

THE ART & SCIENCE OF SITE SELECTION

By Debbie Locklear

Selecting a site for a meeting or event is the most important, challenging and misunderstood phase in meeting planning. Since the space reserved and the flow of the meeting can enhance the program's objectives and interactions among people, site selection is important.

The challenging aspect of selecting a site is that many pieces of the project may be unknown. It becomes necessary to anticipate and visualize a variety of different structures. Many people misunderstand and the site selection process because they see it as a glorious opportunity to be wined and dined. In actuality, the process is a time-consuming, serious and often physically and mentally exhausting process.

Inspections require thoughtful advance preparation, thorough research, an eye for detail and when visiting sites in one day, an exceptional memory. The follow-up is critical in order to document the verbal commitments made by eager sales people. This step is vital because once in a contract is signed, any promises not recorded may be lost.

In order to conduct a successful inspection, it is necessary to know your group's strong and weak points, the objective and purpose, the budget and attendee needs and preferences. In addition, the number of guest rooms, date patterns and daily agendas are a vital need prior to the inspection. The set-up needs for each session help to secure the proper meeting space, taking into consideration ceiling heights, freight entrances, etc. A facility will also want to know guest room pick-up, rates, meal counts, master account charges and credit records.

Your job will be to find out the facilities' high, low and average rates, their occupancy levels at various times of the year and week. Inquire about the internal stability of the staff to provide an indication of the facility management.

When the actual tour of the property begins, look at the following areas on the way to and in the guest rooms:

- Quality of furniture
- Carpets
- Walls
- Lighting
- Fire Exits
- Elevator locations and capacities
- Ice and soda machine locations
- Directional signs
- General cleanliness and maintenance
- Hot and cold temperatures of water pressure
- Television, radio functions and features

Ask to see the worst room. Make note in your follow-up letter to avoid booking any of your guests in those rooms if necessary. Call the operator and see how long it takes to answer the phone.



As you enter the meeting area, look for the same things listed above but check inside a meeting room for the locations of light switches and outlets, low hanging chandeliers and distracting noises.

When air walls are used, ask for a guarantee to have space remaining between yours and another group's function.

During the inspection discover if the facility is union. If so, ask when contracts expire and what restrictions may affect your meeting. Find out what equipment is provided at no cost and the cost of other equipment you may need.

Inquire about other groups booked during your meeting. This will give you your first indication of whether you need to be concerned about an overbooked situation. If there is potential to overbook, ask what the procedure is in that case. Generally, the facility will pay for transportation to and from the other property and the overnight room. Be sure to confirm this in writing.

A costly item for the planner is food and beverage. Evaluate these prices by asking the cost of a gallon of coffee. Knowing the range is normally \$15 to \$30 you can make a quick judgment. Ask for a mid-range lunch and dinner price to get a general sense of the way their costs will match with your budget.

If you are planning a few years in advance, make the current menus a part of the contract with a statement that limits the price increases to some predetermined percentage.

When you have gathered this information from every property under consideration, the final step is to check a few references. Request the names of three groups of similar size and have met there in the last three months. This limits the facilities' ability to give you their best references.

At this point you are armed to go into negotiations with the facilities you feel are best suited for your meeting. The negotiating process requires a certain amount of knowledge, patience and follow-up. Many of your findings during the site inspection can be favorable when contracted properly.

If the site inspection is conducted with these things in mind, you will ultimately save time and gain well-deserved respect for a professional approach.