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Planners book with service at top of mind
December 18, 2006
By Nancy Lazarus

Service clearly has pushed its way alongside the front-line considerations of cost and location as key criteria for meeting planners when selecting host properties, according to the most recent MeetingNews survey of 463 meeting professionals.

Service of course plays an integral role in every aspect of a meeting, from the planner's initial site inspection, to the attendees' meeting experience, to the planner's post-con and bill reconciliation interactions.

"Nothing replaces service," said Jaime Bernhart, conference coordinator at Employees Assistance Professionals Association of Arlington, VA. "Attendees at my association want low room rates and a good location in the city, but they expect the hotel to provide exceptional service on top of it all."

Corporate planners agree, including Liz Hall, meeting planner at Raymond James & Associates in St. Petersburg, FL. "Many things can be forgiven throughout the course of a meeting or event if the level of care and service is high. Conversely, special note is taken if service levels are not up to par. Quality care and service can make or break an attendee's experience."

Service has become a primary point of differentiation for hotels that host meetings. "In today's marketplace, there rarely is a significant facility and product difference within the same tier of conference hotel. What truly separates a hotel is the spirit and expertise of the staff servicing meeting planners and their attendees," said Pam Gilbert, director of marketing at InterContinental Hotels Group in Chicago.

Peter Shelly, executive vice president of sales for HelmsBriscoe in Scottsdale, AZ, agreed. "Everyone is adding a new bed, a better shower head, or some other bell and whistle. Service is the only true indicator as to how a hotel separates itself from competitors."

Service is clearly foremost on attendees' minds as well, especially given the current travel environment. "It's important that a hotel provides service levels that lessen the strain of travel in today's fast-paced and high-security world," added Gilbert.

Business pressures also play a role. "Attendees need to focus on the business of their meeting while still juggling business back home. They want a hotel that is comfortable but also conducive to getting business done," and good service assists with that objective, commented Suzanne Stephan, director of marketing at Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center in Kissimmee, FL.

## Seeing is Believing

This service-first perspective is further evidenced in responses to another survey question regarding which informational sources are most valuable to planners when learning about meeting properties. The two top-rated sources were word-of-mouth referrals (64.1 percent) and planner-initiated site inspections (60.7 percent); both involve direct observation by planners.

There is, however, some difference of opinion regarding site inspections as an accurate predictor of the actual service a meeting could receive. Hall finds advance visits to be good forecasters, "especially if you visit the venue unannounced. It is abundantly clear, when you first walk into an establishment, how the staff is trained and if they are service oriented. If you're able to look around on your own, you can get a very accurate gauge as to how your guests are going to be received."

But Bernhart feels that referrals are a more reliable barometer of actual hotel service levels. "Talking to other planners who have used the facility or seeing the property in full swing during another planner's program is usually my best indicator. Referrals can be a tie-breaker in final selection."

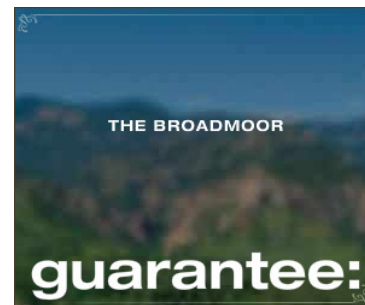
Referrals can also be an efficient way to learn about venues if pressed for time. The survey shows that many lead times are short, especially for corporate planners. As a result, they may have less of an opportunity to visit new venues and thus often need to rely on others' experiences.

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Hotel websites also influence planners' venue decisions; they were rated the third most important source of information. While they do not replace site visits, they are an effective way of narrowing down options. "I cull down the list of properties I'm looking at and then see the venues side by side," according to Hall. The websites' photos and specs "help eliminate unsuitable locations and venues, making better use of the time spent doing site visits."

Other advantages of hotel websites include providing valuable information for attendees and clients. "It's an easy place to send attendees who want a little more information about the conference facility," said Bernhart.

Christy Lamagna, president and chief strategist for Strategic Meetings & Events in Bernardsville, NJ, also likes "the ability to share the site's photos with clients so they have an image of the facility and can quickly give feedback."

Meanwhile, hotel websites will continue to evolve to meet planners' needs. According to Gilbert, "Website development will include more interactive capability for meeting planners, with virtual guided hotel site tours, meeting space set-up planning tools, and the ability to provide online quotes."

For more on hotel service, see page 20.

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