

DISPELLING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ONLINE RFPs – UNITING PLANNERS AND SUPPLIERS TO INCREASE INDUSTRY EFFICIENCY

Speaking at HSMAT's Affordable Meetings® National in Washington D.C., in September, Reggie Aggarwal, Chairman and CEO of Cvent, Inc., outlined some best practices for planners and suppliers for coming together with efficiency and profitably for both.

“Regardless of professional background, we all long for the same thing – more time,” Aggarwal says. “Planners and suppliers are constantly looking for ways to do business more efficiently, but often do not work together towards this common goal. Online search sites and online RFPs are an ideal way to remedy this disconnect.”

He advises meeting planners to get multiple quotes, have flexible dates, track your spend, leverage volume business, know the value of your meeting, and use sites that give you what you need. “How do planners find venues today? They search the web, call venues one by one, and it works, but it's time consuming, repetitive, and you don't find everything,” Aggarwal says. “What you need is a kind of Travelocity for planners, and there are a number of companies out there that do that, free to meeting planners, including Cvent, ConventionPlanit, Unique Venues, and others.”

There are four criteria to look for when choosing a search and

strategic meetings management (SMM) company:

1. Make sure they have a comprehensive and accurate database. Aggarwal noted that Cvent has 20 to 30 employees to keep a database of hotels, restaurants, and unique venues (e.g., aquariums, zoos, museums, wineries, amusement parks, galleries, conference centers, educational facilities, etc.) up to date. You also want to be able to search service providers of all kinds – audio/visual suppliers, caterers, entertainment providers, décor rentals, printers, promotional products services, transportation, etc. “Find a one-stop-shop provider,” Aggarwal says.
2. Be certain the site's technology is user friendly, and can “slice and dice” information for you. You want to be able to use filters that narrow your search to location, size, chain, sleep rooms, meeting and exhibit space, food and beverage, amenities, 4-Star rating (or whatever), etc.
3. When you do an online RFP through the site, you want a response. Look at the response rate and whether the company will follow up with your choices of hotels, etc., if you don't get a response.
4. Look at the reporting – you want to see reports in a grid that makes your choice easy and clear to your principals.



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Most companies' online RFPs are compliant with CIC-APEX and are easy to use. Still, planners often express reservations about using eRFPs. Some typical complaints include last minute meetings (but hotels love short booking windows); eRFPs are not always looked at (but most hotels have dedicated "web-catchers" to receive and process RFPs, and the online RFP staff should follow up with hotels for you); and lack of personal communication (eRFPs are the start of the conversation, not the end).

Aggarwal offered ten eRFP best practices for planners:

1. Include information about your organization and event history.
2. Use online RFP tools that allow attachments so you can include all needed information.
3. Specify alternative dates for hotels whenever possible.
4. Identify alternate locations to receive additional options from hotel companies.
5. Limit your RFP to 5-10 venues that are a good fit for your event (no blasting).
6. Be realistic about what hotels are a good fit for your event.
7. Give hotels a reasonable amount of time to respond.
8. Provide as much information as possible about your meeting space and sleeping room needs to get accurate pricing.
9. Include an agenda and the format of your meeting to better help the hotel or venue provide the most accurate pricing.
10. Select competitive sets intelligently.

Then Aggarwal turned his attention to offering advice to the suppliers in the audience, including:

1. Target your audience – have a presence on site selection tools like Unique Venues, Convention Planit, Cvent, and/or others.
2. Create an integrated marketing plan – use multiple channels.

3. Generate robust ROI – simply having a website or running the occasional search marketing campaign is not enough – adopt a policy centered on high, measurable ROI.
4. Have a unique value proposition – design your marketing in a way that focuses on the unique, and sets your venue apart. Hotels are not a commodity – don't compete solely on price.
5. Adopt a holistic view – create a long-term strategy that employs search marketing, email marketing, strategic linking, display advertising, social media, and seasonal online promotions.
6. Consider Web 2.0 and social media – engage directly with customers and leads.
7. Don't ignore the local – over 1/3 of all search queries are local in nature, and local group meetings often fall outside the scope of major hotel brands' marketing efforts.

Especially in today's tough economic climate, both planners and suppliers need innovative ways to reduce cost and increase efficiency. You want to look for wide-ranging and easy-to-use services that help you to accomplish this.



Reggie Aggarwal is the CEO and Founder of Cvent, a profitable venture-backed CRM software company that has grown to over 500 full-time global employees. Cvent is the largest event management software company in the country, organizing over 200,000 events for over 4,500 customers in more than 20 countries. Some of its clients include KPMG, JP Morgan, Marriott and Yahoo. Forbes Magazine called him one of the rising stars of Washington. Washington Business Forward magazine named him to its list of the Washington, D.C.'s 40 most influential business leaders, along with the CEOs of Nasdaq, AOL, and Marriott. Meeting News, the largest magazine in the industry, named him as one of the 25 most influential people in the \$350 billion dollar meetings industry. He was also appointed by the Governor of Virginia to be Chairman of the Chief Information Officers Advisory Commission. Contact: raggarwal@cvent.com.