

| HOW TO: CHOOSE A WINTER MEETING SITE |

Companies cooling off to extravagant winter meetings

There are many barometers of the economy's health.

And as the winter corporate meeting and party season approaches, one of the more telling measures may be the slimmed-down approach many companies are taking when it comes to corporate events.

For example, officials at Greater Boston restaurants say there's been an increase in interest from business that in the past might have booked area hotels for larger and more lavish events.

Hotel officials say companies are delaying final booking of events for later this year and early in 2009. Many companies are choosing to hold events at their corporate offices instead - all in direct reaction to a slower economy.

Paul Dooley, director of sales and marketing for the **Four Points by Sheraton Norwood**, which draws business from both providence and Boston, said business often start by looking at both location and price when determining where to hold an event.

Location is important if people are coming from multiple offices or out-of-town locations, or if the meeting is meant to help spark creativity with a change of scenery.

Still, many companies are holding off on booking events at the hotel, which has 30 different event spaces for corporate meetings and formal parties, both during and beyond the holidays and into 2009, Dooley said.

"Some accounts seem to be waiting to see what's going on with the economy," he added. "We have seen a shift where businesses are either delaying or canceling meetings for the first quarter in addition to holding space and delaying signing contracts.

Some companies, especially those in financial services, have already canceled their annual winter formal dinners and major end-of-the-year meeting events, said **Eleanor Arpino**, vice president of operations for **Davio's** restaurants in Boston, Foxborough and Philadelphia and the **Avila** restaurant in Boston.

Others are changing events by modifying menu selections or choosing less expensive wine options.

"While we've lost some events, we've also had some business come to us as companies downsized from the larger venues," Arpino said. For instance, some companies may be hosting only employees themselves and no outside guests.

Denise Josephs, principal of Seekonk based meeting-

FAST FACTS

Restaurants say they are getting more inquiries from companies looking to scale down their winter events from larger hotels.

Locations and price of a venue are weighed together when choosing a site.

Area hotels are using special offers to drum up business in this down economy.

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Director of sales and marketing, Four Points by Sheraton Norwood



planning firm **Bloomspring LLC**, says many of her clients are eschewing formal events at traditional venues this year.

"They're pulling in their special events such as holiday parties, opting to instead hold them at their offices with a caterer," she said.

That move can equate to significant savings, as in-house events don't always include alcohol, which can significantly increase the final tab, noted Arpino.

Many hotels are trying to drum up business with special offers, said Josephs. However, steep discounts are still rare due to the fixed overhead costs that often accompany an event.

On the meeting side, a slowing economy often means easier access to the area's top meeting centers. Corporate meeting spaces, however, such as the **Forefront Conference Center** in Waltham, where Josephs often books meetings, remain reasonably priced for many businesses.

Whatever the type of event, "my clients are looking for venues that offer the most value for their money" as well as all-inclusive packages to help keep costs down, Josephs added.

Regardless of where events take place, business clients are more subdued than they were a year ago.

Corporate clients seem to be 'more sensitive to the current mood," said Josephs.