

Site Sifting

By Terra Cooney

Set Your Sites High, Costs Low

If your meeting and budget are small, check out what's available inside your own company's walls. An unused training room is free and nearby, which is great if most attendees will be from your company, or would enjoy a tour of your offices. If you can't get no-cost, you probably want low-cost, so first, know your options. "For business meetings we look at hotels, conference centers and some very unique learning facilities," says Vicki Flahaven, Concierge Unlimited International's representative at the Riverway and O'Hare International Center in Rosemont, Illinois. In addition to facilities in the complex she rents out, Concierge Unlimited (and other similar service companies) have access to a vast network of other properties, hotels, restaurants and venues throughout Chicago and the surrounding area. Vicki mentions the Merit School of Music in particular, which "rents out their space, and at a very reasonable rate, because all of the money goes to the school."

Various sites, depending on the type of attendees, may find an interest in giving you a discount. Some educational facilities charge less, or open their doors exclusively, for events that promote education. The Field Museum has separate rates available for not-for-profits as well as customized rates, and can offer up their exhibits. "Groups who book meeting space here during daytime hours can visit all permanent collections at no additional charge," says Ellyn Nugent, manager of Special Events for The Field Museum. This facility boasts classrooms and a 700-seat theater for larger groups. "Our Founder's Room holds about 50 to 75 people for board meetings and luncheons, and we have a list of caterers, exclusive lighting and audio visual providers," she says. Restaurants (and sometimes stores) want the exposure and may have deals for large parties, sometimes in the form of specialized menus, private space or special hours.

One unique hot spot Vicki raves about is Catalyst Ranch, situated right inside the West Loop. Known for their colorful, playful vibe, the site is great for promoting brainstorming and team-building, as well as super-serious business affairs. "Fortune 500s are the majority of our clients," says Bobbie Soeder, explorer-matchmaker and VP of Sales and Marketing at Catalyst Ranch. "It's a creative environment that allows people to get a lot done. It puts them in a different frame of mind," she explains. With a décor full of character and unconventional business furniture, the facility (and the menu available for meals throughout meetings) is very diverse.

Location is another thing to think about when you're not bursting with budget funds. Though a beautiful cityscape backdrop might be nice, suburbs can offer bargains, are often much closer to the airports and have hotels aplenty. This might be the way to go if you're inviting out-of-town guests. Places like Pheasant Run Resort and Spa Hotel in St. Charles, Illinois, which has facilities for business and pleasure, can be fitting for an extended gathering. Complete with a spa, two golf courses and plenty of nightlife offerings, this resort has the professional space to host corporate events.

Space and Time, and Time is Money

Where you settle on is dependent on the amount of space needed. It's important to plan for the best room setup to suit your party. So while determining budget, number and type of attendees, time and date, meal options, audio-visual needs and general purpose of the meeting, think about tables and chairs, too. To get an accurate estimate of how many you'll need (and without the help of RSVPs), act as if everyone you've invited is coming. Then add to the number just in case of uninvited guests. If you will be inviting 10 people, plan for 12 or 15. If you're asking 300 to the party, plan for 320, depending on the possibility that others might get wind of the invite, whether it's more entertainment than educational or if you will have tight security for an invite-only party.

Will your guests need elbowroom to eat lunch? A theater setting with chairs lined up to face a podium may not be ideal if people are expected to take notes. A U-shaped arrangement of tables and chairs may spark a full-group discussion. If small breakout sessions will happen, consider round-tables. Think specifically of the area the tables, chairs or desks will take up. Then note that Vicki has found room rentals to be about \$1 a square foot. "A boardroom for 10 people might run about \$300 to \$500, and if you need a room for 300 people, you're talking about a room that is easily 3,500 square feet," she says. Other costs to consider are taxes and gratuity, setup and cleanup fees, and equipment rental. Conference centers can sometimes give you one flat rate a person and will make things easier by offering a pre-set menu.

Overall, things will fall into place if you stick to your budget and splurge for the comfort of the attendees. "When you're negotiating a contract, all things will be written in," says Vicki. So always get your agreements in writing, and keep a copy for yourself. If the plans come together, so will the people, time after time. Once you've signed off on the contract, you can breathe a sigh of relief, knowing you'll have yourself a cozy, convenient meeting space with all the comforts you can offer your audience. ■

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