain that the minimums are equivalent when comparing the bids of various vendors.

It's also important to weigh the pros and cons of a higher minimum versus a lower minimum. A higher minimum will give you a lower per-person cost, which may help to sell more tickets to association members who are paying their own way. But if you don't reach the higher minimum, the tour may need to be canceled unless your organization is willing to pay for the unsold tickets. The bottom line? Tours with lower minimums, although more costly to delegates, may help you avoid cancellations.

General service contractors. Some contractors quote aisle carpeting in square yards; others quote it in linear feet. If you find yourself in this situation, you'll need to convert feet to yards in order to reveal the real pricing structure.

One of the most effective and efficient ways to analyze bids is to put together a chart or spreadsheet listing the main items of each proposal. Then, as you review each bid,

Exposition Services Comparison Chart

Following is a side-by-by comparison of actual proposals from three decorators. If we compared the bids based on price alone, Decorator #3 would have been the logical choice. However, Decorator #1 was selected based on past performance and service history along with the personal relationship established between the account executive and the organization. Knowing what is important to your group is ultimately the deciding factor when selecting a vendor.

	Decorator #1	Decorator #2	Decorator #3
10'x10' Booth w/ID Sign Standard	$8.00	1998–$6.00 • 1999–$7.00 2000–$10.00	Complimentary
Aisle Carpet	9' wide – $2.20/sq. yd. 10' wide – $2.60/sq. yd.	1998–$2.45/sq. yd. • 1999–$2.45/sq. yd. 2000–$3.65/sq. yd.	9' & 10' @ $2.22/sq. yd.
Masking Drape	1st 200' of each 3' & 8' @ no charge 3' – .50/linear foot 8' – 1.50/linear foot	1st 200' of 8' @ no charge 3' – .75/linear foot 8' – 1.00/linear foot	1st 200' of each 3' & 8' @ no charge 3' – 1.00/linear foot 8' – 1.75/linear foot
Association Freight	20,000 pounds – complimentary Additional @ 25% discount	3,000 pounds – complimentary Additional @ 50% discount	40,000 pounds – complimentary Additional @ 50% discount
Association Booths	10 booths w/furniture – complimentary Additional @ 50% off list	(1)10'x10' booth w/furniture – complimentary, Plus labor @10% discount	(1) 10'x10' booth w/furniture – complimentary
Registration	(20) counters, (40) padded chairs, (20) 6' draped tables, 1,800 square feet padded carpeting, 4 kiosks, 10'x15' office, 100' of 16' colored drape, kick-plate logos for counter, one set dimensional cut-out letters indicating "association" – complimentary Additional counters @ $150 each	(20) counters, (40) arm chairs, (20) 6' draped tables, (20) wastebaskets, 80' of 16' high drape, 1,800 square feet carpet w/foam padding, (2) MIS sign-in counters – complimentary Additional counters @ $150 each Additional sign-in counters @ $250 each, 8' high office @ $15/linear foot	All counters, furnishings, high drape, office, 1,800 square feet 1" padded carpeting – complimentary Framed letters designating "registration" @ $18/letter, 4 kiosks @ $150 each
Entrance Unit	(1) custom unit, graphics and floral – complimentary	(1) custom unit, graphics and labor – complimentary	(2) units w/standard graphics and floral – complimentary
Signage	(4) You are Here, (10) 22"x28" signs and stand – complimentary Additional signs @ 20% discount	(10) 22"x28" with logo – complimentary (4) 1 mtr. x 8' directional sign @ $200 ea. 30 days prior to move-in – 25% discount	20% discount @ 30 days out 10% discount @ 29 days out
Labor	**Denver:** Straight (8am -5pm): $39/hour O/T (before 8am, after 5pm, Saturday, and Sunday): $69/hour **Orlando:** Not listed **St. Louis:** Straight (8am-5pm): $46/hour O/T (before 8am, after 5pm, Saturday, and Sunday): $92/hour	**Denver:** Straight (8am-4:30pm): $39.50/hour O/T (4:30 daily, 8am-midnight Saturday): $59.25/hour D/T (all other): $79/hour **Orlando:** Not listed **St. Louis:** Straight (8am-4:30pm): $60.30/hour O/T (all other): $116.10/hour	**Denver:** Straight (8am-4:30pm): $35.95/hour O/T (4:30 daily, 8am-midnight Saturday): $54/hour D/T (all other): $71.90/hour **Orlando:** Not listed **St. Louis:** Straight (8am-4:30pm): $44/hour O/T (all other): $74/hour
	** List less 10%*	** List less 10%*	** List less 15%*

you can fill in the blanks and clearly see where the discrepancies between each company lie. Whenever you find an item quoted in another form (i.e., a la carte vs. package price, hourly vs. daily), ask the supplier to resubmit the information in the form that's easier for you to decipher.

Going through the steps outlined above will enable you to evaluate all suppliers equally even if the information provided isn't consistent from one proposal to another. Remember, comparing apples to apples will allow you to make a more informed decision when selecting suppliers for your meeting.

Marlene Burle and Gina Golde are account planners at Conferon, Inc. in St. Louis.

When Money Doesn't Count

By Kim Becker, CMP, and Caroline Spinner, CMP

What? Money always counts in the bottom-line world of today's marketplace, but have you ever sent out a request for proposal (RFP) for a particular service and received back from the suppliers an "inexpensive" quote, an "expensive" quote, and a "middle-of-the-road" quote? How then do you determine:

- If the inexpensive company is a case of getting what you pay for, or if it really does have economies of scale to offer the best price?
- If the expensive company is overcharging for less than desirable equipment, or if it truly does have the best equipment and/or service?
- If the middle-of-the-road company can meet your needs at the best price, or if you will just receive mediocre equipment and/or service?

Although price is certainly important, there are many other factors to consider when comparing quotes. So try to put bottom-line dollars on the back burner for a few minutes when reviewing bids and utilize the following checklist to make sure you are selecting the best supplier to meet your needs.

- Was professionalism exhibited in all aspects of your dealings with the company — from the first phone call, to e-mail correspondence, to the quality of the presentation submitted to you? Did the representative meet the RFP deadline? Did he or she follow up?
- Does the vendor have the particular resources or services to handle your program? Does it need to subcontract out any equipment or labor? Ideally, it is preferable for a supplier to provide all of the resources and services that you need for your meeting. In the event that a supplier has to subcontract out some portion of the event, be sure the prices you were originally quoted will apply to the subcontracted portion.
- Can the company service your meeting in a second-tier city as well as a first-tier city? If a supplier doesn't do business in a second-tier city often, it will cost more for the company to service your meeting from its next closest location. But consider the opportunities for a multi-year contract, which would make it less expensive for a vendor to service all of your meeting locations over the course of the deal.
- What is the company's relationship with the hotel or convention center you are using? Is it the in-house company, "preferred" vendor, "exclusive" vendor, or none of the above? In-house, preferred, and exclusive suppliers already have knowledge of the property, have established relationships with the in-house staff, and have in-house storage facilities. However, the drawback to these vendors is the commission and fees typically paid to the facilities. Use of exclusive vendors also limits your ability to competitively price the supplier's service.
- What is the company's level of experienced personnel? How long has it been in business? How long have the key employees been with the company?
- Did the supplier include pictures of its physical equipment, props, and/or decor so that you know what you are paying for?
- Did the vendor offer any additional concessions over and above what was requested in the RFP? Typically, a supplier that wants your business will offer additional incentives — such as a higher discount percentage and/or complimentary signage, easels, or walkie-talkies — to help secure the contract. This could lead to a better bottom line even if the company's initial prices are higher than the competition.
- What is the payment/deposit structure of the company? Are you required to pay 100 percent upfront? Typically, suppliers require a 50-percent deposit at the time of contract signing, an additional 20 percent prior to the beginning of the conference, and the remaining balance within 30 days of the conclusion of the meeting. Steer clear of any vendor that requires you to pay the full amount before a service has been performed.
- Check the company's references. Ask your industry peers and other suppliers if they have worked with a particular vendor before and what their experience was like. Also be sure to check the company's reputation with the local unions or labor brokers.
- Is the supplier a member of the local convention and visitors bureau or any industry associations, especially associations for the company's particular service area?
- Did each company provide prices for all of the items listed in the RFP? If one supplier missed a few key items, it could make a big difference.
- Even though money doesn't always count when making a decision, did the supplier respect the submitted budget?

Remember that the lowest price doesn't necessarily mean the most beneficial deal for you, but by doing your research you can feel confident that you've made the best effort to find the best partner for your meeting.

Kim Becker is an account planner and Caroline Spinner is a senior account planner at Conferon, Inc. in St. Louis.

Location, Location, Location

By Jeff Sacks, CMP

This 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

For 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 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.

Teri Tonioli is director of the Midwest region at Conferon, Inc. in St. Louis.

Negotiate Like a Pro

By Mike Burns

Some meeting managers love to negotiate; others hate it. Regardless of whether you fall into the former or latter category, negotiating is something that you have to do … and do well in order to be effective in your job. Meeting planners who negotiate successfully all have one thing in common: They know the value of their meeting from the hotel's perspective. All too often, planners make the mistake of assuming that because their annual convention is valuable to their organization, it must be valuable to the property. But that's not always the case.

Remember that a piece of business is only valuable to a hotel if it provides profit — maximum profit, if possible. (The value of your meeting drops, for example, if any other group wants the same dates and is willing to pay a higher room rate or provide more food and beverage revenue.)

So be sure to thoroughly analyze every aspect of your event — just the way a hotel sales manager would. The result will be power and confidence at the negotiating table. Here are seven major areas to consider in your analysis:

1. Corporate or Association Influence

Corporate meetings can be more attractive to hotels than association meetings for several reasons. For starters, they're typically short-term and yield a higher average daily rate. Corporations also usually spend more on food and beverage than associations and are much better at estimating their room pickup since attendance is often mandatory.

On the other hand, corporations tend to cancel their meetings more frequently. Associations rarely cancel because their bylaws generally require them to convene once a year and their annual meetings are, more often than not, their biggest revenue-generating events of the year. In addition, association meetings are often booked many years out, allowing hotels to forecast future years much better. An association's annual meeting also can offer more guest room nights — a hotel's largest profit area.

2. Number of Room Nights

You may think that the more room nights you can offer a hotel, the stronger your negotiating leverage will be. But that's not necessarily a given. More important than the *number* of room nights is how those room nights fit into the business mix of the hotel. The transient market has been on the rise for the past several years, resulting in an overall drop in the number of rooms committable for the group market. So, in certain instances, a large meeting may actually be too large for a particular property's group block allotment.

Fortunately, the number and variety of mid-range hotels geared toward the transient market (Courtyard by Marriott, Fairfield Inns, Hilton Garden Inn, etc.) is also on the rise, which means group room blocks are slowly inching their way back up again.

3. Season

Most properties have three seasons. During high season, hotels typically have occupancy rates of 90 percent or better and, as a result, have little incentive to be flexible and make rate concessions. During shoulder season, occupancy rates usually fall between 70 percent and 89 percent, giving you a bit more negotiating power. You have the most bargaining leverage in low season, when occupancy dips below 70 percent and properties are pretty much willing to "do whatever it takes" to book the business. (Low season conditions also can occur when a hotel is hit with a short-term cancellation and needs to fill the hole quickly.)

A hotel's seasons most often correspond with the seasons of the year. In Florida, for example, winter is high season and summer (especially August) is low season. But a hotel's "seasons" also correspond with the days of the week. At most downtown and airport hotels, for instance, high season is Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday; off season is Friday and Saturday; and shoulder season is Sunday and Monday.

At resorts, high season is generally dictated by the weather and its relationship to the resort's recreation focus. May through September could be high season at a midwestern resort, low season at a desert resort, and shoulder season at a ski resort. (In gaming destinations like Las Vegas, weekends are high season and weekdays are shoulder season.) And if you meet over a holiday, you are definitely in low season at most hotels.

4. Food and Beverage

Food and beverage has gone from being a break-even line item for hotels in the '70s and early '80s to their second-largest profit center. So the more F&B revenue you can offer a property, the more valuable your piece of business becomes. Using post-convention reports, calculate exactly how much your meeting is worth to the hotel in terms of food and beverage dollars. Don't forget to include "hidden" revenues from affiliated groups, hospitality suites, exhibit floor concessions, and other trackable revenues that a hotel may be able to provide. After tallying up these miscellaneous sources of revenue, you may discover that you have more negotiating clout than you initially thought.

5. Space Requirements

Ideally, the amount of meeting space you need to book should be proportionate to the number of rooms you need to block. If you're blocking 100 rooms in a 500-room hotel, but require all of the function space, for example, your event is not going to be perceived as valuable because it leaves the property with no space to sell to another group. If you find yourself in this position, look for ways to reduce your space requirements. Perhaps you can use your general session room for lunch. Or maybe you really don't need 16 concurrent breakout sessions.

6. Pattern

Your arrival/departure pattern should fit into the group pattern of the hotel — historically Sunday to Wednesday or Wednesday to Sunday. If your convention falls into one of these time frames, its value automatically increases. If you want to arrive on Tuesday and depart on Saturday, however, its value significantly decreases since the property would most likely have to break apart a standard date pattern before and after your meeting.

7. Opportunities for Ancillary Revenues

The more opportunities you create for your attendees to spend money, the greater the value of your business to a hotel. Properties in gaming destinations love to see open afternoons and evenings. Resorts want your attendees to utilize their spa, golf course, and other extras. If your program runs from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., the hotel knows those facilities will not be utilized. Other areas to consider are in-house service providers such as a destination management company or audio-visual company, which typically give a portion of their revenues to the property.

Once you have a handle on the true value of your meeting to the hotel, you are ready to negotiate. Begin by compiling two lists: one of your *needs* (items that are not negotiable) and one of your *wants* (items that you would like to augment your event). An example of "needs" might be a specific number of guest rooms, a rate no higher than $140 a night, a general session room that seats 1,500 people, and 12 breakout rooms accommodating 200 people each theater-style. Your "wants" might include a complimentary breakfast for your board of directors, limo transportation for your keynote speaker, and six suite upgrades.

Always negotiate your needs first. If the hotel can't meet these basic requirements, move on to the next property on your list. When negotiating your wants, remember that the hotel has to turn a profit. Your "wish list" should be reasonable, based on the value of your meeting, and not so extensive that the hotel decides to take another piece of business over yours.

Also keep in mind the three main factors that come into play when negotiating with a hotel or any other supplier: 1) time, 2) information, and 3) power.

TIME

Recognize time as an investment. Don't expect to select the site for your next meeting in a day. (There may be times when your meeting fits well into the first destination you call, but don't expect this to happen often.) Expect to invest a significant amount of time researching various destinations and properties as well as analyzing the value of your meeting. Only then will you be able to negotiate successfully.

Listen for key indicators to get the upper hand. Every salesperson has performance goals. So if a hotel sales manager indicates a sense of urgency by saying, "I could really use the contract back by the end of the week" or "What is it going to take to get this done by the 26th?," it most likely means that he needs your piece of business to meet a quota or secure his performance bonus. As a result, those few remaining contract points or concessions that you still haven't obtained may be in reach if you can address the hotel's need to close the deal quickly.

Remember, this works in reverse too. If you are behind schedule in selecting a site for your annual convention and tell the sales manager that you need to sign a contract by the end of the week, don't expect to close the conversation and be successful with: "And by the way, can I have three more dollars off the rate and six limo transfers?"

You set the clock. Don't allow time to become your enemy. Never begin the process of negotiations or allow someone else to force you into a scenario where, due to lack of time, you agree to unfavorable terms just to get it done. At the same time, don't draw the process out once you have a fair agreement.

Concessions are made when time is running out. A sales manager has no added incentive to make concessions at the start of the negotiation process when he knows you are looking at seven cities and 21 hotels. He does have incentive, however, when he is one of three finalists and this is the last shot at earning your business … and if he thinks you may walk away from the negotiating table if your requests aren't met. Very few hotels, after all, are willing to lose an important piece of business based on two suite upgrades or not wanting to provide a complimentary newspaper delivery.

INFORMATION

Know their business. Before you can sell the hotel on the value of your meeting, you need to know how the hotel makes its money and what its "hot buttons" are. (Did you know, for example, that the profit margin on hotel rooms can be 70 percent or more, food can be in the low 20-percent area, and beverages are over 70 percent?) Only then can you show the strengths of your meeting and how it fills the hotel's needs. Ultimately, only meeting planners who provide the best historical data on their events that address the overall value of their meeting to the hotel get the best deals.

Know your meeting. A sales manager who has been in the industry for six months may not be familiar with your organization or understand the significance of your piece of business. As a result, it's up to you to continually prove the worth of your meeting.

POWER

Volume. The more business you can give the hotel, the more negotiating power you have. If you can book two meetings — the annual convention and perhaps a board of directors meeting, for example — you will have more leverage than a planner looking at the same dates who can only offer the property one event. If you know you have or can influence multi-year bookings or multiple meetings, bring these to the negotiating table.

Competition. If a sales manager thinks there's no competition, there's no reason to offer you the best possible rate or make any other concessions. On the other hand, if a hotel knows it's competing against two or three properties, it will be much more likely to sharpen its pencil to offer you the best deal possible. If too many hotels are in the final running, however, a property will be less likely to compete aggressively.

Flexibility. The ability to be flexible automatically puts you in a position of power. If you can change your dates slightly, add another food and beverage function, live without 24-hour holds on all meeting space, or switch from classroom to theater-style seating, you may very well boost the value of your piece of business.

The ability to walk away. Even when both parties have done everything they can to attempt to create a win/win situation, you may still find yourself short of your negotiation goals. You must be willing to walk away. Remember, every hotel has a "walk-away rate" as well.

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Understanding Yield Management

By David Peckinpaugh

If you've been in the meeting planning industry for any length of time, you've no doubt heard hoteliers use the term "yield management." But you may not know exactly what it means and how it came into being. Basically, yield management is an inventory management system that allows hoteliers to forecast supply and demand and adjust their pricing strategies accordingly. Yield management also plays an integral role in determining the size of group blocks, group cutoff dates, preferred arrival/departure patterns, reservation restrictions, and food and beverage guidelines.

The airline industry is primarily responsible for the birth of yield or revenue management. Prior to deregulation in 1978, all airlines offered the same government-approved fares; discounts were rare with the exception of night and weekend flights. When People's Express introduced the industry's first low fares nationwide, major carriers were forced to react or go out of business. That's when American Airlines unveiled the first true yield management system, which allowed it to track fares and bookings systemwide and adjust fares based on historical and current booking patterns.

Up until the late 1980s, revenue management for most hotels was similar to revenue management for the airlines before deregulation. Their rate variables consisted of offering weekday and weekend rates, negotiating corporate volume discounts, and overselling group blocks in order to maximize occupancy. Once the airlines instituted yield management, however, the hotel industry gradually woke up and realized the potential that this management philosophy, and subsequent technology tools, offered.

So, in the early 1990s, major hotel chains began experimenting with yield management models. Some chains, like Hyatt, invested in sophisticated computerized systems that tracked numerous sources of data. Others responded with predominantly manual systems combining the reporting capabilities of their reservations and front desk systems with a team of trained managers to direct pricing and inventory issues. Either way, the result was the same: Hotels discovered that they could dramatically increase revenue growth and profitability by committing to yield management systems.

In 1996, for example, a typical hotel suddenly realized that a 1 percent increase in fixed-cost expenditures yielded a paltry 2.3 percent increase in operating profit. But a 1 percent increase in pricing yielded a hefty 11.1 percent increase in profit. (The inverse held true too — a 1 percent decrease in pricing resulted in an 11.1 increase in loss.)

Considering these figures, it's easy to understand why hotels invested heavily in both the technology and manpower to attack yield management head on. Yield management allows properties to discount with discretion in order to build market share, uncover hidden demand that promotes aggressive pricing, identify lost revenue opportunities, and, most importantly, increase revenue growth without increasing fixed costs.

To this day, yield management practices still vary widely from chain to chain and hotel to hotel. Some chains live and breathe yield management, creating entire revenue management teams dedicated to crunching the numbers at the property level. Others utilize yield management but rely more heavily on input from the general manager, director of sales, sales managers, convention services managers, and reservation manager of each hotel. And others have yet to adopt yield management practices, but they are rare.

Generally, yield management is an ongoing, day-in and day-out, week-in and week-out process. The yield management team at a property may meet once a week to review a predetermined period into the future, but on a daily basis team members are most likely evaluating each and every piece of potential business to see how and if it fits into the acceptable business guidelines of the hotel.

One of the major effects of yield management is more consistent pricing from sales manager to sales manager, hotel to hotel, and competitor to competitor. Translation? Less negotiating power and rate flexibility for the meeting planner.

As properties take a closer look at their overall market mix in an attempt to maximize their return, certain hotels may decide to cut group blocks and allocate more rooms to other market segments such as transient leisure, corporate volume accounts, wholesale, and tour and travel. That affects not only the availability of rooms at individual hotels, but also the number of hotels that need to be utilized for citywide events.

In addition, due to yield management, cutoff dates have truly become a rate issue, not a date issue. Hotels want the ability to control their inventory after cutoff in order to maximize the return on their remaining rooms. As a result, meeting planners are seeing less flexibility with cutoff dates and contract terms that allow the group rate to be honored after cutoff only "if *group* rooms are available in inventory."

Yield management has affected contracted concessions as well. Concessions that directly impact REVPAR (Revenue Per Available Room), such as reductions on rate and increases in complimentary rooms, are far less attractive to hotels than soft cost items such as VIP amenities, airport transfers, and food and beverage discounts.

The bottom line is that it is now more difficult, but by no means impossible, to find a "good deal" at a hotel. It is, however, more important than ever for the hotel to perceive your convention as being valuable. Essentially, you need to sell your meeting to the property by pushing as many of the right revenue buttons as possible.

Here's an example of yield management at work at a 700-room hotel with a maximum group block of 500:

- Rack rate: $175 (peak season)
- Peak seasons: March - May, September - November
- Meeting space: 25,000 square feet
- Desired catering revenue per room per night: $74-$65 peak season, $64-$50 shoulder season, $50 or below off season
- Peak demand days: Midweek (Monday-Thursday)
- Slow days: Weekends (Friday-Sunday)
- Desired patterns: Thursday-Sunday, Wednesday-Sunday, Sunday-Wednesday
- Peak season transient (individual traveler) demand: 200 rooms

If your meeting profile matches most of the hotel's guidelines based on the above considerations, your ability to negotiate will be excellent. But if you want to book 200 rooms in April, arrive on Tuesday and depart on Friday, use all of the meeting space, and hold only continental breakfasts on site, the property will most likely turn down your business. The decision hotels must make is: Do they book your meeting today or do they wait to book a higher revenue group and risk having empty rooms and meeting space if they're unable to do so? (For more information on how you can make your meeting more valuable to a hotel, see "Negotiate Like a Pro" on page 27.)

In summary, it's important to keep in mind the following points:

- It is currently a supplier's market. Rate and occupancy will continue to increase over the next few years.
- Demand drives hotel pricing. Hotels do not have consistent margins; their product is perishable and its shelf life is one day.
- Many variables affect pricing; the key is to be flexible and knowledgeable about your meeting and your group.
- Yield management is here to stay ... so learn how to play the game.

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Tips for Easier Hotel Contract Review

By Robin Roth

Reviewing a hotel contract can be time-consuming, confusing, and frustrating. As a meeting manager, you are seeking a fair agreement that accurately and comprehensively covers your meeting arrangements. Yet the contract you receive from the hotel may be one-sided in favor of the hotel, vague in many places, and missing essential language.

The next time a hotel contract lands on your desk, read it twice. First, read what is there and identify the terms that need to be rewritten, changed, or deleted. Then, read it for what is not there and needs to be added. The following checklist will help you determine what to look for and what is missing. *(Note: This information is not intended to be "legal advice." Meeting planners and hotel managers should consult a qualified attorney to review all contract issues.)*

General Contract Issues

- Date of contract initiation.
- Accurate and complete legal names of both parties, addresses, and contact information as well as the name of the meeting. Be sure the contracting party is not listed as the name of the meeting; they are often not the same.
- Actual dates of the meeting, *not* the dates of the room block.
- Statement of whether the contract is a first or second option. A *first option* should specify the date by which the contract must be signed and returned to the hotel, after which date the option will expire and the contract may have to be renegotiated. A *second option* should include the above as well as the date by which the hotel must reply to you after receiving the signed contract (typically three business days) and notify you of its decision.

Sleeping Room Block

- Table format showing the year, days of the week, and dates of the room block.
- Specific breakdown by type(s) of rooms/suites and number(s) per night.
- Beware of language that locks you into payment for the entire contracted block.

Room Rates

- Year quoted. If rates are quoted for any year other than the current year, that year should be specified.
- Future rates. If rates are not definite yet, indicate the formula to be used and when final rates will be established (usually 12 months out). Use at least two factors in the formula, such as percentage off rack rate, maximum percentage increase per year, or the Consumer Price Index, and state that final rates will be the lesser of the two formulas.
- Breakdown of rates by type of room/suite, single/double, deluxe, and government rate. State the percentage blocked in each rate category.

- Applicable taxes (sales, occupancy), service charges, and gratuities.
- Applicable charges for extra person in room.
- Currency. If the contract was initiated in another country, the rates are usually quoted in that country's currency.
- Ensure that final rates are not subject to change.

Complimentary and Other Negotiated Concessions

- One complimentary room per 50 revenue-producing rooms actually utilized. Spell out how the comps are calculated (on a cumulative or per-night basis) and whether they can be credited to the master account.
- Additional concessions. Include specifics such as the duration of each concession, i.e., comp rooms are for five nights each.
- If concessions are based on 80 percent of the room pickup, specify what happens if the pickup is less than 80 percent.
- State if a concession is complimentary.

Reservations

- Procedure. Is the group, hotel, or a third party handling housing? Will individuals call in, use reservation cards, be identified on a rooming list, or be serviced by a housing bureau? Will you use your own reservation form or the hotel's?
- Cutoff date. Identify the exact cutoff date — usually 30 days prior to the major arrival day. Indicate whether reservations received after the cutoff date will be honored at the group rate or a rate at the hotel's discretion.
- Confirmations. Specify if/when they are to be sent by the hotel.
- Check-in/check-out times.
- Dishonored reservations. Spell out what will happen if individuals with guaranteed reservations are turned away or "walked." Consider reimbursement of replacement accommodations or transportation to and from the new hotel.

Payment

- Rooms. Will individuals or the organization be responsible for payment?
- Deposits. For the group's master account, how much is due and when? For individuals, a credit card guarantee or one night's deposit is usually required.
- Early departure charge. Specify the amount (it should be less than one night's room rate) and that guests will be informed of this potential charge upon check-in.
- Master account. Typically, the credit application is due 90 days prior to arrival. Stipulate items that are to be included on the master account, as well as authorized signatories and payment terms.

Reports/Printouts to Request

- A per-night room pickup report.
- Individual cancellations and no-shows.
- Statistics for food and beverage revenue.

Function Space and Meeting Arrangements

- Agenda. Is it tentative or finalized? What are the due dates for the program? When will the hotel provide room names?
- Exact days, dates, setups, and functions.
- Specific room names or minimum square feet required; start/end times for 24-hour hold on space.
- Ancillary charges. Are there charges for meeting room rental and/or setup? Is there a fee for "extensive" meeting room setups and how is that defined? Is there a charge for using outside suppliers or contractors? If there is no charge for any of these services, be sure to state that.
- Release of space. What are the terms?
- Security guards. Hotel should "request," not "require," security guards.
- No changes to function space assignments or requirements should be allowed without written group consent.

Food and Beverage

- Menu prices. Firm prices should be established no later than six months out.
- Guarantees. Most guarantees should be given 48 or 72 hours prior to the function. Specify how weekends affect this deadline.
- Taxes and gratuities. State whether the service charge is taxable.
- Hotel's alcohol service policy, adherence to laws, and intoxication policy.
- Food and beverage cancellation or reduction/mitigation clause.

Exhibit Space

- Exact dates. Include beginning and ending times, setup and move-in, tear-down, and move-out.
- Costs. What is the rental fee? Does it include daily maintenance and vacuuming of the aisles? Be sure the charges are by net, not gross, square feet.
- Booths. List type, size, and number.
- Box delivery. What are the charges? When shipping boxes to the hotel prior to the meeting, where and by when should they be shipped?
- Security guards. Are they required?
- Release of space. What are the terms?
- Exhibitor responsibility clause. Make sure it absolves both the hotel and your organization of liability.

Room Block Control and Pickup

- Provisions for attrition and mitigation. (See "Analyzing Attrition Clauses" and "Making Sense of Mitigation" on pages 37 and 40, respectively.)
- Meeting room rental/facilities service fees. Does the rental fee apply per day for a certain number of days (if so, it should apply only to the major days) or is it all-inclusive? The rental scale should be based on sleeping room revenue.
- Include room block review dates and allowed adjustment/attrition.
- If there are no room block performance charges, that should be stated.
- Any nonrefundable individual cancellation or early departure fees that are collected should be applied to any group performance or cancellation charges due.
- Do not allow more than one room block performance charge.

Rights of Termination for Cause

- Force majeure for termination in the event of an emergency over which neither party has control (also known as an "impossibility") should be mutual and state that termination will be without a cancellation charge.
- Termination should be allowed for construction, change in management company or ownership, bankruptcy, conflicting booking/competitor, and unavailability of convention center or other facility.
- "Without liability" is often missing in these clauses.

Cancellation

- By the group. There should be a sliding scale of charges as well as mitigation.
- By the hotel. The group should be made whole for its losses.
- The same clause should not include both the hotel and the group; issues affecting the group and the hotel are too different to have the same charges owed.
- Cancellation clause. Be sure to include one for your group or total revenue could be owed.
- Watch out for cancellation clauses that seek to recoup all revenue that the hotel would have lost; damages owed should be in terms of lost room revenue only.

Americans with Disabilities Act

- Hotel should warrant its compliance.
- Specify the group's obligations.
- State mutual cooperation in identifying needs.
- Each party should indemnify the other for violations by the indemnifying party.
- Beware of vague language and one-sided obligation for the group.

Dispute Resolution

- What method will be used — arbitration, litigation, or other?
- Which side pays attorney fees?
- In the event the hotel sues the group for collection of funds the group owes, and the hotel wants to be reimbursed for its attorney fees, the hotel should be reimbursed only for attorney fees the hotel incurred to collect charges that the group does not dispute that it owes.
- Any dispute resolution should be at a neutral site.

Miscellaneous Issues

- Indemnification should be reciprocal and each party should be responsible for its own negligence.
- Insurance should be a mutual clause.
- The hotel should warrant the condition of the facility. It should be the same or better than at the time of the on-site visit or contract signing.

- The hotel should state its adherence to laws regarding fire, safety, and health codes.
- The hotel will usually ask that the laws of the state where the hotel is located will apply in the event of a dispute, as will venue and jurisdiction, but that may unnecessarily lock the group into traveling if there is litigation.
- The laws of which state govern the contract?

Closing Issues

- Can the contract be assigned to other parties?
- How are notices to be given?
- Itemize all attachments.
- Merger clause. State that this contract constitutes the entire agreement and supersedes previous agreements.
- Changes can be only in writing.
- Severability. Is the contract enforceable if any provision is ruled unenforceable?
- Is a faxed document valid? It should be if the original is received within 72 hours of the receipt of the fax.
- What is the authority of the signatories?
- Signature information — name, title, group name, and date.

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Analyzing Attrition Clauses

As hoteliers and meeting planners both know, contracts have gotten increasingly longer and more complex in recent years, mainly for two reasons:

1. Hotels are trying to protect themselves from previous mistakes that have cost them money.

2. Prosperity reigns. Convention hotels have experienced record-breaking occupancy, profits, and annual rate increases.

As a result, performance-related clauses are now the rule rather than the exception. Some other reasons for this trend include:

Owner demands have increased. In the past, owners purchased hotels for real estate investments and tax write-offs. Today, however, many of the hotel chains and ownership groups are publicly traded and need to deliver a return to their shareholders. Properties are now competing not only against each other, but also against other investment opportunities.

Availability is shrinking. Growth in the meetings market has outpaced the building of convention hotels.

Many hotels continue to invest tremendous amounts of capital to improve their product through renovations and additions and they need a return on these investments.

Guest rooms are perishable. Today's available guest room cannot be sold tomorrow — enter the buzzword "yield management." Given the fact that hotels' goals are to maximize revenue and occupancy, hoteliers now must ask themselves the critical question: "Can we afford to take a piece of business that is unprotected?"

Unfortunately, there isn't much you can do about this trend toward including performance clauses in contracts other than make sure the clauses are fair to both parties. Here are several tips to consider for your future negotiations:

Restrict room block performance to a single clause. Many hotel contracts include multiple performance clauses all tied back to room pickup. Conferon encourages hotels to narrow room pickup liability to one clause — no double jeopardy. Include language that encourages both parties to manage the room block.

Ensure that attrition fees are due after the date the meeting would have been completed. Remember that if the meeting hadn't been cancelled or there was no attrition, the hotel would not have received the room revenue until after the meeting concluded. No fees should be paid before the meeting date.

Do not use the term "penalty." Penalties constitute unfair, unequal financial payment and are frowned upon by the courts.

Attrition fees typically should not include room tax. In many states, liquidated damages are not taxable. Ask the property to provide documentation of taxation of liquidated damages prior to including it with your payment.

Get credit for miscoded rooms. Make sure you (or the hotel) compare your registration or attendee list to the hotel's in-house guest list and receive credit for all of the rooms associated with your group.

What if there is no attrition clause? If there isn't a clause, consider adding a clause that states: "The Group will not be liable for utilization of the entire room block or any guest room slippage."

Computing Attrition Damages

For any room block reductions or room pickup deficits that exceed the agreed-upon scale, include a very clear and concise formula to determine the damages due. This should be a formula that all parties can interpret, calculate, and use to derive the same answer. It needs to take into consideration making the hotel "whole" for the actual damages. A provision including the property's duty to attempt to mitigate, or lessen, the damages is recommended.

Actual Contract Clauses

Below you will find a review of two sample clauses from actual hotel contracts, pinpointing language that needs more definition, identifying pieces that are missing, and suggesting language that should be added. (Note: None of the information contained here is intended to be legal advice. Meeting planners and hoteliers should consult a qualified attorney to review all contract issues.)

The first example is found in many small-meetings contracts and is more typical of a small chain hotel.

Sample Clause 1

If the Group room count should fall short of utilizing 80 percent of the original group commitment, or should any food and beverage function be deleted from your agenda, we reserve the right to review and adjust the special rates offered, and/or a charge for meeting space may result.

This clause presents several challenges:

- Very few groups can support a room rate increase after promoting the group rates to potential attendees.
- The language is so vague that it's impossible to determine the organization's actual liability.
- Terms don't encourage review of pickup and advance management and adjustment to the room block.
- This clause does not allow for the hotel to reduce the group's damages if it is able to recoup lost revenue.

The next clause, more typical of a large convention hotel, is far more detailed.

Sample Clause 2

Should the hotel not realize the full amount of its anticipated revenue from sleeping rooms and food and beverage functions, due to reduced usage of sleeping rooms within your block and/or reductions in food and beverage functions or their scope, the parties agree it would be difficult to determine the Hotel's actual loss, because the Hotel would not only have lost the anticipated revenues derived from this agreement, but also the opportunity to have offered the unused sleeping rooms and/or food and beverage services individually or as part of a larger block to other parties. Accordingly, the parties agree that the following performance scale (see Performance Scale Chart below) will apply, that it represents a reasonable effort on behalf of the Hotel to establish its loss prospectively, and that it shall represent liquidated damages.

Performance Scale for Determining Liquidated Damages

If the percent of anticipated revenue from sleeping rooms and F&B functions actualized by the hotel is 80 percent or more, then the percent of anticipated revenue from rooms and functions to be paid by Group in addition to revenues actualized = No fee.

If the percent of anticipated revenue from sleeping rooms and F&B functions actualized by the hotel is 70 percent to 79 percent, then the percent of anticipated revenue from rooms and functions to be paid by Group in addition to revenues actualized = 10 percent of total room revenue.

If the percent of anticipated revenue from sleeping rooms and F&B functions actualized by the hotel is 60 percent to 69 percent, then the percent of anticipated revenue from rooms and functions to be paid by Group in addition to revenues actualized = 20 percent of total room revenue.

If the percent of anticipated revenue from sleeping rooms and F&B functions actualized by the hotel is 50 percent to 59 percent, then the percent of anticipated revenue from rooms and functions to be paid by Group in addition to revenues actualized = 30 percent of total room revenue.

If the percent of anticipated revenue from sleeping rooms and F&B functions actualized by the hotel is 49 percent or below, then the percent of anticipated revenue from rooms and functions to be paid by Group in addition to revenues actualized = 75 percent of total room revenue.

Items that should be negotiated to make this clause more equitable include:

- There is no "resell" provision. The hotel is assuming it will definitely lose revenue. If it is successful in reselling, it may not suffer a loss.
- There is no formula for computing the total anticipated revenue expected by the hotel. Could two different salespeople at the same hotel come up with the same figure?
- If there's no fee for an 80 percent pickup, should the group really pay 10 percent of total room revenue if it actualizes 79 percent?
- This clause does not encourage review of pickup and advance management of the room block.

An Alternative Clause for Consideration

The following clause addresses many of the difficulties discussed above:

Group is required to utilize 85 percent of the final adjusted room block that has been mutually agreed upon in writing ("85%"). Adjustments to the room block herein may only be *made with the written consent of both parties. If Group fails to utilize "85%," it will pay to the Hotel as liquidated damages, not a penalty, an amount equal to the lost profit on the room revenue: 75 percent (assumes hotel gross room profit at 75%) of Group's single room rate multiplied by the difference between "85%" and the number of rooms utilized.*

Group will only pay liquidated damages for rooms that are not resold and remain available for sale. Group will not be charged for more rooms on a particular night than Group had blocked on such night. Prior to the billing for the attrition payment, Hotel must submit to Group a copy of the city ledger or daily occupancy report documenting that the rooms were not resold and were available for sale. Hotel agrees that after receipt of this attrition payment it will not seek additional damages.

Several features of this attrition clause are desirable from a meeting planner's perspective:

- The term "final room block" allows for adjustments in the room block.
- The group's liability for 85 percent of the room block is generally accepted by most hotels.
- Limiting the payment to lost profit on the room revenue is consistent with the legal remedy recommended to make the hotel "whole" in the event of breach of contract.
- There is a resale provision with documentation required from the hotel to prove its damages.

—Robin Roth

Making Sense of Mitigation

If the cancellation and attrition clauses in your contracts with hotels don't include a mitigation provision, you could find yourself in an expensive situation in the event that you need to cancel a meeting or your group fails to pick up all the guest rooms that were contracted for.

What is mitigation? It is the duty that the hotel has to a group to reduce or minimize its damages by reselling canceled or released rooms. It is part of the process of compensating the property for actual damages, and it helps to make the property "whole." Although hotels are not legally obligated to agree to both liquidated damages and mitigation, they will often do so in order to maintain a sense of fairness and to avoid the appearance of "double-dipping" — receiving payment both for the canceled or released rooms and for the same rooms if they are successful in reselling them.

Have you ever wondered how to figure out the amount due for actual damages after mitigation? Contracts initiated by hotels rarely have mitigation clauses, and these are usually limited to vague statements along the lines of "If the hotel is able to sell any of the guest rooms canceled, that portion of the damages will be refunded based upon the number of guest rooms resold."

There is no industry-wide formula generally agreed upon for the calculations, so it's often difficult for two people to agree on the amount due. The language of the provision needs to be fair, clear, and concise. No hotel should receive more room revenue from an attrition or cancellation fee on any single day than it would have received had it been sold out.

Let's say a group cancels its meeting six months out and owes 75 percent of unsold room revenue from the rooms in its block. Correct interpretation of this clause would be that the group owes 75 percent of the daily contracted room revenue for its room block or the unresold room revenue at the hotel for that day, whichever is less. You should first multiply the total number of rooms in the group's block for each day by 75 percent and then multiply the resulting figure by the group's average rate as shown in Formula 1. (For purposes of this example, average rate equals $140 per night.) The sum for each day will equal the group's maximum liability.

To see if this amount can be reduced, you need to determine the total number of rooms available for sale each day

Example

	Group's Favorite Hotel	
	Wednesday	Thursday
Total Rooms in Hotel	200	200
Rooms Unavailable for Sale:		
Out of Order and Complimentary	10	6
Total Net Available Rooms for Sale	190	194
Total Occupancy, Including Group Rooms	180	95
Group Rooms Blocked	100	115
Rooms Utilized by Group	65	81
Group's Average Rate	$140	$140

by taking the number of rooms in the hotel and subtracting any complimentary rooms and rooms that are "out of order" for that day as shown in Formula 2. From this figure, subtract the total number of occupied rooms and multiply that sum by the group's average rate ($140).

Let's take each day, according to the example.

Wednesday

- Formula 1: 75% of 100 rooms blocked = 75 rooms that the group is responsible for: 75 x $140 = $10,500
- Formula 2: 200 rooms in hotel minus 10 rooms unavailable for sale = 190 rooms available for sale, minus 180 rooms occupied = 10 unsold rooms: 10 x $140 = $1,400

Amount Due:

For Wednesday, the group would owe the lesser of the two totals: $1,400. On this day, the hotel recovered damages by reselling some canceled rooms. The group was responsible for 75 rooms, but the property only had 10 rooms unsold that were available for sale. Mitigation saved the planner more than $9,000 and the hotel received full value for 100 percent of its rooms.

Thursday

- Formula 1: 75% of 115 rooms blocked = 86 rooms that the group is responsible for: 86 x $140 = $12,040
- Formula 2: 200 rooms in hotel minus 6 rooms unavailable for sale = 194 rooms available for sale, minus 95 rooms occupied = 99 unsold rooms: 99 x $140 = $13,860

Amount Due:

For Thursday, the group would owe the lesser of the two totals: $12,040. On this day, the hotel was not able to recover any damages by reselling the canceled rooms. The group was responsible for 86 rooms, but the hotel had more than that — 99 rooms — unsold that were available for sale.

By using the above method, all parties can easily calculate and arrive at the same figures, and the damages due are a fair amount for both parties.

Calculating Attrition Damages

The same method can be used to calculate attrition damages. Let's say the group is responsible for 80 percent of the room block. Should the group's actual pickup fall below 80 percent, then the group must make up the difference to the hotel. We'll use the same figures as before, only we also need to take into account the number of rooms the group utilized.

Let's take each day again, according to the example.

Wednesday

- Formula 1: 80% of 100 rooms blocked = 80 rooms that group is responsible for. Group picked up only 65 rooms, so 80 minus 65 = 15 rooms that group is responsible for: 15 x $140 = $2,100
- Formula 2: 200 rooms in hotel minus 10 rooms unavailable for sale = 190 rooms available for sale, minus 180 rooms occupied = 10 unsold rooms: 10 x $140 = $1,400

Amount Due:

For Wednesday, the group would owe the lesser of the two totals: $1,400. On this day, the hotel recovered damages by reselling some of the rooms that the group failed to pickup. The group was responsible for 15 rooms, but the hotel had only 10 rooms unsold that were available for sale. Here, having mitigation in the contract saved the group $700.

Thursday

- Formula 1: 80% of 115 rooms blocked = 92 rooms that group is responsible for. Group picked up 81 rooms, so 92 minus 81 = 11 rooms that group is responsible for: 11 x $140 = $1,540
- Formula 2: 200 rooms in hotel minus 6 rooms unavailable for sale = 194 rooms available for sale, minus 95 rooms occupied = 99 unsold rooms: 99 x $140 = $13,860

Amount Due:

For Thursday, the group would owe the lesser of the two totals: $1,540. On this day, the hotel was not able to recover any damages by reselling the rooms that the group did not pickup. The group was responsible for 11 rooms, but the hotel had more than that — 99 rooms — unsold that were available for sale.

Since an important part of the mitigation process is accounting for resold rooms, it's important to get proper documentation from the hotel as to its occupancy. Ask the property to provide a city ledger report, which will show occupied rooms as well as complimentary and out of order rooms. A city ledger report is run on a nightly basis by the hotel to document room tax that is paid to the city.

Using these easy-to-follow formulas, you and your hotel sales representative should be able to arrive at an amicable agreement in the event that you need to cancel a meeting or your room pickup is off by a wide margin … provided that a mitigation clause is included in your contract with the hotel.

—Robin Roth

Food and Beverage Performance

In recent years, performance clauses dealing with attrition and/or cancellation of food and beverage functions have become commonplace … and fraught with problems. Often it's difficult to determine the damages due and whether the terms are fair to both parties, leaving meeting managers to contend with a three-ring circus of language that is too vague, too broad, and overly punitive.

Consider the following excerpt from a food and beverage attrition clause in a hotel contract:

More than 6 months prior to the scheduled date: 33 percent of the food, beverage, and meeting room revenue [is due] based on the minimum estimate of the total cost of the function.

This clause presents several challenges. First, you probably won't know what the "minimum estimate" is since menu prices usually aren't confirmed until six months out, nor is the final agenda typically submitted by that time. Second, meeting room rental may not be defined six months before the start of the meeting.

The situation gets even more complicated when F&B performance is tied into room block attrition and/or cancellation clauses as in the example below:

The commitments and concessions the Hotel has made on behalf of the Organization are based upon the revenues the Hotel expects to realize under this agreement and are based upon full usage of the sleeping room block and/or the full attendance at the catered food and beverage functions to which the Organization has committed. Should the actual revenue fall below 90 percent of the Committed Revenues herein, the Organization agrees to pay additional charges in the amount which would bring the total to equal 90 percent of the Committed Revenues.

What are the "Committed Revenues"? In this particular contract, the only term that even remotely resembles "Committed Revenues" is a term called "Total Committed Guest Room Revenue," a total of the revenues expected from the room block being held. Also in this specific contract, there are no catered functions, but they may be added at a later date. If a food and beverage function *is* included at some point in the future, will "Committed Revenues" be defined at that time? The clause doesn't address this issue.

In addition, this contract was signed three years out. How can the group contract for a fixed amount of F&B revenue three years out when the agenda and the hotel's meal prices probably won't be finalized until six months out? A slippage allowance of only 10 percent in three years leaves little room for adjustment.

If the organization *did* include F&B in the agreement and, two years out, the expected attendance at a dinner decreased to a number below 90 percent of the originally contracted number, would it be fair for the property to charge the group the difference that far in advance? Lastly, is it fair for the hotel to charge the same amount for F&B slippage as for room block slippage when the profitability of the two areas is so different?

The following points should help you make sense of food and beverage performance clauses and negotiate terms that are fair to both your organization and the hotel:

F&B performance should be addressed in one separate clause. The clause should be clear as to whether F&B attrition or cancellation or both are applicable, and it should include specific time frames as well as a specific method for determining the damages due.

It should *not* include meeting room rental, and there should be no tie-in to room pickup. Room block performance issues are better left to a completely separate clause.

What happens if the contract contains a food and beverage cancellation clause and the organization cancels the whole meeting? The contract should explicitly address this possibility in an independent cancellation clause. Remember, F&B attrition and/or cancellation clauses are intended for individual functions — not entire events.

The hotel should recover lost profit only. If a dispute arising from a food and beverage performance clause were settled in court, the hotel would most likely be entitled to recover its lost profit in order to be made "whole." Surely liquor offers more profit, breakfast less. However, most hotels are willing to agree to an overall profit percentage of between 30 percent and 40 percent for all functions.

Define lost profit. Define profit both in terms of a percentage range (30 percent to 40 percent) and actual dollar amounts for each meal. For example, if the property's profit from F&B is 35 percent, a $15 breakfast would net the hotel about $5 profit per person, a $21 lunch would net $7 per person, a $36 dinner would net $12 per person, and a $24-per-person reception would net $8 per person. These numbers can be negotiated and changed depending on the circumstances of the individual hotel and meeting.

Include only definite major functions. Smaller events like coffee breaks and committee luncheons should *not* be included in performance clauses. Definite major functions can be defined by referring to the schedule of events in the contract.

F&B liability time frames should be close to the meeting. Many groups have been successful in negotiating with their meeting property to have the liability not become effective until two or three months prior to arrival. The hotel does not purchase food until a week before the meeting, so technically it does not suffer any lost profit from canceled or reduced functions until after the meeting.

What it *does* suffer is a loss of profit for the event cancelled. Remember, the closer to the meeting dates a cancellation takes place, the harder it is for a property to resell the banquet space. Everyone's goal should be that no party loses financially should an F&B function be cancelled. Give the hotel enough lead time to book another group. Accordingly, within two to three months of arrival is a recommended compromise point for food and beverage liability to kick in.

Get credit for resold functions. If the group cancels a function and the property is able to replace it with another function, the resulting profit should be credited toward the damages owed by the group. In addition, if events are added in conjunction with the meeting, the resulting profit should be credited toward the damages owed.

Performance fees should be due after the meeting. This is the same time the hotel would receive revenue from F&B functions if the meeting had occurred. It gives you time to review the hotel's actual loss and adjust your fees should mitigation be in your contract.

Do not use the term "penalty." Penalties constitute unfair, unequal financial payment and are frowned upon by the courts.

Performance fees typically should not include tax. In many states, liquidated damages are not taxable. Ask the hotel to provide documentation of taxation of liquidated damages prior to including taxes with your payment.

What if there is no F&B performance clause? If there isn't a clause, it may not mean you are free from liability if the hotel suffers a loss. Consider adding a clause stating that the group will not be liable for any performance charges other than those specified in the contract.

Use either a per-event or an aggregate clause. A performance clause may be based on each event according to the schedule of events or it may be based on an aggregate dollar amount of your total meeting's anticipated food and beverage revenue.

An example of an acceptable per-event clause is:

If any definite major food and/or beverage function in the schedule of events in this contract is canceled within two (2) months of arrival, Group shall pay to Hotel as liquidated damages, not as a penalty, an amount equal to Hotel's lost profit for each such function. If Hotel is able to replace a canceled function, or if a food and/or beverage function is added in conjunction with this meeting, the resulting profit shall be credited against the liquidated damages owed by Group.

- *Reduction: If attendance at any definite major food and/or beverage function is reduced within two (2) months of arrival to a number below 75 percent of that specified in the schedule of events in this contract, Group shall pay to Hotel as liquidated damages, not as a penalty, an amount equal to Hotel's lost profit for each cover below 75 percent. If a food and/or beverage function is added in conjunction with this meeting, the resulting profit shall be credited to Group against the liquidated damages owed by Group.*
- *Definition of "profit": As used in this clause, the term "profit" is defined as 30 percent to 40 percent of the anticipated food and/or beverage revenue. However, it is agreed that lost profit will not exceed $5 per person for breakfast, $7 per person for lunch, $12 per person for dinner, and $8 per person for a reception.*

The following is an example of an acceptable aggregate clause:

Hotel is relying on, and Group agrees to provide, a minimum of $ [INSERT 80 percent of anticipated amount] of the total food and beverage revenue. If Group's total actual food and beverage revenue slips below this amount, Group agrees to pay as liquidated damages (agreed not to constitute a penalty) the lost profit on the food and beverage revenue: 30 percent of the difference between the agreed minimum and the actual total food and beverage revenue. Group also agrees that, with respect to guaranteed functions, Group will pay for the greater of (1) actual attendance or (2) the guaranteed attendance, with the revenue from such payments counting toward the satisfaction of Group's minimum total food and beverage revenue commitment.

Please keep in mind that none of the above information is intended to be legal advice. Meeting planners and hotel managers should consult a qualified attorney to review all contract issues, not just those related to performance.

— *Robin Roth*

How to Boost Attendance

By Marian Calvin

Given the number of items on your meeting management "to do" list — negotiating rates and space, analyzing contracts, sending out requests for proposals, planning the program, making food and beverage decisions — you might be tempted to "steal," or reallocate some time (and funds) from the marketing of your meeting. But that could prove to be a costly mistake. Need convincing?

Consider the fact that the annual meeting is the single largest source of non-dues revenue for most associations. Also consider the fact that most exhibitors view a sizable base of interested, qualified buyers as the linchpin of a successful trade show. Consequently, it's in the best fiscal interest of your organization to ensure that as many delegates as possible turn out for your event. Promotion is the key to increasing attendance figures, provided that the rest of the "Four Ps" — product, price, and place — have been properly developed.

Do Your Homework

Before drafting the marketing plan for your next meeting, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you certain that you're offering the best educational program to your audience? Do you ask your attendees and members (including those who do not attend) what they need to know and learn to prosper professionally and personally? Are you responding to their needs? Do you actively seek grants, partnerships, and sponsorships that will help you afford to bring the best to your delegates?
- Are the cities you choose affordable and accessible? Are the room rates suitable? Are your registration fees reasonable and competitive while yielding acceptable profit margins?
- Are the time of year and the day of week pattern easy to sell to your audience? (Educators are usually free in the summer, while entrepreneurs of any ilk may have a hard time pulling away from their source of income on weekdays.)
- Is your event scheduled so as not to compete with other industry (public and private) events or your own organization's regional events?
- Is your marketing database the most comprehensive and accurate it can be? Has it been tested, corrected, and USPS-certified? Have you captured the names of all potential attendees from Web inquiries, product purchases, membership inquiries, exhibitor surveys, and marketing alliances with related associations?

- Are your conference mailings frequent enough and timely? Do respondents have sufficient time to budget for the event, get permission to attend the event, and benefit from the early-bird registration cutoff date and the hotel cutoff date in general? Is your program printed far enough in advance to allow you to take advantage of the significantly cheaper, yet slower, nonprofit or bulk mail rates?
- Are you missing opportunities to promote your meeting? Frequently missed opportunities include e-mail signatures, broadcast fax cover sheets, letterhead, ads and articles in every newsletter and magazine you produce, inserts in dues renewal letters and all other outbound correspondence, announcements to the trade press, and splashy unveilings at the previous year's convention and all mid-term events. Do you provide your local chapters and exhibitors with turnkey packages that enable them to support the marketing of the national meeting?

Keep in mind that many activities are competing with your conference for a share of a potential attendee's time and discretionary funds these days. Less personal time; shrinking educational budgets; and an increasing number of educational opportunities available locally, regionally, and on the Internet are forcing meeting managers to create a more sophisticated, quantifiable approach to marketing than ever before.

Sample Marketing Timeline

14 months out —
Select graphic design/marketing firm. Prepare meeting theme, logo, and introduction for unveiling at current year's event. Prepare exhibitor pre-prospectus. Prepare call for speakers. (Note: All information should be placed simultaneously on the organization's Web site and in vendor newsletters. Public relations team has parallel timeline.)

12 months out —
Unveil meeting theme, logo, and introduction at current year's convention. Provide preliminary destination information. Host committee and CVB should exhibit at event. Update media contacts in press room. Place call for speakers on Web site and hand out to speakers who will be returning. Program committee evaluates current year's speakers. Renew booth space on site using exhibitor pre-prospectus.

10 months out —
Distribute meeting dates to press and affiliated associations for their informational calendars. Begin exhibitor marketing and continue speaker acquisition. Thoroughly analyze current year's exhibitor and attendee evaluations and adjust program to address the issues.

9 months out —
Send out initial mailer (or broadcast fax and/or broadcast e-mail) to members and prospects, asking them to prepare their budgets, mark their calendars, and make plans to attend. Announce keynote speakers and entertainment if possible. Promote destination attractions. Create and approve registration and housing forms. Create PDF and/or interactive forms for Web site. Prepare confirmation letterhead, envelopes, and fax cover sheet.

9 to 6 months out —
Education committee updates members and exhibitors on key speakers and vendors signed up to date via Web site and newsletters. Prepare early-bird registration mailer. Prepare press releases and contact lists, complimentary trade show passes, and marketing materials for inclusion in exhibitor service kits. Send event logo to general service contractor for kit covers. Place event promotion ads in affiliated journals and association's publications.

6 months out —
Send out early-bird mailer. Include registration and housing forms for attendees and exhibitors. Develop preliminary program. Update Web site.

4 months out —
Mail preliminary program, providing specific information on speakers, educational sessions, and the destination as well as registration and housing forms. Post registration and housing forms on Web site. Develop final program mailer. Send list of pre-registered attendees to exhibitors for their pre-event promotions.

3 months out —
Send out final program mailer. Organize public relations efforts for venue and local attendance. Prepare/place ads in local publications if appropriate. Send last-chance broadcast fax or e-mail if necessary. Prepare promotional splash for next year's event for closing ceremony. Prepare materials for your own booth in exhibit hall or welcome area.

Immediately before event —
Prepare directory, proceedings, and on-site materials, including art for signage, sponsor banners, at-a-glance agendas with room assignments, miscellaneous attendee instructions, message boards, emergency contact information, and other bag stuffers as needed.

— *Marian Calvin*

Do the Math

According to the Professional Convention Management Association's Ninth Annual Meetings Market Survey, marketing and promotion account for 11.1 percent of event expenses. Compare this figure to the amount that you are spending to promote your event. Are you spending enough? Too much? Let's calculate.

Assume your attendance goal is 1,500 — an increase of 5 percent over the previous year — and your registration fee is $500. If you achieve your goal, you would generate $750,000 in gross revenue. If you spend the industry average of 11 percent to secure this attendance, your out-of-pocket marketing expenses would be $82,500 or $55 for each registered attendee.

Given that the acceptable rate of return for direct mail is at most 3 percent, you would need to mail at least 50,000 total pieces to net 1,500 attendees (.03 x 50,000 = 1,500). With a budget of $82,500, your cost per mailer would be $1.65 including postage. But since research has shown that people need to see your message at least three times before they respond, your cost per mailer would drop to 55 cents. Since this is a low unit cost, you would need to be creative with your distribution costs by including the piece with your monthly newsletter or as a polybagged insert with your journal to save on postage. Advance planning is key.

Create a Timeline

The development and utilization of an annual marketing plan and timeline is a tool that will help streamline advance-planning issues. If you rely heavily on board members and volunteer committees, a timeline is a particularly valuable tool. It contains all deadlines so that both staff and volunteers know exactly what is expected of them. It serves as a volunteer recruitment device, allowing prospective volunteers to either commit to the time frame outlined or decide that their schedules won't allow them to participate. And it empowers everyone — volunteers, staff members, and potential speakers — to be on the same page at the same time.

Create the timeline with all deadlines and cutoff dates backed up from the date of the event, including sufficient time for development, layout, printing, and distribution in order to avoid rush fees. Following are a few examples of the elements of a bare-bones timeline:

Initial mailing

The purpose of an initial mailing, most likely a postcard, is to prepare the recipients to act. It should inform them to mark their calendars, prepare travel budgets, check the organization's Web site regularly for updates and prepare them to be dazzled at the upcoming event. Destination promotion can be included here along with information about any new educational elements resulting from last year's evaluation. Be sure to send the initial mailer during budget planning time for your industry, typically six to nine months out.

Second mailing

The goal of this mailing is to encourage early registration. The piece, mailed four weeks before the early-bird cutoff date (or eight to 10 weeks before the hotel cutoff date), should include registration and housing forms in addition to finalized information on keynote speakers and seminar topics and presenters.

Final mailing

The purpose of the final mailing, sent out a minimum of three weeks before the hotel cutoff date, is to ask for the order and close on it. It should include all the information that potential attendees need to know to commit — final agenda, list of exhibitors to date, names and photos of all speakers, airline and car rental discounts, optional tours, registration and housing forms, and anything else that will entice them to attend.

You should be able to determine whether an additional marketing push is needed by figuring out the date, historically, by which half of your attendees are usually registered. If the numbers are lagging at that point, you may want to add another mailer, broadcast e-mail, or fax to the mix.

For each element on the timeline, provide a final copy approval deadline, final layout approval deadline, blueline or press proof approval deadline, and mail date. All dates should be realistic, firm, and shared with all parties as early in the marketing cycle as possible.

When all elements of the event — from site selection to program planning to exhibit sales — are promoted via a well-oiled marketing machine, the inevitable benefit is increased attendance and satisfied delegates and exhibitors.

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Creating the Ideal Registration Form

By AnnMarie Branagan and Vivian McLaughlin

If you've never created a registration form before, you may think it doesn't require much thought or effort. You may assume it simply needs to present the basics — name, address, phone number, fax number, choices for educational sessions, cost, and method of payment. But creating a registration form that actually works for you and your organization, and allows you to report critical information for all stakeholders, does require considerable effort.

The challenge is to fit everything you need to know about the attendee on an easy-to-read, one-page document. (Two-sided forms should be avoided due to faxing logistics. Inevitably, some delegates forget to write their name on the second page, and it gets separated from the first page.) You should strive to make it as simple as possible for a delegate to register and arrange for housing for your event. Ideally, you will weave these two components into one process and allow registration and housing transactions to be processed via all mediums — Web, fax, mail, and phone.

How Do You Go About Doing This?

To help you get started, we have prepared the following registration form outline. Keep in mind that it is only an outline. Your document must be adapted to the unique requirements of your meeting. You may not offer post-conference events, for example, but you may need to find out the attendee's shirt size if you're hosting a golf tournament. Simply add and subtract items from the outline until it meets your individual needs.

It's also important to make sure that your registration form corresponds with the format of your database. If your database lists last name followed by first name, for example, your registration form should use the same format to help reduce data entry errors.

1. "Belly button" information — First Name, Middle Initial, Last Name, Suffix or Credentials, Badge Name, Organization, Title, Street Address, City, State or Province, Zip Code, Country, Work Phone Number, Home Phone Number, Fax Number, E-Mail Address.

2. Registration category and fees — Member, Associate Member, Non-Member, Student, Exhibitor, Exhibits Only, Press, Spouse/Guest, One-Day Registrant. Clearly define the inclusions for each registration category and consider using color-coded badge holders to define attendee types.

Registration categories often have varying fees depending on the date registered. Think about offering a discount for early registration (45 to 60 days prior) and adding a premium for registering on site ($50 to $100). Some groups also offer discounts, ranging from $25 to $100, to encourage participants to register via the Web. If you decide to offer Web registration, be sure to use a secure server and allow attendees to also print the registration form from your Web site.

3. Member identification number — This usually helps in membership verification. If you outsource registration services, it also will provide a potential link between your membership database and your supplier's registration database.

4. Membership signup or renewal — Many organizations like to price their conference packages to encourage individuals to become members or to renew their membership along with their conference registration in order to obtain the discounted member rate.

5. Choices for educational sessions — If workshops tend to fill up quickly, you may want to ask registrants to indicate a second or third choice for each workshop. If there is a maximum capacity for any session, note it in the advance brochure as well as your database.

6. Optional pre- and post-conference events — Make sure you have inventory controls in place for minimum/maximum attendance and communicate any associated fees. Some groups offer a discount for pre- and post-conference educational sessions when coupled with the purchase of registration for the full conference.

7. Optional tours/activities/meal tickets — Know your maximum capacities for buses and specify any associated fees. Think about the recreational activities you'll be offering and whether you need to obtain any specific personal information from the registrant. What is your shirt size? Shoe size? Do you use right-handed or left-handed golf clubs? If you are selling tickets to a banquet or awards luncheon, identify those events in this section.

8. Demographic and marketing information — Take a hard look at this area to determine the absolutely critical information that you want to track. Some organizations track first-time attendees, number of conferences previously attended, number of years in the business, industry sector, role in purchasing decisions, number of employees, size of company in dollars, or how attendees heard about the conference. From an exhibit sales perspective, you definitely need to track some of this data to help market and grow your show in the future. In addition, if you're able to measure the success of any of your marketing initiatives, it will

How to Block Rooms Accurately

Once upon a time, hoteliers would let you slide if you overestimated attendance and didn't pick up the majority of your room block. Unfortunately for meeting managers, those days are long gone. Today, you're likely to incur stiff penalties if you miscalculate and fail to pick up 80 percent or more of your block. So unless your organization has very deep pockets, it's crucial to come up with room counts that are as close to "real life" as possible. Here's how to do just that:

Using last year's room pickup, calculate the percentage of peak for each day of the meeting by dividing the number of rooms used on a given day by the number of rooms used on peak night.

Sample Room Block

Day	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.
# Rooms	50	125	950	1,650	1,650	1,300	75
% Peak	3%	8%	58%	100%	100%	79%	5%
Example for Saturday: 125 ÷ 1,650 = .08 or 8%							

Application

When booking multi-hotel or citywide events, use the percentage of peak to calculate the number of rooms needed at each hotel on each night. (This formula also can also be used for single-hotel events.)

Example: The hotel can commit 500 of your needed 1,650 rooms on peak night. How many rooms do you need each night? Multiply 500 by the percentage of peak, as shown below:

Day	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.
# Rooms	15	40	290	500	500	395	25
% Peak	3%	8%	58%	100%	100%	79%	5%
Example for Saturday: 500 x .08 = 40 rooms							

Be sure to block as close as possible to actual room pickup, which will maximize occupancy for the hotels, protect you from performance clauses, and ensure room availability for the duration of your event. Also make certain that you review your room flow after each year's event and make adjustments based on the most current trends.

Staffing the Registration Area

Registering on site or picking up credentials is often an attendee's first impression of your convention or trade show. So it's important to make that impression a good one, meaning delegates must be able to complete the registration process quickly. To help ensure this happens, take the following steps:

Number of Pre-registration Counters

Pre-registration counters are usually reserved for people who are only picking up their credentials. Typically, they are also prepaid registrants. Use the guidelines below to help you determine how many pre-registration counters to set up. Remember to round all numbers up; it's definitely better to have too many counters than not enough.

- Less than 1,000 attendees – 1 counter per 300 people
- 1,000 to 2,000 attendees – 1 counter per 400 people
- 2,000 or more attendees – 1 counter per 500 people

Some groups can increase these ratios by as much as 30 percent to 40 percent if they have heavy spouse or youth registration and distribute all badges as a group. This also holds true for exhibitor badges that are distributed by company.

Staff two or three temporary employees or volunteers per counter to disseminate credentials. Many organizations have heavy badge pickup during the first few hours of the morning and often can cut staffing in half for the afternoon shift. To help you staff the registration areas properly for your show, create a history of badge pickup by hour.

Number of Computers/Printers for On-Site Registration

To figure out the correct number of computers and printers needed to handle on-site registration demands, you need to know the number of people expected to register on site on the busiest day.

For simple registration forms (i.e., not more than 10 demographics or ticketed options), have one computer and one printer to support every 75 to 100 on-site registrants expected that day. For more complex registration forms, order one computer and one printer to support every 50 to 75 on-site registrants expected that day. (Note: Often a printer can be shared by two entry stations.) You may find it advantageous to place data entry terminals and printers on tables behind the registration counters to allow for more work space and a greater focus on customer service.

Consider staffing two people per computer — one to enter the data and one cashier to handle the financial transaction. For larger shows, you should be able to make do with fewer cashiers than data entry people.

Crowd Control

If there's a mad rush at the registration counter, look for ways to move people through the lines quickly.

- Consider not entering demographic or other information that is not essential to registrants receiving their credentials. Note: Most lead retrieval applications require the entry of name, address, and contact information.
- Consider handing out a ticket or voucher that allows attendees to enter the trade show or not miss the opening session and return afterward to complete the registration process.

help your decision making in coming years.

9. Do you have any special needs? — Theoretically, this is where a registrant would indicate that he or she is wheelchair-bound, a vegetarian, a diabetic, or other specific consideration. Many groups insert a wheelchair icon to draw attention to this section.

10. Method of payment — Note credit card, check, money order, or purchase order. Be sure to include credit card type, name on card, card number, and expiration date.

11. Cancellation policy — Clearly state whether the registrants will receive a refund if they cancel, how much money they will receive, the method by which they will receive the money, and the cancellation cutoff date.

12. Housing — If you're coordinating housing, list all the hotels (indicating the headquarters hotel) along with their rates and locations, as well as the housing cutoff date. Require attendees to request their first three choices to help fulfill their requests. Also ask for their arrival and departure date, method of guarantee or deposit, roommate name(s), bedding configuration request, smoking preference, and special needs.

Finally, remember to provide check boxes on the registration form rather than blank lines whenever possible in order to avoid receiving indecipherable handwriting. If you'd like to know how large an attendee's company is, for example, provide boxes for "less than $5 million," "$5 to $25 million," "$25 million to $100 million," "more than $100 million," or whatever categories your prefer. The person completing the form and the people inputting the information will thank you … and you will be able to more completely categorize and report on these fields.

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CHAPTER 7

How to Decide on Meeting Room Design

Theater? Classroom? Banquet? Conference? U-Shape? Which type of meeting room setup should you use? The answer depends on the objectives of the individual function. Use the information below to help you decide which of the seven major meeting room designs will work best for each of your events.

Theater Style

Overview: Chairs are lined up in rows facing the speaker. The rows can be straight, semi-circular, or herringbone (angled toward the front of the room). If space isn't an issue, it's best to offset each row so that delegates are not sitting directly behind one another.

Best usage: When attendees take on the characteristics of an audience (i.e., listening to a speaker or watching a slide presentation), theater-style is the most efficient setup. This design is also used to maximize the seating capacity of meeting rooms or allow the audience to be as close to the speaker as possible. It is not recommended for taking notes, referring to material in binders, or any event at which food is served.

Classroom Style

Overview: Long, narrow tables are positioned in front of rows of chairs facing the speaker. The tables usually abut one another, although tables that extend beyond the stage ideally should be angled toward the speaker in order to provide better viewing. Water pitchers and glasses are typically placed on the tables.

Best usage: Classroom-style is the best setup for situations in which the presenter is expected to do most of the talking and/or delegates must take notes, refer to material in binders, or work on computer equipment. It's also the most comfortable design for very long sessions. It is not the preferred setup for encouraging conversation among attendees.

Banquet Style

Overview: Guests are seated at round tables — usually 60", 66", or 72" in diameter.

Best usage: Banquet-style is the setup of choice for most meal functions. In addition, it's appropriate for small committee meetings and small breakout or study groups involving group interaction and/or note taking.

Crescent Style

Overview: Attendees are seated at round tables — usually 60", 66", or 72" in diameter. The two or three chairs in which delegates would have their backs to the speaker are removed, thus forming a "crescent" of seating facing the speaker.

Best usage: This design works well when you need to use a room for meals and for an educational session that immediately follows. It's also appropriate for general sessions where attendees break into small discussion groups in the same room.

Conference Style

Overview: Delegates are seated on all four sides of a table. For smaller groups (16 people or less), a single conference table is typically used. For larger groups, several 6' x 30" or 8' x 30" tables are often combined to create a solid rectangular table.

Best usage: The conference-style setup is often used for board meetings, committee meetings, and other smaller functions at which interaction between participants is expected. This design also can be used for high-level food and beverage functions with a small number of guests.

U-Shape

Overview: Rectangular tables are positioned to form a "U." Seating is usually on the outside of the U, but it's possible to seat delegates on both inside legs of the U.

Best usage: The U-shape setup is often used for board of directors meetings, committee meetings, and breakout sessions involving audio-visual presentations because all attendees can see the AV when the screen is placed at the open end of the U. It also can be used for banquets, with seating on all sides of the U.

Hollow Rectangle

Overview: 30" wide classroom tables are arranged in a square or other multi-sided design in which the center of the design is empty.

Best usage: Larger committee or board meetings of 17 to 30 people, at which interaction among attendees is important, can benefit from the hollow rectangle design. (Note: Avoid long straight sections of tables over 12 feet long. Octagons and hexagons work well to improve sight lines among attendees.)

Calculating the Capacity of Function Rooms

By David Lutz, CMP

If you've ever stood in a breakout room with the hotel's meeting space capacity chart in hand and thought, "There's no way 125 people can fit in here theater-style," you know how important it is to be able to independently determine the number of attendees that can be seated *comfortably* in any given function room. Fortunately, it's relatively easy to do just that. All you need to do is follow a few simple, step-by-step formulas.

First, you need to calculate how much space you actually have to work with after taking columns and other obstructions into consideration. Here's how: Measure the room to determine the shortest distances that form the room's length and width. For example, the hotel may show the dimensions of a room to be 130' x 60'. But if you factor in the columns along the back wall of the room and the storage areas along the sides of the room, the "clear meeting area" may be significantly less.

Once you've determined the clear meeting area, you can use the following formulas to figure out the true capacity of the room for the three most common types of seating — theater-style, classroom-style, and banquet-style. The objective of all three formulas is to ensure that every attendee has an unobstructed view of the screen or speaker, easy access to his or her seat, and sufficient elbow room. Note: To maximize capacity, arrange for the front of the room to be on the narrow wall.

Theater-Style Formula

Most hotels and convention centers offer meeting room chairs that are 20" front to back and between 17.5" and 18.5" wide. The standard used by the majority of facilities is to place the chairs immediately adjacent to each other and to use one chair's length as a measuring stick between rows. When these standards are used, it's very difficult to fully utilize the seating area since attendees typically do not want to climb over each other to reach an empty seat or sit shoulder to shoulder with their neighbors if they manage to get a seat. The result? Chairs remain unoccupied.

The following formula adds two to three inches to the above standards, thereby increasing comfort and allowing a greater percentage of the seating area to be utilized.

Step 1: Determine the number of rows that can be accommodated.

- Take the clear room length and subtract the space between the screen and the front row (normally two times the screen height) and the space between the back wall and the back row (minimum of four feet). *Note:* Two times the screen height is a standard that allows a person to view the entire screen comfortably. If you don't know the screen height, subtract 20 percent from the clear length of the room.
- Then divide by the distance between rows, measured from chair back to chair back (3.58 feet or 43 inches).
- Round the resulting figure down to the nearest full row.

Note: Do not exceed more than 30 feet of continuous seating before placing aisles. Many city fire codes will dictate a similar standard for adequate ingress and egress.
Example: 100 (length of room) – 20 (2 x screen height) – 4 (distance from back wall) = 76 (usable room length)
76 ÷ 3.58 (distance between rows) = 21.2 rows, rounded down to 21 rows

Step 2: Determine the number of chairs that can be set in each row.

- Take the clear room width and subtract space for aisles (normally about 15 percent).
- Divide by the distance between chairs, measured from chair center to chair center (1.83 feet or 22 inches).
- Round the resulting figure down to the nearest chair.

Example: 75 (width of room) – 11.25 lost to aisles (15% of 75) = 63.75 (usable room width) 63.75 ÷ 1.83 (distance between chairs) = 34.84, rounded down to 34 chairs

Step 3: Multiply the number of rows by the number of chairs in each row.

Example: 21 (rows) x 34 (chairs) = 714 people that can be comfortably accommodated in the room

Note: Seats from which the view of the screen or speaker is obscured should be removed. Seats located less than a 30-degree angle to the screen also should be removed since the viewing angle is too acute to provide easy reading of the projected material.

Classroom-Style Formula

Most hotels and convention centers offer six-foot and/or eight-foot tables that are 18 inches wide for their classroom-style setups. To determine the space between rows, the majority of facilities use a six-foot table as a measuring stick. A six-foot table is placed at a 90-degree angle to the first table in the room. The front of the first table is matched up with one end of the six-foot and the back of the second table is matched up with the other end of the six-foot table. The result is a three-foot gap between the two tables [6 feet – (2 x 18 inches)]. This standard is perfect for proper spacing between rows.

The majority of facilities will seat three people at a six-foot table or four people at an eight-foot table (allowing two feet per person). This is also a good standard for most sessions, although you may want to request seating of two people per six foot or three per eight foot if you're using large binders or conducting computer training.

The following formula uses the above standards, ensuring comfort and allowing for a greater percentage of the seating area to be utilized.

Step 1: Determine the number of rows that can be accommodated.

- Take the clear room length and subtract the space between the screen and the front row (two times the screen height) and the space between the back wall and the back row (minimum of four feet).
- Divide by the distance allotted per row, measured from table front to table front (4.5 feet or 54 inches, assuming the tables are 18 inches wide).
- Round the resulting figure down to the nearest row.

Example: 50 (length of room) – 14 (2 x screen height) – 4 (distance from back wall) = 32 (usable room length)
32 ÷ 4.5 (distance per row) = 7.1 rows, rounded down to 7 rows

Step 2: Determine the number of chairs that can be set in each row.

- Take the clear room width and subtract space for aisles (normally about 15 percent).
- Divide by the distance allotted per chair, measured from chair center to chair center (2 feet or 24 inches is the minimum space per chair for classroom seating).
- Round the resulting figure down to the nearest chair.

- Factor in the length of the tables provided by the hotel: six-foot, eight-foot, or both.

Example: 40 (width of room) – 6 (15% of 40 to determine space lost to aisles) = 34 (usable room width)
34 ÷ 2 (distance allotted per chair) = 17 chairs

Since the hotel only has eight-foot tables, you need to determine how many eight-foot tables can fit in the 34 feet available for seating (34 ÷ 8 = 4.25). The number of chairs in each row would be reduced to 16 (4 tables x 4 attendees per table).

Step 3: Multiply the number of rows by the number of chairs in each row.

Example: 7 (rows) x 16 (chairs) = 112 people that can be comfortably accommodated in the room

Banquet-Style Formula

Most hotels or convention centers use round tables that are 60", 66", or 72" in diameter. The standard used by the majority of facilities is to allow five feet between each round, which provides sufficient room for chairs to be placed around the table and for banquet staff to provide meal service. The ideal number of seats per table is eight at a 60" round, nine at a 66" round, and 10 at a 72" round.

To determine how many rounds can fit in a given room, it's helpful to think of each round as a square. Add five feet to the diameter of the table (60 inches plus 5 feet = 10 feet) and then calculate how many 10-foot squares can be accommodated in the space using the following formula.

Step 1: Determine the number of tables that can be accommodated.

- Take the clear room length and divide by each table's linear feet (from the chart below). Round the resulting figure down to the nearest table.
- Take the clear room width and divide by each table's linear feet. Round the resulting figure down to the nearest table.
- Multiply the two numbers.

Example: 75 (length of room) ÷ 10.5 (linear feet for a 66-inch round) = 7.1, rounded down to 7

50 (width of room) ÷ 10.5 (linear feet for a 66-inch round) = 4.76, rounded down to 4

7 x 4 = 28 tables

Step 2: Subtract excess tables that need to be removed for staging, buffets, rear-screen projection, or chairs directly in front of an exit, etc.

Step 3: Multiply the number of tables by the number of chairs to be set at each table (from the chart below). Example: 28 (number of tables) x 9 (number of people at each table) = 252 people that can be comfortably accommodated in the room

After you've taken the time to figure out the capacities of the function rooms, don't leave the actual setup of the rooms to chance. Be sure to specify, in writing, the standards that you require the hotel to follow such as 4.5 feet between table fronts for a classroom setup or 22 inches from chair center to chair center for a theater-style setup. You may even have to show the setup crew how to properly place the tables and chairs. (Also be sure to clearly communicate what wall you want the chairs to face — north, south, facing airwall, facing banquet service hall.) It's a little extra work, but it will ensure that your delegates are comfortable. Remember, comfortable delegates are usually attentive delegates.

David Lutz is executive vice president at Conferon, Inc. in Twinsburg, Ohio.

How Many People Can Fit at a Banquet Round?

Available Sizes	Linear Feet Needed	Number of People
60″ round	10'	6-9 people
66″ round	10.5'	8-10 people
72″ round	11'	9-11 people

Quick Calculations

To quickly figure out how large of a room you need for a setup, multiply the number of people by the appropriate square footage per person from the formulas below. To determine if a certain meeting room can accommodate a desired setup, divide the room's total square footage by the appropriate square footage per person from the formulas below.

Theater Style

- 12 square feet per person for groups of less than 60 people
- 11 square feet per person for groups of 60 to 300 people (the most common size breakout session)
- 10 square feet per person for groups of more than 300 people

Classroom Style

- 22 square feet per person for groups of less than 60 people
- 20 square feet per person for groups of 60 to 300 people (the most common size breakout session)
- 17 square feet per person for groups of more than 300 people

Banquet Style

- 13.5 square feet per person

Conference Style or Hollow Square

- 30 square feet per person

U-Shape

- 35 square feet per person

Note: The smaller the room or more square the room is, the greater the square footage needs per person. In a smaller or square room, there is more wasted space per person in the front, back, and sides of the room.

Formulas for Other Situations

Unless your meeting is quite small, chances are you'll need to look beyond theater, classroom, and banquet seating when attempting to determine whether a particular facility meets your space requirements. The following formulas will help you factor a variety of situations into the equation including exhibit space, receptions, dance floors, rear-screen projection, and stage height.

Exhibit Space

Exhibit booths: Number of booths x booth length x booth width x 2

This is a very common and widely accepted formula in the meetings industry. Basically, you determine the area needed for the exhibits and double it to accommodate the aisles, lost space in corners, and other miscellaneous space-takers. If you need extra space for registration or food service, just add the gross square footage of those items to the total area required for exhibits.

Example: 100 (booths) x 10 (length) x 10 (width) x 2 (aisle space) = 20,000 square feet of space required to accommodate the booths.

Note: The formula works in reverse. To determine how many 8' x 10' booths will fit in a 12,000-square-foot space, divide 12,000 by 2, then 8, then 10 (or simply divide once by 160). You'll be able to fit 75 booths in the room.

Tabletop exhibits: Think of tabletop exhibits as 6' x 8' booths … and follow the above formula for exhibit booths. Example: 30 (booths) x 8 (length) x 6 (width) x 2 (aisle space) = 2,880 square feet of space

Poster boards: Think of poster boards as 3' x 8' booths … and follow the above formula for exhibit booths. Example: 200 (posters) x 8 (length) x 3 (width) x 2 (aisle space) = 9,600 square feet of space required

Receptions

Number of people x 10 square feet per person

Many ballrooms don't have sufficient foyer or assembly space to comfortably accommodate a reception for several thousand people. This formula will enable you to quickly determine whether a particular area can hold your entire group. If you need extra space for extensive buffets, bars, staging, or props, simply add the gross square footage of those items to the total area required for the function.
Example: 2,000 (number of people) x 10 (square feet per person) = 20,000 square feet minimum needed

Note: To visualize what 10 square feet is, picture yourself standing in a three-foot square and you're just about there.

Dance Floor

Number of people x 2 square feet per person (assuming about 1/3 of the group is dancing at any one time)

Generally, hotel setup crews dislike putting down and picking up a dance floor. It's heavy and time-consuming. So if you leave the size of your dance floor up to the setup crew, you may end up with a dance floor that's too small. Use this formula to figure out your requirements.
Example: 200 (number of people) x 2 (square feet per person) = 400 square feet minimum needed for the dance floor

Rear Screen Projection

Number of People	Space to add
Less than 100	add 1,000 square feet
100 to 200	add 2,000 square feet
200 or more	add 3,000 square feet

These formulas will help you decide whether there's sufficient space for rear-screen projection in a function room. To apply them, first calculate the minimum square footage requirements for theater-style, classroom-style, or banquet-style seating using the formulas on page 63. Then add the appropriate additional square footage from the chart above based on the number of attendees.
Example: 3,750 square feet (banquet-style seating) + 3,000 square feet (based on 280 attendees) = 6,750 square feet minimum to accommodate rear-screen projection

Note: If your audio-visual needs are elaborate, consult your production company before using these formulas.

Stage Height

Room length ÷ 50

Common stage heights are 8', 12', 16', 24', and 32'. Staging comes in three primary sizes — 4' x 8', 6' x 8', and 3' x 6'. Be sure to find out what sizes are available and then specify your staging requirements by length, width, and height.
Example: 75 (room length) ÷ 50 = 1.5 feet or 18 inches needed for stage height

— David Lutz

Hints on Handling AV

By Ken Sien, CMP

If you're like most meeting managers, you probably don't use lavalier microphones, Xenon projectors, or multiple computers in your everyday life. You may, in fact, still need help programming your VCR. So it's only natural that you may be intimidated by coordinating the audio-visual component of a convention. But there's really no need to be. All you need is a knowledgeable, dependable AV company and a basic understanding of some of the tricks of the trade. The following tips, culled from years of on-site experience, should help you feel more comfortable.

Types of Microphones

There are several types of microphones used by speakers and entertainers. The most common choices are:

Lectern/podium mic — As the name suggests, this type of microphone is used by speakers who present from a lectern or podium. The mic is usually attached to a gooseneck mic holder mounted to the lectern or podium. Unless the in-house AV company is supplying the mic, there may be a charge for the gooseneck. These mics have ball-type heads and are omni-directional, meaning they accept sound from all parts of the top of the mic.

Lavalier mic — A "lav" mic usually has a flat top and is worn on the lapel of a speaker, which gives him or her the freedom to move around the room rather than remain at the lectern. It is a uni-directional mic, meaning that sound is only recorded from the very top of the mic.

Table mic —This is an omni-directional microphone placed on a table stand and used for speakers who speak from a table.

Standing/aisle mic —Typically used for questions or comments from the audience, this omni-directional microphone is placed on a tall mic stand and usually positioned in one of the aisles of the meeting room so that attendees can walk up to it. It can also be used for entertainment, such as a singer or comedian.

Wired vs. Wireless Microphones

The biggest advantage of using a wireless microphone is the convenience and freedom of being able to move around the room without worrying about a cord. (Just be sure the mic has fresh batteries.) The disadvantage, depending on your AV budget, is the cost. The average cost of a wireless microphone ranges from $75 to $125 versus $25 to $30 for a hardwired microphone. In addition, you'll most likely need to order an audio mixer (a device that enables you to control the sound on the microphones you use) if the wireless mic doesn't feature volume adjustment.

If you're holding multiple concurrent sessions, ordering wireless mics for each room can be a very expensive proposition. For a general session, however, it makes sense to let speakers use the microphone they feel most comfortable with. After all, they are addressing the entire group and their presentations should be as smooth as possible.

Since some speakers may ask for a wireless mic on site, it's important to make sure your AV company approves the speakers' requests through you. (This guideline applies to all AV equipment added on site.) When given the choice, a speaker will almost always select a wireless microphone over a hardwired mic, not realizing the cost difference.

Do You Need A Technician?

It's obvious that technicians are required for major audio-visual productions, but it also makes sense to have a technician in a meeting room in the following situations:

General Sessions. An on-site technician can prevent and/or resolve problems quickly, which can save your organization time as well as embarrassment. If only a podium microphone, lavalier microphone, or overhead projector's being used, however, it's probably not necessary to hire a technician for the event.

Important Video/Computer Presentations. For important presentations involving video playback or multiple computers, you should definitely consider hiring a technician. Many speakers, after all, struggle to locate the "play" button on a VCR or adjust volume levels. A technician can cue the video for the speaker's signal to play the tape and adjust volume levels and light levels during the presentation. When multiple computers are used in a session, a technician can swiftly switch from one computer to another with little or no delay.

35mm Xenon Projector. This particular projector is usually used for important slide presentations, particularly for medical meetings. It can be intimidating to speakers, however, so it's always a good idea to hire a technician to operate it. In addition, bulbs on Xenon projectors are very difficult to change should they blow during a session.

Multiple Pieces of Equipment. A technician can be very helpful to speakers when multiple pieces of equipment are being used during a meeting. It's not uncommon, for example, for a 35mm projector, video playback, overhead projector, and computer projection to be used in a single session with multiple speakers. A technician can assist each speaker with the start of the presentation while adjusting light levels to help audience members see the screen.

Multiple Microphones. If more than four microphones are being used, especially wireless microphones, it's wise to have a technician in the room to adjust volume levels so that each speaker can be heard without feedback problems.

Lastly, ask your AV supplier to check with all speakers before their sessions regarding the operation of the equipment. Making sure that they know how to use their projectors and showing them the location of the light switches and how to adjust them, for example, can make for smoother presentations.

— *Ken Sien*

When to Order a Microphone

There are no specific rules on when a microphone is needed, but there are some general guidelines:

- If there are fewer than 60 people in the room, a microphone isn't necessary unless the presenter is soft-spoken or the ceiling height is 15 feet or more. If a speaker is presenting a multi-day seminar, however, you may want to order a mic to preserve his or her voice. If the session is being audiotaped, a mic is definitely required.
- When attendance is greater than 60 to 75, a microphone is recommended. Even though some speakers feel they can project sufficiently to a group of 100, it may be difficult for people in the back of the room to hear over background noises such as coughing, throat clearing, or paper shuffling.
- Standing microphones for audience questions aren't necessary for sessions of less than 100 people. Many attendees already feel uncomfortable approaching a microphone and most likely won't use it for small meetings.
- For large groups where audience participation is part of the program, you'll need audience microphones and, of course, a mixer so that the volume on the different mics can be controlled.

Audio Mixers

Audio mixers are used to connect multiple pieces of sound equipment, such as microphones, cassette players, compact disc players, VCRs, and computers, to the public address (PA) system, and allow control over the volume level of each piece of equipment.

While it varies from AV company to AV company and facility to facility, an audio mixer is generally needed when:

- Four or more microphones are required.
- A cassette player, CD player, VCR, or computer sound is connected to a PA system.

The most commonly used audio mixer is a four-channel model, meaning you can connect four audio devices (such as one podium mic, one lavalier mic, one standing mic, and a cassette player) to the PA system. If more inputs are needed, additional four-channel mixer(s) can be added or an audio mixer with more inputs can be used.

External PA Systems

Most meeting rooms in hotels and convention centers have a built-in PA system, except for small rooms of less than 1,000 square feet. But there are times when you'll want to use an external PA system, which involves renting speakers, an amplifier, a mixer, and microphone(s). External PA systems are typically used for general sessions, awards banquets, or special events utilizing elaborate AV presentations or audio tracks that are in stereo or rich in sound.

Depending on the size of the group and the need for quality sound, it's easy to spend up to several thousand dollars a day on an external PA system. When using a built-in PA system, on the other hand, you only need to pay for the mic and perhaps a mixer.

Making the right AV decisions will come with experience. Meanwhile, make every effort to locate an AV company that you can trust and that will give you the guidance you need.

Ken Sien is an account executive at Conferon, Inc. in Twinsburg, Ohio.

Lighting Problems Solved

Naturally, it's always beneficial to make the image on the projection screen as bright as possible. This objective can be achieved by lowering the lights in the meeting room, but in doing so there may not be enough light for attendees to take notes or read handouts.

A much better alternative is to turn off the lights above the screen, which will greatly enhance the image. This may require contacting another department within the facility, however, and waiting 15 to 20 minutes. The solution? Ask your AV company or convention services manager to have the lights turned off above the screens when the meeting rooms and AV are being set up.

Additional lighting considerations come into play when convening in an exhibit hall. Many exhibit halls (and some meeting rooms) only feature mercury vapor lighting. Mercury vapor lights are either completely *on* or *off*; the light level cannot be adjusted. What's even more important to keep in mind is that once mercury vapor lights are turned off, it takes about five to 10 minutes for them to come back to full illumination. In addition, projection in a room with this type of lighting yields a screen image that's not easily viewed. So be on the lookout for mercury vapor lights when conducting your site inspections.

— Ken Sein

Additional AV Tips

- To avoid feedback you can simply turn down the volume of the mic, use an audio mixer, or turn off any PA speakers above the area where the main microphones are used.
- Find out if the meeting facility has any audio-visual policies or restrictions, such as patch fees (a charge from the facility if you use the in-house sound system for your mics) or union requirements.
- If you're considering booking a non-carpeted room in which microphones will be used, be sure to test the acoustics with a mic during your site inspection.
- When ordering flipcharts (average price: $25), remember that you are actually renting the hardback easel (average price: $5) ... but you are buying the flipchart pad (average price: $20). Depending on how frequently it's used, one flipchart pad may last a week.
- If you order a flipchart for four days, you may be charged $25 a day for four days, totaling $100. But the actual charge should be $40 (hardback easel at $5 x 4 days = $20, plus a one-time charge of $20 for the pad), resulting in a savings of $60.
- If you'll be using draping for rear projection, request that the AV company place heavy weight on the bases that hold up the pipe and drape in the air. (Don't assume this will automatically be done.) When drape is elevated 12 to 16 feet, it becomes top-heavy and unstable.
- Request that back-up equipment be available on site (at no charge).
- Leave 35mm projector bulbs on except during long breaks. In most cases, the only time a bulb blows is when it is turned on.
- Negotiate to have a technician outside breakout rooms to stand by for problems.
- Trying to stay within budget is a concern for every organization, but sometimes selecting the least expensive piece of AV equipment is not always the best decision.

— Ken Sien

Selecting the Right Screen

In contrast to all the changes in the audio-visual industry in recent years, there have been only a few changes to screens since the early 1900s. Still, screens remain an important item when projecting information to audiences. While there is no such thing as a "state-of-the-art" screen, ordering the right size and type of screen is not always easy. In this section, we will discuss the types and formats of screens available, how to determine the correct size, and the proper placement of the screen in the meeting room.

Screen Types

There are a few types of screens available, though the most common are tripods and fastfolds. Other types include "existing screens," which are built into meeting rooms, and cradle or saddle screens, which Conferon doesn't recommend and are rarely used today. Common screen types and sizes are usually listed on an AV company's price list, but most AV companies should have access to uncommon types and sizes as well.

All of these screens serve the same purpose of projecting an image, but there are advantages and disadvantages to each type. Your AV budget and appearance preference can help you determine which type to order. Following are the advantages and disadvantages of each type of screen:

Screen Type	Advantage	Disadvantage
Tripod	Less expensive Anti-keystone device available in sizes less than 8' Fast to install	Largest size is 8' Not attractive in appearance Full dress kit not available
Fastfold	Appearance is excellent Sizes can be very large Rear projection available Dress kits are available to improve appearance	More expensive No anti-keystoning device available More labor intensive
Cradle/Saddle	Sizes can be fairly large Less expensive Somewhat easy to install	Appearance is poor No good way to control screen image height Dress kit not available
Existing (Built In's)	Usually complimentary Size can be fairly large	Screen can't be moved Meeting room must be set around screen

Tripod screens are a great choice for overhead projectors due to the anti-keystone device. Keystoning occurs when the distance from the projector lens is greater to the top of the screen than to the bottom. The resulting image looks like a "keystone" and is impossible to focus on both the top and bottom at the same time. The anti-keystone device on a tripod screen corrects the problem, allowing the overhead image to focus correctly. Unfortunately, the keystone device is only available on tripod screens that are less than eight feet.

If you order tripod screens, request that the AV company skirt the bottom of each screen. Not every company does this, but when it is done, it greatly improves the appearance of the screen.

A full dress kit, available only for fastfolds, gives the screen a movie theater look by placing drapery around all four edges. While this increases your costs, it brings a more professional look to the AV presentation. Dress kits are most commonly used in general or plenary sessions or anywhere a "finished" look is important. They add additional weight to the top of the screen, but with additional support brackets (which you should request), you should encounter no problems.

If you are looking for a more professional AV presentation, and have adequate meeting space and a larger AV budget, you have the option of using rear projection. Rear projection, sometimes referred to as RP, places all projectors behind the screen. This method is more expensive because it requires additional draping along the sides of the screen and possibly behind the stage. It's also only available with fastfold screens.

Screen Formats

There are two primary screen formats — square and rectangle. Examples of square screens include: 7'x7', 10'x10', and 12'x12'. Rectangular screens are available in a variety of sizes including 7'x10', 9'x12', and 10'x14'. (Note: The first number listed is the screen's image height; the second number listed is the screen's image width.)

Screens are designed to match the type of projector you are using. For example, a 35mm projector has a 2 by 3 image ratio and video/computer projectors have a 3 by 4 image ratio. Be sure to order a screen whose size matches the image ratio of your projector.

The format you choose will depend on the projection equipment used. When ordering an overhead projector or a

35mm slide projector with both horizontal and vertical slide images, a square screen is likely necessary. One exception to *not* ordering a square screen is when there will be both overhead and video/computer projection on the same screen, but the overhead is used sparingly.

Rectangular screens that match the image ratio of your projector are recommended for projecting video, computer, and horizontal 35mm images because they allow you to project a larger image to the audience as it relates to the ceiling height and to fill the screen completely.

Example: Let's say you are staging a computer presentation for 400 people in a room with a 17-foot ceiling. If you use the formula below to determine the maximum height for a square screen, the largest size would be 12'x12'. (Your actual image would be 9'x12'.) If you use the same formula for a rectangular screen, you discover that you're able to project a 12'x16' image (3 by 4 image ratio). The rectangular screen gives you a 33 percent larger image than the square screen.

If the scenario is such that your overhead projector is important, but you still need to present material via videotape or computer, the image should be projected as high as possible on the square-formatted screen.

When it comes to ordering the correct screen size, there is one important rule to remember: In almost every single case, there is no such thing as a screen that is too large.

Maximum Screen Size

When it comes to ordering the correct screen size, there is one important rule to remember: *In almost every single case, there is no such thing as a screen that is too large.* If an attendee or speaker complains about the screen size in a session, it will most likely be because it is too small, making the information difficult to read. You obviously won't need to order a 12-foot screen for your breakout meeting for 100 people, but it is better than ordering a five-foot screen.

When determining proper screen size, it is essential to know the ceiling height in every meeting room where a screen will be needed. You should also be aware of any obstructions such as chandeliers or coves. The meeting room specifications may say the ceiling height is 18 feet, for example, but there could be a chandelier that hangs down three feet, making the actual clear ceiling height 15 feet. When inspecting a facility, take notes about these items since they could trigger changes in your room setups down the road.

Once you know the actual ceiling height in all of the rooms, use the following two general formulas to determine the maximum screen sizes:

- For meetings of *less* than 200 people: Subtract 4' from the clear ceiling height to determine the maximum size of your screen.
- For meetings of *more* than 200 people: Subtract 5' from the clear ceiling height to determine the maximum size of your screen.

Example: If you're having a meeting for 300 people in a room with an actual clear height of 17 feet, you would subtract five feet from that figure (based on the formulas above) and come up with a maximum screen height of 12 feet. (Note: If the ceiling were 35 feet high, you would not order a 30-foot-high screen. Rather, you would order a smaller screen that meets your projection goals.)

For meetings of more than 200 people, you will notice that we subtract an additional foot. We do this because the farther back you sit, the higher the bottom of the screen must be in order for attendees to see it without obstructions. For a more precise determination of the distance that the bottom of a screen must be from the floor, Conferon recommends that for every 15 feet of seating, the screen should be raised an additional four inches in order to create the optimal view for attendees, keeping in mind that the minimum distance from the bottom of any screen to the floor is four feet.

These formulas also can be used in reverse to determine the minimum ceiling height to accommodate your program if you know the screen size you want:

- For meetings of *less* than 200 people: Add 4' to the desired screen height.
- For meetings of *more* than 200 people: Add 5' to the desired screen height.

Example: If you know you need a 10-foot screen for 250 people, you would add five feet to that figure (based on the formulas above) and come up with a minimum ceiling height of 15 feet. If you plan on using a drape kit on your screen, add one more foot and seek out a meeting room with a ceiling height of at least 16 feet.

Minimum Screen Size

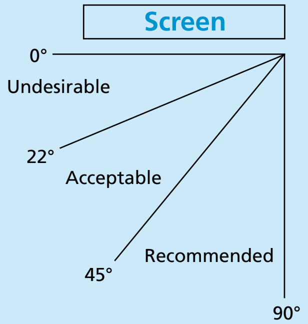
We have talked about calculating the maximum screen size, but there are situations where it is necessary to calculate the *minimum* screen size in order to ensure that everyone can read what is on the screen. To do this, we use the

Screen Placement

There are three options for placement of a screen within your stage set — center stage, to one side of center stage, or in a corner. When deciding on the placement, ask yourself the following question: "What is more important in the presentation, the speaker or the information on the screen?" Generally, the most important element should be positioned in the middle of the room since it is the focus of attention.

If the speaker is conducting software training and using computer projection, for example, the screen should be centered and the speaker should be off to the side. If the presenter is a motivational speaker who uses some AV support, *he* or *she* should be in the center of the room and the screen should be to the side of the speaker. Placing a screen in a corner is rarely done except when trying to save space for a rear-screen presentation.

In addition, you need to be aware of the angle at which attendees will be in relationship to the screen. The most desirable angle is between 45° and 90° degrees, although 22° to 45° degrees is acceptable. Any angle less than 22° is not recommended because the angle is too acute to provide easy reading of the projected material. At Conferon, we prefer a minimum angle to the screen of no less than 30°.



Here are some other helpful tips regarding screen placement:

- Do not block fire exits.
- Be sure that lighted exit signs do not shine through the rear of screen.
- The darker the area above the screen, the brighter the projected image will be. So ask the AV company or meeting facility to turn off lights above the screen either by shutting off circuit breakers or unscrewing those specific light bulbs.
- Since most people are right handed, place the screen so that the speaker can refer to his presentation material with his right hand.
- All projectors *must* be positioned at a 90° angle to the *center* of the screen.

— Ken Sien

Conferon "2 x 10" formula. The 10 in this formula helps to determine the minimum screen size when a room is large but has a low ceiling. You can use the 10 two different ways:

1. *If you know the length of the room*, divide the length by 10 to calculate the minimum screen image size for that room. Example: If a meeting room is 120 feet long, the screen image should be no smaller than 12 feet.

2. *If you know the screen height*, multiply the screen height by 10 to determine the maximum distance from the screen that attendees can sit and still be able to read the projected material. Example: For an eight-foot screen, seating should be no farther than 80 feet away.

These formulas also can be used to find out whether a challenge exists with a particular meeting room. Example: The room is 40' x 80' with a ceiling height of 11 feet. Since the length of the room is 80 feet (assuming the screen is set on the short wall of 40 feet), the minimum screen size is eight feet in height (80' length ÷ 10' formula = 8' screen). Since the bottom of the screen must be at least four feet from the floor, a 12-foot ceiling is required if seating were to be 80 feet from the front of the room. In this situation, a seven-foot screen is the maximum you could use and people should not be seated farther than 70 feet away.

Distance to First Row of Chairs

The "2" in the "2 x 10" formula is used to determine the recommended distance from the screen to the first row of seating. If a delegate is seated the proper distance from the screen, she will be able to see the entire screen with one glance. If she is seated too close to the screen, however, her eyes will have to dart back and forth in order to see the entire image.

The distance from the screen to the first row of seating is calculated by doubling the image screen height. Example: For a 12' x 12' screen, the first row of seating should be 24 feet from the screen.

Following these guidelines will enable attendees to comfortably view projected information and help the speaker achieve the objectives of the meeting.

— Ken Sien

How to Handle Traffic Flow

By Bruce Harris, CMP

Orchestrating the smooth and orderly movement of attendees between venues is one of the most overlooked and underrated tools in the meeting manager's toolbox — one that certainly separates the professional from the amateur meeting planner. There are a number of situations in which traffic or flow planning is absolutely essential, including directing people into meeting rooms, coffee breaks, cocktail receptions, and banquet functions. On the following pages you will find time-tested techniques and helpful hints on handling all of these scenarios and more.

Meeting Rooms

If any attendee is standing in the back of the room without a seat nearby, then you have not done your job, which is to have everyone seated in a prompt, efficient, and courteous manner. To accomplish this goal, use the following strategies:

- Load the front of the room first, setting aside seats for VIPs and speakers.
- If there are side doors, open the front-most door first and direct delegates to the front seats.
- To prevent people from going down the aisle, stand in the middle of the aisle and point to where you would like them to go. Don't argue with insistent guests, however, if they choose to move down the aisle.
- As the front fills, close the front-most door and open the next door. Continue this procedure until all but the back of the room is filled.
- Tape or ribbon off the seats farthest from the speaker and nearest to the back entrance door or use reserved signs to maintain the integrity of this area — approximately one-tenth of the chairs in the room.
- Finally, once the other seats are taken or the meeting has begun, remove all tape, ribbons, and signs and save the rear-most seats for late arrivals. Be sure to place meeting room signage by the back door once the session has started.

For large groups, station one person in front of the doors that are to remain closed and one person at the entrance that is to be used first, which will automatically direct traffic flow to the desired door. Staff members stationed inside the room decide when to open the next door and communicate that decision via walkie-talkie to staff members stationed outside the room. When the next door is opened, the coordinator steps into the flow and directs the delegates into the new door opening. Inside, staff members make their way to the new door and continue seating people. Walkie-talkies and many coordinators or assistants are vital for large group movements.

Coffee Breaks

- Never have open stations near the doors of a meeting room. If it is unavoidable due to space limitations, keep those stations closed and direct delegates to the farthest stations first.

- When setting up the stations, always consider the direction people are coming from and position the stations so that movement is *away* from the meeting rooms.
- Organize the stations so that attendees do not stop moving until *after* they get their coffee or hot water. Place tea bags, sugar, and cream just downstream from coffee or hot water so that those needing coffee only can move through the line unimpeded. Place regular coffee first, decaffeinated second, and hot water last.
- Place sodas and snacks (if applicable) on *separate tables*. Arrange items in the correct order — glasses, then ice, then soda.
- If it is necessary to have a fast break and labor costs are not a problem, coffee can be poured by servers. Once again, keep tea bags, sugar, and cream downstream.
- Make sure that the end of the stream has an outlet — do not run the end of the station into a wall, escalator, or dead end. Keep stations away from restrooms.
- When going from a general session to breakout sessions or vice versa, always try to locate the break in front of the next chronological destination. If you go into breakouts that are remote from the general session foyer, for example, set up the coffee break in the breakout area.
- In a situation where remote breakouts and the general session are both being used, you could have a problem when attendees going to the remote breakouts attack the coffee station reserved for the general session breakout. To solve this problem, have the speaker excuse the breakout session attendees first and keep the general session foyer stations closed until these people pass through. Then, as soon as the first group has exited the room, send the second group (those returning to the general session) to the break just outside the room.

Cocktail Parties

Meeting planners must be proactive to ensure that their events have the proper space and design. Obviously, the type of cocktail party as well as the number of hors d'oeuvre stations, entertainment options, and props greatly affect the layout design and flow pattern of the room. The following guidelines apply to *all* types of cocktail receptions.

- Do *not* position bars near doors.
- Food stations should not overlap or flow into bars.
- Avoid high-density bar areas — four or more bars back to back is not a good idea.
- Consider beer and wine bars at large events and outdoor events.
- Place seating away from high-traffic areas and group the seating together. Don't spread it out so that traffic is forced around those seated.
- Always create large spaces for traffic to move between areas of the function.
- For large groups, move guests to the back of the room first by not opening bars and food stations closest to the entrance until after the majority of the attendees have entered.

Moving People to Dinner

To buffet dinners — Goal: No long lines

- Only move as many people as necessary from the cocktail party to keep the buffet lines full. "Bleed" attendees away from the reception by telling *only* those closest to the exit or dinner area that the buffet is open. (They will likely thank you and move quickly.) When the lines get shorter, repeat this procedure with the next group closest to the exit.
- Do not close all the bars until the buffet line is finished. Close bars nearest the buffet first.
- Always discuss your plan with the hotel staff to ensure that *you* control the flow.
- Never flash lights or do anything to encourage all the guests to leave the reception at the same time.

To sit-down dinners —
Goal: Seat quickly so food service can start.
There are several techniques that work.

- Close all bars at the same time. (Always do a "last call" before using this technique.) When a bar is closed, a tablecloth goes over the bar and the bartender steps to the side.
- Do a last call, then signal delegates that dinner is served by flashing lights or by playing exit music.
- In each scenario, encourage people farthest from the exit doors to leave the event first in order to have their choice of seats. As they pass through the party, others will notice the movement and will also make their way toward the dining room.
- When using these techniques, always be polite, not dictatorial. Keep in mind that courtesy and warmth work wonders.

Seating People at Food Functions

Seating people at food functions is critical, especially for larger groups. Keep these three rules in mind when seating groups of several hundred or more in unassigned seating:

1. Establish larger aisles to more easily move the masses through the room. The "filter through" method (no cross

aisles) is a guaranteed disaster for 500 or more guests.

2. Line up banquet staff in the aisles to direct early arrivals to the far reaches of the room. If early arrivals sit at tables closest to the entrance, they block the passageways needed to move attendees to the back. (Note: Reserved signs on tables nearest the door force people to the rear. Remove them as the room fills.)

3. Use as many entrances as possible, combined with multiple corridors if possible.

Reserved Seating Events

Reserved seating events require a major use of manpower and signage for groups of 800 or more. The first challenge is to have people enter the correct door, which minimizes wandering around the room in search of the correct table numbers.

To achieve this objective, follow these guidelines:

- Place large reproductions of the room layout, complete with table numbers, at eye level in the reception area.
- Hang a sign above each door to the ballroom displaying the table numbers that can be located by entering through that particular door.
- Position staff members outside each door with a list of seating assignments.
- You also can color code each area of the room (with balloons, tablecloths, or banners) and affix a corresponding color sticker to each attendee's name badge. This tactic will direct them to the right area. Numbers are then necessary to help them find the right table.

Bruce Harris is the founder and president of Conferon, Inc. in Twinsburg, Ohio.

Effective Crowd Control

The key to crowd control is to persuade people to give you their authority in an area where you need control, and there are various ways to achieve this goal.

One of the most effective strategies is to become a symbol of authority. If you are in a restaurant, for example, and a person dressed as a maitre d', holding menus in his hand, instructs you to follow him, would you do so? Most likely you would. To a great extent, this example applies to a banquet or reception where waiters dressed in tuxedos are assumed to be in the know. Other symbols of authority are megaphones, uniforms and/or costumes of distinction, people using hand signals, and people giving directions while holding a flashlight in one hand.

In the meetings business, a walkie-talkie is a symbol of authority. When directing traffic, there are three simple tips to keep in mind:

1. Put the walkie-talkie in an outstretched hand.
2. Speak with great authority.
3. Make decisive hand movements.

If you use these techniques, you will become a symbol of authority. But this does not mean you will be successful at crowd control 100 percent of the time. You also need to *perfect* your technique.

- Survey the area in advance and use as many physical barriers as possible in areas where you do not want people to go, such as entrance doors that you don't want used or aisles that you want people to avoid.
- Use symbols of authority, including something as simple as signs and orange cones (for outdoor events).
- Dress in a fashion that separates you from those you are directing. Many groups provide staff members with matching shirts. If outdoors, use the colors that most safety forces use (i.e., yellow or orange).
- Use uniformed people to block exits or to direct people to alternate routes.
- Hold a walkie-talkie and keep it up high; wave it when you use hand motions.
- Get the first delegates going in the desired direction. The rest will always follow as long as the group is moving steadily.
- Speak loudly. Sound official. Be decisive. Leaders lead … they do not ask or plead. Yet they should always be friendly and courteous.
- If you need to change the direction of the flow (an extremely difficult task), you must physically become a barrier — outstretched arms, megaphone, walkie-talkie, loud and clear voice, simple directions. *But never touch anyone.* If some guests manage to get by you, ignore them and focus on the masses.
- Enlist the help of the crowd itself, reading their names off their badges: "Bill, could you help by moving in that direction? Please head those people over there." People generally like to cooperate when they hear their name.
- Directions such as "This area is closed" or "Open buses this way" also work.
- For outdoor crowd control, elevate yourself above the crowd if at all possible.

Remember, the key to crowd control is to get the attendees to voluntarily transfer their authority to you. By using these tools and strategies you will be successful in overcoming the independent mind that crowds often have.

— *Bruce Harris*

Negotiating F&B

By Jerry Murphy, CMP

Gone are the days when food and beverage negotiations were done over the phone with your catering manager, trying to get a dollar off a gallon of coffee. These days, with meeting planners under pressure to submit realistic budgets and hotels looking at food and beverage as a significant revenue center, everyone is taking food and beverage expenses very seriously.

The first step in food and beverage negotiations, just as in any other type of negotiation, is to gather all of your facts and figures. Using post-convention reports, calculate exactly how much your meeting is worth to the hotel in terms of food and beverage revenue. Don't forget to include "hidden" revenues from affiliated groups, hospitality suites, individual room service, exhibit floor concessions, and on-site restaurants and lounges.

Next, draft a list of your priorities. Although everything is technically negotiable, it makes sense to determine what you absolutely must have and what you can live without because chances are you won't get everything that you ask for. So ask yourself how imperative it is to get filet mignon at a particular price or to have themed coffee breaks every day or to serve a different wine with each course at your final-night banquet.

The following guidelines address a number of important issues, including price, complimentary items, guarantees and overset, and service. Keep in mind that the time to begin food and beverage negotiations is at the contract stage; waiting until six months or a year out will leave you with little to no bargaining leverage.

Price

If you're booking five years out, you can't expect to negotiate menu prices at the time the contract is signed. But you can expect to establish cost parameters before signing on the dotted line. You may, for example, be successful in negotiating a fixed percentage off the printed menu prices in effect six months before the meeting date. Another technique is to negotiate to have the previous year's prices apply to your meeting. Or you could attach the current banquet menus to the contract and negotiate that the prices won't increase by more than a certain percentage each year (perhaps 5 percent or the Consumer Price Index, whichever is smaller).

Catering managers usually don't like to establish firm menu prices until six months out, but you may be able to negotiate them as much as 12 months out by agreeing on a percentage ceiling above the current prices. If it turns out that prices drop in the interim, you can cover yourself by stipulating in the contract that you will pay whichever is less — current costs or the ceiling price you established.

If the menu prices don't meet your budget, you can usually be more successful by working with your catering manager or the chef to design menus that are in your price range. You may even be able to choose the same menu as another in-house group and thereby save the hotel time and money by not having to create an entirely different preparation. (If you do this, be sure to schedule your dinner to start just before the other group's dinner so that your function won't be affected if the kitchen runs out of food.)

Complimentary Items

While the days of complimentary receptions are pretty much over (unless you offer great value during the off season), you still may be able to negotiate a relatively low-cost comp or two. If your group is hosting a large or lavish dinner, for example, ask the hotel to provide complimentary hors d'oeuvres, a glass of wine, a dessert, or perhaps an upgrade of one of your courses.

Other comps to consider negotiating include: a continental breakfast for your board meeting; a reception or dinner for the executive board; decorative items such as props, votive candles, centerpieces, ice carvings, or themed backdrops; one complimentary meal for every 50 to 75 covers; or a credit to your master account based on a fixed percentage of your total food and beverage revenue.

Take a chance and ask for something even if you don't think you're going to get it. Remember, if you don't ask you won't receive.

Guarantees and Overset

Many hotels have increased their guarantees from 48 hours to 72 hours, meaning that you need to give the catering manager a final head count for all of your food and beverage functions three days before they're scheduled to take place. Depending on the individual property and the complexity of your menus, however, you still may be able to negotiate a 48-hour guarantee. If you're ordering standard food and beverage items that are offered in the hotel restaurants, for example, the property may agree to a 48-hour guarantee.

The majority of hotels also have decreased overset from 10 percent to 5 percent, meaning the property will set up seating for 5 percent more than the guaranteed number of guests at any given food and beverage function. For groups of more than 1,000, however, many hotels cap the number of extra seats at 50.

Depending on the menu and style of service, you may be able to negotiate a higher overset percentage. You may be able to negotiate 10 percent on a standard buffet or continental breakfast, for example, but you probably won't be able to make that kind of a deal for a custom-designed menu at a formal sit-down dinner.

It's also important to note that the term "overset" typically refers to the setup of extra tables and chairs. It doesn't necessarily mean that the hotel will be prepared to serve food to the additional people who might show up. So unless you specify in the contract (and remind the catering manager) that the hotel will not only set the extra places but also will be prepared to serve, some of your guests might be left waiting for their meals … or find themselves eating a meal that's different than everyone else's.

Service Ratios

Payroll costs can account for as much as one-third or more of a meal function's total price. Consequently, some hotels are reducing the number of servers at group events. So be sure to negotiate service ratios and spell them out in your contract. For a sit-down or plated meal, there should be at least one waiter for every 25 guests at breakfast and one for every 20 at lunch and dinner. For a buffet meal, the preferred ratio is one-to-40 for breakfast and one-to-30 for lunch and dinner. It's also important to specify that there will be no extra labor or service charges for these ratios.

If the menu is higher priced or has many courses, try hard to negotiate a service ratio of one-per-16 or one-per-15. When wine is being served, you must have more servers; otherwise food service will be slow when wine is being served, and wine service will be slow when food is being served. Once again, a one-per-15 or one-per-16 ratio will work. But don't pay extra for these ratios since the hotel shouldn't decrease the quality of service at your event when you spend more by adding wine or extra courses.

Many properties now apply a flat service charge to meal functions under a certain size (typically 25 people). These types of charges can add up, especially if you stage many smaller events throughout the year. Whether your meeting is large or small, however, it always makes sense to ask for the service charges, labor charges, and/or bartenders fees to be waived altogether … or to be based on the total dollar amount spent on the function. (For large hosted bars, don't ever pay bartender fees.)

Finally, be sure all of the specifics that you negotiate with the catering manager are spelled out in your contract. Remember, if you don't get it in writing you might not get it at all.

Jerry Murphy is an account planner at Conferon, Inc. in Chicago. Additional information for this article was obtained from Hotel Catering: A Handbook for Sales and Operations*, co-authored by Patti Shock.*

Menu Planning 101

By Karen Watson, CMP

It looks so easy in *Bon Appétit* — though not necessarily in *Martha Stewart Living* — but there are a myriad of variables to think about before you can begin planning banquet menus. There's the obvious factor of budget, since this may eliminate any number of items from the menus as options, but there are other important considerations as well.

Attendee Profile

Within a corporation, you might plan a national meeting for store managers from around the country, including smaller cities and rural areas, or you might plan a team-building program for the northeast sales force. Within an association, you might organize an event for a group of student volunteers or for the board of directors. Even though everyone is from the same company or works in the same industry, there are differences that determine what types of menus may or may not be appropriate.

Younger attendees may eat healthier, but they're also still more likely to enjoy junk food or more casual fare. Older delegates may not want anything too exotic, spicy, or heavy. Some women might not mind being served chicken or fish or a salad entree, but some men might not be satisfied unless there's a piece of beef on their plate. Other factors that can help you predict the types of foods that may be acceptable to a particular group include: occupation, socioeconomic status, ethnic background, and geographic area.

Scheduling

Take into account what your delegates will be doing immediately before and after the meal. If they're coming from a function at which heavy, filling hors d'oeuvres were served, the meal should be lighter. If they're coming from a liquor-only reception, the meal should be heavier.

Ease of Production

Certain delicate items, such as lobsters and soufflés, can't be produced and served in large quantities without their quality being sacrificed. Chicken and beef, on the other hand, are banquet staples for good reason. They're easy to prepare, they can be cooked a variety of ways, and they're palatable to most people. Beef also has the advantage of being consistently available in a wide range of cuts.

Labor Costs

Since payroll costs can account for as much as one-third of a meal function's total price, it makes sense to steer clear of items that require a lot of time and/or many pairs of hands to prepare. For example, you may not want to order anything that's stuffed, wrapped in puff pastry, or baked in parchment. Elaborate vegetable garnishes and sauces painted on plates fall into the same category.

Product Shelf Life

Since food functions don't always run on time, it makes sense to order items that will hold up well if service is delayed. Foods that will remain moist and flavorful despite service delays include chicken, filet mignon, medallions of beef, roasted potatoes, rice, green beans, and steamed carrots. Items that won't hold up as well include Eggs Benedict, any food served en croute, and carved beef items.

Traffic Flow

Some foods hold up well but can cause major traffic flow headaches. Deli buffets for large groups, for example, are notorious for becoming jammed up as attendees attempt to create the perfect sandwich. An alternative is to serve pre-made sandwiches cut in half so that people can still have a choice, but the lines move faster. Remember that the more food choices offered on a buffet, the slower the line will move.

Repetition

When planning menus for a multi-day meeting, be sure to pay attention to what is being served at other events held during your convention such as spouse tours, exhibitor-sponsored functions, and hospitality suites. You wouldn't want your guests to have cheesecake at an exhibitor-sponsored function, again on a spouse tour, and then again at the final-night dinner. Similarly, it's important to avoid repetition within any given meal… as in sautéed carrots, carrot and raisin salad, and carrot cake.

Sometimes, however, repetition can be good. If you have one memorable event each year — the gala awards dinner, for example — attendees may expect the same (filet mignon). Then again, they may want something different each year (chocolate dessert one year, crème brûlée the next). That's why it's so critical to know your group.

Political Sensitivities

While it's fairly obvious that you wouldn't serve Pepsi at a Coca-Cola convention, the licensing agreements for companies like Burger King require that certain drink products be served at their events. Similarly, grapes should never be served to union groups because of union-backed boycotts. It's your responsibility as the meeting planner to find out about all of the subsidiaries, licensing issues, and political sensitivities of your organization and plan accordingly.

Regional/House Specialties

More often than not, attendees appreciate the opportunity to sample some of the signature dishes of the destination. That might mean gumbo in New Orleans, deep-dish pizza in Chicago, or cheese steaks in Philadelphia. Individual properties also may have a standout specialty of the house that you wouldn't want to miss. The sticky buns served at Marriott's Camelback Inn in Scottsdale, for example, are always the first item to disappear from a continental breakfast buffet — no matter how health conscious a group is.

Menu Balance

The appetite is stimulated by all of the senses, so it's important to try to balance flavors (sweet, tart, salty, sour, bland), colors (aim for contrast), textures (crispy, chewy, soft, firm), shapes and sizes (flat, round, long, short, shredded, chopped), temperatures (hot soup, cold salad, salad entrée, warm dessert) and preparation methods (sautéed, grilled, broiled, roasted, steamed).

Variety

There are many easy ways to vary meals so that delegates don't have the same experience over and over during the course of the convention.

Style of service. Think beyond the traditional American-style plated meal. Other options include French service, Russian service, buffet, family-style, cafeteria-style, action stations, preset courses, box lunches, and butler-passed hors d'oeuvres.

Entrée selection. Consider dual entrées (beef and shrimp), salad entrées (chicken Caesar), sandwiches, and wraps in addition to the usual beef, chicken, fish, and pasta.

Vegetables and starches. Potatoes can be fried, baked, boiled, roasted, mashed, or twice-baked. Choices for rice include white, brown, wild, long-grain, pilaf, risotto, jasmine, and basmati. Pasta comes in many shapes and sizes — from orzo to penne to fettuccini. Polenta is yet another option. As far as vegetables are concerned, find out what the chef's selection is and make sure she doesn't repeat it during your stay.

Beverages. In addition to the standard coffee, tea and soft drinks, you can serve lemonade, iced tea, or bottled water. At receptions, think about drinks with local flair such as margaritas, microbrews, mai tais, and hurricanes.

Coffee breaks and continental breakfasts. Each day, vary the breads (whole wheat, whole grain, sourdough, muffins, cornbread, sweet breads), juices (orange, grapefruit, apple, cranberry), and fruit (whole fruit, slices, cubes, kebabs). It's also a good idea to upgrade to a breakfast sandwich one day.

When it's time to sit down with the catering manager and actually plan the menus, start with your most important — and probably most expensive — events first, such as the opening reception, closing dinner, or awards luncheon. If you decide to do a Tex-Mex welcome reception, that eliminates Tex-Mex for lunch. If you want to do a four-course final dinner with a salmon entrée, that eliminates fish for lunch.

It's a balancing act — one that you'll hopefully find is relatively easy to master by following these guidelines.

Karen Watson is director of account planning at Conferon, Inc. in Austin, Texas. Additional information for this article was obtained from Hotel Catering: A Handbook for Sales and Operations, *co-authored by Patti Shock.*

Safe Bets

- American men prefer beef by a wide margin.
- American women prefer lighter items such as grilled fish or broiled chicken and a variety of salads.
- Salmon is the most popular fish, followed by swordfish, although Chilean sea bass is gaining.
- Shrimp is the most popular seafood entrée, followed by lobster.
- Italian is the most popular ethnic cuisine, followed by Mexican, although Asian is gaining.
- Broccoli is the favorite vegetable.
- Caesar salad is by far the most popular salad.
- Cheesecake is the most popular dessert.
- Shrimp is the most popular hors d'oeuvre.

** The above statements are generalities and may not apply to your particular group.*

Controlling Your Reception

Receptions can be among the most fun events to plan … and attend. But they're certainly not much fun — for you or your delegates — when the hors d'oeuvres disappear in 20 minutes. Regardless of whether you're planning an elaborate themed reception or a simple cocktail party, considering the following factors will help you determine how much food to order and how to maximize the quantity of food you can afford.

1. Your audience. The more accustomed people are to hors d'oeuvres, the fewer they're likely to consume. Doctors, lawyers, and bankers, for example, typically underconsume hors d'oeuvres because they attend receptions, banquets, and other elegant social events on a regular basis. So you can order less food and still have plenty left over.

Conversely, people who rarely attend cocktail parties, dinners, and other social functions tend to overconsume hors d'oeuvres. For such groups, proper planning is essential. Without appropriate guarantees, setups, and controls, even the most generous supply of hors d'oeuvres can be depleted in 20 minutes.

2. Method of service. When food is displayed on a buffet table so that guests can help themselves, they will likely eat much more than if the food was passed butler-style. Passing hors d'oeuvres also gives you the ability to control the pace of service. You can stagger service by sending out waiters with trays every 15 minutes, for example, instead of bringing all the food out at one time. And if you serve only one type of hors d'oeuvre per tray, people will usually limit themselves while waiting for a different type to be passed.

3. Buffet setup. The physical setup of buffets can make access to food easy or difficult, which can control, limit, or extend the length of time that your food lasts. (See accompanying diagrams.) With 360-degree access to food, guests may consume eight to 10 hors d'oeuvres each. With 180-degree access to food, however, the figure drops to six to eight pieces per person. Obviously, the more access, the greater the consumption.

4. Plate size. The size of the plates used on a buffet table also impacts consumption. Bread and butter plates make it difficult to pile on the food. (Granted, nothing is impossible and determined individuals can always find a way to recreate the Leaning Tower of Pisa on their plate.) Salad plates, the next size larger, are the type most commonly used for receptions. Dinner plates should be used only if the food items being served constitute dinner; anything else will look skimpy on such a big plate.

If your budget is extremely limited, you can eliminate plates entirely and use napkins only, which really makes it difficult for attendees to overeat. This strategy also can create a less-than-pleasant atmosphere, however, and guests may end up asking the waitstaff why there are no plates on the buffet. As a result, plates should only be eliminated in cases of very restricted funds and insufficient quantities of food.

5. Types of food. Receptions are like Sunday brunch in that many people like to try one of everything. So, for a 500-person reception, it makes more sense to order 500 pieces each of four different types of hors d'oeuvres than 250 pieces each of six different types. Offering larger quantities of fewer kinds of hors d'oeuvres will help you feed more guests and ultimately maximize your reception dollars. You can always supplement the menu with less expensive foods such as cheese and crackers, chips and dip, and fruits and vegetables.

6. Distractions. Consumption also drops when delegates are distracted by music, entertainment, dancing, or slide shows. If they're on the dance floor or entranced by the entertainment, they're less likely to concentrate on the food.

7. Tables and chairs. The availability of tables and chairs encourages people to sit and eat rather than mix and mingle. The result? Increased consumption. Chairs for 25 percent to 30 percent of attendees, placed in groups along the perimeter of the room, is usually sufficient.

8. Time of the event. If the reception is scheduled for 5 p.m. or 6 p.m., most people will not assume that it is intended to take the place of dinner. If it's scheduled for 7 p.m. or 8 p.m., however, most people will consider it to be dinner and consequently eat more.

9. Purpose of the event. When the purpose of the reception is to network (which means not providing much/any seating or too many distractions), consumption won't be high because eating is not the primary focus for attendees.

10. Location of the event. If the function is off site, everyone may not attend. And if transportation to an off-site event isn't provided, attendance drops even further. Therefore, you can reduce the number of hors d'oeuvres that you order. If the reception is held outside the meeting room, on the other hand, most delegates will attend.

Armed with this information, you should now feel confident that you can control your reception … instead of letting your reception control you.

— *Karen Watson*

How Much Should I Order?*

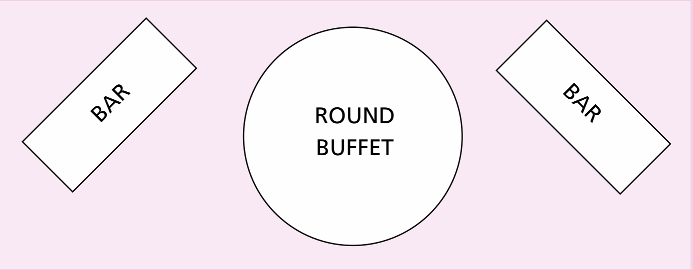
Dry snacks	1 ounce per person
Anchor foods (cheese, vegetables, fruits)	enough for 1/3 of attendees
Action stations (carving station, pasta station)	enough for 1/2 to 2/3 of attendees
Passed hors d'oeuvres	1 of each for all attendees
Dessert and coffee	enough for 1/3 to 1/2 of attendees

** when budget is an issue and the reception is replacing dinner*

Reception Buffet Setup Options

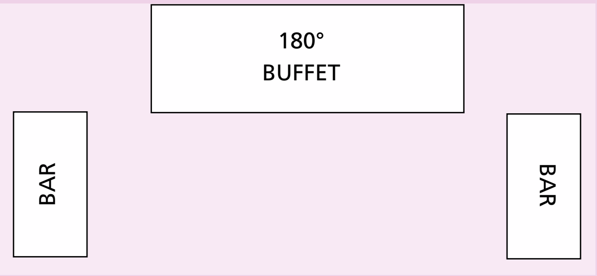
Round Buffet

If you're using this buffet for hors d'oeuvres, it has no beginning and no end for lines to form naturally, so it actually helps limit consumption. This type of buffet setup, used as more of an elaborate display with height (i.e., fruit, cheeses, or vegetables), is an attractive and elegant addition to a reception.



180˚ Buffet

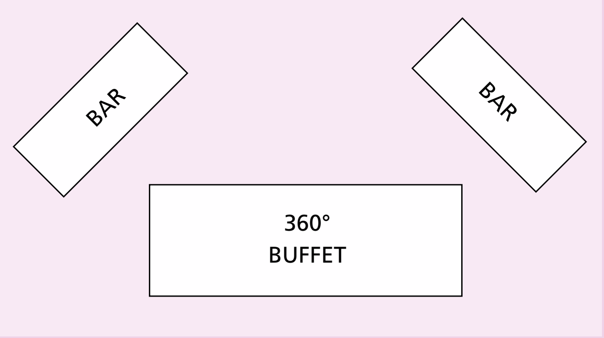
Buffets with only 180˚ access are useful in limiting or minimizing consumption. If a budget is limited or insufficient for comfortable/unlimited hors d'oeuvres, then this type of buffet setup can help the food last for a longer period due to reduced access.



Food access = 7-8 pieces per person with plates and 5 pieces per person without plates (napkins only).

360˚ Buffet

This buffet provides convenient and fairly easy access to food, thereby increasing consumption.



Food access = 8-10 pieces per person with plates and 6-8 pieces per person without plates (napkins only).

Planning Beverage Breaks

By Karla Bauman, CMP

It's time for that unnerving task of planning your coffee breaks. How much coffee should you order? How many stations do you need? How should the stations be arranged and managed? These are just a few of the questions that have popped into every meeting planner's mind regarding this necessary task.

Over the years, Conferon has developed a number of rules and procedures that have proven to be very successful in planning beverage breaks for new meetings with no consumption history as well as repeat meetings with a lot of history.

First, there are some assumptions:

- The breaks are a.m. and p.m.
- 90 percent of a.m. attendees drink hot beverages.
- 60 percent of p.m. attendees drink cold beverages.
- No other drinks are being offered during the breaks (i.e. juices or lemonade).
- Outdoor breaks increase cold drink consumption by 10 percent and decrease hot drink consumption by 10 percent.
- Coffee can be purchased by the gallon or half-gallon.
- There are 20 cups per gallon (15 cups per gallon for mugs).
- Brewed decaf (with signage) is always ordered.
- Soft drinks are always ordered on a consumption basis (meaning you only pay for what is consumed).
- The hotel will provide signage specifying that the break is for your group.

How Much Should You Order?

Conferon has created several formulas (see charts A-C) to help you determine the amounts of beverages needed depending on the demographics of your group and the time of day.

First, locate the percentage associated with the makeup of your group — all male, all female, or 50/50. Then multiply that percentage by your overall attendance. Divide the resulting number by 20 (six-ounce cups per gallon) to determine the number of gallons needed. Round each partial gallon up to the next highest half-gallon.

For example, for a morning break at a conference with 500 male attendees, the formula should be calculated as follows:

Regular = 60% x 500 = 300 cups = 15 gallons
Decaf = 20% x 500 = 100 cups = 5 gallons
Tea = 10% x 500 = 50 cups = 2.5 gallons
Soda = 25% x 500 = 125 sodas

One important variable that these formulas don't take into consideration is your group's individual consumption rate. For this reason, we recommend using them to calculate quantities for the first day's breaks and then adjusting the numbers as needed. As you collect consumption history from year to year, your initial order should become more and more accurate.

What should you do if the amount of beverages you need to order, according to these formulas, is beyond your budget? Keep in mind that almost all regular coffee drinkers will drink decaf if regular is gone, but very few decaf coffee drinkers will drink regular if decaf is gone. So if you need to reduce quantities, reduce the amount of regular coffee ordered. Another way to keep beverage breaks within your budget is to serve hot beverages in the morning and cold beverages in the afternoon, rather than have both options available in the morning and afternoon.

Food Note

Unless your beverage break budget is unusually generous, it makes sense to serve food items that can be ordered on a consumption basis such as whole fruit, packaged cookies, bags of peanuts, granola bars, and candy bars.

A reasonable rule is to order enough food items for 75 percent of the group on the first day and then adjust the numbers as needed for the remainder of the meeting. Also, don't forget to inventory the food items in and out.

What Goes Where?

Now that you know how to determine the quantities of beverages you need, the next step is to figure out how the beverage stations should be arranged. How many times have you walked up to a coffee station only to discover that the cups are at one end of the table, the coffee at the opposite end, and the milk and sugar in the middle? Such a setup forces anyone adding condiments to their coffee to backtrack and disrupt the flow of traffic.

To avoid these problems, and many others, follow these guidelines:

- Set up one beverage station for every 75 to 100 guests.
- Set up separate soft drink stations for groups of 100 or more.
- Spread out stations and place them away from meeting room doors so that bottlenecking is kept to a minimum.
- In large break areas, open stations farthest from the meeting room doors first.
- Arrange coffee stations for quick service, placing the coffee cups at the end of the table closest to the meeting room doors, followed by regular coffee, decaf, tea bags, hot water for tea, spoons, and a receptacle for used tea bags. (Be sure to identify each hot beverage with a sign.) Set condiments (cream, sugar, honey, and/or lemon) at the end of the station. For large groups, set up a separate condiment table approximately four feet past each coffee station to allow attendees to move through the line quickly.
- For soft drink service, place the glasses at the end of the table closest to the meeting room doors, followed by ice (with at least one scoop), soft drinks, and a container or space for empty cans or bottles at the end of the station. It's also a good idea to store extra soft drinks and glasses under the station so that your replenishment, if needed, does not have to be carried through a crowd.

How to Avoid Surprises

Have you ever gotten your final bill from a hotel or convention center and thought, "I don't remember serving that much coffee" or "Wow — we went through a lot of sodas!" Easy ways to minimize final bill surprises include communicating your replenishment requirements ("reorder only upon approval of authorized signature") and inventorying sodas in and out (meaning counting the sodas prior to each break and after each break). Here's how to conduct a soda inventory:

Soda Inventory — In

- Always inventory in at the time of setup and always do it with a banquet person present.
- Initial her count or have her initial yours.
- Remember that the hotel staff (not you) is responsible for preventing other groups from dipping into your break. If another group breaks early, have a banquet person guard your break.
- Never sign a bill until after the break.

Soda Inventory — Out

- Inventory as soon as the break is over or else you could lose sodas to other groups.
- Always inventory out with a banquet person present and have him or her sign your final count (or you sign the banquet check).
- If sodas are taken by your group while the inventory is in progress (even if it's from one of the stations that has already been inventoried out), always give the property credit.
- Once the inventory is done, leave the area … the sodas are no longer your responsibility.

Now that you have the tools to properly purchase, arrange, and manage your beverage breaks, you can move on to the next task on your list.

Karla Bauman is an associate planner with Conferon, Inc.

CHART A — AM BREAK

Drinks		All Male	All Female	50/50
Regular	Attendance	x 60%	x 50%	x 55%
Decaf	Attendance	x 20%	x 25%	x 25%
Tea	Attendance	x 10%	x 15%	x 10%
Soda	Attendance	x 25%	x 25%	x 25%

CHART B — PM BREAK

Drinks		All Male	All Female	50/50
Regular	Attendance	x 35%	x 30%	x 35%
Decaf	Attendance	x 20%	x 20%	x 20%
Tea	Attendance	x 10%	x 15%	x 10%
Soda	Attendance	x 70%	x 70%	x 70%

CHART C — AM BREAK/ALL HOT DRINKS

Drinks		All Male	All Female	50/50
Regular	Attendance	x 70%	x 55%	x 65%
Decaf	Attendance	x 25%	x 30%	x 30%
Tea	Attendance	x 10%	x 20%	x 10%

How to Cut Liquor Costs

By Jim Harmon

While the overall consumption of liquor at meetings has shown signs of decreasing, cocktail receptions still remain an area where major dollars can be saved. Consider the fact that the gross profit on liquor at a cocktail function can be as high as 65 percent, making liquor a bigger profit maker than food. Yet, it's possible to save anywhere from 30 percent to 40 percent on hosted beverage functions simply by taking control of the event.

Choosing a Liquor Plan

By the bottle, the drink, or the person ... what's the best way to buy liquor? Let's take a close look at each of the plans.

Per person/unlimited consumption plan. For an agreed-upon time frame, usually an hour, the hotel provides all the liquor and you pay one price regardless of actual consumption. The only advantage of purchasing liquor on a per person or unlimited consumption basis is that you know in advance what the damage will be at the end of the evening. It's generally the most expensive way to pay for a hosted bar. Here's why.

When you purchase liquor on an unlimited consumption basis, the hotel sets a price that takes into account the worst-case scenario. So unless the majority of your attendees are heavy drinkers, you'll end up spending more than if you had purchased it by the bottle or by the drink.

Per drink plan. The hotel charges a set price, such as $4.75, for each alcoholic drink. After the event, the hotel measures what was actually consumed and bills you for all of those drinks at the $4.75 price.

Per bottle plan. The hotel establishes the cost of each full bottle of liquor, and you pay for every bottle that's opened. For example, if the bottle price is $90 and your group consumes 2-1/2 bottles of liquor, you would pay for all three opened bottles.

When you consider the likelihood that on average the remaining opened bottles at each bar will be half full at the end of the evening, and that under the per bottle plan you will be paying for those partials, the advantages of buying liquor by the bottle diminish. This plan usually makes no sense for small one-night-only events. If you have more than one reception, however, you can carry the partials over to another function, which limits any extra liquor you're required to purchase. Some hotels also may agree to "marry" the partials and give you a credit for full bottles. This would limit the partial bottles that remain after your function and make this plan a sure winner.

To determine your anticipated cost under the bottle plan, first determine the estimated number of drinks that will be consumed in a properly monitored and controlled pour bar. Assuming an average of 2.5 drinks per person, multiply 2.5 by the number of attendees and divide by 27 (the number of 1-1/4-ounce drinks in a bottle). The resulting figure is the number of full bottles that will be consumed.

Next, to estimate the number of partial bottles you'll be paying for, multiply the types of liquor offered (gin, vodka, scotch, rum, or others) by the number of bars at the reception and divide the resulting number by two since you'll average one half-full bottle of each type of liquor per bar.

Number of Drinks Per Bottle

Liquor	Ounces	No. 1-oz. Drinks	No. 1.25-oz. Drinks
750 ml	25.3	25	20
Liter	33.8	33	27
Wine	**Ounces**	**No. 5-oz. Glasses**	**No. 5.5-oz. Glasses**
750 ml	25.3	5	4.6
Liter	33.8	6.7	6.1
Magnum	51.2	10.2	9.3

How do you pick the best plan? Consider the following example for a group of 200 men averaging 2.5 drinks per person when using inventory and pouring controls.

Per Drink Plan — $4.75 per drink x 2.5 drinks x 200 people = **$2,375 total cost**

Bottle Plan — $90 per bottle x 18.5 bottles (200 people x 2.5 drinks ÷ 27 drinks per bottle) = $1,665

6 bottles (12 partial bottles x one-half bottle) x $90 per

bottle = $540
$1,665 + $540 = **$2,205 total cost**
Unlimited Consumption Plan — $14 per person x 200 people = **$2,800 total cost**

As you can see, the bottle plan offers the lowest price in this example. Not all hotels offer the bottle plan, but all offer the per drink plan. The per drink plan is the plan that most knowledgeable planners use to keep a lid on costs.

Inventory the Bars

Inventorying all bars plays an essential role in determining how much liquor was actually consumed at the reception. An "inventory in" should take place once the bars are set up in the function room (usually 30 to 45 minutes before the event begins). To inventory in, count the number of bottles of each type of liquor and make sure that all of the seals on the bottles are uncracked. Write down the figures on an inventory sheet and ask the bartender to initial it.

Instruct the bartenders:

- Not to discard any empty liquor or wine bottles.
- Not to use empties as water bottles (so they don't get confused with the actual liquor you're paying for).
- Not to give out any liquor or wine by the bottle.
- That no additional bottles can be brought to the bar (in case you run out) except through you so that you can keep track of what is at each bar.

Similarly, an "inventory out" should be conducted in the same room where the cocktail reception is held (if possible). To inventory out, check under the bar and on the table behind the bar for extra empties. Then recount the number of bottles of each type of liquor, noting how many full bottles were used and how many will be returned to the hotel. For partial bottles, estimate the amount consumed to the nearest tenth. Write down the figures on the inventory sheet and ask the bartender to initial it.

Control the Pour

Explain to the bartenders that they are not allowed to free pour. Require all bartenders to use jiggers (one-ounce or 1-1/4 ounce, depending on the demographics of your group) or provide your own pour tops and demonstrate how to use them. (Posi-Pours, which control the amount of liquor poured, are available in one-ounce, 1-1/4-ounce sizes, and six other sizes from Magnuson Industries, (815) 229-2970.)

If you're using the bottle plan, you can further reduce your liquor bill by "marrying" the bars before the function ends. (We recommend one hosted bar for every 75 guests.) If you have four bars, for example, close one station 15 minutes before the reception ends. Then take the partials to bar number one and gradually close the party bar by bar. This strategy enables the bartenders to use partials before opening any more new bottles, thereby reducing the number of opened bottles that you have to pay for … and gives attendees the message that the party is coming to an end.

Jim Harmon is an account executive at Conferon, Inc. in Twinsburg, Ohio.

Determining Actual Consumption

Many variables determine how much liquor will be consumed per person per hour at a cocktail reception. The chart on this page shows averages based on several of those variables. But it's important to keep these points in mind as well:

Average per person consumption will be less if …

- the event is on the evening of the major arrival day.
- the event is before 5 p.m.
- there are hors d'oeuvres served. (It's hard to hold a drink and eat hors d'oeuvres off a plate at the same time.)
- the event is after 8 p.m.
- there are activities in the reception area.
- the event is on the recreation day and follows the conclusion of the activities by two or more hours.
- there is a cash bar.
- the group is predominately female.

Average per person consumption will increase if:

- the event is on the final night of the meeting.
- the event is scheduled between 6 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.
- the event is outdoors in a warm climate.
- the event is held during the Super Bowl or any other major sports event where there is a large video screen in use.
- dry (salted) snacks are the only type offered.
- there is a hosted bar.
- the group is predominantly male.

Average Drink Consumption*

Demographics of Group	Using inventory and Posi-Pour system	Using inventory and jigger pour	Using no controls
Predominantly male	2.2	2.7	3 – 3.6
50% male/ 50% female	1.8	2.4	2.8 – 3.3
Predominantly female	1.3	1.9	2.4 – 2.7

** per person, for a one-hour reception*

Winning the Guarantee Game

When you consider the number of variables that can influence attendance at a meeting — appeal of the destination, program content, type of speakers and entertainment, number of competing events — you might be tempted to conclude that establishing guarantees for food and beverage functions is a guessing game. In fact, it's more a matter of statistical analysis — a thorough, competent analysis of historical data as well as current conditions.

When analyzing the history of your meeting, examine patterns of pre-registrations, local ticket sales, arrival/departure patterns, number of cancellations, number of no-shows, number of attendees (broken down by category — members, exhibitors, spouses), guarantees, excess over guarantees, and the percentage of attendees at a particular meal function to the total number of attendees. And don't limit your analysis to just one year of records. Look back at several years in order to obtain the most accurate picture.

When you have a handle on the statistical history of the meeting, examine how current conditions could affect attendance at meal functions. Consider the following variables:

Location

If the property is in an isolated location, attendance at meal functions will likely be high because delegates don't have anywhere else to go. But if it's located in a lively area, you could lose attendees to local restaurants, shops, museums, theaters, comedy clubs, sports events, and casinos.

If your meeting is in Boston, for example, delegates might go shopping at the mall and pick up something to eat at the food court instead of attending the lunch … if you give them an hour and a half for lunch. But if you only give them an hour, they might not leave the area because they won't have time to both eat and shop.

Extra Bodies

Remember to consider "extra bodies" such as exhibitors, spouses, speakers, entertainers, and staff. Spouses are usually invited to some meals, but not all. They may not be invited to the lunches, for example, but they might be invited to the opening reception and final-night dinner. Exhibitors also usually aren't invited to all meals. And when they are invited, they may not attend if the meal is at a time when they're setting up or tearing down.

Local Attendance

If local attendance is high, you may see a drop in attendance at food and beverage functions. Locals may not join you for breakfast, and they may not stay for evening functions because they want to be with their families.

Program Changes

Review any significant changes in programming from year to year to see if the change will somehow affect the attendance at a function. If you schedule a new competing activity during a lunchtime slot, for example, it could potentially lead to a decrease in the number of people present at the lunch. The same concept applies if an exhibitor schedules a demonstration of an important new product during lunch.

Scheduling

If attendees will be staying up late at a reception, theme party, or exhibitor-sponsored event, many may not make it to breakfast the next morning, particularly if it's scheduled for 7:30. And if you schedule lunch for too late in the afternoon at a resort destination, delegates may opt for a round of golf instead.

While you're working on your calculations, keep in mind that guarantees, once given to the hotel, can never be decreased, but they can almost always be increased since it means more money for the hotel. But you have to do it within a reasonable period; Conferon tries not to do it less than 24 hours in advance.

In situations where you have to give guarantees for more than one day, especially when weekends are involved, a very effective tactic is to moderately undercut the second day's guarantee. The objective is to buy yourself some time to see where attendance at the previous day's function ends up before giving a final guarantee for the next day.

It's important to note, however, that you must first discuss this with the catering manager to make sure he is comfortable with a soft guarantee and also to determine how flexible he can be in terms of increasing the guarantee within 24 hours. Most facilities will work with you if you're open and honest in your communication.

If you need a very large increase at the last minute, and your menu includes special items that the hotel normally doesn't have in stock, you may not be able to serve the same meal to everyone. You may, for example, need to vary the entree and dessert. If such a situation arises, instruct the waiters to serve the alternate items to entire tables in one section of the room — preferably to staff sitting at tables that aren't in the center of the room. It's also important to keep in mind that the hotel may not be able to secure the extra banquet staff to meet your service ratio.

To assure an accurate guarantee for the closing banquet (most likely your most expensive event), establish a banquet ticket exchange. Announce in your registration materials that there will be a ticket exchange and possibly reserved seating for the final banquet. Indicate the hours that attendees will be able to exchange tickets and/or reserve their seats while on site. And set a reservation deadline that is during your convention but still meets the hotel's guarantee policy. (You may want to reopen the registration desk for a short time the day of the function to accommodate last-minute changes.)

While the main benefit of a ticket exchange is cost control, attendees actually prefer the system because they can choose their dinner companions in advance instead of having to stampede into the ballroom as the doors open to reserve a table.

Karen Watson, director of account planning at Conferon, Inc. in Austin, Texas, contributed to this article, which was reprinted from The Meeting Manager's Food & Beverage Guide *published by* Convene *and sponsored by Hyatt Hotels and Resorts.*

Doing the Math

Analyzing pre-registration numbers is one way to get a handle on initial guarantees. The following method is used by Conferon.

To use this method, you need at least one year's past history, including what was guaranteed versus what was actually served for each function, plus the pre-registration total for that particular year as of the day the guarantees were determined.

For each function, figure the percentage of pre-registrants that were actually served at the function by dividing the total number of covers served by the pre-registration total.

For example:
The 1999 pre-registration for NAME group was 900 as of the day the guarantees were determined.

Function	No. served	% of pre-registration
Lunch - Day 1	810	90% (810/900)
Lunch - Day 2	720	80% (720/900)

How to use this information to set the guarantees for your current meeting:

- Determine the total number of pre-registrants as of the day the initial guarantees are figured.
- Multiply the pre-registration figure by the above percentages to establish the current year's projected attendance for each function.
- Based upon the hotel's overset policy (usually 3 percent to 5 percent, but many facilities max at 50 overset seats for larger parties), back off the numbers conservatively (somewhere within the overset percentage) to allow for flexibility and eliminate potential waste.

For example:
The 2000 pre-registration for NAME group is 950. The hotel overset is 5 percent. With only one year of history to rely on, we were a bit cautious and established our guarantees based on a 2.5 percent reduction of the projected attendance (half the overset percentage). To come up with the maximum number set, we multiplied the guarantees by the overset percentage — 5 percent.

Function	Projected covers	No. guaranteed / No. set
Lunch - Day 1	855 (90% of 950)	834 (855 –2.5%) / 876(834 +5%)
Lunch - Day 2	760 (80% of 950)	741 (760 –2.5%) / 778(741 +5%)

What Would You Do If…?

By Amy Henderson, CMP, and Nancy Wise, CMP

No matter how carefully you've planned and prepared for your meeting, inevitably, things happen. Flight attendants decide to go on strike. An attendee passes out on the dance floor. The hotel double-books a breakout room. More people than expected turn out for a food function. "Crises" like these take place all the time…and you have to be prepared to handle them.

Obviously, you have no control over whether a tornado touches down or a fire breaks out in the hotel. But you *can* avoid many other crises simply by being well prepared. Consider the following guidelines:

- Anticipate challenges and plan accordingly.
- Visualize every aspect of your program from an attendee and staff perspective.
- Communicate well and often.
- Review facility and supplier specifications.

If, despite your best efforts, a difficult situation *does* arise, remember to solve the problem first, then ask questions. If three gallons of coffee instead of the 30 you ordered arrive at a break, for example, focus on getting 27 additional gallons out of the kitchen quickly rather than "who's to blame." Once the situation is under control, go back and determine exactly what happened so that it doesn't happen again.

To help you hone your crisis management skills, we've come up with 10 realistic meeting-related crises. What would you do in each of these scenarios?

Medical Emergency

An attendee has an apparent heart attack in the ballroom foyer just before your opening general session.

What do you do? Immediately contact hotel security and/or the facility's designated emergency contact. Tell them what happened and where, and instruct them to call 911 as well as the in-house paramedics if applicable. (Do *not* call 911 yourself unless that is the preferred procedure of the facility. The facility's security personnel are much better equipped to meet medical personnel and escort them to the site.) If the attendee stops breathing before help arrives, ask if there's a medical professional in the crowd to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) or perform the procedure yourself if you are certified.

Meanwhile, direct staff members to block off the main entrance to the ballroom and move attendees out of the foyer and into the general session through another door. If there's only one entrance, you'll have to delay the general session until the area is clear.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? If you weren't prepared, this crisis could have been a tragedy. No one can predict a heart attack. The best you can do is take the following steps before any event:

1. Review the facility's emergency procedures.
2. Obtain important contact numbers and provide them to all of your staff members. Many groups also include emergency numbers in their program.
3. Be sure your staff is trained in CPR.

Not Enough Room at the Inn

At 2 p.m., your headquarters hotel tells you that it is oversold and will be relocating 40 of your attendees to a nearby (15 minutes away) comparable (minus a star or two) hotel for one night.

What do you do? Since this scenario is not a rare occurrence, every meeting professional should take the following precautions:

1. Require the hotel to give you as much advance warning as possible about the potential relocation, or walking, of any attendees.

2. Include a relocation clause in your contract stating that, in the event a guest is relocated either voluntarily or involuntarily, the guest will receive:

a. a complimentary room at the new hotel for *every night* that the attendee cannot be accommodated at the original hotel;

b. a complimentary five-minute phone call to let others know of the change;

c. complimentary transportation (or the cost of transportation) between the new hotel and the headquarters hotel until the guest can be accommodated at the headquarters hotel;

d. upgraded accommodations when the delegate returns to the original hotel;

e. an in-room amenity upon return; and

f. a letter of apology to the guest in which the hotel accepts responsibility for the overbooking situation.

The purpose of including these concessions is to persuade people to "want" to move to another hotel, which is always the best way to handle the situation.

3. Find out which properties are traditionally used as "overflow hotels" for relocated guests so you can rule out those that don't meet your standards. If the city is sold out, however, you may not have that option.

On site, ask the hotel to move other guests (i.e., transients or delegates from other groups) before moving *your* guests. If your contract includes a relocation clause outlining the above concessions, the hotel will be more likely to relocate guests whose contracts don't include such a clause.

You also have the option of relocating or doubling up staff members to free up additional rooms. (Don't even think about doubling up your board members or asking top executives to share a room.)

Another alternative is to discuss with the hotel the possibility of offering voluntary relocation incentives to earlier-arriving guests checking in at the front desk. The package could include the items outlined above, a cash incentive, or a future complimentary stay at the hotel or an affiliated property.

If relocating attendees is inevitable, then this next step is imperative. Examine the list of guests who have not yet arrived and compile a list of those who absolutely *cannot* be relocated (such as VIPs and speakers) under any circumstances.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? You *should* have been tracking your room pickup on a weekly basis starting at four months out (or more) and kept in close contact with the hotel. Had you done so, you and the hotel most likely would not have been surprised at the eleventh hour. The property still may have been forced to walk delegates, but perhaps you could have given them several weeks' notice.

You also should have provided the property with several years of no-show and cancellation history, if possible, to help management make a more accurate decision on overselling. And don't forget to always include a relocation clause in your contract with the property addressing all of the issues outlined above.

Potential Protest

You've heard that a local group opposes your keynote speaker and plans to protest in front of the hotel during your opening general session.

What do you do? Inform the hotel or convention center about the potential situation as soon as you know it exists. Discuss the issue thoroughly with property management, including the head of security, and together come up with a detailed plan. (Do *not* settle for assurances from the facility along the lines of "We've got everything covered.")

Notify the local police and request that officers be on site, both inside and outside the property, in uniform and plain clothes. Arrange for in-house security to be on site, too. Alert your staff and have all facility department heads alert their staff members, too. Advise the speaker to use an entrance that allows him to bypass public areas of the property. And inform your attendees so that they won't be surprised.

On the day of the opening session, post association staff at all entrances to the ballroom and instruct them to check for attendee name badges and refuse admission to anyone without a badge. Instruct security to remove hecklers or protesters during the session (after one of your staff members confirms that they are not part of your group) only if they become an annoyance or safety hazard. If necessary, arrange for the speaker to exit the ballroom and facility via "back-of-the-house" routes to a waiting car.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? You must always consider this possibility when selecting a controversial speaker. Be sure to notify top executives about the potential problem so that they can be part of the solution.

A Blown Guarantee

You guaranteed 60 for your committee lunch; 55 are already in the room and it looks like another 15 are on the way. The room is set for 64.

What do you do? Alert the banquet captain and kitchen as soon as you realize you're running out of seats. Ask staff members not to sit down until everyone else is seated. Try to add chairs to existing tables in an effort to accommodate the higher number of guests.

If this strategy doesn't provide enough seating, instruct the banquet staff to set up additional tables with chairs and linens only. (Don't create extra work for the servers by adding tableware until you know that you absolutely need those tables.) If at all possible, this should be done in the back of the house. Rolling tables into a room should be a last resort.

If the room becomes overly full and attendees are still arriving, consider sending them to the in-house restaurant and arranging with the hotel to post their charges to the master account.

Meanwhile, ask the banquet captain or chef if there's enough food from the pre-arranged menu to serve all of the guests in the function room. If there isn't, instruct the banquet staff to serve the different meal to entire tables at the back of the room. And be sure that everyone at the table is eating that same replacement meal. (This ensures that a delegate eating chicken is not sitting next to a delegate eating pasta.)

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? If you tracked the guarantee history of all your food and beverage functions from previous years, you may have discovered that this particular committee lunch tends to attract a greater number of attendees, especially if there are hot agenda items to be discussed. You also could have checked the in-house list the day before the event, or at least on the morning of the event, in an effort to determine the size of the potential audience.

Meeting Room Double-Booked

The hotel tells you at 5 p.m. that the room blocked for your committee meeting tomorrow at 7 a.m. is actually being used by another group. You need to move to another room.

What do you do? Find out the name of the other group and when they booked. If your organization was booked and blocked first, or your group represents a substantially larger piece of business, you may be able to persuade the hotel to relocate the other group instead. If you *must* move, make sure that the room you're being moved to is adequate in size and facilities. If the original room had the permanent screen and white board you needed and the new room doesn't, for example, the property will have to provide replacement audio-visual equipment.

The facility should call all of the attendees in their guest rooms and notify them of the room change or slip a message under their doors if they're all staying in the headquarters hotel. Also arrange for the hotel to place signage directing delegates to the new location in the registration area and any other high-traffic areas, as well as outside the original meeting room and outside the new meeting room. In addition, both the group and the facility should station staff members in strategic areas to assist attendees with directions.

Require the hotel to facilitate all logistics and absorb all costs associated with the room change, such as signage and audio-visual equipment. It also may be appropriate to ask for additional monetary compensation or concessions, such as a complimentary coffee break, for the inconvenience and confusion that such a situation can create. If you choose to do so, ask for these concessions while on site (never after you return home) and be reasonable.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? Ideally, the specific room should have been listed in your contract. (For many good reasons, hotels typically will not specify exact meeting rooms more than a year in advance of the meeting.) Double-booking situations usually occur when the facility has not communicated with you fully. It's also essential to review the hotel résumé and banquet event orders prior to the opening day of your convention. Discrepancies may be caught when reviewing this paperwork, thereby avoiding potential problems after the meeting has started.

Overflowing Session Rooms

You're running 15 concurrent sessions and one that is about to begin has 150 people instead of the expected 80. Room is set to max.

What do you do? If an adjoining room isn't being used, open the airwall between the two rooms. If a session in an adjoining room has a low turnout, move that session to a smaller room and open the airwall between the two rooms. If your general session room is unoccupied, relocate the entire overflowing session. If a nearby room has more space, but a low turnout, work with the speakers to change rooms (be sure that the AV needs of the speakers can still be accommodated). If none of these options is possible, offer to repeat the session later in the day or later in the conference.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? You *should* have required delegates to preregister for specific sessions, which would have given you far more control over the number of people in each room. It's also important to carefully examine the agenda as well as past history and ensure that hot industry topics and the most popular speakers are booked in the largest rooms.

I'm Hungry!

The hotel is running 30 minutes late in setting up your dinner in the grand ballroom, which follows a reception in the foyer.

What do you do? Find out exactly *why* they're going to be late. If the banquet staff is pre-setting salads, for example, have them serve the salads instead and start the banquet on time. Otherwise, keep the bars at the reception open until the room is ready and arrange for the hotel to pay a portion of the liquor bill to reflect the extra time that the bars remained open. Ask the banquet captain to quickly bring out some type of food — even dry snacks — to appease your possibly annoyed guests. In addition, if you have entertainment ask the hotel to pay for the band to play for an extra 30 minutes.

Traffic Problems

Your general session of 2,000 breaks and everyone needs to head downstairs for lunch. There is a long line of people waiting to get onto the escalator.

What do you do? Have the facility hold a few elevators to move your guests and either turn the escalators off (so your delegates can walk down them) or arrange it so that they're all going in a downward direction. Station staff members at the top of the escalators to direct delegates to the area that is moving the fastest.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? Anticipating the mass exodus from the general session and the location of the lunch, you should have instructed staff members to perform the above tasks *before* the end of the general session. Alternatively, you could have tried to hold the lunch on the same floor as the general session.

Liability on the Horizon

You blocked 500 rooms at a hotel and signed an attrition clause that makes your organization liable for 80 percent of the contracted block. Twenty-one days prior to arrival, you are on target for meeting registrants, but you are only half way there on your room block.

What do you do? Compare your registration list with the hotel's entire housing list. (Be sure you have negotiated this privilege in your contract.) Contact attendees whose names do not appear on the housing list to find out if they've made a reservation yet or to confirm if they've booked rooms at another hotel. It's very possible that some of your guests have not been correctly coded to your group and will not show up on the list from the hotel. If complimentary rooms and suites are tied to the pickup of the block, give staff members their own rooms to help you reach your quota.

If there's no way you're going to reach the 80 percent mark, negotiate with the hotel. Offer to move an off-site event in-house, for example, as a means of compensating the property for its lost revenue. Or offer to book a future meeting there if the property agrees to drop the fees. If all else fails, and it looks like you'll need to pay attrition fees, ask the hotel if you could allocate the funds to upgraded food and beverage so that delegates get more for their money.

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? You *should* have been tracking your room pickup on a weekly basis starting at six months out and kept in close contact with the hotel. When you noticed a shortfall, you should have immediately worked with the hotel to release some rooms for resale. (The attrition clause in your contract may have allowed limited reductions to the block at six months and three months out.) By tracking your pickup, you no doubt would have realized that the numbers weren't materializing. Then you could have stepped up your marketing efforts in an attempt to boost attendance and/or released some of the rooms from the block.

Wheelchair Bound

One of your attendees calls a week before arrival to tell you that she is wheelchair-bound and is staying at one of the hotels on the shuttle route.

What do you do? The easiest solution is to move the guest to the headquarters hotel where most events are occurring or close to the convention center (if applicable) so that she doesn't have to use the shuttle system. If that's not possible, ask the attendee if she actually needs special transportation. If she's traveling with a companion, for example, she may not require access to a wheelchair-accessible vehicle and may agree to be reimbursed for taxis to and from the event areas.

If she *does* require special transportation, arrange for a wheelchair-accessible vehicle to serve that particular hotel on the shuttle route. Double check with the transportation company to ensure that the bus matches the schedule of the guest needing this assistance. (Note: Many bus companies do not have full-size accessible buses, so you may either have to replace one of the full-size buses in the shuttle fleet with an accessible mini-bus or add a mini-bus to the existing fleet of buses serving the shuttle routes.)

What could you have done to avoid the crisis? You *should* have included a line on the registration form asking participants if they have any "additional requirements" and requesting that any special needs be submitted by a certain date (perhaps three weeks prior to the start of the meeting). Reviewing the previous year's registration list for any notations of attendees with special requirements and then cross checking those names with the current registration list is also helpful. In addition, you could have added a wheelchair-accessible mini-bus to the fleet … just in case.

Amy Henderson is a senior account planner and Nancy Wise is an account executive at Conferon, Inc. in Washington, D.C.

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:

- 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.

Deirdre Bourke is a senior account executive at Conferon, Inc. in Denver.

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.

Preparing a Post-Con Report

By Lise Fitzpatrick, CMP

You've gone through the time-consuming process of reviewing the final bill for your most recent meeting. Now it's time to move on to planning next year's event, right? Not exactly. Before closing out the file on this year's conference you should prepare a post-convention (post-con) report — a detailed summary of every facet of the meeting — from total attendance to room pickup to food and beverage functions and more.

Yes, it will take some time to prepare such an in-depth document, but the rewards are well worth the effort. For starters, a comprehensive post-con report is an invaluable reference tool for planning next year's conference. Imagine being able to quickly locate any tidbit of information about the meeting in a five-page document instead of sifting through two accordion files stuffed with manila folders. The post-con report can also be a powerful negotiating tool since it contains accurate figures from the conference, including an accounting of every dollar of food and beverage revenue generated for the hotel.

In addition to actualized numbers, the post-con report should contain specific suggestions on improving specific aspects of the event the next time around. Should you order more soda and bottled water for coffee breaks? Do you need to hire additional staff to distribute handouts at breakout sessions? Should you increase the guarantee for the final-night banquet? Do you need a bigger room for the general session? To speed up the writing of this section of the report, take exhaustive notes throughout the meeting. You can jot down your thoughts on a copy of the agenda, on a blank copy of a post-con report, or in a notebook dedicated to that particular meeting. Be sure to take detailed notes on marketing information, hotel/facilities, group block, food and beverage, suppliers, and sessions.

To help get you started, we have prepared the following post-con report template. Keep in mind that it is only a model. Your document must be adapted to the unique requirements of your conference. You may not offer tours, for example, but you may need to track the number of attendees in each concurrent session. Or you may include a line for cash sales or gift deliveries to guest rooms. Simply add and subtract items from the template until it meets your individual needs.

Lise Fitzpatrick is an account planner at Conferon, Inc. in Twinsburg, Ohio.

Collecting the Data

In order to write a thorough, accurate post-convention report, you'll need to collect specific pieces of information from the hotel. The majority of this information may not appear in the final bill, so you'll have to solicit the hotel in a separate memo. Here are a few examples of questions to ask:

- How much revenue did our group generate in your food and beverage outlets?
- What specific meal periods were hit hardest by our attendees?
- Did our group use room service and how would you rate the amount of business — heavy, medium, or light? Please list by day.
- How much hospitality revenue was generated in room service by "in-conjunction-with" events (programs sponsored by attendees, usually exhibitors)?
- How much revenue was generated by "in-conjunction-with" events? Please break down food and beverage.
- How much revenue was generated by gift deliveries?
- Were there many special room requests made by our group? If any, what type?
- What were the heaviest check-in and check-out times for our group?
- What was the single/double ratio?
- What was the percentage of no-shows?
- What other information do you feel would be helpful to provide to next year's facility?

Post Convention Report

EVENT INFORMATION	
Name of Event	
Event Location	
Event Dates	

ADVANCE INFORMATION		
	CURRENT YEAR	LAST YEAR
Pre-Registered		
On-Site		
Exhibit Booths		
Exhibit Reps		
Spouses/Guests		
Speakers/Comps		
International Guests		
TOTAL Attendance		
TOTAL Membership		

HOUSING RESERVATION PROCESS	
Housing Reservation Method	
Published Cut-Off Date	
Actual Cut-Off Date	
Rate Honored After Cut-Off Date	

MARKETING INFORMATION		
	MAILING DATE	WEEKS FROM EVENT
Exhibitor Mailer		
Registration Brochure		
Registration Deadline		
Other Marketing		

GROUP PROFILE/DEMOGRAPHICS					
% Male					
% Female					
United States					
International					
	East	West	North	South	Central
United States by Region					

HOTEL FACILITY INFORMATION	
Headquarters Hotel	
–Sales Contact	
–Convention Services Contact	
–Catering Contact	
Overflow Hotel(s)	

HEADQUARTERS HOTEL GROUP BLOCK STATISTICS										
Day	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	TOTAL
Date											
Block											
Final											
% Peak											

% Wash from Cut-Off Date %______
No-Shows %______
% Cancellations %______
Single Room Rate $______
% Single Rooms %______
Double Room Rate $______
% Double Rooms %______
Triple/Quad Rate $______
Suite Rate Range $______
Rooms Found Miscoded #______
Miscoded Rooms Recovered #______
Total Value of Room Nights $______
Average Daily Room Rate $______
Complimentary Room Ratio #______

OVERFLOW HOTEL GROUP BLOCK STATISTICS							
Day	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	TOTAL
Date							
Block							
Final							
% Peak							

FINAL GROUP ACTUALS AND THREE-YEAR HISTORY											
Day	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tues	TOTAL
2000 Total												
1999 Total												
1998 Total												
1997 Total												

% OF PICK-UPS FROM 12 WEEKS OUT												
Week	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	FINAL
%													

FOOD AND BEVERAGE SUMMARY						
Date	Function	Guarantee	Over Set	Actual Served	Total Food	Total Beverage

Gratuity/Tax _______%/________%

TOUR INFORMATION			
Tour Name	Date Of Tour	# Registered	Actual # Attended

Total Tour Program Revenue

2000 __________

1999 __________

1998 __________

1997 __________

SUPPLIER INFORMATION			
Supplier Type	Supplier Name	Final Billing	Concessions
Audio-Visual			
Decorator-Group			
Decorator-Vendor			
DMC/Tours			
Off-Site Events			
Entertainment			
Reg Assistance			
Security			
Other			