

TECH SUPPORT

MAKING INFORMATION SYSTEMS WORK FOR YOU

Is Your RFP A-OK?

Nancy Nachman, CMM, CMP, of The Meetings Concierge in Scottsdale, Ariz., recently sent us this question: "When researching hotels for availability, there should be some basic questions addressed in the RFP (request for proposal) regarding the venues' Internet connectivity in both guest rooms and meeting rooms/public areas. Do you have a few specific questions that I could ask each time?"

specific at all, it was usually found under "telecommunications" or a similar heading. So far, Internet connectivity is generally a yes/no question with a few additional entries related to connection speed and whether it is wired or wireless in different parts of the venue.

The documents we reviewed have simply not kept up with the growth of the Internet and the dependence on connectivity with many meetings today. Meeting planners would benefit from updating their favorite checklists and RFPs with some key questions, and suppliers should be ready with the answers. The requirements and some of the language of meetings have changed.

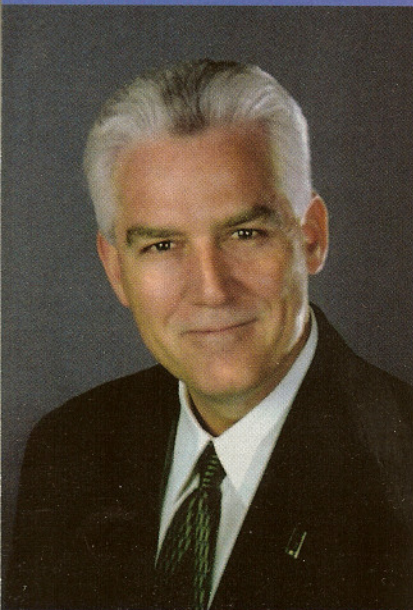
Who's in Charge Here?

It has only been within the past few years that high-speed, reliable Internet connections have been readily available in venues. Some of us remember negotiating with local telecommunications companies to get ISDN, DSL or T-1 lines to our properties in order to have Web access on site. Then we were hit with fees from both the ISP and hotel, and those fees could be enormous. It could be very frustrating negotiating fees because there were few standards and there was little competition. Fortunately, those problems are mostly behind us.

It is by no means simple...yet. Pricing structures still vary wildly from city to city, and even from venue to venue within a city. You see advertising touting "free, high-speed Internet" everywhere, except in meeting rooms. In that space, you may be quoted a flat daily rate, a price per access point or a price per computer. Fees may vary depending on whether you are hardwired into the system or accessing wirelessly. You may find yourself negotiating with engineering, telecommunications, convention services or a third-party provider. The onsite support you receive from

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It seemed like a simple enough inquiry, and so we did a little research on sample RFPs, checklists and specification guides freely available within the industry. What we were able to find was pretty thin, and if there was anything



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the venue can be critical to your success. Your RFP needs to be very clear with your expectations and needs, and you need to identify your main point of contact for technical issues as early as possible.

Are You Up on Your Downloads?

Knowing your meeting is the logical first step in asking the right questions of potential properties. Will there be an Internet cafe? Are there exhibitors needing Internet access? Do attendees need access, and in what numbers? Will you want the connections wired, wireless or both? What about connectivity in public space and guest rooms? Have you considered all the network requirements for your onsite offices, registration desks and attendee support? What are your upload and download speed requirements? Will you be on a virtual private network (VPN)? And what is a VPN?

Within meeting specifications, your overall requirements for Internet access will help with negotiations. You've probably heard the terms "upload" and "download" used in different contexts. With connectivity, the bandwidth (amount of data that can be transferred at a given time) may be split between data coming down from and data going up to the Internet. Usually, much more bandwidth is allocated for downloads, as people are basically taking things off the Internet, not publishing to it. If your group will be feeding massive amounts of data back to an office system, however, your upload requirements may put a strain on the connection, and users will get frustrated by slow response times. As you work with prospective venues, carefully explain not only the number of connections required, but how they will be used.

Internet security is of utmost importance,

Tech Check

Things change quickly in the Internet world, so your questions need to be dynamic in order to keep pace. Here are a few simple items to consider as you work with each area (guest rooms, meeting rooms, public space) of your venue.

- Internet connectivity (yes/no)
High-speed (yes/no)
- Contact information
Provider/ISP
In-house contact (if different)
- Approximate upload speed
- Approximate download speed
- Who will be sharing the connection?
- Will you need dedicated bandwidth?
- Hard-wired (yes/no)
- Network configuration
- Port locations
- Policies related to using own network equipment
- Wireless (yes/no)
802.11b
802.11g
Other _____
- Wireless card availability for guests (yes/no)
Free?
Rental amount _____
- VPN available (yes/no)
- Fees and structure

especially with many corporate meetings. Someone connecting to the office to check e-mail may be opening the door for hackers to access sensitive data. That's where the VPN comes in. A virtual private network encrypts data sent over the Internet between the attendee and the office network. Most VPN transfers will require very little support from the venue, but a serious security-conscious organization may not be able to use commercial VPNs and could require a dedicated line. Obviously, this would require a different level of negotiations and supplier support.

Specifying connectivity can be very complex and is too complicated to cover in a brief column, but we hope this helps in your planning. It may be a while before RFPs catch up to the needs of today's sophisticated meetings, but by understanding your needs and what you can reasonably expect from the property, lining up Internet requirements for your meeting can be as simple as ordering continental breakfast from the banquet menu.



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