

Meeting Trends

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Real Change in Washington... for Government Meetings

Several new developments last year indicate that the federal government and, specifically, The General Services Administration (GSA), is recognizing the volume of government meetings occurring in the marketplace and the need to make it easier for federal agencies to buy the right meeting product at the right price.

The first such indication was when GSA announced Fedrooms (www.fedrooms.com) would be offering its services to the group market. Originally called the Federal Premiere Lodging Program, Fedrooms has historically been the resource for individual government travelers to secure hotel rooms for business travel. Prices are based on per diem rates, set by GSA each year, and terms include a variety of special concessions. An estimated 11,000 hotels worldwide participate in the Fedrooms program and are now also eligible to receive and book group programs as well.

Another interesting development at GSA directly related to the conference market is the soon-to-be-created “conference facilities” SIN (Special Item Number) on GSA’s Multiple Award Schedule Contract (GSA Schedule) program. Purchases by the federal government must follow proper procurement procedures. For example, all federal agencies must obtain a minimum of three bids to ensure they are receiving the best possible terms and price.

Since this process can be quite cumbersome and detailed, GSA created the “GSA Schedule” to help make the process easier. If the buyer needs copy paper, computers or office furniture, a federal procurement officer may simply log on to GSA’s e-buy, complete an RFP indicating the appropriate SIN number, and provide all approved vendors the opportunity to bid on the request. This much simpler process helps ensure the buyer is getting a quality product at pricing and terms that are better than the commercial market is offered.

SIMPLIFIED MEETING BUYS

However, there is no SIN category for hotels or conference facilities. Historically, government purchases in this area have been controlled by per diem rates set annually for each county or market area, based on that market’s competitive rate structure. Soon, government meeting planners will be able to submit RFPs for conferences via GSA’s e-buy, making buying meetings much simpler. In November 2009, The National Conference Center was the first facility to be accepted to the GSA Schedule based on strong past performance in hosting government meetings and their offer to ensure competitive pricing to government markets. The number of facilities in this new “conference facilities” category with GSA will grow, creating the opportunity for

government meetings to be purchased quickly, easily, and at the best rates and terms available.

Over the past several years, with the weak economy causing many association meetings to shrink and some corporate meetings to disappear, many hotels, resorts and conference centers have shifted strategy to court the government meetings market. As times get better, some properties will return to re-emerging, higher-rated markets, while others may continue to see the benefits of the very large, yet cost-conscious, federal meetings market.

GOVERNMENT MEETING TIPS

- **Know the rules.** Understand what can and cannot be paid for. Most agencies and departments will not pay for alcohol or food at receptions, and many can’t pay for refreshment breaks. Conference centers, which offer a complete meetings package, often have an advantage on the latter. NOTE: Not all agencies have the same rules, so be sure to ask.
- **Understand the per diem and how it works.** The General Services Administration (GSA) sets competitive rates for federal travel including hotel room rates and meal allowances. Go online to confirm what is allowed in your area and in the areas where you compete (<http://www.gsa.gov/portal/category/21287>).
- **Study the procurement process.** Often you

will be working with program staff that directs the meeting or conference, but eventually, the final decision rests in the hands of a procurement officer. Just as in other markets, you need to know who you are talking to and where they fit in the decision-making process. In the federal government, you must be careful to respect the position of the procurement officer.

- **Use your resources.** Carralls Publishing is a valuable (although somewhat expensive) online directory of the federal government. If used consistently and correctly, it can be a critical resource. In addition, websites such as Federal Business Opportunities (<https://www.fbo.gov/>) are extremely helpful in finding new programs on which to bid.
- **Know and use ranks.** In the military especially, personnel work hard for their rank, so show them proper respect. Are you dealing with a general or a lieutenant? It’s useful information to recognize and honor. AC&F

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