



Site Inspections – Boondoggle or Boon Redux A fresh look at the true value of a site inspection By Joanne Ireland, President of Ireland Presentations

When I first wrote about site inspections several years ago, I drew on my own personal experience as well as industry best practices. In working with clients and venues over the past few years, I have seen several important changes in the way things work, so I took this opportunity to update the article with fresh ideas and new concepts.

Occasionally I meet with a client who is planning a meeting or event, but balks at the notion of having me perform a site inspection. The rationalization goes like this: “There’s no need for you to fly out to City X to do site inspections, is there? After all, we more or less know where the meeting should take place. A recognized chain or major hotel in the middle of the city – there are only four or five possibilities, so just pick the best one. No need to spend the time or money for you to go there in person.”

Poor client – they don’t understand that there is probably no better way to spend time and money than to do a proper site inspection. In fact, it’s my opinion that if a planner doesn’t do a live site inspection, they are not doing their job in finding the right venue for their client’s meeting. In today’s world of the internet most of the pertinent information can be obtained online for hotels and venues, or by receiving a proposal in response to the RFP we distribute. Websites are all about the pretty pictures and featuring the best side of the property, but that’s not always the reality. What you don’t get online or through a few phone calls with the sales manager is the “real” experience of the property.

Naturally, we do our homework to develop a list of potential properties and distribute a detailed Request for Proposal (RFP). Once we have received all proposals we short-list properties that met our initial criteria – preferred dates, rates, availability of sleeping rooms, meeting and meal space, amenities and the like. We can also find out, through corresponding with the sales manager, cost estimates for initial budgets, whether the property is planning any renovations during our desired time period, and what other groups might be in-house at the time.

But only a site inspection can answer the deeper questions that relate to the ultimate success of the event: the staff, the sleeping rooms, the meeting rooms, and overall atmosphere and ambiance of the venue. Let’s face it – many properties look good on paper or online, but the in-person visit tells the real story. Even if you have stayed at a property in the past, things might have changed – staff or ownership changes, more wear and tear is showing, renovation projects current or planned – nothing stays the same forever. Most importantly, each client and program has specific requirements that must be factored in and should be looked at individually with a fresh set of eyes – what was good in a venue for a program last year might not work for a new client’s program in six months.

When I conduct site inspections I follow a detailed methodology that includes several aspects of the property, to give me a strong feeling for the best venue that will satisfy the needs of my client and their program. Let’s face it – they are spending a lot of money on their event and it’s our job as the planner to ensure that they get the right venue for the overall success of the event.

First Impressions

I observe the outside of the hotel and its surrounding neighborhood to see what the first impression will be, not only by my client but their attendees as well. I check the registration area, the lobby and its décor and overall cleanliness and condition. Even if you have an older property, you can tell if it’s being well maintained, updated or refurbished or if there is noticeable deferred maintenance. Is the lobby

furniture and carpet worn, tattered or dirty, the elevators scarred, or takeout food boxes left around? I'm looking at who's in the lobby and restaurants – I want to see what type of clientele the property attracts. I also watch the hotel staff in all areas we pass to see how they interact with guests. I'm impressed with properties that have trained all of their staff – from housekeepers to engineers making repairs in a guestroom – on the power of a warm greeting. This lets the guests know their business is appreciated and they are welcome.

Sales Manager and Staff

It's important that either I or one of my staff have at least one or two, if not several, conversations with the sales manager who responded to our RFP prior to my site visit. But it's really the on-site meeting that can make or break the opportunity to short-list a property. During the one-on-one time it's always interesting to see how the relationship with your sales manager develops, or in some cases under-develops. The amount of time they spend with you, the space they show you, how they answer your questions, who else you meet along the way. Will you meet the executive chef (especially if they know your client has specific requirements about meals such as sustainability, organic or other preferences) or your conference services manager if they are awarded the business? Will the director of sales or general manager make an appearance? Believe it or not, all of this is very important – it tells me if they have been listening and if they understand my program requirements. And it is a good indicator of how important your business is to them, as well as how you and your guests will be treated once that contract is signed and you're on property.

Sleeping Rooms

Sleeping rooms are very important to all of my clients. Layout and size of the rooms are key – is there an adequate work space with easy access plugs for all of our electronics these days? Can you move around with ease? Is there an additional sitting area, and adequate closet space? At the same time I'm looking at the overall condition of the room. I'm not only looking to see if the room appears clean, but I look at the soft goods to see if they are old, stained or frayed. Are the air conditioning/heating ducts clean or filled with dust (a personal pet peeve). Is the room tastefully appointed – color palette and furniture selection, bright and enjoyable to be in? And the bathroom – is it larger than a breadbox? Has it been updated and when? Does it have adequate counter space to lay out your toiletries? Are the bathtub/shower tiles clean?

And let's not forget the internet. Attendees of business meetings always need 24x7 high speed internet. I make sure to ask when it was last updated, how fast it is, what the daily or multi-day cost is, and of course, can that cost be negotiated or even waived for a group?

A few other things I consider: What are the hours for room service and restaurants? Is there a fitness center and is there a use fee? What are the hours? How close are the sleeping rooms to the meeting space? So many things to consider but all very important to determine if the property is a good fit for your program or not.

Meeting & Function Space

My visual inspection of the meeting space includes much of what I've already been looking at – general condition of the space including when it was last updated, condition of both hard and soft goods. But just as important, does it meet the requirements of my client such as natural light, size and ceiling heights, "usability" of the space (are there pillars or is the room an odd shape), can it accommodate our AV needs, how updated are the air walls and are they soundproof? What's around it – other meeting rooms with other groups, the catering kitchen, pool area or kids club, a garden or a parking lot? So important to me: the overall layout of all of the meeting space – how efficient is the floor plan for all of our space needs including meal service? Are we in one area or do I need to move my attendees around the hotel, even to multiple floors? How would other groups in-house intermingle with our group?

I also make sure that I have seen ALL of the meeting space that could accommodate my event/meeting (even if it “might” not be available on my preferred dates). And, most importantly, has the space I’m looking at, seen and like, been put “on-hold” for my group or are other sales managers still trying to “sell” it even while I’m standing there? Don’t assume that it’s all being held for you unless you specifically ask for it!

Transportation

If guests are local, I check to see if there is adequate parking available, and the cost. In some of the larger cities, valet parking can cost as much as \$50 per night at the property, but there might be a public lot next door or self-parking for less than half that amount. If there are other events planned for the same time, is there enough parking for everyone? It’s very frustrating when your guests arrive at a meeting only to be greeted with a sign at the parking lot that says “Parking Full – Overnight Guests Only”. If guests will travel from afar, does the hotel offer shuttle service to/from the airport? If not, can private shuttle service, taxis or a car service be pre-arranged? What are the costs likely to be? And what is the transfer time from the airport to the venue?

Wrap-up and Scoring

Expenses are important, and it is crucial to ensure that the client’s budget will not be exceeded. But that’s only part of the equation. In order to ensure an optimal event and a very satisfied client, I need to balance the total estimated expenses against the suitability of location, accessibility, comfort, cleanliness, ambiance and overall feel of the venue. By seeing the property, meeting the staff, asking the right questions, requesting documented proof of past performance, and most of all carefully observing during a site inspection, I can make the best recommendation for my client, their event and their guests. This is why an in-person site inspection, by someone who knows what to look for and what questions to ask, is one of the most crucial, and financially responsible, elements of the entire planning process.

There is so much value I place on a live site inspection – and so much to be gained. My expectation is that by the end of my site trip I will be ready to short-list the properties that I will recommend to my client (even though there may be more tweaking to the proposal or concessions or other areas). But I’ll know which property is a good fit and which property wants to partner with me to make the program happen.

On the flip side of this question, and to be fair to the hotels, there must also be expectations of the planner requesting a site inspection. They need to come prepared to spend the time needed to fully evaluate a property. If you have a planner who is visiting 3 or 4 properties but is going to take 3 or 4 days or a week to do it because they need “down time,” are spending a lot of time at the spa (at the hotel’s expense) or sightseeing then I think you have to ask yourself the question “What is the real intention of this site inspection — boondoggle or boon?”

About the Author:

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