

# How will Hotels Rebuild Meeting Planner Confidence?

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**Today's group meeting planner** must have confidence in what the hotel sales manager promises, and in what the hotel and its operations team will deliver. In a post COVID environment, planner is under tremendous pressure to select a hotel that can satisfy their key concerns. Does the hotel comply with the latest health and safety standards?

Is the hotel capable of accommodating the number of anticipated attendees and function requirements? Will the hotel offer flexible attrition and cancellation terms? This article will provide some suggested actions to help your hotel sales team rebuild meeting planner confidence and address their concerns.



**Does the hotel comply with required health and safety standards?** If your hotel is not affiliated with a brand, your sales team needs to be able to speak confidently about the hotel's plan to be compliant with local and federal COVID health and safety standards. If the hotel is affiliated with a brand, take full advantage of published, COVID related programs to protect groups and conventions. Hilton's *EventReady* program, IHG's *Meeting with Confidence*

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program, and Marriott's *Connect with Confidence* are strong examples. Communicating the implementation of completed, brand safety programs, and achieved certifications will further enhance confidence. Additionally, if the hotel's local community has established a method of COVID compliance certification, this too, is another new selling feature for your team to share.

**Is the hotel capable of accommodating the attendees and functions?** Your sales team should have an outline of the hotel's COVID compliant, cleanliness program for guestrooms, public areas and meeting facilities. Your team needs to be able to explain, with confidence, that these operations are in place and sustained daily. In the past, such activities were often completed behind the scenes and after hours. Moving forward, however, the meeting planner and the attendees will appreciate seeing the public cleaning of their meeting space, restrooms and common areas during their functions. It will reinforce that their safety is of paramount concern to the hotel.

The meeting planner must be confident that your hotel's meeting and banquet facilities will be able to accommodate the anticipated group's attendance, with the functions set up to assure safe-distance and reduced capacity guidelines. Your team should monitor state and local guidelines related to gathering standards on a weekly basis, as the country moves into recovery mode. If your hotel has not already done so, all function space capacity charts and meeting room set up diagrams need to be updated with social distancing options.

Ultimately, it is the planner's choice as to the level of compliance they choose to accept. There are no laws in place to enforce compliance, just published guidelines based upon the hotel's state or county of residence that are updated periodically. In conjunction with these updates, the pricing of the function space may need revision. Today's meeting planner understands that prices may increase based upon the amount of space required or the need for increased labor to set the rooms. Planners typically represent a board or higher-level decision makers controlling the investment in the meeting. Increased costs to ensure their guests' safety is an easy upsell for planners to communicate.

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**Who is responsible for guest safety** and will the hotel offer flexible, contract performance terms? Group attrition and cancellation concerns are some of the most frustrating issues every hotel has and will continue to face into the foreseeable future. Group Planners must forecast meeting attendance as they sign agreements with hotels. Therefore, they question what type of liability coverage the hotel has in place for groups exposed to COVID.

Most hotel management companies have implemented an additional protective protocol and indemnity clause on their booking agreements and banquet event orders. These clauses, acknowledge concern for the group's health and safety, assure compliance within public meeting guidelines as well as state regulations, and confirm indemnity for the hotel's ownership and management teams. It is unrealistic and frankly bad business to hold groups to rigid performance standards when so many outside influences can impact attendance right now. The COVID pandemic has taught hotel management teams that they need to extend more flexibility in terms of cancellation and rebooking options to demonstrate partnership with planners.

The new hotel sales environment requires that your team continually monitor what your competitors in the market are offering and keep abreast of how the hotel industry globally is coping with these same concerns. Additionally, the management and owners of the hotel will need to seek legal guidance with revisions to performance clauses within standardized, group booking contracts as they move forward. For example, this may include added language that allows for a progressive deposit schedule, or a more lenient cancellation timeline. The key is to find a compromise that will limit liability to both parties. In terms of differentiating your hotel from its competitors, in most cases, the hotel will not have to offer better terms, but at least match what its competitors are offering. This situation will be particularly challenging when the hotel is participating in large citywide blocks with other hotels.

**How confidence is communicated and delivered** by your hotel's sales professional will be critical to closing the business. The above items are observations of the way hotels have adapted to meet new performance standards in a post COVID world. Your sales team needs

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to be well trained and informed to communicate this information effectively in the current market. Take the time to invest in their training and ensure a successful outcome.

As an owner or operator, we recommend you consider the following:

- Ensure that the right individuals with the experience and proper training are in place to deal with the new meeting planner expectations described in this article.
- Invest in your current sales team to make sure they are up to the challenge of this new, dynamic form of selling. Sales Managers have always been responsible for building topline revenue. In today's market, their primary focus should be in building partnerships that will drive revenue into the future.
- If stronger or increased sales representation is needed, options include:
  - Rehire key team members capable of handling multiple markets
  - Target and hire new team members who have been working at competing hotels
  - Invest in additional training to sharpen the skills of the team members in place

**In summary,** we reviewed that the COVID pandemic has created a new sense of urgency for meeting planners as it relates to the cleanliness, safety and liability. We also shared that the hotels must have effective and visible programs in place that will assure the meeting planner it is COVID compliant and these actions are proactively followed. We shared insights about what sales professionals are dealing with and offered mutually beneficial strategies for success. Having strong sales leadership in place will be critical to how effectively your hotel is able to close new and return group business for the hotel.

## **About Hospitality Performance Systems, Inc. (HPS)**

*Hospitality Performance Systems (HPS) was created to provide operational and sales support to the hospitality industry globally. Founded in 2009 this enterprise takes advantage of its founder and President, Stanton D Jacobs, CHA, with over 30 years of proven success in the hospitality industry and strategic relationships globally, HPS is affiliated with a wide array of professionals specializing in their respective disciplines, enabling HPS to provide a wide range of services. <https://www.hps-strategic.com> <https://www.linkedin.com/in/stantonjacobs/>*