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Finding the Right Fit

by Tony Bartlett
Meetings South, April 2007

In determining what type of hotel works best for a small group, there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Finding the right property is a matter of qualifying your client, with size just one factor to consider.

Christy Lamagna, CMP, CMM, president of Strategic Meetings and Events, a meeting planning firm with offices in New York and San Francisco, says her clients are all over the map when it comes to the size of the hotels they prefer for small meetings.

For example, the company has a client in the medical supply field that likes to feel big and important. For its 180-person events, the client prefers properties where it's the largest group in house. The largest property it has booked is the 490-room Green Valley Ranch Resort & Spa in Las Vegas.

"I have other clients with small meetings who must have a large place with all the amenities, a place that's larger than life," she says. "They want to experience that huge wow. It totally depends on the mindset of the client."

Gary Schirmacher, CMP, senior vice president, Western region, for Experient, a meeting planning firm headquartered in Twinsburg, Ohio, adds that both small and large hotels hold advantages for small meetings, and it's a matter of weighing what is most important. While a small hotel offers exclusivity, larger hotels typically offer more amenities.

"A large hotel has more inventory, restaurant choices and more 24-hour services than their small counterparts," he says, adding that even though there might be other meetings going on at the same time, larger hotels have gotten better about ensuring that small groups have their own private areas.

"A group could have a smaller property all to itself, but it has to have confidence in the staff. Make sure you assess the service levels if one or two key people were going to be out during your meeting," he advises.

Bill Briscoe, Naples-Fla.-based chief industry relations officer for the site selection firm HelmsBriscoe, says in most cases, the firm tries to put smaller groups in hotels with 400 rooms or less.

"With larger hotels, you have to look at whether they have dedicated staff and space for smaller groups," he says.

When choosing any size hotel, Lamagna cautions that it is important to assess whether or not the hotel can handle the specific preferences of the group.

"If they'll be drinking at 3 a.m. will the bar be open?" she says. "If they'll be exercising, are there enough treadmills? Will there be enough bellhops on duty when you arrive? And what's the server-to-guest ratio?" Whether the property is big or small, "service is number one," says Connie Bergeron, CMP, vice president-global sourcing at Benchmark 360, an Atlanta-based meetings and events company, adding that her company's smaller groups mostly involve management strategy, leadership development or board sessions.

"They have definite goals for their events and need minimal distraction," she says.

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