

## New Generation of Hospitality Sales Professionals Lesson #5: Site Inspections

*By David M. Brudney, ISHC, March 2007*

*(Fifth in a series)*

I used to love giving hotel tours. I walked my prospects everywhere, from the Presidential Suite down to the laundry room, whether they had any interest at all.

My thinking back then was that I would dazzle the prospects with my best-in-class tour and, of course, everyone would book right there on the spot.

That didn't work.

I realized soon that I was focusing too much on the tour and not enough on what it would take to close the business. I should have been closing from the very moment my prospect arrived and limit the tour to only those areas relevant to the decision.

That's not a problem for this new generation of hospitality Sales professionals because today's multi-tasking meeting planners don't have the time to spend on long, detailed hotel tours - - particularly so when the planner is considering more than one property in the same market.

Make no mistake, prospect and client tours of hotels are helpful to the Selling process, but they pale in comparison with the importance of the site inspection.

A tour can be with a planner that just happens to drop in, never having experienced your hotel. It could be with a regional or local office manager whose company has an event on the horizon. And sometimes it might involve a local host chapter president asked to check out a hotel under consideration by the association or society.

### ***Site Inspections Occur Mainly at the End of the Sales Cycle***

Tours of that nature typically take place at the very beginning of the Sales cycle. Site inspections, however, occur mainly at the very end of the Sales cycle.

Here are tasks either initiated or already in place prior to the actual site inspection:

- Relationship established between hotel and planner
- Hotel has correct information on subject group's past hotel usage history
- Proposal already issued

- Tentative booking on record, meeting and function space blocked
- Hotel aware planner may be holding tentative space at competitive hotels
- Proposal signed and returned, event considered definite subject to planner satisfaction with final site inspection

### *Successful Site Inspection Tips*

Site inspections, for hotels at least, are like making it to “The Final Four” in college basketball. Much can be at stake. Expectations are high. Pressure can be enormous. Here are a few suggestions for today’s hospitality Sales pros that might help make the site inspection more successful and a “win-win” situation for hotel and planner alike:

**Do your homework.** Be prepared. Leave no stone unturned. Master the group’s history. What is it about your hotel that makes it attractive to the planner and the attendees? What venues and activities outside the hotel would be most popular? Would the attendees choose to return? What are the needs and expectations of the group and planner? What are the real hot buttons? What can you (and your hotel) do to help make the planner look good (and be praised by her/his direct reports and attendees for selecting your hotel)? Where did the group experience its very best meeting and why? Worst meeting? What worked well, what did not?

**Planner may not come alone.** Be prepared for surprises. Sometimes, without notice, the planner will arrive with “VIP guests”. Guests might include the planner’s spouse or significant other (never underestimate that power of influence!), direct report (CEO, COO or Executive Director), a local chapter potential host, or a manager of a corporate regional or local office. Site selection committee inspections are normally scheduled long in advance and the hotel should be aware of the committee member’s name and contact info in advance. Contact and personal Sales calls with committee members should be the rule of the day prior to the site inspection, with the approval, of course, of the planner and/or subject organization.

**Think like a meeting planner.** It’s always a good idea to put you in the shoes of the planner (and her/his party). Time of day planner will arrive? How far will planner be traveling that day? If by air, limo or private automobile airport pickup arrangements confirmed? How many hotels and possible venues will the site inspection entail? Will your hotel be first on the stop? If not, in what order will you be? What part or event at your hotel will the planner be eager to see and experience most? Make certain planner establishes a relationship with convention service personnel. Will the planner be able to manage the entire tour physically (without assistance)? Show the property, sit and talk or sit, talk and eat, which should come first? Translator needed?

**Customize.** With so much at stake, it becomes imperative to make the site visit “relevant”. If meeting and function space remain an issue in the decision making, be sure to preset the ballroom as close to how the planner envisions, or preset the conference or breakout rooms to the planner’s exact specifications (schoolroom, u-shape, conference or theater style), and then take the planner directly to the

appropriate venue. Perhaps the planner has concerns about the block of guestrooms reserved for planner's staff or rooms negotiated at lower rates for some attendees. Take the planner directly to one or two of your lowest rack rated rooms with the least attractive location so you can put that issue behind (make sure those rooms "shine").

**Showtime.** This is showtime for you and your hotel. Site inspections afford hotels opportunities to dazzle in the presentation. Show your stuff. As Dave Evans would say, "dare to be different." Send the planner a roundtrip airline ticket. Make a big splash at the airport pickup (general manager opens the vehicle door). Put out a welcome sign at the entrance or in the lobby (hotel policy allowing). Place a special gold star on the planner's lapel or have a photo and short bio of the planner and the group distributed to all departments prior to planner's arrival. Literally, roll out the red carpet. Have the bell staff, door persons and valet parking team lined up at attention. Should the site schedule include a meal at your hotel, serve it at a lone table smack in the middle of your ballroom or at the Chef's Table. Select a special entrée that is a favorite of the planner or the group's. Have fun and make it fun!

**Prepare the team.** The Sales pro should take task ownership of seeing to it that the entire hotel team is prepared for the important site visit. Executive Committee and department head meetings are the best place to start. Put photos in place for all employees to see. Do whatever necessary to stress the importance of the visiting planner and the site inspection itself. And remember, too, everyone needs to put their best foot forward here. Nothing turns off a planner faster than observing a real disconnect - - or dislike - - between departments and individual employees.

**"One last thing"**. No matter how well prepared you are, there's always going to be that "one last thing" to check. Something overlooked. Be sure and check the preset meeting and banquet rooms personally. Check the planner's guestroom or suite personally. Walk the property one more time. Pick up any last minute litter under the porte cochere. Check the mirror: is your "game face" on?

**Takeaways.** Don't forget to record digital camera highlights of the visit delivered to the planners lap top for downloading on the plane ride home. I'm betting the planner will distribute it to the planner's board or CEO - - especially, if you got the business.

### ***Meeting Planner Closing Story***

Let's close with a story that has been shared among planners worldwide ever since groups began booking meetings and conventions at hotels, but still worth repeating.

A meeting planner has a dream about arriving in Heaven and being greeted warmly by St. Peter. The planner tours Heaven in a chauffeur-driven limo, is treated to a magnificent 5-star restaurant lunch and then visits the planner's new home, an 8,000 s.f., 5-bedroom estate, complete with maids, a chef, putting green and Mercedes.

A few weeks later, the planner is involved in a car accident, is pronounced dead at the scene and winds up at the Pearly Gates for real this time. Behind the gate waits a bad attitude driver in an ugly duckling golf cart for the planner's tour of Heaven. After stopping for lunch at a seedy hot dog stand the tour passes the planner's new home, a run-down trailer with broken windows with a goat and stove in the front yard.

The planner arrives back at the main gate and says to St. Peter, "I don't understand, in my dream, Heaven was nothing like this. I had this beautiful estate and now I have a run-down trailer with broken windows."

"That was a site inspection," said St. Peter.

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What's next? Sales Lesson #6 will address the importance of relationship building.

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