

Press contacts

Barb Worcester
PRpro
Tel: (440) 930-5770
barbw@prproconsulting.com

Jeff Loether
Electro-Media Design Ltd
Tel: (301) 355-5050 x1
jloether@electro-media.c

Editorial:

'Sound' Advice for Event/Meeting Space Site Inspections

Nothing says quality like a quiet event; What every facility manager needs to consider to ensure they are providing acoustically-sound event spaces before site inspections are performed

By Eric Bracht

Many things go into the selection of a venue for a meeting or event. One criteria that is often overlooked is the ability of a facility (hotel or independent conference center) to support the technical requirements of the function. To ensure that a venue will meet all event/meeting planner specifications during a site inspection, facility managers should first conduct an examination of their own to ensure that architectural and entertainment acoustics are in check.

Every event has specific technical requirements—not only the capabilities of the in-house provider or an outside service orchestrating the event behind the scenes, but also the physical environment of the facility itself. “How does the room sound when it is empty? Is it quiet or noisy? Do you hear sound coming in from adjacent areas? How loud is the HVAC system? These are all questions that need to be addressed in the design stage in order to ensure a facility will pass the site inspection.

Sound Basics: Hearing and Intelligibility

Since a meeting is fundamentally people communicating, the ability to BOTH hear and understand the material being presented is critical. While hearing is a function of sound volume, understanding is based upon intelligibility; and intelligibility relies heavily on the acoustics of the room.

Before a site inspection is performed, facility managers need to look and listen to their event spaces. Are there a lot of hard surfaces in the room; wood floors or walls, windows or glass, hard ceilings? Or are the floors carpeted, the walls padded and the ceiling covered with acoustical tiles? If you stand in the middle of the room and clap loudly one time how many echoes of that clap do you hear? This is actually a good test . . . try it. If you get multiple echoes of that clap, it means that sound is bouncing all over the room.

Imagine being in that room full of people with all of the background noise they generate. Do you think it is easy for attendees to understand the presenter with all of that sound bouncing around? Providing a microphone will increase the ability to hear the person speaking (volume), but in actuality, it only adds more sound to bounce around the room. Understanding (intelligibility) will not be improved.

Acoustical Issues: Noise Annoys

Speaking of noise, how does the empty room sound? Depending on location and the season, it is almost certain that the HVAC system will be used to either heat or cool the space. Will the equipment be running during a prospective customer's site visit? If it's not, you can be sure that the event/meeting planner will ask for it to be turned on (or at least they should ask). No systems will be completely silent if on, but what do you hear? Air movement, fan noise or rattling, whistling, rumbling, mechanical noise through the ducts? As with any mechanical system, performance will vary over time, but today's event/meeting planners are trained to listen for equipment noise during their site visits to give them a good indication of what to expect during their actual functions.

Another major acoustical concern is sound that comes through the walls from an event in the next room, or from the service hallway. Walk into an empty meeting room with an adjoining room that has an event in progress. Listen to determine how much you are able to hear in the next room. When event/meeting planners are looking at a space that is divided by operable partition walls, they will conduct an "eyeball" test to identify how well the panels will perform in keeping out unwanted sound. Make sure the lights in the adjacent room are turned on full, and then, in the room you are in, turn the lights off. Wait five minutes for your eyes to adjust. How much light do you see leaking around the movable wall, or through gaps in the panels? The more light you see, the more sound will pass through.

Since lights are typically always on in any adjacent service corridor, that same test can be performed to see how much noise can invade from the service area. Does your facility have sound-lock vestibules between the meeting spaces and the service corridor? This offers additional protection from noise intrusion by having two sets of doors to pass through, ensuring there is always at least one closed door between the space and service area. Some facilities that lack the vestibule will have a thick curtain that can be drawn to provide some insulation from sound and light intrusion. Others may have a "Meeting in Progress" light or sign to indicate to the staff the need for quiet. While you are in the service hallway, also take a look at the floor. Is it carpeted, smooth concrete, or tiled with grout lines? Imagine a large cart full of dishes being pushed down the hall. What will the wheels have to run over?

A 'Sound' Conclusion

When we boil down the reason for bringing people together for a meeting, it is typically to communicate a message. It is important to ensure that the environment being selected for an event will help, not hinder that goal. Spaces that let sound in from adjacent rooms and service areas, have noisy HVAC systems, or are filled with hard surfaces for sound to bounce around in are stressful environments not conducive to communication. The suggestions above are easy ways to identify potential challenges so that facility managers can find ways to resolve them before event/meeting planners conduct their inspections and then find alternative venues. Alternatively, event/meeting planners also can use the above questions while they are performing site inspections to avoid unwanted distractions for presenters and attendees. Nothing says quality like a quiet event. Only when the acoustics are just right will attendees be free to focus on the message.

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About Eric Bracht

Eric Bracht is a senior consultant with Electro-Media Design Ltd., an AudioVisual systems design and Acoustical consultation group with expertise in audio, video, control, and related presentation, entertainment, and communications technologies. The practice also includes AudioVisual Operational and Management consulting to address the entire AV systems lifecycle. As independent consultants over the last 25 years, EMD has provided consulting services for more than 800 projects globally, including: hotels, conference and convention centers, spas and resorts, government facilities, corporate board rooms, theaters and auditoria, schools and electronic classrooms, training and meeting rooms, courtrooms, places of worship, restaurants and nightclubs, sports facilities and venues, and command and control centers.