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RESULTS OF A CONFERENCE SITE SELECTION AND RECREATIONAL
AMENITIES SURVEY MAILED TO SOUTHEASTERN MEETING PLANNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to determine the influence that the presence of recreational amenities has on a meeting planner's convention site selection process. A total of 459 surveys were mailed in October of 1988 to meeting planners from Georgia, Florida and South Carolina. The 161 returns received accounted for a 35% response rate.

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INTRODUCTION

National organizations are placing thousands of dollars in conventions annually. Their intent is to train, educate and hopefully rejuvenate tired corporate minds. Meetings and conferences are held to train and educate. Recreational amenities are offered to renew and relax those corporate minds. Recreation allows attendees not only to relax, but it encourages the development of friendships.(12)

More and more, meeting planners are choosing resort destinations for their corporate meetings. Delegates are being encouraged to bring spouses and families along. As the corporate segment becomes more lucrative, the competition between hotels, resorts and conference centers will become even more intense.

What is behind the decision-making process of a meeting planner in selecting a particular convention site? In 1976, Fortin and Ritchie conducted a research study analyzing association decision processes in convention site selection. Also, in 1986, Kutler looked at choosing a city hotel versus a resort hotel for continuing education meetings. Last fall, The Meeting Manager magazine conducted its own survey of the site selection process.(2)

All of these studies listed various criteria for selecting a potential convention site. However, only a minor portion of the articles discussed recreational preferences. A study which justifies the need for

recreation amenities at convention sites would benefit properties considering a recreation amenities package and would also strengthen those that already have established programs. Finally, the importance of on-property recreational amenities as compared to other site selection criteria such as rooms, conference facilities, location and overall pricing needs to be addressed.

This study was designed to determine the influence that the presence of recreational amenities has on a meeting planner's convention site selection process.

The purpose of this study was twofold:

1. to comprise a rank order listing of recreational amenities most commonly desired by meeting planners, and;
2. to compare the importance of recreational amenities to other site selection criteria.

NEED FOR THE STUDY

According to figures compiled by the American Hotel and Motel Association: 40 percent of all lodging customers in the U.S. are business travelers; 25 percent are leisure guests; 25 percent are conference attendees; 5.5 percent are on government business; and 4.5 percent have other (personal/family) reasons for their stays.(1)

Resorts, hotels and conference centers are all competing for their fair share of the dollars spent on conventions and meetings. As properties vie for convention business, knowing why planners make certain decisions in choosing a convention site are critical.

In a recent informal survey conducted by Meeting Planners International, the service level received at a facility ranked number one in selecting a site (2). However, as the length of the conference increased, planners were more concerned with the amenities that the facility provided. People want a total blend, a place where meeting facilities and recreational amenities go hand in hand.

In view of the foregoing, those hospitality individuals responsible for attracting group business should become more familiar with the recreational amenities most often requested by meeting planners. To address this need, the researchers designed a four-page survey targeted towards meeting planners.

In this study, the author attempted to collect adequate data which, when tabulated, would comprise a rank order listing of recreational amenities most commonly desired by meeting planners. Also, an effort was made to compare the importance of recreational amenities to other site selection criteria.

With this information, recreation professionals employed in a group meeting environment may better evaluate the value of all recreation

facilities, services and programs. For developers of convention properties, the results of the study may aid in determining what recreation amenities to include in their development plans.

FRAMEWORK

What's so special about group recreation? Bob Fraser, Director of Sales and Marketing at Miami Lakes Inn and Country Club, estimates that at least 80 percent of business groups incorporate recreation into their meeting plans.(6) America's continuing passion for tennis and golf has prompted corporations to conclude that a healthy body leads valued employees to a healthy mind. Recreation and sports events "serve as great ice-breakers" at conventions. They put attendees and spouses in a situation to meet people they have never met before. Business may be carried out while guests are enjoying themselves in a relaxed atmosphere away from the traditional work environment.(6)

The major reason hotels and resorts solicit group and convention business over social business is for economic reasons. Florida's Director of Tourism, Dean Gaiser, states that "there's an emerging appreciation and understanding of the importance of group travel. It fills in off and shoulder seasons and helps assure high occupancy.(3)" Hotels and resorts that thrive on tourism business cannot live without the individual or social guest, but they are the most expensive ones to get. The easier market is group business. In a February article, the Meeting News reported that nearly one-third of Florida's \$15 billion dollar 1984 tourism income was generated by meetings and conventions. Because of this, Florida's Division of Tourism is using research to define and hone in on the group business market.(3)

Resorts have discovered that it is more profitable to book a convention group rather than a comparable amount of social guests. Dollar for dollar, convention guests spend twice as much on food and beverage and recreational amenities as their social guest counterparts. Also, most conventions have established a master account which allows their delegates to utilize resort amenities for free. This leaves convention attendees with more discretionary income to spend on items such as gifts and sundries. Length of stay of convention attendees varies from resort to resort. Average figures are two to three days and nights.

Most major meetings or conferences are classified into the three areas of association or corporate business and incentive travel groups. Association meetings are normally your largest and they tend to book in-state. Incentive travel groups are pleasure trips with little or no meeting time required. Attendees are sent to these as a reward for good work performance. Corporate business is the most sought-after market for resorts. There are literally hundreds and thousands of corporate groups that schedule conferences.

The current trend has resort sales departments going after specialized industry meetings such as those in the insurance and medical fields. Professionals such as lawyers and physicians must attend yearly

conferences to obtain continuing education or certification renewal in their specialty areas.(3) Incentive travel by group attendees is being sought after even more. In most cases, the entire family is included at the conference. Incentive travel groups are more concerned with recreation and relaxation over any scheduled business meeting. For the resort recreation director, this means that attendees and their families have the majority of their time allotted for pleasure. Most participants of incentive travel are salespeople rewarded for exceptional work performance.

Regardless of the group's classification or size, their recreational preferences and interest levels must be converted into a recreation agenda. From past experiences, the group's meeting planner or coordinator can relay this information to the recreation director. To be safe, individual surveys can be included in registration information and sent back to the resort for compilation. As more and more groups book resorts with exceptional sports facilities, there's a distinct possibility that golf clubs and tennis racquets will become as common at meetings as notepads and calculators.(6)

Most major hotel chains are answering the fitness phenomenon with their own construction plans. Gone are the days when the swimming pool was the only recreational amenity for the business traveler. Jim Kelly, vice president for planning and construction for the Hyatt Corporation, notes that tennis courts are now built with every hotel. Also, exercise rooms with Universal weight machines have become part of their recreational amenities package. Hyatt caters mostly to the business traveler rather than families. Even at a conference, attendees still demand exercise facilities or jogging routes.

Holiday Inns, Inc., is a more family-oriented chain. In the early seventies, they began adding their own famous Holidomes at their hotels. These 10,000 square foot atrium facilities include an enclosed swimming pool and various other recreational amenities such as miniature golf, shuffleboard, ping-pong, whirlpools and saunas. Today, Holiday Inns is continually expanding its recreation because they feel it's an attraction for business and they have to stay competitive with others who are doing the same thing.

If conference attendees are traveling alone, then providing facilities is more important than programs. However, when dealing with incentive travel groups or conventions that allow spouses or children to attend, facilities are not enough. Requests for specific spouse, children, teen or overall family programs are critical when mandatory meetings are held.

In addition to facilities, groups attending resorts are needing programs for specific age groups. Spouse programs are normally geared toward women participants. The recreation director coordinates an activity for the spouse not attending any meetings. Typical events include tours of local points of interest, speakers bureau combined with food function or a fashion show, shopping excursions, and aerobic/exercise programs.

Associates are putting pressure on their national offices to include

full programming at their meetings; not just for spouses, but for the kids, too! These meetings are seen as an excellent time to combine business with the family vacation.(11) Resort recreation directors develop programs for all ages on an hourly, half-day or daily basis. Usually, the programs are scheduled to coincide with the adult meetings or functions. Normally, a children's program will run for a half-day or six to eight hours, including lunch. Sample age groups are four to six, seven to nine, and ten to twelve. Teen day trips and adventure outings to neighboring points of interest can be offered for the 13 to 17 year old age groups. Any event with food and music works great!

Without a doubt, organized tournaments are the number one requested activity by convention attendees. Golf is number one, with tennis becoming very popular once again. Close behind are volleyball and softball tournaments. The recreation leaders must be very careful to match players of comparable skills and abilities, especially in tennis and golf events.

A sampling of leading hotels and resorts offering golf and tennis programs for meeting and incentive groups reveals that these sports are valuable attractions for generating first-time and repeat business.(6) Golf still edges out tennis in ranks of preference for utilizing free recreation time. A recent national survey showed that 81 percent of Fortune 500 executives play golf. Of those that play, 71 percent said they used the game as a means of conducting business.(6)

Paul McNamara, manager of corporate services for GD/T Sports, states that recreational programs provide a crucial ingredient to the successful meetings formula. In fact, they are becoming as popular and as effective as the traditional cocktail party in bringing people together.(6)

It has been said that the right combination of staff can make an otherwise ordinary program an excellent one.(11) In the past, many convention hotels and resorts didn't employ a full-time recreational professional. Most facilities started out with a pool manager or a health club manager. For conventions requiring a recreation programmer, outside contractors were hired.

The recent demand for varied recreation facilities and programs at hotels and resorts has created new positions for professionals in the field. Regardless of the title, more and more recreators are being called upon to develop group recreation programs. If it wasn't for the group convention business, many properties could not justify a recreation position.

However, even with the demand for more available recreation, hotels in general are overlooking recreation professionals. Only a few Hyatt hotels are hiring recreation professionals to provide programming. Presently, the growth in hotel recreation appears to be centered around facilities rather than personnel.

For smaller resorts or urban hotels, outside contractors are hired to run convention recreation programs. Tony and Barbara Locricchio of Hawaii are a husband and wife team who established Youth Convention Programs. For the past 25 years, they have been called upon to set up youth programs for major conventions.(11) Other examples of outside

workers include conventions hiring teachers, athletic coaches or babysitters to assist in handling their group's recreational needs.

Finally, many groups request recreation activities that aren't available on their particular convention site. Off-property excursions such as deep sea fishing charters, historical tours, or attendance at professional sporting events require separate planning. Many resorts try to get groups to do everything on their property. A smart resort will sell all their amenities first and then complement a group's stay with added local attractions.

Some of the current problem and trend areas in group recreation deal with the amenities desired, the site location, staffing, pricing and liability. Next to the conference site's location and its climate, most meeting planners choose a particular resort based on the recreational amenities available for convention attendees. The facilities most often requested are golf courses, tennis courts, swimming pools, health clubs and gamerooms. These amenities are added to hotels and fill vacancies during the weekend when group business is at a low and when families are traveling. The trend has now reversed where group business is now demanding expanded recreational facilities.

Many meeting planners place golf and tennis facilities as a primary concern when they're choosing a site. Climate and location are the primary concerns for groups. Meeting space arrangements and recreational amenities are the next most important criteria in selecting a particular resort for a conference site.(6)

A group's decision to choose a downtown hotel or a destination resort depends on two factors. Assuming that the costs are equal for both sites, the purpose of the meeting must first be determined. A full-day training seminar with only a lunch break obviously doesn't leave much time for recreation. On the contrary, an incentive travel group normally schedules very few required meetings. Attendees at this type of convention would utilize all facilities available to them. Second, a large percentage of spouses and children attending a given convention would necessitate a site that offered a full range of recreation amenities.

While there are certainly exceptions to the rule, the urban hotel sites are usually high-rise buildings with very limited recreational amenities. Certain recreation pursuits such as jogging or playing golf or tennis must be done at a reciprocal site designated by the hotel. A destination resort is designed just as its title states. A guest arrives at one destination and may enjoy all recreational amenities at one location.

DEVELOPMENT AND DESCRIPTION OF INSTRUMENT

The Conference Site Selection and Recreational Amenities Survey was designed to elicit candid responses from Georgia, Florida and South Carolina meeting planners. The sample design was developed to obtain information in respect to the site selection process and the influence,

if any, that recreational amenities had on this process.

For this study, a mailed survey was chosen as the data collection instrument. Several alternatives, such as, office or on-site telephone surveys and on-site surveys, were considered for data collection.

Due largely to the length of the survey instrument, the mailed, written survey was selected over a telephone survey. Since meeting planners are frequently away from the office and their phone, it was therefore decided a written survey would be more favorably received.

No formal pre-test was conducted. However, the original data collection instrument was designed and then reviewed by several Sea Palms Resort department heads in the early fall of 1988. Their input was requested on the length, content and design of the survey. After a few minor changes, the survey was distributed to Sea Palms on-site meeting planners.

The majority of respondents had nothing but positive comments concerning the length, content, design and appropriateness of the survey. A cover letter was drafted and the list of meeting planners to be sampled was assembled.

SELECTION OF SUBJECTS

The entire membership roster of the Georgia Society of Association Executives (GSAE) was used for the study. In addition to the 388 GSAE members, 33 certified meeting planners from the Florida Society of Association Executives (FSAE) and 38 South Carolina Meeting Planner International (SCMPI) members were selected to receive the survey. These 459 subjects were selected due to their paid, professional positions in their respective companies. Each of these subjects was ultimately responsible for planning meetings and conventions. Due to their membership in a professional meeting planner's association, it was determined these subjects would respond positively to participation in the author's study.

FINDINGS

A total of 73% of the 161 returned questionnaires came from association meeting planners. This was not surprising, due to the fact that all subjects were selected from predominately association executive membership lists. The remaining 27% classified their organization's meetings as other, educational, corporate, recreation or government.

The mean membership size of each organization surveyed was 6,811. Five of the 161 respondents stated membership in excess of 50,000. The smallest group contained 17 members and the largest listed 170,000.

Each group averaged 17 meetings per year, with 14% meeting only annually. Over 25% of the organizations scheduled twelve or more

meetings a year. The highest number of meetings held in one year was 253. This was an educational institute.

The average attendance for an annual meeting was 637. The smallest attendance was 15 and the largest attendance was 5,000. Only 3% of the organizations required mandatory attendance at their annual meeting.

The time of year for most annual meetings fell between September and November (29%). A close second was June through August (28%). A large 45% segment of all groups held their annual meeting in-state. Another 35% meet in the southeast region.

Resorts captured 40% of the annual meeting business, while downtown hotels realized 26% of the group business trade. Surprisingly, a combined 32% of all meeting planners surveyed either didn't know or didn't care about the property rating of the facility which hosted their annual meeting. The Mobil Corporation and the American Automobile Association (AAA) annually inspects properties and awards ratings based on merit. A total of 23% of the respondents requested a Four Diamond/Four Star rated facility. These facilities are in the top 2% of approximately 20,000 properties inspected.

Most organizations relied on their board or officers (31%) to select the location for the annual meeting. Individually, the executive director (25%) and the meeting planner (16%) both had sole authority in selecting the meeting site. A total of 85% of all meeting planners participated in a personal site tour of the facility in consideration.

When asked how long the site selection process lasted, 28% stated two to six months, 27% took seven months to a year and nearly one-quarter (24%) took longer than one year to choose their meeting site. Over half (53%) of the respondents stated that no formal site selection procedure exists for their organization.

The average length of most annual meetings lasted three days (40%). Conferences lasting four days or more comprised 30%. Two day meetings totaled 16% while 14% all meetings lasted for one day only.

The largest portion of the convention attendee's time was spent in meetings/sessions (57%). Recreation and free time comprised 19% while planned meal functions (18%) and other (6%) accounted for the remaining period of time.

Approximately 41% of all conference attendees in 1988 were men. Women attendees totaled 30%. A large percentage of respondents (28%) didn't know or didn't respond to the question of gender. An even higher percentage of respondents (48%) either didn't know or didn't answer the question pertaining to spouse and children participation. Those respondents that did answer (66%) stated 42% of attendees brought their spouses and 10% brought their children to the annual meeting.

Expenses incurred at the convention were paid primarily by the individual. Sponsoring organizations paid only for the group's planned meal functions (67%). Each attendee was responsible for room accommodations (84%), personal food and beverage (83%), recreation (82%)

and meeting registration fees (62%).

Respondents were next asked to rate the importance of eight criteria in respect to their site selection process. The quality of service received was rated very important as was the size of meeting facility, location, food quality, cost of services and number of guest rooms. The AAA/Mobile rating and the availability of on property recreation amenities were listed as only moderately important.

Meeting planners stated golf (42%) as being the first thing on their mind when hearing the term "recreation amenity". Other responses included tennis (28%), swimming (17%) and other (13%). Golf was also listed as the number one recreational amenity preferred by convention attendees (59%). A combination of swimming, tennis, beach or ocean and other comprised the remaining 41%. According to meeting planners, the top five amenities used by their conference attendees were golf courses, swimming pools, tennis courts, restaurants and bars or lounges.

One closing question asked respondents to rate the importance of the availability of twenty-one recreation amenities. The top five (restaurant, golf course, swimming pool, tennis courts and bar/lounge) were no surprise. The remaining seventeen amenities rated very important to not important at all.

The final section of the survey included personal questions directed towards meeting planners. The average respondent has planned meetings for eleven years, with seven of those years being with their present employer. Females composed 56% of the survey respondents. Their mean age was 36. Males comprised the remaining 44%. Their mean age was 47.

Both male and female meeting planners listed swimming pools, golf courses and tennis courts as the three recreation amenities they personally expected to find at a meeting site.

The survey ended with the question, "Does the presence of recreational amenities influence a meeting planner's decision to select a convention site?" Nearly half (45%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 26% agreed, 19% somewhat agreed, 5% disagreed and 5% didn't know.

Tables can be obtained from the author that provide a breakdown of each question included in the survey based upon those usable responses received.

CONCLUSIONS

Responses from the survey highlighted a number of interesting factors regarding conference site selection. A total of ninety percent of all association meeting planners believe that the presence of recreational amenities positively influences their decision to select a particular convention site. Their association convention will be held at a southeastern resort with an average of 637 attendees. The annual meeting will be scheduled for either the summer or fall months.

The average length of the annual meeting will be three days. Nineteen percent of the attendee's time will be spent in recreation. Golf will be the preferred recreation amenity, followed by tennis and swimming. Over half (52%) of all attendees bring their spouse or children to the annual convention. All convention expenses, with the exception of planned meal functions, are paid by the individual.

Quality of service was listed as the most important criteria in choosing the site for the organization's annual meeting. Only 16% of all respondents listed on property recreation amenities as being "not important" when considering a particular site. The AAA/Mobil Rating was the least important criteria a meeting planner considered when their organization's annual meeting site was chosen.

While golf was clearly the number one recreation amenity, more respondents (74%) listed the availability of a restaurant as being very important versus the availability of a golf course (52%). The availability of an on-property recreation director was rated higher than the availability of fishing, boating, organized teen events, gameroom or a marina.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings and experience of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. That results of this study be sent to the Georgia, Florida and South Carolina Society of Association Executive offices for general membership review.

2. That recreation professionals become more aware of the importance of on-site recreation amenities and how the availability of these amenities attract meeting planners and future convention business.

3. That properties catering to convention business become familiar with the rank order listing of recreational amenities most commonly desired by meeting planners.

4. That developers of properties catering to convention business incorporate the top five recreation amenities used most by conference attendees into their facilities.

5. That aspiring professionals utilize the survey findings or develop further studies in order to provide evidence for creating new recreation positions at conference facilities.

6. That properties with conference facilities put more of their sales and marketing efforts into attracting the forty-five percent of association business that meets in-state.

7. That a formal site selection procedure be established for all association organizations.

8. That meeting planners keep more detailed registration information as it applies to their annual meeting attendees.

9. That a similar survey be designed and distributed to other United States geographic regions in an effort to compare meeting planner responses.

10. That a similar type of survey be designed and administered to social guests for the purpose of obtaining their rank order preference of selected recreation amenities.

In summary, the findings of this study could be utilized to create new or strengthen existing recreation positions within the group meeting environment. Findings as a result of this study have stressed the importance of on-site recreation amenities. The site selection process is definitely influenced by the presence of certain amenities. A rank order listing has provided the top twenty-one recreation amenities preferred by convention attendees. All of these findings should benefit the development of future research based on similar subject material.

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