

Cut Costs, Not Quality – Five Tips for Saving Money on your Next Meeting

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#1 START WITH A GOOD HOTEL CONTRACT

The foundation to a profitable meeting is a good hotel contract. Know your group's history before locking in a room block and food and beverage minimum. Your contacted block should reflect your actual pick-up from the most recent meeting, while taking into consideration the fluctuation that can result from an East Coast vs. West Coast pattern and the location of the meeting. You will want to be more conservative with your room block if the host hotel is in a city center where there are many other hotels within close walking proximity and less conservative if you are in a secluded resort location with few overflow options.

Strive for a guest room commitment of 80% cumulative pick-up of your block (20% allowable attrition) with review dates where you can release additional room nights without penalty. Always try to make the contracted food and beverage minimum lower than you actually think you will spend to allow flexibility if your attendance numbers drop from one year to the next. Contracted F&B minimums usually are exclusive of tax and service so be prepared that the actual amount you are committed to spend is that minimum dollar amount plus approximately another 30% for tax and service charges. Tax and service charges on food and beverage easily and quickly add thousands of dollars. Ask the hotel to lock in a minimum that is inclusive of tax and service when you are negotiating the contract.

The contract is also the time to negotiate money saving, value-added concessions including: discounted staff and speaker rooms, 1/40

comps, complimentary meeting space, suite upgrades, complimentary airport transportation for staff and VIPs, among others. Be realistic in what you can expect to negotiate. Groups with larger room blocks have more leverage than smaller room blocks.

#2 GO ELECTRONIC

Avoid printing and mail costs, while also being environmentally friendly, by going electronic. Meeting promotions such as save the date postcards and conference brochures get as much bang for their buck by being electronic and posted to the group's website and distributed via blast emails. Another plus for going electronic with your conference brochure is that the information in it always stays current. If a speaker cancels and is replaced by someone else, that information can be instantly captured in the PDF of the brochure. Going electronic also saves the printing cost and waste of speaker handouts and evaluations.

Gone are the days of massive three ring binders with speaker handouts. Post the handouts online via a password protected page of the group's website. Have attendees download handouts and print what they want. Speaker evaluation can be conducted electronically following the meeting. Electronic evaluation not only saves printing and paper, but if you enlist a service like Survey Monkey, the results are instantly tabulated, saving hours of manual tallying.

#3 IMPLEMENT TIERED REGISTRATION FEES

Tiered registration fees are a win-win; they help the members and your group. Early, Ad-

vanced, and Onsite (or Late) registration fees help the planner lock in solid guarantees and reduce the guessing game for over or under ordering while also giving an incentive to the members. Early fees should be the most discounted. Sometimes the early fees are equivalent to the prior meeting's pricing (i.e. "Lock in the 2009 registration rates for 2010 if you register by December 31."). Those who sign up with this early rate will likely also make their hotel reservations, allowing the organization to project the pick-up of the block early on. Advanced fees are not quite as discounted as the early fee, but they are certainly less than the late or onsite rate and provide a worthwhile incentive for registering early. The deadline for the advance fee should be tied into the cut-off date at the hotel, roughly four weeks from the meeting date. The intent is that a large majority of your meeting attendees will register at either the early or advanced rate so that the meeting manager can have solid projections for head counts when submitting the banquet event orders to the hotel and ordering meeting collateral. Onsite or late registration fees are assessed closest to the onset of the meeting. The onsite fee is the highest registration fee. The higher onsite fee is beneficial to groups who typically have a good deal of local attendees who are within close driving distance to the venue. Increased onsite registrations can dramatically change meal guarantees or room sets. A higher onsite fee will offset these extra last minute costs and inconveniences.

#4 SECRETLY SCALE BACK ON FOOD AND BEVERAGE

Meeting planning is a blend of art and science. The hard science of ordering strictly by the numbers blends into an art when you learn how to get creative to scale back on food and beverage. Buffet meals allow flexibility in the meal guarantees that plated meals do not. If you have a function where you have the additional time needed for buffet service, this will help you to keep costs down. Hotels always have more food than you need on a buffet which allows you to guarantee under your expected atten-

dance and rest assured that the food will stretch. Be sure the buffets are double sided and that you have buffets set in several locations of the room to avoid long lines and crowds.

Skip the bottled water and opt for water stations or water service instead. Bottled water is easily \$5 or more a bottle once tax and service is included – water stations are free. Be sure to ask for glasses at your water stations instead of plastic cups to reduce waste. Also, opt for glass coffee cups at your coffee stations and forgo “to go” coffee cups. Not only are “to go” cups bad for the environment, they are bigger than the glass mugs so attendees drink more coffee with each cup they have. Another way to cut F&B cost is by being a picky eater. Rather than ordering items directly from the banquet menus, work with your Convention Services Manager to create menu options that fit into your budget. Don't be afraid to name your price and ask the hotel to create a menu that fits within that limit. It may mean offering one type of salad at the deli

buffet instead of three kinds, but the attendees will never know what was eliminated if you get creative with what you do serve them.

#5 AV FOR AMATEURS – IT'S NOT JUST FOR TECHIES

The Society for Social Work Leadership in Health Care saves a substantial amount of money on their audiovisual for their Annual Conference by having various Conference Committee Board members bring and lend their LCD projectors to the conference. SS-WLHC has five concurrent sessions – a projector is borrowed for each of those sessions. The business card of the owner is taped to the outside of the projector case so we can be sure that the equipment gets back to its rightful owner at the end of the conference. The AV technicians take the projectors at the hotel pre-conference and they kindly set up, break down and secure the projectors each day of the meeting, returning them upon adjournment. Since AV techs do not have to be re-

sponsible for equipment that does not belong to them, in exchange, each technician is tipped as a way to acknowledge their willingness to go above and beyond.

LCD projectors are typically rented for \$300-\$500 per projector, per room per day. Having volunteers who have the opportunity to borrow projectors from their places of employment can trim thousands of dollars from association's annual conference AV budget. Another trick to containing AV costs is to offer a standard AV set for every room (for example, a screen, microphone, LCD projector). Let speakers know what this standard set is and encourage them to work within that. Additional equipment will be available to the speaker only upon request by a set deadline. And lastly, when AV sets differ per room, assign concurrent session meeting rooms not only to the size of the audience but also according to AV needs so the equipment is already in the room and you aren't paying for it more than once. ■