

Convention Centers—Thinking Outside the Big Box

PMM5 Postscript™ Number 20

Background Information: In *Professional Meeting Management*®, fifth edition, Michael McQuade and Julie Burford discuss convention centers and their operations. In Chapter 14, Convention Centers: Unraveling the Mystery, they:

- Identify the purpose and functional differences between a convention center and other meeting venues
- Describe the relationship between the Convention and visitors Bureaus (CVBs) and the convention center
- Name the reasons for the booking pricing and contracting procedures associated with convention centers
- Explain the breadth and quality of meeting services available from a convention center
- Discuss the convention center's relationship with labor organizations
- Distinguish the role of exclusive and preferred providers in convention centers

PMM5 Postscript™ Use: This PMM5 PostScript™ discusses current trends affecting convention center design and operations. It also discusses in detail the types of technology readily available at convention centers. Finally, it builds upon McQuade and Burford's tips for meeting managers to create outstanding events at convention centers. This PMM5 Postscript™ also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter.

Learner Outcomes: At the completion of this reading, you should be able to:

- Identify current trends in convention centers.
- Describe the benefits of working with exclusive or preferred suppliers at convention centers.
- Select tips when utilizing convention centers.
- List suggestions for meeting attendees who attend events at convention centers.

Related PMM5 Chapter: Chapter 14, Convention Centers: Unraveling the Mystery
Authors: Michael McQuade and Julie Burford



Trends in Convention Centers

McQuade and Burford write, "The last decade has witnessed more dramatic change in how convention centers work than in any similar period." The change has been driven by rapid innovation, technology, economics, globalization, politics, geography and an ongoing demand for quality space (McQuade and Burford, 2006, p.197).

Not surprising, convention centers continue to change and adapt to market forces. Six trends in convention centers include:

Trend 1: Location, location, location

Convention centers are being built in better locations. Marla Lenhart quotes David O'Neal, chairman of a convention center development consulting firm, in her article Better Design:

"At one time, convention centers were built in blighted or outlying locations in hopes that they would encourage other development. Now convention centers are being built in prime areas and on prime sites near hotels and attractions. They are part of an overall downtown package that makes the destination competitive" (Lenhart, 2007).

They (convention centers) can be emblems of a city as well as useful for groups from all over the country," says Paul Peterson of Phoenix Convention Center (Bjrtklie, 2007)

In order to compete with large convention hotels, convention centers have to package themselves with nearby hotels, restaurants and retail to create the "under one roof" convention experience. Proximity to all of the city amenities is key to a center's success.

Prime real estate is now being utilized for convention centre development and waterfront settings are becoming increasingly desirable. The San Diego Convention Centre and the Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Center boast some of the most spectacular views of the ocean from their prime function space.

Trend 2: Sense of Environment

Convention centers are incorporating local features and culture. Convention centers have a reputation of being big boxes. However that aspect is fast becoming a myth. For example the Palm Springs Convention Center has Native American and desert-inspired architectural details. During its 2005 renovation, the buildings entrance was re-oriented to face the surrounding mountains. Rick Leson, director of sales for the convention center states in Better by Design, "The aesthetics are important to attendees. They don't want to be plopped down in a box. We give them sweeping views of the mountains in the pre-function areas" (Lenhart, 2007). Convention centers are paying attention to interior and exterior architecture that reflects the culture of the community and the natural environment they are surrounded by. Great care is being given to a delegate's sense of arrival to the building and ease of movement throughout the facility.

Trend 3: New Form and New Function

As alluded to above, convention centers are no longer being designed as big boxes. Atriums, windows, grand entries and other design elements are incorporated into the latest architecture of convention centers.

The traditional focus (or misconception) that convention centers are focused only on large meetings changes. While convention centers are purpose built spaces designed to hold meetings, trade

shows and conferences, they are not only suited for large meetings. Some convention centers offer a range of space allowing a convention center to attract small meetings, smaller conferences. Many have separate meeting rooms on multiple levels and many breakout rooms.

Chris Meyer, CMP, CEM, senior director of convention center sales for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, says that even in Las Vegas, home of the biggest and brightest shows, small meetings are an important part of the mix. "Last year in Vegas," Meyer says, "we hosted over 24,000 meetings. Now, 57 percent of those were smaller than 500 people. That's about 14,000 smaller meetings in our area." (Krist, 2006).

Trend 4: Small is the New Big

Small conventions centers, in terms of both size and market, are available for meeting managers. New facilities are being built in second- and third-tier markets including:

- Bayfront Convention Center (Pennsylvania)
- Lancaster County Convention Center (Pennsylvania)
- Branson Convention Center (Missouri)
- Mississippi Telecommunications Conference and Training Center

Trend 5: Package appeal

Convention centers, as purpose-built space for meetings, make their money on meeting space. And in most cases that is all they control – their meeting space. However, convention center staff recognizes the importance of destination appeal, hotel pricing, attached hotels, hotel proximity to convention center and shopping facilities and restaurants in the area.

Convention centers are also focusing on creating a more appealing meeting and trade show environment through attention to loading efficiency, building access, traffic separation, better sound and lighting systems and full-service business centers.

For example, the Georgia International Convention Center (GICC) is installing a high-tech project that will allow convention-goers to fly into the airport, disembark their plane and arrive at the GICC without ever getting into a taxi, bus or shuttle. The Automated People Mover (APM), a new light-rail train currently under construction, is designed to transport travelers from Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, which is a quarter of a mile from the GICC, to the airport's new consolidated rental car agency complex. The next stop on the APM line will be the GICC making it even easier to access the facility. The service is scheduled to begin late in the fourth quarter of 2008 (Mitchell, 2007).

The new Tahoe convention facility when finished in 2009 will feature 56,000 square feet of retail and dining space (Bay, 2007).

Trend 6: Green

In response to meeting planners and the communities they serve, convention centers are focusing on the greening of meetings. They are making improvements in recycling, environmentally conscious landscaping and energy-saving heat lighting and air-conditioning.

Some centers have received the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification from the US Green Building Council.

For example, in Pittsburgh, the Lawrence Convention Center opened in 2003 following an international design competition and years of civic planning that set out to create a leading-edge facility.

With its gold-level LEED certification, the convention center features natural ventilation, carbon monoxide sensors, a water-reclamation system and skylights and glass walls that diffuse light and uniform temperature.

“This building makes you a little bit healthier,” said Debbie Smucker, the center’s director of sales and marketing. “Our public areas are blessed with natural light, the exhibit halls all have natural light and we have a ventilation system that can cool the building by pulling air from the Allegheny River.” (Farmer, 2006)

The Metro Toronto Convention Center recently partnered with a show, Construct Canada, to produce a “zero waste” show. The event which drew nearly 23,000 attendees and 1,100 exhibits, recycled 26 tons of waste at a diversion rate of 95 percent. The remaining 5 percent consisted mainly of carpet scraps left by exhibitors. (Convene, 2007).

Green roof technology is allowing facilities to contain heating and cooling costs and collect water for re-use in the facility operation. The Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Centre’s expansion project features a 6 acre living roof that when completed, will create a natural habitat for a wide range of native plants (Smith, 2007).

Another example is the Moscone Center in San Francisco which was named one of the five winners of the Environmental Protection Agency’s Green Power Award recognizing the center use of renewable energy (Bjerklie, 2007).

Indoor pollution is another concern. The World Health Organization and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have identified polluted indoor air as a significant public health concern associated with asthma, allergies, developmental and reproductive disorders, and cancer. According to Carl Smith, CEO and executive director of GEI, “Many convention centers are working to improve indoor air quality by upgrading their ventilation systems. That’s a good first step. As convention centers replace their furniture, repaint their facilities and make other improvements, choosing Green-guard certified products for these upgrades will help them achieve and maintain better, healthier indoor air quality.”

Technology

Technology as a trend warrants its own section. Meetings today are driving the demand for convention centers to have high-tech equipment and services to meet the needs of groups. Technological amenities are no longer an exception, but rather the rule.

Current technology for convention centers includes:

- High-speed Internet access
- Video teleconferencing capability
- Communication infrastructure capable of moving voice, video and data
- 24-hour technical support staff
- Plasma screens
- Digital electronic signage

The Duke Energy Center in Cincinnati boasts LED screens strategically placed throughout the center. The Monona Terrace Convention Center (Madison, Wisconsin) offers the higher speed Internet2 access. They also have a sophisticated phone system that can be customized for individual meet-

ings allowing meeting planners to set up individual phone lines, speaker phones, etc. to meet the needs of the meeting. The Ernest Morial Convention Center is supported by seven different mobile phone carriers' networks.

Another example is the Greenville Convention Center, meeting managers will find:

- Integrated audio system that can broadcast throughout the center or in segments with in-room master controls
- High definition screens (14-foot-by-14-foot)
- Exhibit space providing each exhibitor with electric, phone line and network access via an in-floor network grid

The Greenville Convention Center is wired with 13,000 feet of single or multi-mode fiber optic cable, 80,000 feet of category six cable to support networking and phones and infrastructure to support Web casting, broadcasting and video conferencing (Mitchell, 2007).

Technological offerings at convention centers extend past audio/visual services. For example, at the Georgia International Convention Center (GICC), CyberLock converts traditional mechanical door locks into a time-controlled access system, where doors within the center can be opened with programmable electronic cards.

“Electronic access-control technology means locks and keys can be programmed to permit—and restrict—access in ways that accommodate an astounding combination of people, needs and circumstances,” Andria Towne, director of marketing and public relations at GICC said. “For example, using a single CyberKey, an employee, meeting planners, or a trade show vendor may have access to certain locks at all hours; to other locks only on weekdays, say, between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.; and to other locks not at all. The technology gives the GICC incredible flexibility in controlling access privileges” (Mitchell, 2007).

In a world that is very multi-cultural and multi-lingual, some convention centers offer translation booths so that meeting managers can plan multilingual meetings.

Finally in the area of health and safety, convention centers are making investments in health technology. Over 335,000 Americans die annually from sudden cardiac arrest, but a properly administered and certified cardiac readiness program can increase the chance of survival as much as 70 percent. Cardio Ready, a private company, is working with the American Heart Association to bring certified cardiac readiness programs to convention centers. Several convention centers are now certified CardioReady venues including:

- Atlantic City Convention Center
- Charlotte Convention Center
- Monterey Conference Center
- McCormick Place
- Tampa Convention Center

Meeting managers can use CardioReady’s search feature to find convention centers or other meeting venues that have received this certification at <http://www.cardioready.com/search.asp>.

Technology is also enhancing delegate security as video surveillance, motion detection and Radio Frequency ID (RFID) is becoming more common in facilities world wide.

The Value of Exclusivity

McQuade and Burford write about the difference between preferred and exclusive suppliers. They also outline why convention centers have exclusive suppliers. The reason primarily allowing vendors the guarantee of business to allow them to make long term capital investments in equipment and infrastructure (McQuade & Burford, 2006, p. 209). It also allows the facility to ensure that quality of services is maintained by ensuring their suppliers adhere to quality service standards. Meeting managers have the option of using some preferred vendors offered through a convention center. However, exclusive vendors at convention centers must be utilized.

Exclusivity does serve meetings and meeting planners. Exclusive vendors do help meetings, trade shows and conferences to run smoothly. Exclusive vendors:

- Offer familiarity with building and business
- Supply critical systems (like electricity) or services (like rigging)
- Ensure safety of infrastructure and systems
- Have easy access to convention center space
- Are linked into convention center communication systems (often)
- Continue to make long-term, extensive capital investments

Even preferred vendors offer advantages including:

- Knowledge of building
- Quality service and performance measurement
- Good relationships with facility by on-site staff
- Extensive inventory of equipment (typically)
- Proven supplier
- Able to accommodate many last minute changes and requests

Be sure to ask for a full list of preferred and exclusive vendor in advance of negotiating your contract with the convention center. Be certain to clarify any special surcharges that may apply if you choose to select a non preferred supplier.

Customer Service

Customer service is another area in which convention centers are working hard to meet the needs of meeting professionals. They have historically been viewed as government entities that are slow moving and bureaucratic but in an increasingly competitive environment; they are becoming more and more flexible and responsive to the needs of their customers.

Convention centers are challenged with coordinating the activities of many parties toward the fulfillment of an outstanding event. They include (McQuade and Burford, 2006, pp. 199-200):

- General services contractors
- Exhibitor-appointed contractors
- Production companies
- Audiovisual contractors
- Registration companies
- Plant and floral contractors
- Housekeeping

- Caterers
- Security contractors
- Telecommunications and internet service providers
- Transportation companies
- Electrical contractors
- Emergency medical contractors

The event manager or convention services manager (CSM) is the meeting manager's main contact when at a convention center. One example of a new service paradigm is at the New Bern Riverfront Convention Center. Sandy Chamberlin, director of the New Bern (N.C.) Riverfront Convention Center (NBRCC), said her staff is able to add value to events by providing extra services. "We offer one-stop shopping since the convention center manages the city's convention and visitors' center. The visitor center staff acts as the convention concierge. They make golf tee times, make restaurant reservations, contact transportation companies and more. Planners appreciate this service because it reduces the need for their staff to direct attendees to area restaurants, attractions and more." (Mitchell, 2007).

At the Phoenix Civic Plaza Convention Center, their small space in the conference center housed in the West Building, the building has its own dedicated staff.

Tips for Meeting Managers

Meeting managers using convention centers for the first time will benefit from these tips:

Schedule site visits well in advance. Most busy convention centers have meetings or other events going on all the time. This means key staff members have to juggle demands from events in progress with requests for tours and meetings regarding future events at the same time. Plan to contact a convention center early to get on their schedule.

Ask the center to include their main exclusive and preferred suppliers in the site inspection so that you are able to see how they work together and ask any questions directly to the vendors.

Check the site. Conduct a thorough site visit. In addition, pay close attention to the following areas:

- **Directional signage** — Will it be clear to attendees how to find the meeting and register?
- **Wayfinding** — Is the layout of the building intuitive to delegates, will they be able to find their way around? Do they offer a concierge service to help orient delegates and answer questions? The PMM5 Postscript™ Number 38 also covers wayfinding in more detail.
- **Arrival experience and registration** — How will attendees feel upon arriving at the convention center?
- **Cell phone** — Mobile-phone service can be spotty at convention centers; check service for the meeting planning staff and attendees
- **Food service** — Are there areas for retail food service?
- **Amenities** — Are there ample restrooms available and assessable to the function space
- **Business support** — Do they have a business center and permanent internet café?

- **Accessibility** — While every convention center in the US must adhere to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the basic requirements of the law don't often create an accessible environment to attendees with disabilities (Convene, 2007). The PMM5 Postscript™ Number 50 further discusses barrier-free meetings.

Ask about Renovation. Address the issue during a site visit and in contracts. Use the expertise of vendors participating in the meeting to unearth the right questions to ask. If a convention center will undergo renovation, stay in touch and if possible, visit during the construction phase (Convene, 2007).

Block space in the convention center as early as possible. Like a hotel, book space in a convention center early. It's not unusual for convention centers to hold space for 10 years in advance.

Anticipate a mixed booking scenario. Convention center construction has boomed in recent years. An overall, across the industry, demand for exhibit space grows and convention center occupancy rates increase. However, demand is not consistent across all markets. In the article Aiming High, writer David Kovaleski quotes Robert Canton, director of Sports, Convention and Tourism Services at PricewaterhouseCoopers:

"The gap between the haves and have-nots is growing. When you look at the percent increase (in exhibit space demand) we're seeing in the industry, a lot is taking place in about 60 percent of the buildings." The article concludes "the other 40 percent are struggling to fill their centers in a very competitive market that is flush with supply" (Kovaleski, 2007).

Be aware of cost differences from hotels. Hotels make their money on sleeping rooms and often give away meeting space, but convention centers don't have that luxury. Instead, centers must charge for meeting and exhibit space. Generally, groups pay for exhibit space by the square foot. Increasingly, convention centers charge for their meeting space and may be able to offer discounts and/or complementary meeting space depending on the overall revenue generated by the event and their funding model. Prices per square foot vary from city to city and from year to year.

Respond promptly to the center's contracting process. Signed contracts and deposits are required to have a legal claim to convention center space. Most centers contract between 12 and 24 months in advance. Convention centers are often owned and operated by the city or state and the facility contracts may have to adhere to local government requirements.

View the booking process as a firm business commitment. When a space hold is confirmed, the staff of the convention center will hold that time and space out of their inventory and reserve it for the group.

Carve out the right space. "Convention centers should be sensitive to the needs of a smaller group when booking the event, and avoid placing the event in an area where a larger event may be taking place," Rowley counsels. "The attendees should feel that they are in their own space."

Plan adequate signage. "Planners should look to their convention center partners to provide advice on signage and how to meet and greet people," Nora Rowley, director of consumer and short-term sales for McCormick Place, advises. "Convention service specialists can help planners determine the various points of entry for attendees. A map of the event venue, provided in advance to the attendees, is also very helpful."

Review space holds regularly. Meeting managers should periodically adjust the amount of space being held. If changes need to be made, contact the convention center. As the meeting date gets closer, there will be less flexibility for changes.

Review the convention centers policy manual. Request a copy of the facility's policy manual and review it thoroughly.

Ask for references from other similar groups who have held meetings in their centers. Talk to other meeting planners who have worked in the building and ask them for tips, suggestions or recommendations when working with the venue.

Work to build positive relationships with new vendors. When meeting in a convention center, meeting managers need to work with a number of providers. When hiring new vendors, ask other planners or contacts at the convention center or CVB for recommendations.

Work to build positive relationships with unions. Ask questions of the convention center staff up front, so you'll know what to expect at a convention facility as it relates to unions. Labor rules vary from state to state, city to city, and even from facility to facility.

Meet with key labor representatives at the convention center and understand the local bargaining agreements. Invite labor representatives to your pre-convention meetings, and emphasize the importance of labor's contribution to the success of your meeting.

Communicate key information, especially changes about labor and union procedures, to your sponsors and exhibitors.

Communicate frequently with convention center contacts. Never assume anything about services or facilities. Ask questions and rely on the Convention Services Manager (CSM) to provide answers.

Provide event requirements in final form in plenty of time. Send event requirements to the convention center event manager at least three weeks before the event begins. That allows the center to anticipate labor requirements and schedule crews so that all needs can be handled smoothly.

Develop an Emergency Management plan. Create a written risk management plan in advance of the meeting. Elements to include in the plan:

- Insurance coverage
- Emergency medical staff
- Communication of safety measures to on-site staff, attendees and exhibitors

Include safety and emergency preparedness as an important element during the site visit and pre-con. The PMM5 Postscript™ Number 49 also covers risk management issues.

Offer your feedback to the convention center. Once the event is over, share feedback with the staff about the service and experience.

Many tips based upon Convene, February 2006 article in Meeting Management section of the magazine. Other sources cited within tip.

Tips for Meeting Attendees

Meeting managers can help a convention center to be less intimidating for attendees by sharing these tips:

Choose a meeting spot. Encourage your attendees to re-unite with their group or colleagues by choosing a location at the convention center to meet for lunch or at other designated times.

Don't hoof it any more than necessary. Encourage your attendees to use the complimentary shuttle service (if available) located outside the convention center. Encourage their use maps and floor plans for the local convention center and meeting hotels to locate their meeting rooms.

Getting Around. Encourage attendees to allow plenty of time to find meeting rooms in large hotels and convention centers.

Summary

Convention centers are viable venues for meetings large and small. Convention centers hold their own unique features that make planning events there different from hotels or other venues. Convention centers are a reflection of their communities and ownership. Meeting managers can utilize these spaces with success when they communicate closely with the staff at a convention center and work within the parameters of a convention center.

Group Discussion or Projects

1. Getting lost in the shuffle is exactly what planners fear when they consider putting small groups in a large convention center. Nora Rowley, director of consumer and short-term sales for McCormick Place, says that even in Chicago's large multi-building convention complex smaller groups are most definitely welcome (Krist, 2006). What can a meeting manager do for a small group in a large convention center?
2. As a meeting manager on a site visit at a convention center, what other elements would you consider important for an annual association meeting?
3. In addition to vendors and unions, meeting managers must adhere to local codes. This necessitates dealing with fire marshals, police and other local officials. What strategies can you offer to a meeting manager?
4. Research a convention center that is managed by a CVB. What advantages does this arrangement offer?
5. Create a timeline for planning a large-scale, city-wide meeting at a convention center.
6. This PMM5 Postscript™ describes the benefits of working with exclusive or preferred suppliers at convention centers. What are the disadvantages of such arrangements for meeting managers?

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