

ML

MOVE YOUR TRADE SHOW TO A CONVENTION CENTER WITHOUT A HITCH

BY MARK LEDOGAR

Transitioning your annual trade show from a hotel to convention center brings significant change on many levels. Here are some tips and key questions to ask facilities management of trade shows and expos to help make a smooth transition:

Know the Owner and Operator

Understanding who owns and operates the convention center and how they will work with you to execute your event is key to developing realistic expectations. Appreciating the objectives of everyone involved is the first step to ensuring a win for everyone. Some telling questions are:

- **Who “owns” the convention center?**
Its ownership structure will define the center’s priorities. For example, if the center is owned by a municipality (or another nonprofit government entity), it’s likely that its primary purpose is to attract visitors to the area. However, a for-profit owner may be more interested in the overall profitability of the center.
- **Who operates the convention center?**
The employment policies and guidelines of the center’s staff (i.e., duration of their work day, the practice of working a “shift,” etc.) will help you understand staff availability. You may work with a team of event managers whose responsibilities are handed off to the next person when shifts end.
- **If the center is privately managed, when is the contract up with the management company? What is the health of that relationship?**
Most contracts with centers are negotiated many years prior to the event, so it’s helpful to recognize that the team in place today may not be the team in place for the event.

Negotiations

Regardless of the venue used, your event brings revenue to the host city. For events held at a convention center, the majority of the revenue may be generated outside the convention center as attendees spend dollars on hotel rooms, restaurants, taxis, etc. This dynamic provides considerable leverage when negotiating contracts with the convention center.

When beginning negotiations, be sure to include the city’s convention and visitors bureau in your discussions with the convention center. The CVB represents a wide variety of businesses and individuals who will benefit from the wide spend of your event, and this perspective can be leveraged as you attempt to obtain the best rates possible on everything from transportation and electrical to parking and room rental.

As you work through negotiations, consider these key issues to minimize ambiguity and keep surprises at bay:

- **Which service providers are you obligated to work with because of their exclusive relationship with the center? What’s their contract term? What’s the health of the relationship?**
The relationship between the venue and its partners, especially those partners with whom you are obligated to work by virtue of their exclusive arrangement with the venue, is crucial when forming your event team. Forging a personal relationship with these partners will help further invest them in the success of your event.
- **Who holds the relationship with other area providers?**
This will help you determine who to contact regarding other elements required for your event.
 - Fire marshal
 - Airport welcome signage
 - Police department
 - Streets and sanitation
 - Parking lot

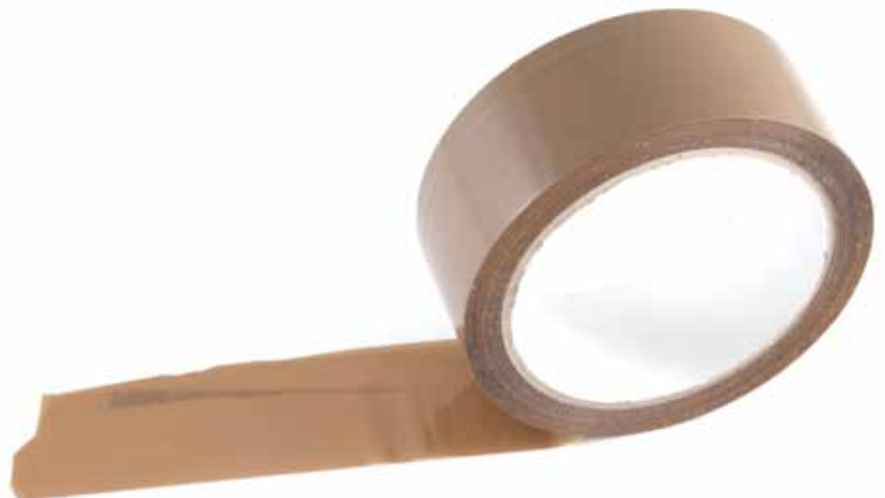
- **Is the convention center space usage fee based on square footage of exhibit space?**

If your rental fee is based on the size of your trade show, be sure to have a clear understanding of the elements included in the space calculation (i.e., comps, trade-outs, discounted space, etc.). There should be a clear understanding of how the amount of space is calculated and how your rental fee will be audited.

- **Is the convention center space usage fee based on a flat rate per room/hall? What are the rates for move-in/out and show? What is the ratio of move in/out days to show days?**

Each center is different. All negotiable factors are based on show size, show dates, amount of space, etc. Know what the center’s policy is and negotiate from there.

- **What services does the convention center have in-house? What do they outsource? Who owns and operates the marshaling yard?**
In-house services have a greater capacity for negotiation.
- **What is the policy regarding motorized vehicles on carpet in convention centers?**
Significant costs of labor and/or materials can be incurred depending on what is required for highlifts, or any other motorized vehicle, to be used on carpeting within the space.
- **Request a “right of first refusal” or “first option” on all un-contracted space.**
If granted, the right of first refusal allows you to contract the space



you know you need, while providing the option to expand your footprint should you need it in the future. By obtaining a right of first refusal, the convention center is required to ask you if your event would like additional space before selling it to someone else.

- **What is the tipping policy for personnel?**

Have an open discussion with the convention services manager and/or labor contractor to understand the tipping policy, as well as what's appropriate and what's not.

Everything is up for negotiation on the front end. Having a reference list of negotiable elements before negotiations begin can provide a much-needed perspective and help ensure a "win-win" agreement for all involved. Consider the following elements when entering into contract negotiations with the convention center:

- Rental price per square foot and how it's calculated
- Flat rate and the ratio of load in/out days to show days
- Air conditioning, heat for load-in/out



- Lighting — show lighting or half lighting for load-in/out
- Dumpster fees
- Cleaning fees
- Electrical power (discounted if provided by the convention center or subsidized by the center if provided by an outside supplier)
- Internet service
- Room re-set fees
- Complimentary use of table linens
- Marshaling yard
- Catering rebate
- Convention center's share of advertising revenue from sponsors
- Parking rates for local attendees
- Security
- Rekeying fees
- Audio patch fees
- Complimentary use of built-in theatrical lighting, audio

Execution

While the items below affect the on-site experience, several should be discussed prior to arrival:

Prior to Arrival

- What is a reasonable expectation for response time to requests?
- When is it best to involve the event manager, and when should you go direct to someone else? Acquire a list of who gets called for what services.
- What is the policy regarding personal transportation inside the convention center? Are Segways, scooters, bikes, skateboards or roller blades permitted?
- Request the convention center's emergency response plan, and communicate it to all key personnel.

On Site

- Walk the space with your event manager to check out the condition of the facility. Take photos to document any damage that precedes your occupancy.
- What is the access policy to the center? What doors are open for entry during specific hours? Are there any special passes required after hours? How is the building secured?
- Meet the fire marshal. If the fire marshal has any concerns, this meeting allows for a conversation in which to find a solution together, as opposed to a faceless mandate.
- When will final invoicing be done? Set a time to review your invoice with your event manager, in-person, near the end of the event. If there are any initial corrections, these can be discussed before final invoicing. Request a copy of the changes (even if just handwritten) to take with you.

Post-event

Sending a formal thank-you letter to both the center and the city goes a long way, especially if you want to return to the city in the future. Be specific regarding what you appreciated, and note specific individuals deserving of special recognition. ■

Mark Ledogar is senior vice president, One Smooth Stone, and serves as executive producer for a variety of clients. For more information, visit www.onesmoothstone.com.