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# Site Inspections: Death of a Planning Tool?

Dec 1, 2005 12:00 PM, By Michael Bassett

“**Once upon a time,**” recalls meeting planner Christy Lamagna, “site inspections were the rule.” Now they have become the exception because of a variety of factors — time constraints, budget issues, and Web sites that are almost as good as being there.

Yet a survey of North American planners taken last year by Orlando-based Yesawich, Pepperdine, Brown & Russell found that respondents rated site inspections as *the most important source of new information* on destinations and lodging.

If they are so important, why are site inspections going the way of the dodo?

## No Time, No Money

As with everything a meeting planner does, the decision about whether to travel to a potential site often comes down to time.

“It's a major factor,” says Michael Hughes, sales manager, Hyatt Regency Boston. “It takes a lot of time and effort to get on an airplane, and to be away from your office and your family.”

That definitely rings true with Lamagna, CMM, CMP, president of Strategic Meetings and Events in Bernaresville, N.J., and former vice president of events and operations for New York — based Cendant Corp. “If you're a typical corporate planner, it's getting hard to get out of the office,” she says. “I know that when I went out on site visits, I had to get up early and stay up later so I could get my work done. A site visit takes up time that you could be spending at your desk.”

The rule now for planners who do site inspections is to squeeze a lot more into a shorter period of time.

“It used to be that when you did a site inspection, you explored. You might check out six possible hotels,” says Lamagna. “Then you'd decide on a venue, and find a DMC. Then a few months later, you'd go back for a second visit.”

Not any more. Now, a typical site visit for her might include just one intense day of touring at prospective venues, during which time she might bring along a digital camera and take photos of rooms and exteriors — information to use in lieu of a second visit.

Often, there isn't enough lead time for an inspection. Hughes is seeing many of his pharmaceutical industry clients planning meetings with such short turnaround times that they forego site inspections — even for

larger meetings, such as a 300-room meeting he recently booked six weeks out.

Not only have corporate meeting departments made staff cutbacks in recent years, but they have also reduced costs in other ways. Increasingly expensive airfares, especially, make it harder to justify sending people on inspections. Lamagna will book travel well in advance, on nonpeak days/times, to save money, and she will try to arrange for a free pickup at the airport.

## Virtual Site Inspections

Hotel Web sites are one of the first sources that planners now turn to for site selection. On Hyatt's site, for example, you will find 'virtual tours,' e-brochures, even PowerPoint presentations.

What these kinds of tools are, says meeting technology consultant and speaker Corbin Ball, of Corbin Ball Associates, Bellingham, Wash., is a "first step" — a chance for hotels to begin to demonstrate the value of their facilities. "In most cases, hotel Web sites give the planner a way to narrow the number of visits they have to make," he says.

But they are not enough, says Victoria Juntti, CMP, event manager for Sagebrush Corp., Minneapolis. "I still believe there is no replacement for the site inspection. You learn things there that you couldn't possibly learn otherwise." However, she says, "before the Internet, I think it was much more important to go out on site inspections for just about everything."

Now that technology has become such an important source of information, accuracy has become a factor. "That came up in a roundtable that Hyatt recently held for insurance and financial services planners," says Hughes. "The planners have to be very confident in the accuracy of the specs in floor plans."

One tool that can help is the Function Space Verification Program, through which the Professional Convention Management Association certifies measurements of hotel meeting space. Planners can also use software to help them create setup diagrams, with the most well-known program being MeetingMatrix.

However, Lamagna points out that all the technology in the world will never give you a complete picture of a venue.

"I can check out a hotel online, and the pictures may be beautiful, but that picture won't tell me that the resort is across the street from a strip club."

## Site Selection Help

The emergence of site-selection companies has also reduced the need for planners to go on site inspections, particularly for smaller programs, says Juntti, "but for the bigger programs, I still want to go on site and touch and feel it."

"A lot of people do find that they [site-selection companies] offer tremendous value," Lamagna agrees, but adds that sometimes these companies respond to requests so enthusiastically that they present meeting planners with too many choices. "You'll have to wade through more information than you really need."

Peter Shelly, executive vice president of Scottsdale, Ariz. — based HelmsBriscoe, a major site-selection

firm, points out that his company's business is up 40 percent over 2004 — “a good indication that companies are utilizing more third-party representation.”

Shelly says that when it comes to larger meetings, HelmsBriscoe clients, accompanied by HelmsBriscoe associates, choose to go on site inspections because of the size and magnitude of those meetings. But, on a day-to-day basis, when the meetings might involve a three-night stay with 175 rooms — the “average corporate meeting,” as he puts it — planners will often defer to HelmsBriscoe's expertise and skip the inspection.

“In our typical day, with a small or midsize meeting, our associate who deals with that client is usually empowered to make a selection on the client's behalf,” Shelly says.

When there is no budget to hire a site selection service, planners often turn to their peers — perhaps now more than ever. “It's really nice when you get a couple of people weighing in on a property — it seems like it's more non-biased,” says Juntti. “It also confirms what you think about some of the properties when you hear back from others. I just did a meeting in Miami and I put a note out on the MIMlist [the Meeting Industry Mall listserv at [www.mim.com](http://www.mim.com)] asking for comments about the property. The responses I got were pretty much in line with my feelings about the property, and based on that feedback and the objectives of the meeting, I decided the property was fine.”

## An Unintended Consequence?

As meeting departments consolidate, preferred vendor agreements can become part of the process. Along with the benefits of negotiating these agreements — discounted pricing, standard contracts, more efficiency — Judi McLaughlin, CMP, director, strategic sourcing for Maritz McGettigan in Philadelphia, points out that there is less need for site inspections.

“Preferred hotel programs will often limit the number of properties that a company chooses, and increase the use of and familiarity with properties included in the program,” she says.

On the flip side, preferred programs can keep planners from using unique, independent properties or those they might only use once. That type of property, McLaughlin says, “absolutely requires a site inspection to gain detailed product knowledge.”

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