



## Site Inspections – Boondoggle or Boon? Shedding light on the true value of a site inspection By Joanne Ireland, President of Ireland Presentations

I occasionally meet with a client who wants to plan a meeting or event, but balks at the notion of having me perform a site inspection. The rationalization goes like this: “There’s no need for you to fly out to City X to do site inspections, is there? After all, we more or less know where the meeting should take place. A known chain or major hotel in the middle of the city – there are only four or five possibilities, so just pick the best one. No need to spend the time or money for you to go there in person.”

Poor client – they don’t understand that there is probably no better way to spend time and money than to do a proper site inspection. Of course, I have visited and stayed at most of the major hotels in downtown City X. Of course, I can go online and see all of the pretty pictures of the hotel exterior, the lobby, sleeping rooms, meeting space and perfect spa. I can even look at current room rates, catering options, meeting room capacities and driving distances from the airport. But experience has proven that there is no substitute for the real, live, in-person site inspection, since I will only be able to answer about 10% of the questions relative to the venue in relationship to the event without going onsite and “seeing” the property.

Naturally, I do my homework to develop a short list of potential properties, making sure they meet the initial criteria for meeting space, equipment, accommodations and the like. I can also find out, through phone calls and email, whether the desired dates are available, if the property can accommodate the number of rooms I need, cost estimates for initial budgets, whether the property is planning any renovations during the desired time period, and what other groups might be in-house at the time.

But only a site inspection can answer the deeper questions that relate to the ultimate success of the event: the staff, the sleeping rooms, the meeting rooms, and overall atmosphere and ambiance of the venue. Let’s face it – many properties look good on paper or online, but an in-person visit tells the real story. Even if you have stayed at a property in the past, things might have changed. Most importantly, the client often has specific requirements that must be factored in, such as a requirement for ocean-view rooms or minimal distance between sleeping rooms and meeting rooms.

When I conduct site inspections I follow a detailed methodology that includes several aspects of the property, to give me a strong feeling for the best location.

### **First Impressions**

I observe the outside of the venue and even its surrounding neighborhood to see what type of first impression it will make. I then check the registration area and proximity to the front door, the lobby and its décor, restaurants and coffee stations as well as cleanliness and condition. I keep an eye out for security and even look at the other guests to see “who” the property attracts. I try to observe the staff in all areas of the venue to see how they interact with guests. I expect to see employees interacting with guests warmly, letting the guests know they are welcome.

### **Staff**

I’ve talked with the Sales Manager many times prior to my arrival for a site inspection. But once on site, it’s important to see how your relationship with that person develops (or under-develops in some cases).

How they handle your project is incredibly important – the amount of time they spend with you, the spaces they show you, how they answer your questions (one of my favorites is “show me your worst sleeping room”). And, who else they introduce you to throughout. Will you meet the chef (especially if they know your client has specific requirements about the meals, such as sustainability, organic, or other preferences); or the Director of Catering or your Conference Services Manager if they get the business? Will the Director of Sales or even the General Manager make an appearance? Believe it or not, all of this is very important and is a good indicator of how important your piece of business is to a property, and how you and your guests will be treated once that contract is signed and you’re on property.

### **Sleeping Rooms**

First I look at the layout and size of the room – is there an adequate desk/work area (and enough easy access plugs for all of our electronics); can you move around with ease, is there an additional sitting area, closet space and access to the bath area? At the same time I’m looking at the overall condition of the room, especially all of the soft goods including bedspread/duvet, carpet, window coverings and even the bath towels to see if they are old, stained or frayed. A look at the bathroom lets me know if there are any loose tiles or water damage, or enough counter space to lay out your personal toiletries. Even the color palette of the room is important - is it tasteful, light and an enjoyable space to be in? I inspect the lighting to make sure it is functioning and adequate. And how about those air conditioning and heating vents – are they clean? Attendees of business meetings always need high speed internet. I make sure to ask when it was last updated, how fast it is, what the daily or multi-day cost is, and of course, can that cost be negotiated for a group? What are the hours for room service and restaurants? Is there a fitness center and is there a use fee? What are the hours? How close are the sleeping rooms to the meeting space?

### **Meeting & Function Space**

My visual inspection of the meeting space includes much of what I’ve been looking at on the property as a whole – the general condition of the space including hard and soft goods; does it meet all of the requirements of my client such as natural light, size (both for increasing and even decreasing if necessary); ceiling height; can it accommodate AV requirements (front or rear screen projection, multiple screens or will a simple 8’ screen and LCD projector get “lost” in the room?); what’s around it (other meeting rooms, the catering kitchen, the pool area, a garden or a parking lot?); where are other meeting rooms located if I need more space or a separate room for meals; is there enough room in the pre-function space or foyer outside of the room for registration and will that space be shared with other groups or private? I make sure to check the lighting, heating and air conditioning, soundproofing, proximity to restrooms and outdoor space. I check to see if there are any pillars or other obstructions that would limit visibility, and even check the room shape since they aren’t all square or rectangular. I ask to see a layout of the room with a seating arrangement for the same number of people I am expecting; how the AV equipment will be set up and other in-room requirements such as table top displays or food stations. Is the AV company in-house, a vendor to the property or are they staff?

Other questions we discuss as we’re walking the space - What is the room rental charge? What is the setup charge? Is there a Food & Beverage minimum to get certain charges waived? What are cost estimates for meals and breaks? Are there any non-standard issues that I need to be aware of (did you know that in certain cities union contracts dictate how something simple like a coffee break can be charged?). What are the service charges and taxes? What is the cutoff date for guarantees? Next I check the menus, scoring them for selection, price, presentation, creativity and willingness to be flexible to meet specific client requirements.

I make sure that I have seen ALL of the meeting space that could accommodate my event/meeting (even if it “might” not be available on my preferred dates). And, most importantly, has the space I’m looking at, seen and like been put “on-hold” for my group or are other sales managers still trying to “sell” it even while I’m standing there? Don’t assume that it’s all being held for you unless you specifically ask for it!

### **Transportation**

If guests are local, I check to see if there is adequate parking available, and the cost. In some of the larger cities, valet parking can cost as much as \$50 per night at the property, but there might be a public lot next door or self-parking for less than half of that. If there are other events planned for the same time, is there enough parking for everyone? It’s very frustrating when your guests arrive at a meeting only to be greeted with a sign at the parking lot that says “Parking Full-Overnight Guests Only”. If guests will travel from afar, does the hotel offer shuttle service to/from the airport? If not, can private shuttle service, taxis or a car service be pre-arranged? What are the costs likely to be? And what is the transfer time from the airport to the venue?

### **Wrap-up and Scoring**

Expenses are important, and it is crucial to ensure that the client’s budget will not be exceeded. But that’s only part of the equation. In order to ensure an optimal event and a very satisfied client, I need to balance the total estimated expenses against the suitability of location, accessibility, comfort, cleanliness, ambiance and overall feel of the venue. By seeing the property, meeting the staff, asking the right questions, requesting documented proof of past performance, and most of all carefully observing during a site inspection, I can make the best recommendation for my client, their event and their guests. This is why an in-person site inspection, by someone who knows what to look for and what questions to ask, is one of the most crucial, and financially responsible, elements of the entire planning process.

### **About the Author:**

Joanne Ireland, a 20 year veteran of the meeting and event planning industry, is Founder and President of Ireland Presentations, a meeting, conference and event planning company based in San Francisco. Joanne is one of San Francisco’s leading consultants in planning, coordination & management of conferences, meetings & events. Her expertise is design, project standards/content, conceptualization & design of project strategy, and contract negotiations. Joanne and her team continue to produce successful events and meetings for a wide range of corporate and non-profit clients both large and small, domestically and abroad. More about Joanne and Ireland Presentations can be found at [www.irelandpresentations.com](http://www.irelandpresentations.com).