

Planning A Great Meeting

The University of Southern Maine's Department of Conferences staff are meeting planning experts. They can assist you with the **logistical planning and registration support** for your meeting while saving you time and money. This allows you to focus on the all important **program and content**.

For the do-it-yourself-ers, the following guideline may be helpful. Meeting planning provides the necessary logistical support to the content of a meeting's program. The meeting organizer has a clear purpose for holding a meeting. The meeting planner must understand that purpose, and work with the meeting organizer by suggesting ways to make the meeting accessible, functional, pleasant and smoothly run. The meeting-planning process involves five main steps:

1. Determine what needs to be accomplished at the meeting.

Sketch out a mental picture of the meeting.

What does the organizer want the meeting to accomplish?

Who will be invited?

How many days will the meeting take and when should it occur?

What budget is available?

Are certain geographic locations more convenient for attendees or pertinent to the meeting?

Will participants handle their own long-distance transportation?

2. Use your meeting goals to identify criteria for selecting a good site.

Match the meeting's site to its purpose. For information exchange or other large meetings, conference centers might be the best choice because they house, congregate and feed large numbers of people in a pleasant and work conducive environment. Think tanks and brainstorming are thought to benefit from more relaxed and unusual settings. Consider a resort only if the attendees will have a chance to use the facilities.

Identify features and services that potential sites will need to support the meeting, including accessibility features that meet the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG). Develop a site checklist *tailored to that meeting*, and use it to evaluate each facility (see [Sample Site Inspection Checklist](#)).

For popular locations and times of the year, it may be necessary to select a site a year or more in advance. Three to five years may be necessary in order to get the best and most accessible facility (the best facilities obviously book faster than others).

Conferences on topics of interest to many can result in larger than expected attendance. (The number of attendees will affect the budget.)

3. Inspect potential sites *in person*.

Use a site inspection checklist. Take notes at each site—memories fade when you inspect several sites (see [Sample Site Inspection Checklist](#)).

Ask to see the sleeping rooms that are designed to accommodate people with disabilities, including wheelchair-accessible rooms with and without roll-in showers. Also ask staff to show you what features, including adaptive equipment, are available to accommodate guests who are blind, low vision, deaf or hard of hearing.

Visit each meeting room. Check for adjustable lighting and test to see that sound-proofing is adequate. When possible, select meeting rooms with windows. Avoid rooms with blank walls. Are all meeting rooms accessible to people who use wheelchairs? Are they equipped with assistive listening systems for guests who are hard of hearing?

Confirm that accessible hotel accommodations, services and equipment are available in compliance with the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#). The facility staff and employees, as well as the meeting staff, should understand basic disability etiquette.

Verify that accessible transportation options to and from the meeting site are readily available. The concierge for the facility should be knowledgeable about the accessibility of local attractions or should know what questions to ask of the proprietors of the attractions. The local Independent Living Center or other disability organization at the chosen location may provide helpful information (e.g., area resources, accessible restaurants), which can be included in information for attendees but should not be provided as a separate resource list.

4. Negotiate the Facility Contract.

Try to have at least two or three hotel options. Compare prices and use the other hotels' price quotes as leverage when negotiating with the hotel you want.

Negotiate complimentary guest room nights and use of special rooms. One complimentary guest room night usually comes with a certain number of room nights booked (for example, one complimentary room night for every 50 room nights booked).

A complimentary hospitality suite, often worth two guest rooms, can also be negotiated.

Large conference rooms should be complimentary if the group is large (100 people or more) and there are meal functions. Likewise, smaller meeting rooms can often be negotiated on a sliding fee schedule.

5. Pamper guests to facilitate meeting goals.

Good food goes a long way. In one case, 12 program leaders worked 2,000 hours (with no pay) since they were fed a wonderful dinner the night before each meeting.

Have someone on site who can change travel reservations. Attendees then can focus on the meeting's topic.