MARKET SEGMENT REPORT: GOVERNMENT & EDUCATIONAL MEETINGS

Government & Educational Meetings

Addressing Budgetary Restrictions & Regulations

By Shannon Rasmussen

Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort & Spa in Cedar Creek, Texas
Every industry faces budgetary restrictions of some sort but for planners of government and education events, budget is often the major consideration, not only because of limited funds but also because of strict rules regulating expenses.

Gail Bell, the conference coordinator for the Texas Center for the Judiciary (TCJ) in Austin, is tasked with providing legal updates to district, county, court-at-law and appellate judges throughout the state. Her organization notifies judges about changes to the law since the last legislative session and provides opportunities for judges to meet face-to-face.

“Because of rules about privilege in our legal system, some judges – especially those in isolated areas – don’t have other people to talk to about cases,” Bell said. “Our meetings provide an opportunity for them to get different perspectives without worrying about impropriety.”

She pointed out that TCJ operates in a hybrid situation because the organization receives grants from the government but it isn’t a government organization.

“Because we’re affiliated with the government, we just don’t have crazy budgets,” she said. “We cannot absorb surprise expenses very well, so we really like properties that understand that. They know going in that this is our budget and we aren’t going to be able to increase it.”

Government per-diem rules restrict what TCJ can spend on food, so she looks for partner properties that will help her work within that constraint.

“The properties I work with know that my food budget is limited so they don’t try to sell me on higher things,” Bell said. “They understand that they won’t be able to nickel and dime us.”

Elaine Hall, senior sales manager for the Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort & Spa in Cedar Creek, Texas, has worked with Bell for a number of years to host the judiciary events.

“It’s easy for us to book these events because Gail understands that in order to get the government rate, she needs to maintain flexibility,” Hall said. “If a group has flexibility with dates and pattern, it really helps properties determine whether they can offer the needed rate and enables the hotel to offer a variety of options.”

Hall said that one of the other things that Bell does is include custom menus in the event contract since her organization has a ceiling on the amount it can spend for food.

“Many groups settle for 10 percent off of menu pricing but Gail has to dig deeper than that because of her budget limitations,” Hall said. “Our chef creates menus that fit into her budget and we include that in the contract.”

**Flexibility is Essential**


Her organization contracts with FEMA to provide national flood insurance training to insurance adjusters who are required to attend class once a year. Because all training must be completed prior to the June 1 start of hurricane season, Bachick’s challenges are a little different.

“Our biggest challenge is false numbers,” she said. “Adjusters are required to attend our courses but sometimes they get deployed and they can’t attend the meeting they originally registered for. We have to manage registration well enough that everyone who needs a seat can get one.”

The FEMA contract dictates that one of these events be held in each FEMA region, with a total of 30 offerings. A larger proportion of the classes are held in Regions 4 and 6, which encompass Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Florida and Georgia, because those areas are more heavily affected by hurricanes and flooding than other parts of the United States.

“I try to find locations that are easily accessible by airport and by highway but I try to avoid downtown locations because of traffic and congestion,” Bachick said.

She uses a combination of hotels and convention centers for her meetings and

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**Planning an Educational or Government Event**

Repeat facilities and relationships are key to planning educational and government events, according to Jane Bachick of H2O Partners, Inc. Prior to each year’s hurricane season, Bachick provides free, mandatory training to insurance adjusters and agents who sell flood policies.

Because government contracts often differ greatly from industry standards, it’s important for planners to find facilities that are willing to work within given constraints. Here are some suggestions offered by industry professionals.

1. Planners seeking government rates should operate in the short term when possible, according to Elaine Hall, senior sales manager for the Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort & Spa in Cedar Creek, Texas. Although it’s risky to do, it allows hotels to fill existing holes so that the event is a win for both sides. Flexibility with dates helps, too. “If you’re able to book short-term when you find a hole, you’re going to get a heck of a deal,” Hall said.

2. Consider arrival days when planning your event. “Sunday arrivals are best, allowing us to meet on Monday and leave Tuesday,” according to Gail Bell, conference coordinator for the Texas Center for the Judiciary in Austin. “For a lot of judges, though, Monday is their busy day because it’s the day for trials to begin and a day to catch up on the weekend’s cases. Try to mix and match your start days as you can.”

3. Consider location and ease of travel when planning, said Elizabeth Hovell of the University of Georgia Center for Continuing Education & Hotel. “Being in the Southeastern U.S. is ideal because it’s so easy for people to get here from so many of the surrounding states,” she said.

4. “Budget, budget, budget,” Bell said. “We’re stewards of other people’s money so we have to use it wisely. Find the things that are important to you and be willing to compromise on others.”

5. Seek partners who understand your needs. “We are the government,” Hovell said. “We speak your language.”
said that budget is a big consideration.

“Events held at a tiny location in West Virginia will cost less than events held in Dallas but I know that ahead of time because I’ve done this for so many years,” she said. “I’ve also grown to expect that prices will increase a little bit each year.”

Bachick’s events don’t require elaborate facilities but the facility staff is an important consideration.

“In terms of facilities, I simply need large ballrooms with tables and chairs, and basic A/V and sound capabilities,” she said. “We’re not allowed to provide food or beverages under the terms of the contract, so attendees do lunch on their own.”

She added: “I’m really looking for a staff that is willing to help out whenever I need them and a good working relationship.”

Some Facilities Can Offer Expertise

Government contracts, in general, can be very strict and sometimes complicated, so Elizabeth Hovell, department head of sales at the University of Georgia Center for Continuing Education & Hotel, recommends that planners affiliated with the government ask properties about their experience with government contracts.

“Organizations like ours that regularly work with the government are very knowledgeable about the kinds of clauses that are allowable and those that are not,” she said. “Government contracts are different because of the things they aren’t allowed to agree to. The billings may not be the same as normal contracts.”

The Georgia Center is a unique property situated on the University of Georgia campus, with access to all the offerings campus provides, according to Hovell. The center is owned by the state but staffed entirely by UGA employees who carry out the university’s outreach and public service missions.

“We’re a lot like a traditional full-service hotels except that we have 200 hotel rooms with 38,000 square feet of meeting and exhibit space,” she said. “Industry standards suggest we should have 850 rooms with that much space. It provides us tremendous space for breakouts and all the requirements of educational events.”

The center offers continuing-education courses that allow the public to attend classes, such as grant writing, test prep, project management, professional and leadership training, and even turf management. Additionally, though, the facility also operates much like a traditional hotel in its access to businesses, government departments, associations and other entities.

“We do education well because we’re serious about it,” Hovell said. “We have access to trained facilitators who can help people as they are training for their events and we have spaces that are designed for education.”

Specifically, she said, the center intentionally opts for 60-inch tables instead of the industry-standard 72 inches because larger tables make it more difficult for conversations to take place. Meeting rooms offer lecterns that allow speakers to control every aspect of the presentation from the front of the room.

Additionally, the facility offers banquet dining rather than conference dining so that each group has its own eating space. Hovell pointed out that there is ample research that suggests that “eating at your desk” doesn’t promote productivity, so the center provides separate meeting and eating spaces.

Best of all, the university offers shuttles to and from the Atlanta airport and free shuttles to locations on and around the campus for those staying at the facility.

“The bang for your buck here is phenomenal,” Hovell said. “Once you’re here, you don’t have to worry about anything else.”