

No Reservations

When it comes to hosting tech meetings, being a winning hotel is similar to being a winning real estate agent -- while it's not all about location, that factor plays a huge role.

Most of the busiest hotels in the Greater Boston area for technology events are either along the Route 128 technology belt or in Boston and Cambridge, according to data from Hotel-Inntell.com. The top local venue for tech-related meetings, according to the data, is the Marriott Burlington, which hosted 144 such meetings through the first nine months of the year. Two other Route 128 hotels were in the top five as well: the DoubleTree Suites and the Westin, both in Waltham.

In total, area hotels hosted more than 2,900 meetings through September of this year. Area meeting professionals say that while the market may never return to the heyday of 1998-2000, business is good and looks to stay that way through 2009.

“Location is a key ingredient in most cases,” said Paul Dooley, director of sales and marketing at the Four Points by Sheraton Norwood Hotel & Conference Center. “It might be close to airports or major interstates or parking considerations, but location comes up in almost all meeting selection decisions.”

That's especially true when businesses hold brief meeting sessions, such as half-day offsites. Holding those meetings close to the office cuts down on travel time and enables more time for the business at hand.

Top meeting hotels also stay current with trends in meeting accommodations, including the latest technology, he added.

“The best conference centers make the meeting-planning and staging process a stress-free experience,” Dooley said.

Increasingly, meeting planners are seeking the technology expertise of the staff at meeting hotels. Jim Osaka, information technology director at InterContinental Boston, which opened last year on the Fort Point Channel in downtown Boston, said his staff recently had a client ask for space on the hotel's server that was used to create a virtual private network (VPN) back to the client's office.

“I think we're going to see more requests for that type of service,” said Osaka. “That's a real direction the market is going toward. More companies are doing more things remotely, and they need to have secure access to the data on their networks even when they're offsite.”

At the nearby Seaport World Trade Center Hotel, the hotel recently had a company rent all of its 426 rooms and its meeting space.

“We literally turned over our server to them, shut down the hotel and it became a command center for them,” said Marianna Accomando, the hotel's vice president of sales. At another meeting, the hotel's IT staff hard-wired 60 laptops in a conference space for a training session. “I think meeting planners really look for that support and expertise so they don't have to worry about it,” Accomando said.

The Seaport is one of the busier meeting sites in Boston proper; it hosted 43 meetings during the first three quarters, according to the Hotel-Inntell.com data. The hotel has a total of some 50,000 square feet of meeting space at the World Trade Center, including a 400-seat amphitheater and a ballroom space.

Many meeting organizers are interested in the hotel's wireless network, which covers the guest rooms and all the meeting areas, Accomando said.

"Any meeting now is pretty much looking for wireless connectivity," she said. "A presenter wants to be able to look at their presentation and make final changes without having to go back to their room."

More meetings are now including a remote component as well. At the InterContinental, one of its smaller meeting rooms has been designed specifically for such blended meetings. The meeting table has built-in microphones and cameras and the room is equipped with a moveable plasma TV screen.

"We're seeing more and more demand for combining onsite meetings and connecting them with people in another location," said Steve Juscen, catering and conference services director at the InterContinental. "Technology in general is becoming more essential to good meetings every day. Businesses are realizing how important it is to work with a venue that can provide that expertise."

Several hotel meeting managers expect 2008 to be a good year for their business, which often rises and falls along with the economy.

"This has been a good year and it looks like it's going to continue," said the Seaport's Accomando, who said medical sector and financial services meetings are rounding out the business driven by technology firms.

Regardless of the macro trend, hotels that embrace technological change will continue to lead the pack, said Dooley.

"Conference centers and hotels that keep in tune with technological trends will gain a competitive advantage in the future," he added.

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