



Texas A&M Hotel & Conference Center on the university's College Station campus.

Photo courtesy Stewart Cohen Pictures

GOVERNMENT & EDUCATIONAL MEETINGS

Planning Top-Notch Events On A Budget By Paige Townley

Planning a meeting or event in any market comes with its own challenges and requirements, and the government and educational segments are no exception.

These markets often come with even more regulations than other segments because funds are often more limited and there are stricter rules when it comes to spending those dollars.

Planning With Per Diems

Making the budget work is one of the primary guiding factors for the Council on Occupational Education (COE), an accrediting association which serves various educational institutions across an 11-state region. The organization hosts multiple programs a year, from board and committee meetings to large conferences and annual conventions.

Tami Maynard, executive assistant of agency operations for COE, plans upwards of a dozen programs per year.

Besides the challenge of finding a convenient, centrally located destination for attendees from a variety of cities, Maynard must ensure she can work within a budget her members can afford.

“With our members’ limited funds, I try to build an event around what I know their expenditures will be because they have to plan

and get approval to travel based on the funds available to them,” she explained.

To create that budget, more often than not, Maynard has to find venues that will provide her with per diem rates.

“Particularly with our two bigger events in July and November, I have to make sure I can work with a property that will provide me with government per diem rates, which can be challenging sometimes,” Maynard said. “If they will not give me a government block comparable to what the government will pay for lodging, I have to block rooms outside the main hotel, requiring attendees to commute back and forth, which can be an issue.”

To balance getting the best destination while ensuring a manageable budget, Maynard often deals with a lot of repeat locations as she has formed strong relationships with various cities and hotel chains. She also uses data taken from previous events when reaching out to new destinations or venues, specifically highlighting the revenue cities can make from her groups.

“I have a destination history sheet I share, and it shows the economic impact our attendees make in a city,” she explained. “It shows how much money is being spent in a destination because of our event, and this helps us negotiate because it shows the potential for them with our group.”

Creative Budget Solutions

In searching for all savings possible for her events, Maynard also gets creative with the food and beverage prices. While the event registration typically covers breakfast and beverage breaks, attendees must cover their own lunch.

Maynard often tries to work with the hotel staff to create lunch menus at a reduced cost for attendees. In return, she encourages attendees to stay at the hotel for lunch instead of going out somewhere else.

The sales and marketing staff at the Texas A&M Hotel & Conference Center, a facility situated on the university’s College Station campus, has also spent a lot of time figuring out ways to best help its many government and educational groups that host events on site. Many of these events occur there because they are tied to organizations that professors or department heads from the university are aligned with.

“Because these conferences are often coming from professors, they want ease in planning,” explained Rachel Forester. “They want to be able to focus on the content of the meeting; they are not meeting planners.”

But they also need to ensure a manageable budget for attendees. To help these groups with costs, the conference center staff has put together a new option, an all-inclusive package, which ►

allows groups to be given a per-person price, making it easier for them to budget.

One way conference center officials are able to control the cost for attendees is looking for creative ways they can save, too. For example, the conference center keeps breaks consistent among all groups that are on property, which helps lower costs that can also be passed along to the customers.

Listen To CVBs For Guidance

Government and educational groups are a large market for Knoxville, Tenn., and, as a result, Visit Knoxville staff does all it can to help groups plan their meetings and events on budget. To help with the hurdles of per diem rates, the CVB often suggests groups be willing to compromise on dates, maybe looking at a Monday through Wednesday instead of a Thursday through Saturday.

“A lot of our hotels want to work with these groups, so a go-to for us is always suggesting the customer be flexible on dates,” says Sarah

Rowan, senior director of convention sales and marketing for Visit Knoxville. “The hotel may have another group in town at a particular time, so the price could look very different when comparing a mid-week event to a weekend event.”

Rowan added because Knoxville is home to the state’s largest public education institution, the University of Tennessee, they have more space to offer groups during the summer months. “Educational groups tend to meet in summer, and since classes are not in session, it is a great time to book our university facilities,” Rowan added. “When they are available, we can even use dorm rooms as they allow us to layer in more groups at a time. Educational groups can be space intensive, so having the ability to use the university in conjunction with the convention center is great.”

The Waco (Tex.) CVB has a similar approach in working with government and educational groups, often recommending suggestions to work best with a budget.

Those are two ways in which the Texas Association of Private and Parochial Schools (TAPPS), an organization which promotes academic, athletic, and fine arts programs with its 225-member private schools, has brought its events to Waco.

An issue TAPPS frequently faces is finding facilities and destinations willing to work with schools.

“It is a different ticket. With a high school crowd, when you have two adults and 20 kids, hotels do not always want that,” explained Bryan Bunselmeyer, TAPPS’ executive director. “One thing we find appealing about Waco is they have good infrastructure in place and a variety of hotels at various price points.”

“We have had to move some of our events to Monday through Wednesday because of hotel availability, but with that, the price point also goes down considerably,” Bunselmeyer said.

Trends Vs. Traditional

While many aspects of the government and educational markets will remain the same, such as per diem rates and tight budgets, there are many changes and new trends happening within the market.

One newer trend is the need for an online component to events, noted Amanda Bergeron, program manager of conference services at the University of Alabama. “Everyone cannot always travel, so we are being asked to include some webinars and online training to be able to fulfill these needs,” Bergeron said. “We have even recorded or livestreamed the event so those who could not attend could still partake.”

In addition, groups are requesting the ability to record their meetings so they can be made available later as needed.

When the online component has to be added, the expense can be quite high. In these cases, Bergeron and her team try to help guide groups to facilities which already offer an audio/video package.

Another newer trend Bergeron is seeing is group planners showing more concern about the health and wellness of their attendees. “Just a few years ago, we did not see many people reaching out to us about dietary needs, but it is really common today,” she said. “I feel like the hotels are doing a pretty good job of accommodating these needs.” ■

BREAKOUT SPOTLIGHT:
The Armstrong Center

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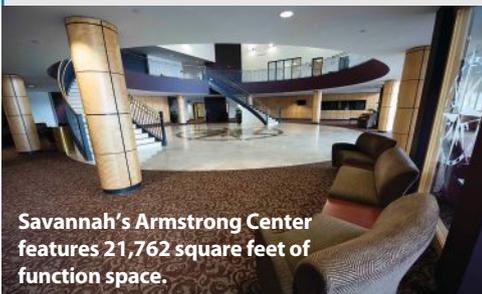
Even the lobby makes a grand first impression with marble floors and a soaring dual staircase that leads to the center’s second floor. Meeting rooms in the center are equipped with the latest in audiovisual presentation systems; wireless internet service is available throughout the facility; and certified program planners offer extensive experience to assist with every detail.



The executive-style boardrooms and meeting rooms capably support a variety of needs while the center’s auditorium, banquet room, and ballroom are ideal for workshops, trade shows, exhibitions, and more.

In all, the Armstrong Center features 21,762 square feet of function space, including 12 meeting rooms.

The largest meeting space has a theater-style capacity of 500, while the largest banquet space has a capacity of 280. ■



Savannah’s Armstrong Center features 21,762 square feet of function space.

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