

Taking Meetings Seriously

Why Business Is Better Than Ever at Purpose-Built Properties

Misfortune for some sectors of the economy in the past few years led to a mini-boom for conference centers. And many of them have not only survived during the recession, but flourished, building their business in the process.

"The Fall of 2008 was certainly a painful catharsis for all of us in this industry," says Bob Nelson, general manager of the Wyndham Virginia Crossings Hotel & Conference Center in Glen Allen, VA. "First there was the AIG Effect. Then the collapse of Lehman Brothers...and pretty much the rest of the economy with it. But, interestingly, those events

actually served to spark increased interest in conference centers. Many corporations began shunning meeting venues with more-glamorous images, for fear of public perception." Case in point: The Wyndham Virginia Crossings has been seeing 11 percent year-to-year increases.

Upward Trend

Tom Bolman, executive vice president of the International Association of Conference Centres (IACC), says that meetings business at conference centers is projected to increase by 3-5 percent this year and 5-7 percent for 2012.

Nonetheless, Bolman explains, the recession has created some changes that may be permanent, among them more regional meetings, where attendees can drive in.

"And we're seeing the disappearance of some of the old misperceptions," he says. "Conference centers were once considered sterile and institutional. Today, though, they tend to have a full array of amenities and fine dining onsite. And they now run the gamut from smaller retreats that cater to one group at a time to conference resorts that include golf and spa services."

"And," he adds, "we're seeing a recognition by corporate planners that each center has a person dedicated solely to your meeting, who can really relieve the burden — and the stress — on the planner."

The transformation of the old economic order gave conference centers a golden opportunity to shine the spotlight on what they've always done best — facilitate serious meetings. "Conference centers sell a product that's specifically designed to ensure maximum performance at meetings," Nelson says. "These facilities have one core objective — to stage successful meetings, generally for groups of between 25 and 400 people. And we're giving certain types of planners an experience that they might have a hard time matching elsewhere."

One of the areas in which these centers excels is corporate training programs. Indeed, this is the core business for many of them. And everything in the facility — from the physical plant to the furniture and lighting and food — is built for meetings.

"You won't be sitting in a banquet chair for eight hours in a conference center," Nelson says. "You'll be sitting in a comfortable ergonomic chair...a chair that's intended to keep you refreshed and alert all day long. And you won't have ballroom lighting; you'll have lighting that's intended to enhance a serious business meeting — and, often, you'll have large windows, because an open feel encourages more creative thinking."

In addition, the furniture and room setups at these centers are also ergonomically designed, to improve productivity and enhance results.

Virginia Crossings has more than 23,000 sf of IACC-approved meeting space, along with 183 guest rooms for attendees.

Purpose-Built

Eric Whitson agrees with Bob Nelson's assessments. Whitson is di-

rector of sales and marketing at The National Conference Center in Leesburg, VA, which will be hosting the IACC Americas Annual Conference March 23-25. Whitson represents one of the country's largest conference centers,



Tom Bolman, Executive Vice President International Association of Conference Centres, St. Louis, MO

with 265,000 sf of IACC-approved conference space, 250 meeting rooms and 917 guest rooms. Although the facility specializes in training meetings for corporate, governmental and non-profit entities, its size affords it the versatility to host a wide variety of meetings.

"Because we're purpose-built," Whitson says, "we can focus on the things that are most important to corporate planners. IT infrastructure, for example: We've got extensive bandwidth availability here, so we can train hundreds of people at the same time. The ability to be connected by wireless is a growing trend in our field."

Conference centers are generally asked by planners if they have dedicated staff for technological aspects, and the answer is almost always "yes." In addition, the emerging trend toward hybrid meetings — in which meeting content is delivered virtually to complement the face-to-face event — is resulting in conference centers spending a lot of time and money to ensure that such meetings run smoothly.

"Certainly, there will always be a need for face-to-face meetings," Whitson says. "But, with companies watching their ex-

penditures so carefully these days, hybrid meetings are a growing trend. Also, you need to have the most up-to-date audio-visual and presentation technology. And, in order to meet the needs of planners in these areas, conference

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centers are staying a step ahead of the technological curve."

To meet high-tech expectations, conference centers now have large-screen plasmas, plug-in access to all audio-visual sources, surround sound, higher bandwidth, greater attendee-interface capability, and PDA and iPhone applications. And some are even working on



Eric Whitson Director of Sales and Marketing National Conference Center Leesburg, VA

iPad tools for planners, incorporating items such as information on the conference center, contact lists, etc. that they can carry with them.

In fact, in order to carve out a larger niche in the meetings arena, IACC's more than 300-member conference centers adhere to a strict 39-point set of standards,

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Conference Center
Glen Allen, VA



By Steve Winston

covering everything from providing dedicated, single-purpose conference space, which must represent a minimum of 60 percent of meeting space based on net area, to the aforementioned ergonomics and technology to F&B, guest room work areas and green initiatives. IACC has a Code of Sustainability, and members must develop actionable green initiatives...and must show the results. (For more criteria, visit iacconline.org.)

Green Expectations

Dolce Hotels & Resorts, headquartered in Rockleigh, NJ, is one of the leaders in purpose-built conference centers, hosting 30,000 meetings and 4 million group clients every year. Paul Dolce is the vice president of conference centers, and a son of the company's founder and chairman.

"Green' is no longer a request, where meeting planners are concerned, it's now an expectation," Dolce says. "We're trying to be a leader in this area. We conserve water by encouraging our clients to forgo the daily washing of their towels and linens. We use water dispensers rather than plastic bottles. And we try to work with our clients in finding ways to use less paper, by emphasizing a technological approach to communications materials."

Dolce says that the company is also approaching F&B from a new perspective. It's moving away from the typical chip- and snack-filled coffee breaks. For one thing — as in all conference centers — there's no such thing as a "coffee break." Instead, there's a manned refreshment center that stays open all day long. The company is actively promoting fresh local ingredients in both its refreshment centers and its meals. It's getting away from heavy foods and sauces that leave many people feeling too full and a bit lethargic.

"Our centers are located in interesting places around the country," says Dolce, "and these places should reflect the local cuisine. For example, at the Bolger Center,

in Maryland, we might serve Maryland crabcakes; in Boston it might be chowder. We're trying to get away from the one-size-fits-all concept, because different clients deserve different choices.



"Business meetings should be serving health-

"In a conference center, the entire staff is there for only one reason — to give the client a professional, productive, unique meeting experience. Meetings are the only thing we do."

Ted Davis, Senior V.P. of Sales and Marketing
Benchmark Hospitality International, The Woodlands, TX

ier food choices," Dolce adds. "Just because you're at a meeting doesn't mean you have to gain five pounds."

CMP Solution

One thing that differentiates dedicated conference centers from other meeting facilities is that they offer a CMP — Complete Meeting Package. The CMP concept is part of IACC's standards. In this system, you receive one soup-to-nuts price for your meeting, rather than an à la carte menu of assorted extras. This relieves planners of one of the most onerous aspects of planning the meeting: the need to build in extra space in the budget for unforeseen circumstances. It addresses all conceivable expenses in one plan; you don't pay extra for F&B changes or meeting-room changes or technology assistance. For some time, there was a common misperception about CMP — that there was no flexibility, and that the prices may have leaned toward the higher side.

"In fact, the truth is directly opposite," says Ted Davis, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Benchmark Hospitality International, which has 35 private and public conference centers,

hotels and resorts. "There's actually a great value proposition to this concept, with a lot more choices than before. For example, refreshment stations are open as long as the meeting goes on. There's now a great deal of flexibility with meals, and with menus; we can accommodate

most dietary considerations. And there are no budgetary surprises. You know ahead of time what you'll be paying. And that's very important to planners — and to companies — these days."

Bolman adds, "Even with the Complete Meeting Package, it's still possible to stretch your budget. You can find 'hot dates' when conference centers offer lower and more-flexible pricing. You can ask the center to customize a package specifically for your needs. You can hold multiple meetings at the same conference center. And it's still possible to negotiate some extras, such as Internet access in the guest rooms, etc."

Resort-Style Amenities

Davis also addresses another outdat-



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Paul Dolce
Vice President of Conference Centers
Dolce Hotels & Resorts, Potomac, MD

ed misperception: that meeting centers are only for training purposes. He notes that Benchmark's centers are seeing an increase in teambuilding activities, as well as in incentive events. And most of the company's meeting centers are full-service facilities, with amenities such as golf, recreational activities, spas and bowling alleys.

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for every aspect of the meeting, and she says that the CMP package offered her great value and plenty of flexibility.

"They handled all the things you'd expect them to handle," Cassaro says, "such as the training sessions and meetings. But they also handled our talent show and our networking event flawlessly."

Mike Adams is global meetings director of the huge multinational advanced technology company Lockheed Martin. He's used conference centers ranging from The National Conference Center to

ting-edge IACC-approved meeting center and staff, and the sunshine of Florida right outside the door. One of its clients is Oasis Outsourcing, a West Palm Beach, FL, firm that takes over administrative functions for a variety of corporate clients. Oasis uses the DoubleTree Center frequently for its sales training meetings, its most recent taking place in November (30 participants).

"One thing you'll notice about conference centers is that there's usually a lot of whiteboard around the room," says Larry Doiron, director of sales training for Oasis. "You're not limited to a single blackboard. And they have expert meeting facilitators. The most effective meetings are those that become, in the attendees' minds, 'events.' And, because everything is taken care of — the lighting, the acoustics, the furniture, the



Mike Adams, Global Meetings Manager
Lockheed Martin, Bethesda, MD

floor plans — that's exactly what you have at these centers."

Jean Risimini agrees. Risimini is manager of meetings and conventions with Meda Pharmaceuticals, a Swedish company with U.S. headquarters in Somerset, NJ, and Marietta, GA. She held a training meeting in December at the DoubleTree Hotel & Executive Meeting Center Somerset (NJ). She says that some planners are still reluctant to use conference centers, because of the lingering misperception that it's more expensive. However, she notes, when you add up all the extras you receive for one set price — from printing name tags to manning your reception center — it's actually a good value. And she adds that it's very easy to address last-minute issues at conference centers, because they've already planned for every contingency.

"I've been using these centers for many years," Risimini says. "And in this day and age, when so few of us are doing so much, I'm surprised that everyone's not trying them." **C&IT**

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Meetings are the only thing we do. And, because of that, we do them exceptionally well. That's not only our core expertise, it's our only expertise."

Conference Center Converts

Barbara Cassaro is owner of Canton, GA-based Meeting Perfection Inc., which plans corporate meetings and incentive events for clients nationwide. She's planned several meetings at The National Conference Center, which is 45 minutes from Washington, DC. She recently planned a 600-attendee sales conference there for an international technology company. And she's now a devotee of conference-center meetings.

"In today's economy," she says, "places like The National Conference Center provide a cost-effective way of meeting face-to-face, not just for the bottom line, but also for public perception. And the cost-effective aspect was especially true for a large group like ours."

Cassaro used the center's planners

The Marriott Inn & Conference Center at the University of Maryland to the Airlie Center in Warrenton, VA. He says that conference centers often win business precisely because of their affordability.

"Affordability is very important to companies today, and conference centers 'get it,'" Adams notes. "And because you have one specific person there as your point of contact, communication is much smoother and much faster. They know what you're trying to accomplish. We always have a high ROI when we use these centers. And they're consistent with our concern with public perception."

"At Lockheed Martin," he adds, "we're focused on the lowest investment with the highest impact. Our meetings have to pass the 'press test,' and no one in the media's going to criticize you for meeting in a conference center."

The DoubleTree Hotel & Executive Meeting Center, Palm Beach Gardens, FL, has the best of both worlds: a cut-