



# The Fine Art of Planning an International Meeting

*You can add an exciting new dimension to your organization's programs—it just takes a little planning.*

BY BONNIE KOENIG

**S**o you're thinking of holding an international meeting? It's a wonderful way to gain a fresh perspective and open new horizons, but it does take some extra thought.

There are two kinds of international meetings, each requiring different planning. Let's look at both types and how to make them succeed:

## U.S.-Based Meetings with International Attendees

The first kind of international meeting is the U.S.-based meeting to which you invite people from other countries. When organizing such a meeting, keep these suggestions in mind:

**1. Give your program an international flavor.** To attract people from other countries, you'll need a different sort of program. Here are some pointers:

- Include speakers or presenters from outside the U.S. if possible.
- Have your meeting topics reflect globally-oriented themes.
- Ask presenters for handouts and outlines of their talks before the meeting. Distribute these handouts before the session to help non-English speakers follow the proceedings.

**2. Publicize your meeting's international focus.** Consider these ideas

when creating your promotional and registration materials:

- Target particular countries—places where you have key contacts or where your topics will be of special interest. Then translate your publicity materials into those countries' languages.
- Decide how attendees will pay their registration costs. Will you accept foreign checks? Electronic transfers? Credit cards?
- Be sure to give all prices in *U.S.* dollars. Just saying "dollars" can be confusing, since many countries—such as Canada, Hong Kong, Australia, and New Zealand—use dollars.
- If you give hotel information, indicate whether the price includes meals, taxes, and so on.
- Make sure all materials that go outside the U.S. include a country name in the mailing address, and provide the national telephone code (1).
- Remember that 800 numbers are generally accessible only from within the U.S. So if you provide an 800 number for American registrants, also provide a direct dial number.
- On your registration form, ask people what languages they speak. Their answers will help you accommodate them at the conference.
- Provide orientation materials for overseas visitors. Such information might include: sample cabfares, trav-

el times between key sites, rush-hour information, tipping and other local protocol, average monthly temperatures (in Celsius as well as Fahrenheit).

- Give some dress suggestions. For example, how formal will sessions be? Should attendees bring a jacket or sweater for inside the meeting location in summer months? (Overseas attendees, not accustomed to much air-conditioning, may find themselves prepared for outside but not inside temperatures.)
- Be aware that attendees from some countries may need customized letters of invitation to process their visa into the U.S., and invitees will need adequate time to process their documentation.

### **3. Make your guests comfortable.**

Put thought into ways to give your attendees a positive experience:

- Offer foreign currency exchange as part of your conference services. Or provide information on where attendees can obtain this service conveniently.
- Provide translation and interpretation facilities. (Note that interpretation is oral, and translation is written). Familiarize your interpreters in advance with any special terminology of your field. Be sure they speak a dialect appropriate to attendees.



- Create directional signs in the most popular languages of attendees.
- Use special identifiers—such as a pin that says “Je Parle Francais”—to denote bilingual speakers.
- Accommodate visitors’ preferences, which may be different from what you’re used to. For example, consider what the beverage of choice may be. Perrier without ice may be much more popular than sodas with ice.
- Check whether overseas attendees will be showing videos. If so, arrange for multisystem videoplayers. (Different systems exist around the world; we use NTSC in the U.S.)
- Add home country and native language to name badges. This can help communication and networking among participants.
- Depending on the number of attendees from overseas and your resources, you may want to consider a welcome at the airport, a special registration line, or other special courtesies. Those of you who have traveled overseas know how welcome such thoughtfulness can be.

## Meetings Outside the U.S.

The second type of international meeting is one you hold outside the U.S. It requires a special kind of planning. Here are a few tips to help you avoid on-site surprises and headaches:

### 1. Choose your hotel and venue carefully.

- Be aware that few overseas hotels can accommodate large conferences the way U.S. hotels can. You may need to hold your meeting in a convention center. Local hotel and convention bureaus will provide information.
- Review carefully the services a hotel or convention center is offering and the charge for each service. It may be different from what you’re accustomed to in the U.S.
- When negotiating your contract with the hotel, you may want to retain the help of a lawyer with international experience.

### 2. Consider local customs and protocol when planning your program.

- When creating your meeting schedule, be sure to consider travel time and jet lag, local holidays, and local customs for meal times.
- It may be appropriate (and indeed the proper protocol) to invite local governmental representatives to your meeting.
- Create a local committee (host or advisory) familiar with local protocol so that no missteps are inadvertently made.

### 3. Don’t underestimate the importance of logistics.

- Learn the customs regulations in the destination country. Decide what items to ship and what to obtain locally. Find out the best way to ship and how long it will take.
- Be sure equipment—VHS system, voltage, and the like—is compatible. Don’t be caught off guard with videos that can’t be played or machines that can’t be plugged in.
- Learn what the currency exchange rate is likely to be and whether the host country has a VAT tax. Decide the best way to transfer funds back to the home country. When developing a meeting budget, build in a “cushion” in case the exchange rate changes, or lock in the exchange rate if possible.

## General Tips

Whichever type of international meeting you’re pursuing, remember these fundamental keys to success:

1. **Orient the conference planning team to the special features of international meetings.** Spend time in your planning meetings going over the unique aspects of an international meeting. You may want to give special attention to the cultural backgrounds of any large group of attendees from a particular country. For example, “saving face” is important in some countries (particularly Asia) and thus you may want to be especially sensitive to handling some issues quietly.

### 2. Make an effort to communicate with non-American attendees.

Any effort, even a *poor* pronunciation of another’s language, is usually appreciated. Remember to speak slowly and enunciate clearly with those for whom English isn’t a native language (although remember that you’re speaking to an adult, not a child). Avoid acronyms and slang.

**3. Find someone to help with protocol issues.** This advisor might be a colleague from another country, a professional organizer with international experience, or an attendee from a country that will be well-represented.

An international meeting may take some extra time, but it also adds a whole new dimension to your organization’s programs. By recognizing that there are unique facets to an internationally-oriented meeting, and planning ahead, you can host a meeting of which you’ll be proud. ■

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\*Starred publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations’ Resource Center. To order, see the Society’s *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (608-274-9777).

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