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Site Inspections

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- Managing the site inspection conversation
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- Ending the site inspection

Types of site inspection

In Chapter 3, the practice of key account management was discussed. In Chapter 6, the use of face-to-face selling techniques at exhibitions will be explored. A powerful element of – or follow-on from – these two techniques is to invite prospects into the venue so that they can see it for themselves, at first hand.

In this sense, site inspections are the ultimate form of experiential marketing for venues. Experiential marketing may be defined as a form of advertising that focuses primarily on helping consumers experience a brand. As such, it may be distinguished from traditional advertising (radio, print, television), which verbally and visually communicates

the product benefits. Experiential marketing, by way of contrast, tries to immerse consumers within the product by engaging as many other human senses as possible.

Also known as show-rounds, site inspections involve providing a pre-arranged tour of the venue for two principal sources of business: prospects and agencies. A third category of visitors to the venue, for the purposes of a site inspection, is the press – journalists carrying out research for an article they are writing for a trade magazine aimed at those working in the meetings industry.

Such tours can be either individual or in groups. Site inspections may be organised independently by the venue, or they may form part of a broader familiarisation trip or press trip, usually organised by a convention bureau.

In larger venues, the site inspection may be conducted by a member of the sales team. In venues that are too small to have a sales team, any manager may find themselves having responsibility for showing their venue to prospects or agencies.

There are two possible stages in the sales cycle when a site inspection may occur:

- The first is at the very beginning of the sales cycle, when a prospect or agency has no immediate need for a venue for a particular event, but has been persuaded to visit the venue to get an overview of the facilities and experience them for themselves, so that they may consider it for their future meetings and events. This type of site inspection is occasionally called a venue tour, but venue managers who simply show the visitor around the venue are not making the most of the opportunity that such inspections can offer. The prospect may not have an immediate need for a venue, but their visit to the venue offers a useful opportunity for the venue manager to spend time with them, before, during or after the tour, discussing their future requirements and establishing to what extent there is a synergy between those requirements and the venue's facilities and services. In this situation, the site visit may be used as an extension of the lead qualifying process that was described in Chapter 2.

- The second type of site inspection takes place right at the end of the sales cycle. By that stage, a relationship has already been established between the venue and the prospect, following an enquiry being made and a proposal being sent out by the venue. A provisional booking may have been already made by the prospect, subject to their satisfaction with the final site inspection.

Regardless of which point in the sales cycle the site inspection visit takes place, the venue manager's prime objective should be not simply to show the venue to the visitor, but to attempt to get them to visualise how their event will work very well in the venue. But even before the visitor arrives for the site inspection, some preparation is necessary, to ensure its success.

Preparation for the site inspection

The person responsible for showing the visitor around should collect as much information as possible, in advance, about the types of events the visitor has held in the past – all of their events, not only the particular one they have in mind for their visit to the venue. That enables the venue manager to demonstrate how the venue could be used for the whole range of meetings that the prospect generally holds, not only for the particular event for which the prospect is seeking a venue.

It is essential that all concerned agree on the objectives and format of the visit. For example, it must be established in advance whether a visitor seeking a venue for a specific event prefers to have the site inspection before sitting down to discuss their event with the venue manager, or wishes to discuss their event before being shown around the venue. From the venue's perspective, the former format is often preferable, as it allows the person conducting the site inspection to more easily relate the tour to the specific event that the visitor has described.

Another important element of the format is the degree to which the visitor expects hospitality from the venue in terms of coffee or lunch. While almost every visitor will accept a cup of coffee before, during or after the site inspection, their expectations regarding lunch are often less clear. From the perspective of the venue manager, having lunch with the visitor provides a valuable opportunity to build the relationship that

he or she already has with the prospect – an essential part of account development. It also allows for the gathering of more information about the prospect and their events.

But it should always be established in advance whether the visitor is free to accept the invitation to lunch at the venue. If they are, then it is essential that the venue representative allows sufficient time for this in their diary, as it leaves a poor impression if he or she needs to curtail the lunch in order to get back to their office or rush off to meet another prospect. If anyone has to rush off at the end of the lunch, it is far preferable that it is the visitor.

The final act of preparation for the site inspection should take place just before the visitor arrives, when the venue representative should take the tour themselves, in order to check, for example, that all areas are clean and tidy, lights are working, heating/cooling are turned on and the curtains are open. One venue manager learnt the hard way the importance of this pre-checking of the venue when, during a morning site inspection, he opened the door of a seminar room only to find that a homeless person had made it their sleeping accommodation for the previous night!

A comprehensive guide to what the visitor may focus on during their site inspection may be found in any of the numerous checklists available on the internet, designed to indicate to meetings and event planners exactly which features of the venue they should assess during their visit. Getting hold of one such checklist and ensuring in advance that all items listed are ready for inspection can be an effective way of getting the venue in order for visitors. One of the most complete checklists of this type is available free to download from www.write-style.co.uk

The visitor's arrival

First impressions count, and an effective site inspection begins right at the front door of the venue. It is worth remembering at all times that the prospect is paying the visit in order to find out if the venue is suitable for their event, and that they will consider the manner in which they are treated and greeted to be a reflection of what they can expect during their event.