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Weather or not: Winter can be Prime for Meetings

Surprisingly, winter is a very popular time for meetings.

The holidays are over and people are gung-ho to get back to work. And even though AIG gave corporate incentive travel a bad name, that is one of the main ways companies reward stellar performance. Winter is often when that travel takes place.

“It’s a great time to get people together, invite clients in, do a sales kickoff,” said Judie Durant, a meeting planner at Meeting Partners in Dedham. “January through March is a very important quarter. Companies have renewed their budgets and have money for meetings. Winter is a very popular time for meetings.”

Whether it’s incentive travel or a corporate or industry conference, winter meetings present special challenges to companies. Almost all of those challenges can be lumped under one heading: Weather.

When choosing a destination for a winter meeting, it’s usually a good idea to look at the airlines and their routes first. Choose hub cities. The fewer connections your participants have to make the better.

“You want your participants to be able to get there nonstop,” Durant said. “If you’re holding a meeting in Miami, most airports in our area offer nonstop service. If you’re flying to Hilton Head, you’ll have to connect. If it’s snowing in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Charlotte, there’s a great chance of getting stuck there. It’s best to look for destinations with nonstop service.”

If, on the other hand, you don’t mind worrying about weather contingencies, staying close to home in Boston or surrounding suburbs can be economical for you and attractive for attendees.

“You definitely don’t have to fly to a warm climate to make a meeting enticing,” said Donna Wolfe, vice president of sales at NXT Event Inc. in Boston. “There’s a great draw to come to Boston — culture, history, sports, all the academic brilliance you could want. And you can get some fabulous deals on hotels in the winter.”

Your budget, in fact, will likely dictate where you hold your winter meeting. Setting your budget is the first step in planning any winter meeting.

“If I’m doing a site search, I really need to know the per person value of the meeting so I can go to the right tier of hotel and match it up,” Wolfe said.

After budget and venue comes logistics and risk management.

“When you’re planning a winter meeting you have to arm yourself with what-ifs,” Wolfe said. “You need a default mode for the weather.”

Durant agreed weather contingency planning is important, but noted, “you can only plan so much.”

“You are in a contract,” Durant said. “If you are having a cocktail reception, for example, you have to give a guaranty three days before and the hotel has to buy all the food. If you have to cancel because of

a snowstorm, you might be able to negotiate anything the hotel can use or things that won't go bad. For the most part, however, hotels take a hit if you cancel and might charge you. You can't really negotiate this upfront. If you deal with the hotel quite frequently, they obviously will work with you more."

Still, there is a lot you can plan. Make sure there is plenty of parking for folks who are driving in. Make sure your meeting site is centrally located along major access routes for attendees. Allow extra time for arriving.

"Plan an extra 30-40 minutes for guests to arrive in addition to the posted time of the event," recommended Sandra Rios, director of public relations and marketing at Longwood Events in Boston.

Holding a meeting midweek and choosing a venue close to public transportation and/or near your business office will also make your meeting more accessible for participants and boost attendance. Piggyback your meeting with some other event, such as an employee recognition event. This will save money and boost attendance.

"It adds a little bit of value to the company because you are not incurring a separate cost for the meeting," Rios said.

Make sure you have a coat check. And last but not least, plan how you will communicate with attendees should there be any scheduling changes because of the weather.