

Hotel Business Review

Conferences & Meetings

Housing Technology: Ensure a Smoother Process for Your Client

By Marilyn Healey, President, Association for Convention Operations Management



Ms. Healey

With the demand for technology continuing to grow throughout the meetings industry, convention services managers (CSMs) throughout hotels, convention centers and convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) have adapted to this demand by utilizing web-based applications and programs to help ensure a smoother event process for their clients.

"The housing experience, many times, is the first experience the client will have with a city," said Madonna Carr, CMP, Vice President of Destination Services at Meet Minneapolis. "So if the process isn't smooth or flawless from the beginning, then it sets the tone for the rest of their experience with us."

Housing programs have simplified the process for convention services professionals — gone are the days of running pick-up numbers for a conference or convention, transposing them to grids and emailing them to clients on a weekly basis. These web-based applications greatly reduce the time CSMs spend on reservations and housing tasks, therefore providing them with the quality time necessary to exceed the expectations of their clients and their clients' attendees in the planning and execution of their events.

"CSMs have the ability to set up a group campaign to target a specific event in their city or to track any venue changes," said Tina Stark, Director of Housing Sales at The Housing Connection, an Affiliate of the Salt Lake CVB. "It enables faster dissemination of information in a time sensitive environment and gives meeting planners 24 hour access to their groups."

Susan Gosz, CMP, Housing Services Manager at Meet Minneapolis adds, "Web-based systems are crucial to the success of an event as it allows the meeting planner to target a large audience at minimal or no cost to the association."

Client Benefits

Meeting planners are becoming increasingly aware of the simple and real-time reports provided by web-based applications—smart alerts, quick snap shots, pickup reports, filtered rooming lists, and the easy access to them, has greatly reduced the administrative hours spent on these tasks.

"For example, meeting planners providing housing for two or more hotels have the ability to pull reports which give a snap shot of all event information and can be accessed via a PDA or other communication device," said Stark.

Web-based applications can monitor meeting floor plans, schedules and programs and also enable meeting planners to monitor their event's progress and measure results. "Meeting planners can more accurately track their room pick-up, which helps with their report card from city to city," she said. "They are also able to view and analyze the value their meetings bring to the city and the economic impact it has on the hotel." "Web-based applications enable event managers to save time and give them the ability to be much more proactive," said Kevin Panetta, Regional Vice President, Sales at onPeak. "They are able to focus on other aspects of the event process including providing VIP services and executing an effective marketing campaign."

Attendee Benefits

Utilizing web-based applications provide a variety of benefits to both the CSM and the meeting planner, but it also enhances the overall meeting process for attendees. "Attendees are now able to make informed decisions prior to hotel selection. All the information about the reservation process is at their fingertips 24 hours a day, seven days a week," said Gosz. "They are able to confirm their arrangements on their own time, and schedule and receive immediate confirmation."

"In the past, attendees were forced to go online individually, but now they have the ability to obtain all the information they need from one location," said Stark. "The information is always in real-time and is constantly updated, providing attendees with an accurate picture of the hotel."

Panetta added, "The level of customer service attendees experience is at a higher level because event managers are not tied down to the many administrative duties involved in the housing process."

Ensuring Event Success

Beyond housing solutions, other forms of technology have truly made an impact on the meetings industry. Carr adds that meetings professionals are utilizing social networking sites more frequently to support the promotion of events. "Through sites such as Twitter and Facebook, clients can obtain a variety of information on a venue, city or CVB," she said. "If they know they are coming to us, they will often begin to follow us on these sites, which will help them learn what's going on in our city."

"Technology is continuing to evolve and now social media is becoming an integral part of the event process," said Stark. "Passkey has already incorporated social media into their software by offering the distribution of e-mail blasts to attendees notifying them of any changes to the event. Many CVBs have social media pages and are working with groups to get the message out."

"Meeting planners are now able to put their whole event program online, giving attendees the ability to find seminar locations and floor plans of the facility, all from their PDAs," said Carr. "They are also able to receive communication on any changes with regard to their stay and the convention program."

Stark believes that without technology, many events would not have achieved success and yielded such positive results. "We recently serviced a client that had to relocate due to the flooding in Opryland. We were able to open housing within 24-48 hours because of the technology available to us, in this case, Passkey. If it wasn't for the technology we have at our fingertips in the industry today, this would not have been possible," she said.

"Within three hours, we took 2,000 registrations and 85 percent of them were online. The association was also able to send out an e-mail blast to attendees letting them know housing was open and included an embedded link to help drive them to make their reservations. Attendees were also provided with a description of the hotel and received an immediate e-mail confirmation, which helped put them at ease and understand where they were staying. Overall, technology allows us to communicate faster and more proactively with our clients and their attendees to ensure a smooth event process," she added.

Even though technology has truly streamlined the meetings industry, it is still up to a seasoned and professional CSM to utilize the right tools to their fullest potential to ultimately help deliver a successful event for their clients and attendees.

Marilyn Healey is the President of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM), an association dedicated to advancing the practice of convention services management in the meetings industry, and is also Senior Convention Services Manager for the Hyatt Regency Long Beach. Ms. Healey

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