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Editorial:

Shedding 'Light' on Event/Meeting Space Site Inspections

Here's a 'bright' idea . . . before booking a space, make sure there are 'dim' lighting alternatives; Being able to control light levels is key to a successful event

By Eric Bracht

Conducting a site inspection can be a complex process for meeting and event planners. One of the key elements to consider that is often overlooked is the technical requirements (the physical environment) of the function itself. A recent article titled "'Sound' Advice for Event/Meeting Space Site Inspections" discussed the importance of sound and acoustics when selecting a meeting venue. Another important environmental factor in choosing a site is lighting. Do the meeting spaces provide the lighting required for the event? Are the rooms bright enough to allow proper working and reading light for attendees? Can the lights be dimmed for presentations? Can the lights above the presentation screen be controlled? These lighting questions need to be addressed in the design stage in order to ensure a facility will pass the site inspection.

Controlling Light Levels
Visual communication is a critical element of the meeting experience, so it is important that the meeting environment does not interfere with the attendees' ability to see. The space must be bright enough to work in and to read materials, both printed and on-screen. To do this, the space must have the ability to control all types of light from all types of sources, both man-made and natural. When looking at the lighting levels in the meeting space(s), there are some important questions to keep in mind. *Is there enough light where you need it, and can you stop it where you don't want it?* Light comes from the lighting fixtures in the room as well as from windows, doors and adjacent spaces. We need light to see materials, other people and the presenter, but we don't want light to wash out the presentation image on the screen or display.

To make sure that there is sufficient working light for attendees, meeting and event planners will want to check the light levels at table/desk height, and look for levels between 30 and 50 foot candles. This can be done with a small light meter used by photographers, or with smartphone apps available that use the built in camera. (If

using an app, it is highly recommended to calibrate its readings with a real light meter for accuracy). Make sure this measurement is even across the room, not just directly underneath the lights.

If there are windows in the room, can the amount of light that is passing through be controlled? Outside conditions can greatly impact rooms that depend on natural light to make up for insufficient indoor lighting. If you check lighting levels on a bright sunny day, will your light be the same inside the room if your event occurs on a cloudy day, or at night? When windows are present in the meeting environment, they should be equipped with blackout shades and/or curtains to allow for control.

Can the lighting level in the room(s) be adjusted with greater flexibility than just on and off? At a minimum, event spaces should have the ability to provide for at least a 50% level between on and off. This is sometimes accomplished by switches that turn off half of the lights in the room, but it is best accomplished with dimming capabilities. This can be simple dimming through a rotary or fader switch, or by using pre-programmed settings of a more advanced control system, but the ability to dim the lights without turning them completely off will aid in the ability to more easily view on-screen presentations. In flexible meeting space with programmable dimming systems and operable walls, it is also advisable to ensure that when the rooms are combined a single wall control panel will control all lights in all sections of the room. If this is not possible, additional staff will be required to be stationed at each control panel in order to adjust lighting levels as needed.

Setting the Mood
Lighting levels can also set the proper "atmosphere" for an event. Business meetings will require working light levels, however the same rooms likely will be used for social events and banquets. For social events, it is desirable to set lower lighting levels for a more elegant, more intimate experience. During a site inspection, meeting and event planners should ask to see different lighting levels in the space to make sure it will work for all types of functions.

In addition to dimming the entire room, another feature to consider is the ability to turn off lights over the presentation screen to avoid washing out the image. *Can individual or small groups of lights be turned off over screens without leaving presenters standing in the dark?* This is a very common "day-of" request, so knowing in advance and making accommodations will avoid that last minute need.

If the entire front of the room goes dark in order to take light off the screen, planners may wish to consider the addition of some feature lighting so that the presenter is visible. *Are the event spaces equipped with focusable lighting instruments (such as track lighting), or will it be necessary to add theatrical lighting instruments to highlight the presenter(s)? If focusable lighting is required, are there accommodations to easily hang these lights from the ceiling, or will floor-based stands be needed? Is sufficient power available for these fixtures?* Knowing these needs in advance will not only enable the event to run more efficiently, it will also prevent last-minute changes that will impact the event budget.

If video cameras will be used, either for recording, streaming or image magnification, feature lighting will be required. In order for the camera to function properly, the presenter(s) must be well lit. If the internal gain function of the camera is forced to compensate for a lack of light, the video image will be "grainy" and of very low quality. If the event is streamed, this "noise" in the picture will also require increased bandwidth to transmit. For optimal lighting, you will want to have a triangle pattern with lights in front of the presenter on the left and right, and one light behind the presenter for back lighting. *Will the space you are considering have ample room, power and infrastructure to allow for this?*

Seeing What's Important
In nearly all cases, the reason for bringing people together for a meeting or event is typically to communicate a message. It is important to ensure that the event environment being considered will help, not hinder, that goal. The bottom line is that event-space lighting needs to be bright enough to allow for reading and work, controllable enough to keep light off of the presentation screens, and flexible enough to set the right tone for the meeting or event. The suggestions above are easy ways to identify potential challenges that need resolved prior to a

meeting or event taking place; if the challenges can't be resolved, planners will have adequate time to find alternative venues. Avoiding distractions for presenters and attendees will keep everyone more focused 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.