

Meeting Planning Basics:

Four Tips When Selecting a Conference Venue

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Here's the scenario. You've just been given the responsibility to select the location of your association's affiliate or chapter annual conference or meeting. For simplicity, let's assume that time isn't a constraint and that you have close to a full year to plan, or more if your meeting is complex. Even if you have the luxury of being able to hire an experienced or certified meeting planner to facilitate the search and selection process, the basic steps outlined here should help you achieve a successful outcome.

Create a criteria checklist. If you already know the city or approximate region where your meeting has to take place, you've already got one major decision made and off your plate. That being said, selecting the exact venue that will be the best choice for your event can still be overwhelming. Creating a criteria checklist will help you focus and narrow your search. Consider the following questions as you develop your list. What are your potential dates? Is your meeting geared more towards content or networking, and based on your answer, what type of venue will best suit the program? Approximately how many attendees are you expecting? This will determine the minimum number of sleeping rooms, if needed, and the minimum square footage of meeting space required. Where are the majority of your attendees coming from, and how accessible do you need the venue to be? For example, if the majority of attendees will be flying in for the event, how many non-stops flights are available (consider seasonal versus year-round routes) and then what is your maximum driving distance from the airport? Does the property need to have a golf course, spa or other recreational activities onsite or close by? Think about any other criteria relative or important to your meeting and add it to your list.

Send out Request for Proposals. Once you've done some research and have come up with a list of properties or venues that meet most or all of your criteria, you'll need to draft a Request for Proposal, or RFP. An RFP contains all of the pertinent information from your criteria checklist, which will allow the venue to provide a comprehensive response to your request. Be clear and concise as you write your RFP. Provide a summary of your meeting and include data from past years so that the venue can see historical trends and patterns in things like total attendance, total room pick-up, meeting space used, etc. Don't forget to include your contact information in case the venue has questions, as well as an appropriate deadline for responses and when you expect to make your final decision. If your conference is extensive or complex, consider giving the venue as long as four weeks to respond. Make sure to build this wait time for responses into your planning timetable. It's likely that at least one or two venues will decline to respond

to your RFP. This can be for various reasons such as preferred dates are not available, space constraints, etc. Again, depending on the size and scope of your event, you may want to send out as many as five Request for Proposals.

Conduct site visits. While the Internet is an invaluable resource as you compile your list of venues to include in the RFP process, it is critical to schedule a visit to your top one or two venues. During your visit, your primary contact will likely be someone from sales but you'll also meet someone from the events or banquets team as well as the in-house audio/visual team. Make sure you see the entire property or venue. This includes all meeting space, storage and office space, business center, and the different types of sleeping rooms. If possible, try to schedule your visit during the month that your event will take place the following year. This will give you a good sense for what the weather will be like, and if it's a resort location, what the outdoor spaces will look like. Take note of when the sun will set if you are planning any outdoor receptions and dinners, and to know exactly what time to kick off that spectacular fireworks display. If golf is part of your conference agenda, make sure you build time into your itinerary to visit the course. Check out the clubhouse and meet with the golf pro in the pro shop. While at the course, get ideas for contests and sponsorships. Consider transportation if you plan to take your group offsite for golf or other activity.

Carefully review the contract. After your site visits, you should be able to narrow your options down to two, or if you're lucky, one venue or property that ticks most of the boxes on your criteria checklist. Have your sales contact draw up a formal contract for your event. If you're wavering between two properties, read and compare both contracts carefully. Ask questions. Request clarification if there's something in the contract you don't understand. If you have access to a contract lawyer, it's in your best interest to request a review, as these contracts will typically contain legal jargon that, while standard in the hotel or venue industry, may not be part of your everyday vocabulary. If you have a room block as part of your meeting, the contract will include an attrition clause. An attrition clause is a commitment by your organization guaranteeing payment for the number of requested rooms. Typically, hotels expect organizations to fill 80% of the rooms agreed upon in the contract. If the minimum room pick-up is not met, your association will be liable to pay for rooms not booked by your attendees. Be careful not to overestimate the number of sleeping rooms needed for your event. Also pay close attention to the cancellation clause, another area in the contract where your association could pay a penalty to the venue if you cancel the meeting. Make sure that all of the concessions included in the original proposal and discussed during the site visit are accounted for in the contract. Present your recommendation to the decision maker at your association, have both parties sign the contract and Happy Planning!