

# MeetingNews

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## Who Does Meetings Best? Conference Centers Do, According To Cornell U. Study

BY RAYNA KATZ

OAK BROOK, ILL. — Conference centers are effectively differentiating themselves from hotels, and meeting planners consider them superior at servicing meetings, according to a new study by the Cornell University School of Hotel Management.

Conference centers scored higher than hotels in 19 out of the 20 criteria identified as most important by planners responding to the survey. In only nine of the 20 criteria, however, were the scores far enough apart to be deemed statistically significant, according to Cornell researchers.

"The things that conference centers are focusing on, they seem to be doing a good job at," said Cornell associate professor Tim Hinkin, who presented results of the survey at the International Association of Conference Centers annual meeting here. IACC funded the project, which included responses from 78 planners who said they use both types of facilities.

As for costs — an area in which many assume that hotels have the edge because of the Complete Meeting Package rates charged by conference centers — the survey basically called the issue a dead heat.

"I think there is a perception that conference centers are more expensive, but from the perspective of planners who do business in both places, there is no difference," said Hinkin.

One of the nine statistically significant differences was in the single critically important category in which hotels were seen as better: clean, well-maintained guest rooms.

Conference centers were the clear

winners in: offering rooms with a comfortable temperature and climate; availability of audiovisual equipment; appropriate-sized meeting rooms; staff willing to go the extra step; providing immediate and attentive assistance; comfortable chairs and tables; adequately lit meeting rooms; and providing one primary person to coordinate all elements of a meeting.

said Hinkin. "The primary implications from a marketing perspective are for urban properties, which need to make their customers understand that they are a safe place to be."

Several staffing-related issues were among the 20 critically important criteria. "A lot of attention in both the conference center and hotel business has been paid to sticks and

bricks, carpeting and amenities that may not really be valued by planners or attendees," Hinkin said. "What came through very clearly is that all three dimensions of the staff — competence, responsiveness and courtesy — are very important to the success of a meeting."

A third area of primary concern deals with what Hinkin called "sensory attributes" — temperature, lighting, noise, comfort, room size, etc. Conference centers were rated well ahead of hotels in these categories.

Criteria ranked among the least important included fitness and sporting facilities, decor and well-maintained grounds. Conference center executives should take notice of these findings, Hinkin said, suggesting that their focus seems somewhat out of whack with customers' priorities.

"Some of the things conference center operators deem very important might be less important to users," he said.

The bottom line is: "If a conference center spends a lot of money on a golf course and tennis facilities and \$60-a-yard carpet but doesn't have the needed level of service and the needed quality of meeting facilities, then the experience almost can't be successful." ■

CONFERENCE CENTER POWER		
Category	Effectiveness*	
	C.C.'s	Hotels
Guest rooms clean/maintained	3.58	3.99
Comfortable temperature/climate	3.51	3.09
AV equipment/materials available	3.75	3.19
Meeting rooms appropriate size	3.59	3.08
Staff will go the extra step	3.72	3.30
Meeting rooms adequately lit	3.64	3.16
Competitive costs	3.50	3.46

\*Average score on a 1-5 scale by 78 meeting planner/trainers who said they use both types of properties.  
Source: Cornell University School of Hotel Management

Coming out ahead in that last category was particularly gratifying to IACC executive vice president Tom Bolman. "Having conference planners is what we trade on, and if we weren't doing better there, I'd be very worried," he said.

Otherwise, he said, "the survey points out what things are important to planners and shows that in many areas, conference centers do them better. I'm not concerned that hotels do better on guest rooms, because our focus is on meeting rooms."

Planners rated security as the most important issue for a meeting facility. "We were quite surprised to see that,"