

TECHNOLOGY TOOLS TO FIND A MEETING LOCATION:
SITE SELECTION, INSPECTIONS, AND RFPs

MEETING LOGISTICS

One of the top industry uses of the Internet by meeting professionals is in conducting site research. Thankfully, a number of highly useful Web sites can assist you with finding a site and submitting a request for proposal (RFP) online. Today, varying degrees of information and functionality can be found



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on sites hosted by convention and visitor bureaus, hotel chains, and third-party providers.

The potential cost and time savings in utilizing site selection Web sites can be dramatic. Indeed, use of these sites can be a win-win scenario for both planners and suppliers. Consider the case below.

In Lisa's own words. "I was given the task by my boss of gathering information on four different sites, for our organization to vote on for our upcoming Spring meeting. I was to plug them into a spreadsheet, so that he could review the information and pick one particular hotel from each location. The four cities were Charleston, S.C.; Charlotte, N.C.; Hilton Head, S.C.; and Savannah, Ga.," Lisa explained.

"The parameters I was given for the meeting were: a nightly hotel rate of \$100 or less; a quality hotel in a quality location; a restaurant, pool, and fitness room on-site; and, of course, meeting space for classroom- or chevron-style seating for 60 to 70 people."

The steps Lisa took. "I began by going to the Internet and pulling up a travel Web site, getting some hotel information and then contacting the hotel by telephone to interview the sales department. I had made quite a few phone calls to hotels, only to find out that they did not have appropriate meeting space or on-site restaurants. And sometimes I didn't find out about the site specifics until I received the sales packet from the hotel. Of course, little did I know that this project of 'gathering information' would take approximately one week and cause me more aggravation than needed."

To Lisa's credit she sought out a course on meeting management sponsored by the University of Georgia.

Lisa explains her recent experience: "I am taking a Meeting Management Certificate Program with the University of Georgia's Continuing Education Department, with E.J. Siwek, CMP, teaching one of my classes. Much to my

surprise, I learned that there is a Web site that would have done all of the work for me — well, most of the work. It wouldn't have negotiated my BEOs for me, but it would have saved me four days!"

The bottom line. The internal cost of Lisa's experience was probably in the range of \$1,000 in staff time consumed on the organization's end, and probably \$1,000 on the facility side in the costs in pulling information, phone calls, material and package costs, and time required.

Unfortunately, this situation happens every minute of the day throughout our industry.

SITE SELECTION WEB SITES

All site selection Web sites provide users with **free access** to all online information upon providing a user name and password. Some sites will query users on their organization demographics as well as meeting specific information. In addition, third-party providers offer functions beyond site selection and RFP planning. On these robust sites, registered users can participate in online auctions of available space, submit meeting specifications for third-party processing, participate in chat rooms, catch up on industry news, and more.

All of the sites offer a **search utility** of one design or another. In general, you can find a property by clicking on a map or region of the world or by providing a brand name, city, or region in which you are searching for available space.

On some sites, secondary filters allow you to select a facility based on variables such as the number of sleeping rooms, size and amount of meeting space, and location within a venue, such as airport, downtown, or resort location.

The end result is that meeting professionals can quickly identify potential space that meets their primary needs. **Added functionality** will allow planners to drill down into a facility and review room diagrams and view menus, site and venue amenities, and

attractions. Advanced sites even provide virtual tours of select property space and 3-D views of function space. These virtual site inspections are a good way to assess public space and general facility appearances.

Not only will these site selection utilities identify potential properties, but reporting options allow users to build comparison reports to quickly align properties that meet primary needs — and for review by other staff or decision-makers.

Unfortunately, the users of site selection Web sites often stop short of utilizing powerful online modules for **submitting an RFP**, a cost- and time-saving function available on some sites. By using an online RFP utility, the meeting professional can effortlessly submit RFPs to a single site, to a national sales office, or to all facilities identified in the search.

A simple analogy: A person drives his car into a gas station, only to stop short and fill up by using a portable gas container. If the functionality exists, stopping short simply does not make sense unless you are under a very tight decision timeline. In defense of the meeting planner who requires almost instant response, facilities will normally take one to three days to respond to an online-submitted RFP. (However, thanks to technologies like those deployed in San Diego, which take advantage of the power of Net-MarketPlace, facilities can quickly route and respond to electronic inquiries. As result, response time will only improve. See p. 13.)

Within an RFP communication, the meeting professional can provide organization background and specific meeting requirements, including audiovisual, food and beverage, and meeting/session timeframes. In reality, the more information provided upfront, the better a facility can match or exceed meeting needs. In addition, planners can place date options, provide contact preferences, and actually commit to a firm booking.

Is one site better than another? Are any sites more complete than others? Is

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for Implementing an Online Meeting Planning Tool (while saving your organization as much money as possible)

1 Get senior management support. This is the single most important thing you can do for the implementation. The fastest way to get senior management's support is to show the savings potential. Once you have senior management support, get them to actively promote the tool throughout the company.

2 Find out everything you can about your meeting planners. Everyone fears change! Understand the technology comfort factor of your meeting planners and those who will use the system, and educate them on how the system can help them in their daily job.

3 Tailor your marketing message to different audiences. It's most effective to market the tool to at least three different audiences: meeting planners, key influencers (e.g., people and agencies meeting planners are most likely to look to for help), and management. Each one of these audiences has a different motivation. Tailor your messages to these motivations. Use a combination of informational messages and incentives. Keep your message succinct. Create a sense of enthusiasm.

4 Institute information sharing for internal use. Probably the most effective way to encourage adoption of an online tool is to help planners and their managers understand the potential savings from going online.

Savings are evident when information can be shared or re-used by downstream users like IT for list updates, PR for names of press to be in attendance, or Marketing for creating on-site focus groups or pre-conference polling.

5 Consider mandates within the context of your organization's culture. Usually the most effective way to encourage adoption is to mandate use of the tool. The more meetings that are planned online, the more information you will have to negotiate with suppliers, provide adequate support, and make appropriate policy decisions. However, consider your organization's culture. In some instances, mandates create even more resistance. At a minimum, mandate meeting registration in order to understand what meetings are being held and who's planning them.

6 Develop champions. Pilot the tool with a small group of influential users. Provide them with very thorough training. Encourage them to help others learn how to use the tool after the pilot.

7 Help planners adjust to change. Most planners have invested much time and effort into developing relationships and tools that help them do their job better. Naturally, they will find it difficult to change how they do things. Others will find

the move to online threatening. Try to make the change to online tools as easy as possible. Provide training, help desk support, information about the objectives of the program, and incentives to alleviate planner concerns.

8 Combine travel and meeting consolidation programs. To get the most benefit out of your meetings consolidation program, it needs to act in concert with your overall travel consolidation program. Many organizations combine the travel and meeting planning departments under a single manager to facilitate a more coordinated approach. Others simply clarify the travel department's role in the meeting planning process, to manage attendee travel and supplier negotiations. The meeting planning department, which remains separate from travel, is then free to focus on higher valued-added activities.

9 Track and report results. Measure online adoption, savings, and user satisfaction. Report these metrics on a regular basis to management.

10 Be prepared to make changes over time. As users become more familiar with online tools, your approach may need to change.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Brian Ashton assisted in compiling this list. View www.GetThere.com.

information kept more up-to-date on one site than another? In general, yes! However, the unique needs of one planner or another also vary greatly. What may be useful to you is not so with the next, so the ultimate requirement is whether or not a specific site meets your own individual needs.

What to look for in a site selection tool and RFP tool:

- >> Ease of navigation.
- >> Robust search criteria, including location, brand, price, meeting space.
- >> The total number of venues/properties listed on the site. This can vary site-to-site and is dependent on what information is listed free of charge and what is at a premium charge to the facility.
- >> Amenities and services available at a site.
- >> An active link to a facility's Web site.
- >> Access to floor plans, menus, meeting space capacities, and a meeting space calculator.
- >> Reporting options, including the capabilities to export select data and build comparison reports.
- >> Access to virtual tours and multimedia presentations.
- >> Access or ability to download a brochure or fact sheet on selected properties.
- >> An RFP module with criteria that provides for meeting pattern options, preferred and alternative date options, sleeping room block information, event and function requirements (including 24-hour hold requests and pre- and post-meeting staging requirements), and the option to note response and decision dates regarding the RFP.
- >> Ability to store and save specific search queries, save RFPs, and modify or update an RFP.

Using site selection utilities and RFP modules can result in dramatic time and cost savings. And once you start using these robust features, you can focus your time on marketing, content development, and other core meeting/event demands.

ROOM DIAGRAMMING

As a founding father of computerized room diagramming currently in use in the industry, I am a firm believer in this service. A picture is truly worth a thousand words wherever you are in the world! While industry space calculators can provide approximations, facilities are neither equally equipped nor designed. Computerized diagrams can be accurate to within a quarter of an inch!

What you should look for in a diagramming tool:

- >> Free software! Facilities pay enormous amounts of money to have their meeting and function space measured and should provide clients with access to this free software
- >> Can space be measured in metrics? This is important if you do international meetings
- >> Is equipment drawn by the diagramming tool scalable and represented in a metric scale?
- >> Is inventory, such as chairs and tables, drawn to scale?
- >> Are the rules of the industry — industry defaults such as two per 6-foot table, or placement of a seat in relation to audiovisual equipment — coded within the program? Equally important, can you override these defaults to accommodate overflow or to create non-traditional seating styles?
- >> Are accurate line-of-sight angles available? This is important in order to assess where first and last rows should be placed in a meeting room. Have these angles been updated for plasma screen output?
- >> Can you label items inside and outside of a room?
- >> Can you place equipment outside of a meeting room or in public spaces?
- >> Can you print an inventory report listing all equipment required?
- >> Can the software plan a variety of seating layouts, such as U-shape, hollow square, theater, chevron, and banquet seating styles? Can you create your

