

Flexible, Communicative with Meeting Planners Hotels Need to Be

Relationships Could Be More Important in Demand Downturn

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From the devastating shutdowns and effects of COVID-19 on the travel industry to the ever-possible threat of a full-blown economic recession and lowered demand, there are constant challenges keeping hoteliers on their toes.

One way to help ensure meetings business is by working effectively with meeting planners who can bring numerous groups to hotels — especially now that people are back to hitting the road for their companies and business travel is rebounding. Meeting planners work with all sizes of companies and associations in just about every industry, and those who are top in their field can become one of the best working partners to the hospitality industry. Cultivating and preserving your relationships with planners now and in the future is especially important to locking in potentially years' worth of group business as a safety valve as the industry faces the threats of a broad economic downturn and drop in demand.

In addition, internal meeting planners within an organization not only help with a group base, meeting, and food-and-beverage revenues, but they are also a great resource to help hotels understand the company's total travel needs such as business travel, relocation, project assignments and training, helping the hotel build top-line revenues, said Kim Knop, vice president of sales and marketing for the McNeill Hotel Company.

Meeting planning thought leaders look for more beyond square footage and airport proximity these days, said Steve Goodman, managing director, MeetingAdvice, a meetings and event management company.

"Anyone in the industry can inquire about a property electronically, so it's more important than ever for hotels to distinguish themselves by making the 'it' factor obvious. While we perform extensive research in selecting a venue, hotels can amp up their unique appeal against competitors by forging solid relationships with meeting planners through transparency and communications to match the needs and desires of the planner's group," Goodman said.

To ensure that the space will suit their client's needs, hotels should make capabilities and venue information available before the request-for-proposals process begins. Beyond that, ensuring the planner has a go-to point of contact for the entire process, from booking to execution, provides a seamless experience. Delivering more hospitality than they expect and communicating clearly and proactively aid in fostering deeper relationships with planners. In addition, hotels should frame the property's city as

the destination and think like a guest. You can also partner with your local convention and visitors bureau to feature your venue on sites planners use to research. Once you've partnered with a qualified planner, work with the convention and visitors bureau to host a destination preview or familiarization trip to set your space apart, Goodman said.

"Hotels should understand what is important to the meeting planner and work to meet their top needs, such as budget, location and event space. Flexibility to customize the hotel proposal based on what the planner is looking to secure is key in getting the business," Knop said.

Communication is vital to help build the partnership, Knop added. Hotels can offer creative meeting packages, including food and beverage, audio-visual setup and meeting space to streamline pricing, making it easy for the meeting planner to do business with the property. Providing incentives, such as offering event planner loyalty points and commissions, can also be a good negotiation tool. Personalizing the proposal through a video email will help to make the connection with a customer, she said.

"Understanding the customer's overall goal of their meeting will help the hotel understand what is important to the planner, and timely follow-up by the hotel is essential in gathering all their meeting details, and meeting these expectations will be a key factor in building the relationship," she added.

For hotels to benefit the most from their relationship with meeting planners, both parties should share needs and capabilities in an open and honest relationship, said Gary Spencer, Aimbridge Hospitality's senior vice president of corporate sales strategy.

"Customers' needs have changed," he said. "Meeting budgets are varied based on industries and economies, and hotel capabilities and availability vary city to city. Up-front expectation conversations yield the best results for all involved."

Offering meeting planners flexibility is key, since they may have last-minute changes or requests. It is also a good idea to reach out by phone to personally introduce yourself and ask further questions that may not be listed on the RFP or initial inquiry, said Jean Firestone, director of sales at Homewood Suites By Hilton San Diego/Del Mar.

In a possible recession, hotels can attract the attention of meeting planners by offering value-added promotions, such as discounted room rates, complimentary meeting space or free meals. Additionally, offering unique and memorable experiences, such as site tours or team-building activities, can make the hotel stand out from the competition, Firestone said.

"To preserve relationships with meeting planners, hoteliers should prioritize open and transparent communication, even if it means delivering difficult news; honesty and integrity go a long way in building trust and respect in the industry," Firestone said. "It's also crucial to remain flexible and adaptable in face of unexpected challenges or changes."

Going forward, hotels' relationships with meeting planners are likely to become more digital and data-driven, Firestone said. Meeting planners are increasingly using technology to search for and book hotels, and hotels that invest in digital marketing and tools to streamline the planning process will likely have an advantage. Additionally, sustainability and diversity are becoming increasingly important considerations for meeting planners, and hotels that prioritize these values may have a competitive edge.

John Brosnan, regional vice president of sales for First Hospitality, said it's important to understand meeting planners' needs and their groups' objectives. This can be achieved by conducting in-depth pre-planning sessions with the meeting planner and key hotel leadership, such as director of sales, general manager, executive chef, banquet manager and sales manager. Practices like this reinforce all stakeholders' responsibilities, allows for enhanced collaboration and ensure alignment in the execution of the meeting.

"Flexibility, performance and understanding what success looks like to the organizer is essential," Brosnan said.

Nancy Alonzo, corporate director of sales at the Valencia Hotel Group, said the relationship between hotels and meeting planners is symbiotic.

"In order for continued success, hotels need meeting planners and meeting planners need hotels," she said. "With that mindset, the understanding that each is an extension of the other will allow a successful partnership that will benefit the end user — which is the client who ultimately pays that invoice."

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