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3 ways to make meeting planning easier

22 May 2013

When working with meeting planners, hoteliers need to offer options, alternatives, expertise and solutions.



Highlights

- One of the most important factors in repeat business is how well hotels treat meeting planners.
- Offer ideas and options for different ways to stage a meeting or a breakout session.
- In a seller's market, one of the worst things hotels can do is turn away business.

By Penny Fondy
HNN columnist

The voice on the phone starts asking questions. You start searching through the request or proposals that have backed up in your email and on your desk. Plus, you have a large corporate program and three smaller ones in house. You want to handle the caller—a new meeting planner—as quickly as you can and move on. Demand is high and there are only a few dates available on your calendar. Take it or leave it.

If this sounds like the scenario at your hotel, then you need to read this article. In a seller's market, one of the worst things hotels can do is turn away business. Planners are not a necessary evil in the process; they are business people who are the gatekeepers to the corporations they represent.

Think of it this way: Meetings and events are a \$130 billion-dollar industry. Interestingly, it's estimated that approximately 75% to 80% of those meeting have fewer than 50 attendees. That planner on the phone holds the key to your meetings and events business. It's easy to think



Penny Fondy

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of meeting planners as people who look for space, then focus on booking rooms and finalizing menus. In reality, if you don't satisfy them, you won't satisfy their clients.

In my experience as a meeting professional, one of the most important factors in repeat business is how well hotels treat me and my clients. That's what generates repeat business. Planners know what they need and the experience they expect. Give it to us, and we become very loyal. There are plenty of hotels that offer modern facilities, convenient locations and technical support, but it comes down to an attitude of service, flexibility and the commitment to becoming a partner in client satisfaction.

The big demands are obvious, but here are three things that will help make you a lifesaver to meeting planners.

1. Offer suggestions for unique, effective and memorable room setups.

Offer ideas and options for different ways to stage a meeting or a breakout session.

After you ask the size of the audience, the next question to ask is, "What will the audience be doing during the meeting?" The room arrangement should be based on the content the client needs to deliver and not on the tables and chairs you have available.

Think eye contact and not capacity:

- Outside, at the patio or around the pool;
- Near windows; and
- in the presidential suite.

Offer ways to avoid the "meeting in a cave," and you will help make any meeting planner look like an all-star.

2. Offer alternatives and suggestions if you don't have requested dates and space.

Your business objective is maximum space utilization and revenue generation. Meeting planners and their clients have different objectives, and you have to put them first. Even though demand is high for your meeting and functions space, can you afford to walk away from future revenue? You never know what future business that customer might represent.

It may seem more efficient to say, "No, I'm sorry." But it's smarter to become a partner in finding a solution. Instead say, "Here are some options."

Is the customer open to alternative dates? Ask if the customer has any flexibility, then offer specific alternatives. Explain when the space is available and any other options for hosting the event. Be sure to suggest optional dates that give you the opportunity to offer lower pricing. Even if the planner says the program dates are not flexible, offer options.

In case you haven't already asked, make sure you understand what the customer needs. A reception for 200 isn't enough information. What is the client's goal? If you can offer solutions that allow the customer to accomplish their goals, then you have gone a long way in establishing or saving a relationship.

Be a partner in finding a solution at your property. Your goal is to move the event and save the business.

3. Be professional, understanding and courteous if something's not going to work in your hotel.

Not every request is going to be reasonable, profitable or doable. Before you assume that a planner is inexperienced, unrealistic or a "total flake," try to view things from the other perspective. In many cases, planners are passing along their client's specifications or requirements. When client demands exceed the normal scope of similar events, it might be because the client has new ideas they need to try. It may even be a test of your willingness, flexibility, organization and service.

Explain the situation, restrictions and any other factors before you deny the business. Be professional and courteous. You want to turn down a request, not the entire business.

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Here's a quick suggestion. If you get the same request more than once, consider it a trend. Look for ways to make it happen in the future. Is it something you can't do or is it something you don't want to do?

Collaborate for success

The key to becoming a lifesaver to planners is collaboration. They need options, alternatives, expertise and solutions. No one knows your property better than you do, and that makes you valuable. Understand their demands are just as important as the ones you face. It is then that you will become partners, handling those demands together—as well as generating repeat business for your hotel.

Penny is a meeting professional and event producer with a key role in the production of IHG's Americas Investors & Leadership Conference, an annual event for more than 6,000 IHG Owners, Operators and Suppliers. Penny has also produced client events, exhibits and promotional materials for ALIS, NYU and NABHOOD. As an account director for video production, Penny has been involved with production of videos across almost every hospitality subject, including: Service Training, Quality Inspections, Risk Management & Loss Prevention, IT, Food & Beverage, Reservations Training, New Product Launches and Menu Introductions, Development Videos for the Investor Community and Product Sales Videos for the Timeshare Owner Audience. A graduate of Furman University, Penny joined Wits' End Productions in 1995, and she was named a partner after five years. She has been an MPI member since 1999.

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