

Site Selection Savvy

By Tamara Muldoon

Site selection is arguably the most important component of planning an event.

Getting it right may result in lower costs, fewer planning headaches and a successful outcome. Make the wrong choice and you could be fighting an uphill battle to achieve your goals.

"Site selection is critical to the success of any meeting or conference," says Nicole Tanguay, regional vice president for the Pacific Northwest and Canada at HelmsBriscoe, a leading site selection and meeting management consulting firm. "There are so many factors that go into the decision-making process, it is not simply availability and rates. Getting the right group, in the right venue, in the right city, at the right time is critical."

Those new to the process will find the website planninghelper.com to be an excellent resource. Developed by professional meeting planner Sharron Campbell, CMP, it includes detailed, step-by-step information on many aspects of meeting planning, including site selection. Experienced planners will also discover useful tools and tips on the site.

The following guidelines will help you choose the best available venue for your event. Or, you may want to consider outsourcing this time-consuming process to an independent consulting firm like HelmsBriscoe that specializes in site selection and contracting. These companies are highly experienced, with well-established industry contacts and exceptional bargaining power. Some, like HelmsBriscoe (helmsbriscoe.com), charge no fee to the client; instead, their services are paid for by the suppliers.

KNOW YOUR PURPOSE

"The first thing I always ask clients is, 'What is most important to this group?'" says Tanguay. Why is this meeting being held, and what do the organizers hope to achieve? Keep the event's purpose at the forefront of all decision-making. Does a proposed location add to or detract from the ultimate goal?

"A planner who is on top of their game will always strive to find a better site than the year before. He or she should evaluate if the site is conducive to what the organization is doing now and aligned with their strategic goals going forward," adds Tanguay.

HISTORY AND BUDGET

Establishing a budget clarifies attendance and financial goals and provides a framework from which to refine the facility needs for your meeting. Analyze historical data for recurring events and, for a first-time event, make an educated guess and adjust as you move forward.

Estimate revenues from registration fees, sponsorships, exhibits and other income sources. Then establish target attendance numbers. Estimate

expenses, separating them into two main categories—variable and fixed.

Variable expenses are per-person costs that fluctuate with attendance, such as food and beverage. Fixed expenses include items like room rental, audiovisual equipment rental, signage, insurance and other costs that must be paid regardless of the number of attendees. Knowing your fixed expense helps determine the break-even point—the amount of revenue needed to cover the base costs.

Be sure to include location or venue-related expenses such as taxes, gratuities, service charges and attrition fees. These vary by state, city and facility, so do some research to determine those costs.

EVENT SPECIFICATIONS

Lay out a preliminary agenda in order to determine the amount of meeting space to request. Include the time frame of daily events, number and capacity of rooms needed and type of function in these rooms. Allow for unexpected attendance growth or agenda changes. It is easier to return unneeded space to a facility than to obtain extra space later in the process.

Specify when you want to meet. Does your event have a set pattern for time of year or days of the week? Being flexible on dates gives you more options and can reap big savings as venues work to fill off-peak times in their schedule.

PREPARING THE RFP

The Request for Proposal (RFP) should be a comprehensive outline of your group's identity, goals, meeting space and catering requirements, hotel accommodation needs and expectations. Note the deadline for returning proposals and to whom they should be addressed.

Start with a summary of the event, its purpose and the type of people who attend. Include the preliminary agenda and specifications of meeting space needed. Identify functions that require catering service. Specify the number and type of hotel rooms needed day-by-day for your program.

Request current price lists for catering and audiovisual equipment. Note any concessions you are requesting, such as discounts on certain services, complimentary or reduced-rate guest rooms, rebates, and so forth. Always ask for more than you expect; allow some room for negotiation.

Unless your group always meets in the same place, you need to determine where to target your RFP. Some groups rotate around a region, the country or even internationally. Narrowing your search field to a geographic region or city makes your job easier. Some

preliminary research can rule out cities that don't meet your criteria, further reducing your potential locations.

Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) or Convention and Visitor Bureaus (CVBs) can streamline communications for you by distributing your RFP to hotels and meeting venues in their area that are capable of hosting your meeting. They can often also assist by preparing a comprehensive proposal for their destination.

EVALUATING PROPOSALS

Once the proposals have been received, simplify decision making by preparing an at-a-glance comparison of key components. A spreadsheet works well for this purpose. List major items such as hotel room rates, meeting room fees, estimated food/beverage costs and any minimum revenue requirements. If possible, calculate a per-person cost for each option using the projected expenses and attendance numbers. This makes it easier to compare the value of locations relative to each other.

Include perks and concessions being offered. You may also want to show pros and cons such as ease of transportation, desirability of destination, climate and other factors which can add or detract from the attendees' experience.

SITE INSPECTION

Caveat Emptor. Let the buyer beware. If there is one step you should never skip, this is it. After narrowing your choices to one or two finalists, schedule a site visit. The local DMO or CVB typically will arrange a complimentary hotel room and set up a schedule of property tours; otherwise, contact the prospective hotels and meeting venues and make your own arrangements.

Go prepared with a checklist and questions. There is a comprehensive site inspection checklist sample available at planninghelper.com. Look at each facility with your event in mind. Are room sizes adequate? Where will audiovisual equipment be placed? Are renovations or construction planned just before or during the dates of your event?

When meeting with the salesperson, discuss how your group will utilize the space. Emphasize details that are critical to your event. You may be able to negotiate some changes to the proposal that better suit your needs based upon this discussion. Request a written confirmation of any revisions to the proposal.

Following the site inspection, update the comparison chart of the locations and venues under consideration. If approval is needed from others, present your findings and recommendations to help them reach a decision.

NEGOTIATING

Before you request contracts, there is still one last opportunity for negotiation. This is especially true if more than one location or facility is bidding for your event. Know the value of your group's business and whether you have any leverage for further concessions.

Don't be greedy, but do make an effort to secure any additional cost reductions or added amenities that will benefit your event. You might receive a polite "no" response, but if the salesperson is anxious to close the deal, you might also get what you want.

CONTRACT REVIEW & SIGNING

Contracts spell out in detail terms of use and financial obligations. They should benefit and protect both parties, not just the hotel or meeting venue. Read each clause carefully and consider its ramifications. What happens if the facility cancels after the contract is signed?

Don't be afraid to ask for revisions or additions to the contract language if there are sections that cause concern. Check to be sure that all dates, prices, space reservations, and negotiated items are included and correct.

The person signing the contract is accepting the financial obligation specified therein for the group or organization. Therefore, that person should be legally authorized to approve expenditures on the group's behalf. The contract is not binding until both parties have signed the document, so be sure to obtain a copy showing both signatures.

Don't accept verbal or email revisions to a contract. Any changes to the original agreement should be in a written addendum and signed by both entities. Keep your copy of the contact handy. You'll likely refer to it often to verify planning details such as deadlines, deposits due, guest room and catering minimums and more.

PLANNING

Now that the location and venue are decided, enlist the local tourism marketing group and venue conference services manager to help in planning your event. They are the experts when it comes to that community and facility, and they can help you to find vendors, suggest off-site activities and solve problems. After all, they also have a vested interest in ensuring that your event is a success.

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