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FIRST LOOK RESEARCH:
IDENTIFYING THE IDEAL CONVENTION CENTER

PLANNER PREFERENCES AND PEEVES

SPRING 2020



IDENTIFYING THE IDEAL CONVENTION CENTER



When examining the various elements that go into creating an ideal convention center, most people probably start with aesthetically pleasing features such as striking architecture that brings in natural light, intriguing art and décor, and a location near green space or entertainment options. But what element is *most* valued by meeting planners when considering a convention center? In a word: flexibility.

From facility issues to service concerns to the contracting process, the planners surveyed by Northstar Meetings Group indicated they value convention centers that not only have the aesthetic elements listed above but are also able to adapt to the needs of their group and to continually evolve — especially when it comes to technology. Indeed, among the nuts-and-bolts issues that the meeting planners indicated were important, communications technology was mentioned the most often, with planners saying they wanted it to be advanced, easily accessed and affordable. What's more, poor communication experiences attracted nearly as much attention from planners as efficient ones. Convention centers that want to compete in the near future will need to look at least as closely at the flexibility of the technology infrastructure they implement as they do at the space itself.

Issues that also made the top of planners' lists when describing their ideal convention center included safety and security; sustainability measures to offset the carbon footprint of the meeting; reasonably priced, healthy and well-labeled food-and-beverage options; nearby hotel rooms, entertainment districts and green spaces; and easy local transportation.

PHOTOGRAPH AND COVER: JOTILY/ADOBE STOCK

FACILITY

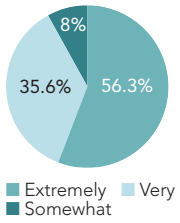


> Important factors about the building itself

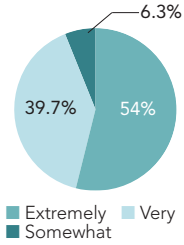
Whether referring to the physical meeting space or the communications technology running through it, providing flexible and advanced options reigns supreme when it comes to convention centers, according to the planners surveyed. Additional qualities they indicated as important include the number of meeting rooms, ample exhibit space, new or renovated space and outdoor event space on site.

HOW IMPORTANT ARE EACH THE FOLLOWING BUILDING FACTORS?

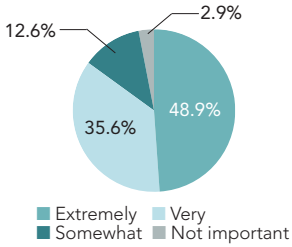
1. Advanced Technology Infrastructure



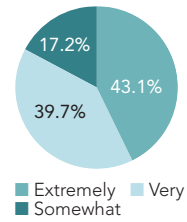
2. Flexible Meeting Spaces



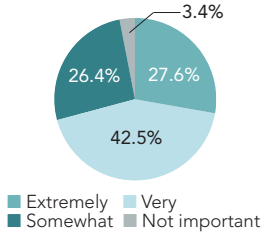
3. Ample Exhibit Space



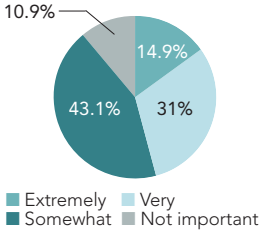
4. Number of Meeting Rooms



5. New or Recently Renovated Space

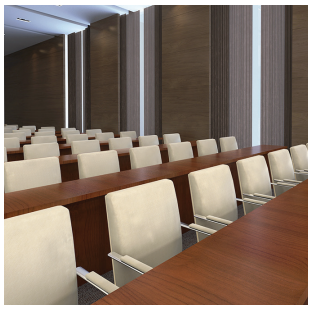


6. Outdoor Event Space on Site



> Most important elements of décor or environment

While an aesthetically pleasing facility was identified as important, providing enough electrical outlets and charging stations in the meeting spaces and common areas ranked even higher. Also ranking very high were visually appealing architecture and interior design, attractive (and moveable) furniture, comfortable seating and sunlight in the common areas. Not quite as important — although with a large majority still stating it was at least somewhat important — were windows in the meeting rooms, interior plants and greenery, and intriguing art and décor elements. Not quite as crucial was the presence of music in the common areas.



53% ranked comfortable seating as extremely important

> Challenges involving convention centers

When identifying the top challenges they have at convention centers, the surveyed meeting planners yet again mentioned communications technology — including unreliable and/or slow WiFi and insufficient cellular coverage. Added together, these concerns were almost double the next response, which was labor costs. Other challenges included the quality of food and beverage and environmental issues such as the inability to control air temperature or lighting. Lack of natural light and the lack of flexibility in room setups were also mentioned, as were load-in/out restrictions and inadequate security.

PHOTOGRAPHS: (TOP) ANDY DEAN/ADOBE STOCK; (BOTTOM) WHITEHOUSE/ADOBE STOCK

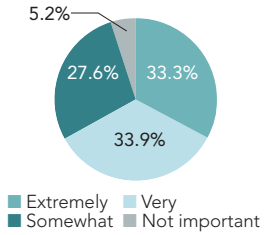
SERVICES

> The importance of sustainability practices

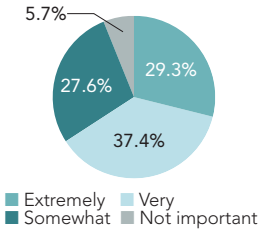
Being as environmentally friendly as possible remains a consistent selling point for convention centers — and this goes well beyond simply providing recycling bins (although they are expected). Providing demonstrable sustainable building operations that include donating unused food and minimizing food waste rank high with planners, as do holding a respected sustainability certificate, reducing the carbon footprint, waste avoidance and eliminating the use of plastic in water bottles, cutlery and straws.

HOW IMPORTANT ARE THESE SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES?

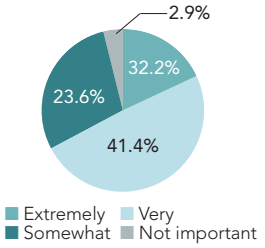
1. Has an Active Food-donation Program



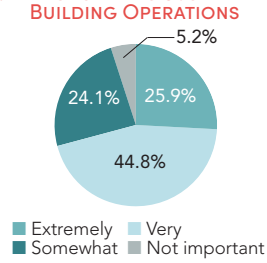
2. Implemented a Program to Minimize Food Waste



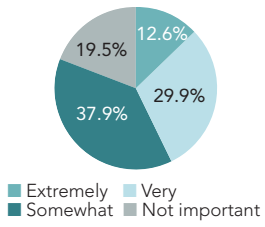
3. Provides Recycling Bins



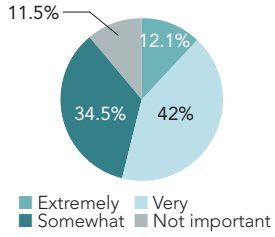
4. Demonstrates Sustainable Building Operations



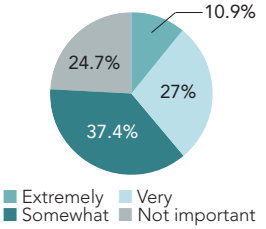
5. Eliminated Plastic Water Bottles



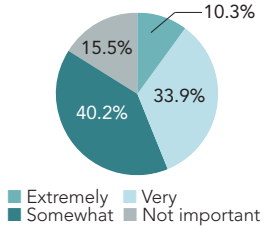
6. Holds Respected Sustainability Certification



7. Eliminated All Single-use Plastics



8. Reports Carbon Footprint and Waste Avoidance





> F&B logistical concerns

One thing that has not changed over time is the importance of providing quality food-and-beverage options. What has changed is exactly what that means — so savvy convention centers will need to constantly be adapting to changing trends if they want to compete. In general, centers that offer flexible options that allow planners to stay within budget, feed a large crowd simultaneously, accommodate dietary needs (and preferences) and provide healthy options will continue to be top contenders.

> F&B priorities

While price remains the top consideration (for 83 percent of respondants), planners also prioritize offering healthy menu options, dealing with dietary needs (including kosher, halal, vegetarian and vegan) and listing ingredients on buffets and menus. Some planners (39 percent) also put a priority on providing local, organic and sustainable options.

> Expectations about foods with common allergens

As the sensitivity to accommodating those with common food allergies increases, shellfish, peanuts and tree nuts were the three food items planners expected convention centers to either avoid altogether or label. More than 80 percent of planners surveyed also expected labels for wheat, milk/dairy, eggs and soy.



Pricing still tops the list of planner F&B concerns, but concerns around dietary needs and food allergies are of growing importance.

PHOTOGRAPHS: (TOP) EUGENELUCKY/ADOBE STOCK; (BOTTOM) SMSPSY/ADOBE STOCK

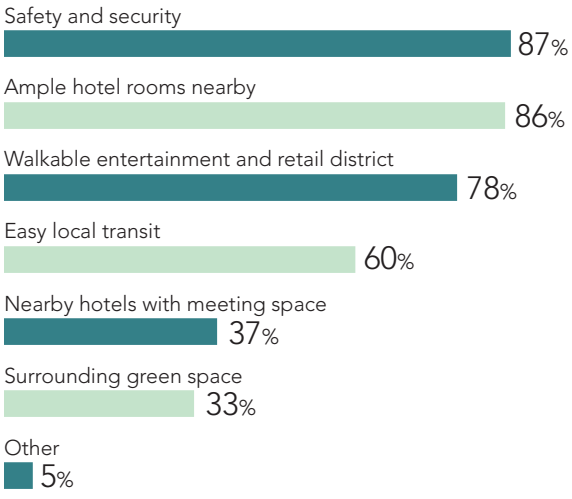
ENVIRONMENT



> Area around the convention center

No convention center is built in a void so it's important that the assets surrounding the center are as top-notch as the features inside the building. The number-one planner concern is providing for the safety and security of their attendees. Also important are having an ample supply of hotel rooms nearby, providing a walkable entertainment and retail district and easy local transit. The existence of nearby hotels with their own meeting space and surrounding green space rounded out the top responses.

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS REGARDING THE AREA AROUND THE CONVENTION CENTER? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



> Specific concerns

A look at the answers provided for the "Other" category sheds some light on some of the specific planner concerns behind their responses. With respect to "safety and security," write-in responses included "visible police or private security presence" and "away from homeless camps/transients."The latter has been a point of publicized contention in some cities, with attendees raising concerns about the homeless population near convention facilities. Additional write-in responses underscored the importance of nearby conveniences — such as the presence of a hotel connected by covered walkway or skyway, or the need for easily accessible dining and fast-food establishments.



Nearly 80% of planners prized a walkable entertainment and retail district — though just one-third felt that surrounding green space was essential

> Safety over beauty

Duty-of-care issues with respect to attendees are paramount in this day and age, so it's no surprise that the top desire here among planners is for an environment that doesn't pose additional risk for large gatherings. On the other hand, aesthetic and sustainable elements such as "surrounding green space," while likely alluring for many planners, simply don't hold the same weight when it comes to site selection.

PHOTOGRAPHS: (TOP) SMSHOOT/ADOBE STOCK; (BOTTOM) DEBERARR/ADOBE STOCK

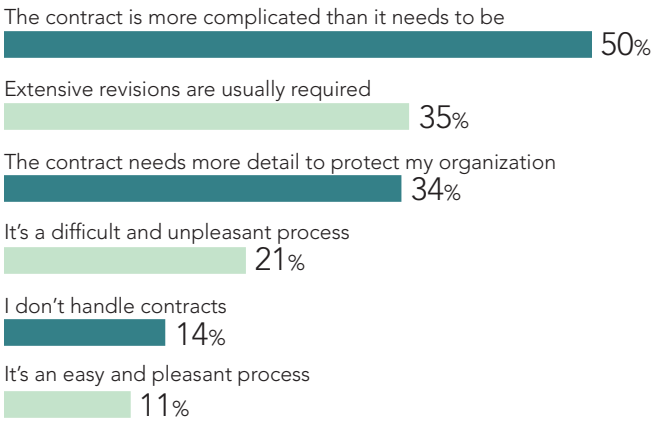
BOOKING



> Contracts

Once again, flexibility is a key quality meeting planners would like to see more of. When it comes to the contracting process, nearly double the number of respondents described it as difficult and unpleasant vs. those who said it was easy and pleasant. Planner challenges included contracts that are more complicated than they need to be, the extensive revisions usually required and the need for them to add more detail in order to protect their organizations.

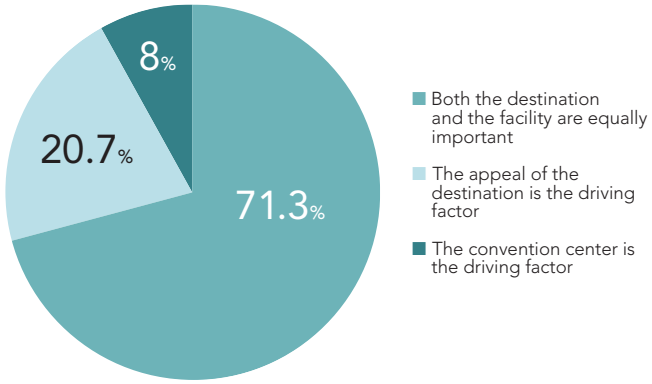
WHICH OF THESE STATEMENTS REFLECTS YOUR EXPERIENCE WHEN CONTRACTING WITH CONVENTION CENTERS? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



> Site selection

The "if you build it they will come" adage is not one that rings true with convention centers, with meeting planners reporting that the destination and the convention center facility are equally important in the site-selection process. Interestingly, of the remaining responses, the appeal of the destination was viewed as more important than convention center itself — so perhaps a more accurate way of looking at the placement of an ideal convention center would be "where attendees will come you should build it."

WHICH BEST DESCRIBES YOUR SITE SELECTION PRIORITIES? (CHOOSE ONE)





50% of respondents said the contract was overly complicated, with more than one-fifth calling the contracting process difficult and unpleasant

PHOTOGRAPHS: (TOP) RAWPIXEL.COM/ADOBE STOCK; (BOTTOM) MICHAEL EVANS/ADOBE STOCK