

Official Airlines Assist Meeting Planners

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Selecting an airline as the official one for a convention or meeting can save meeting planners time, money, and a lot of work. The author discusses ways in which airlines can work with conferences of all sizes.

Passengers bound for meetings are very important people to airlines, and they should be. That's because 20 percent of all airline passengers (one out of every five) are going to a convention, company meeting or incentive. That's a lot of people and a very substantial amount of revenue for the airlines, which, of course, are anxious to attract these passengers. Therefore they offer many services to them.

The meeting planner, both association and corporate, has a responsibility to take advantage of these services — services that can save both time and money and be instrumental in making a meeting a success. There are advantages to meeting planners, or to their official travel agency, in selecting an official airline. The best way to obtain these advantages is to review the potential sites and look at an airline guide to determine which airlines serve the city, and which have the most service and the best schedule, as well as the best reputation and reliability.

Call the airline's local convention representative or its convention center, usually available on a toll-free call. Talk to them; discuss plans for the meeting or convention. Tell them about planned sites and the demographics of attendees. Ask them to do an analysis of different destinations for comparative costs. It can be money in the bank for your company or organization. At the same time, you may want the airline to suggest potential hotel or resort properties or ground transfer services. Rental car rates for attendees may also be negotiated.

Once a site has been selected, the airline can really become involved. This is when negotiation and a working relationship develop. Some airlines assign the meeting planner a coordinator who will take care of all the needs for the convention or meeting. Each time the planner calls the airline, throughout all planning and negotiations, he or she will talk to that individual who knows his or her requirements and goals.

Be candid with the airline. Let them know what kind of help you need and what benefits you anticipate from your official airline. Be realistic in your requests of them. Try to represent as realistically as possible the number of attendees that are expected. Corporate meet-

ing planners will be surer of the numbers attending a meeting than an association or incentive trip where there is a certain amount of guesswork. A look at past incentive history is a good benchmark for providing an accurate count. This can only help foster good future relations with the carrier.

A relationship with an official airline should begin early — months, even years, ahead of the meeting. Very often plans are made and fares are negotiated two to three years in advance. Negotiations should begin at least six months to one year before the meeting.

Before you call an airline, there are several things you should determine and be prepared to discuss. First, of course, are your dates and sites under consideration. Determine the size of your group and its demographics. (Are most people coming from the East Coast or are attendees arriving from throughout the U.S.?) How much control of the group is desired? Are activities for families or amenities such as a beach planned? Are travel costs a major concern? What type of ground transportation will be needed?

Negotiated Fare Discounts Are Available

One of the most important concessions now available from the airlines is a negotiated tariff (fare) to your site. It is the meeting planner's responsibility to negotiate for a special discount. Meeting discounts currently average anywhere from 25 to 35 percent off the normal day coach fare. This item can save enough in the budget to allow for another function, or at least make the planner look like a hero for saving money. It should be noted that the convention or meeting rate is not always the lowest fare available. Special promotional fares, especially from some cities, could be lower than the convention fare at the time of the meeting. The advantage of the convention fare, however, is that it is set with a contract sometimes as long as two years before the meeting. The convention fare is always a substantial savings off the coach fare.

Airlines also offer complimentary site-inspection trips. These savings in transportation costs will help the meeting budget stay healthy. Also, airlines very often will offer earned transportation credits to be used by staff member or guest speakers. The credits are based on the number of bookings that the airline realizes from the convention group. The availability of complimentary site-inspection trips and earned transportation credits naturally depends on the potential size of the group and what has been negotiated.

The airline will offer a toll-free telephone number for attendees or their travel agents to call so that airline will have a record of the bookings resulting from the convention or meeting. It is very important for attendees and agents to use the toll-free number for several reasons. First, the convention rate will only be available through the special number. Next, the use of this number gives the planner better control of the group. The airline can accurately report how many people have made reservations, when they will be arriving, etc. Since earned transportation credits depend on the number of bookings the airline can determine resulted from the meeting, it is important that book-

ings be made through the toll-free number. Some airlines offer this toll-free number seven days a week.

Very frequently, complimentary air freight for the convention's printed materials in reasonable quantities can be negotiated. Cargo discount rates may also be offered to exhibitors who will be transporting materials to the meeting. Bring up these factors in the initial planning period.

Remember, negotiation is a give-and-take proposition. Airlines are in business; they have a bottom line too and that is an important consideration that cannot be ignored. Any concessions to your meeting are considered on a case-by-case basis. The airline must evaluate a proposal before an agreement can be reached. The dates, destination, demographics, number of attendees, and future business potential all are ingredients in the decision-making process. Try to be logical in your expectations. You cannot expect an airline or a hotel to give you the best deal during a seasonal peak.

Much Assistance Is Offered

Additional help available from airlines doesn't require negotiation; it's gladly offered. First, you are working with a trained professional meeting counselor or coordinator, at some airlines the same person from the beginning of negotiations to the follow-up work after the meeting is finished. The airlines can offer group rooms at airports as a central meeting point for attendees arriving in the convention city. Detailed arrival and departure lists can provide information that will be helpful in arranging ground transfers and in the hotel's planning.

Airlines can even help in promoting meetings and conventions. They have many promotional resources. Brochures describing the convention city's attractions and activities are available to help build enthusiasm among attendees. The airline can provide promotional brochures with special messages about your meeting or convention, always including the toll-free telephone number for reservations. In addition, camera-ready ads featuring information about the convention may be supplied for use in an organization's or company's newspaper. These ads should be featured in each issue months in advance of the meeting.

But what does all this really mean to you, the meeting planner facing the responsibility for every detail of a meeting or convention? Let's take a look at a typical situation.

M. T. Planner is a member of the National Association of Convention Goers who has just been given the responsibility for planning the 1986 convention. He is near panic as he thinks of the hundreds of details to be handled. Then a fellow member of the NACG who planned the convention last year advises him to call an airline that best serves the cities under consideration.

Mr. Planner tells the airline's meeting and convention coordinator that his association has voted to hold its 1986 convention during the summer in either Tampa, Atlanta, Dallas, or on the West Coast. Most of the attendees will be traveling from the East Coast, and he has been instructed to hold down travel costs, but to locate in a city where

families will have access to a variety of activities. He is expecting 1500.

The airline meeting coordinator determines that the best fares will be available to attendees if the convention is held in Tampa, and she recommends that the convention be held in early June when airlines and hotels will be able to offer even better rates than busier summer periods. In talking to the airline, Mr. Planner realizes that he can increase his attendance by offering the best fares possible. Also, the attractions available near Tampa will increase interest in attendance since the beach and other attractions such as Disney World and Busch Gardens are nearby.

The counselor advises Mr. Planner to choose a hotel in downtown Tampa near the airport since that would offer a central location between the beach and the other attractions. She offers to have several hotels in that area call him. She recommends a rental car company and offers to have that company call him with convention rates.

They discuss the earned transportation credits arrangement, the toll-free reservations number, complimentary air freight for the convention's printed materials, arrival and departure lists, and promotional materials that are available. Mr. Planner decides his association newsletter will be the best way to reach its members so arrangements are made for the airline to provide camera-ready ads outlining the convention, fares, and toll-free number. He also requests 6,000 color promotional brochures to be mailed to members.

Since Mr. Planner happens to live in St. Petersburg, he is familiar with the convention location, but he will take advantage of several complimentary site inspection tickets since several staff members from Washington, D.C., have to make final approval of the site.

One week after he has called the airline, Mr. Planner receives a letter and a contract outlining the entire convention plan. He is amazed when he realizes that one week ago he didn't know where to begin in organizing the convention, and now it is all planned, in the best, most economical way for his organization. He has realized what many convention and meeting planners already know: Take advantage of the meeting planning resources of an airline, and the airline can literally be an extension of your organization.