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## Articles

### Third Parties to the Rescue

By: Carolyn Koenig

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#### Columns

#### **Help! You need somebody**

The scenario: You're new to the meetings arena and you've been asked to put together a long-postponed, off-site meeting—pronto! Or, you're a department of one. You're pressed for time and resources. You need help.

Fortunately, there's a solution. Third-party site-selection vendors such as industry experts HelmsBriscoe, Meetings Global Inc. and **21st Century Group, Inc.** stand ready to help. These companies focus on identifying and securing the best match for your meeting—doing the groundwork (researching properties, obtaining and evaluating proposals), then providing you with the best possible options. Often, they can assist you in other ways as well.

[HelmsBriscoe](#) specifically offers hotel site selection, says Deanne Vigil, a global sales manager in Carlsbad, Calif. The process includes finding the right hotels to meet the client's needs, submitting an RFP, collecting data from the RFPs and compiling a response grid for presentation to the client—plus negotiating contracts, arranging site visits, managing contract cut-off dates and providing post-meeting feedback. "We represent the client's interest in the marketplace, acting with full permission on our client's behalf; the client remains in control of all decisions," she says.

[Meetings Global](#) takes planners from site selection and contract negotiation to food and beverage, to invoice reconciliation. "It's our job to stay abreast of the industry, and our clients can benefit from our expertise and long-standing relationships—not to mention taking the workload off the planner to free them up for the many other tasks their job requires," says Francine Fyne, owner of the San Diego-based company. "We tell our clients that we are an extension of their team."

Site-selection services by third parties such as these are free to planners; the companies are compensated by a commission or placement fee paid to them by the hotel or venue you select. And you needn't worry that the properties will just jack up their prices to cover the cost—third parties are able to negotiate favorable rates based on their large volume and relationships. “With our global buying power, we have the ability to leverage our spend,” Vigil says. Additionally, HelmsBriscoe can “minimize your risk on financial exposure with preferential cancellation and attrition terms when negotiating contracts,” she says.

Should you require services beyond site selection, however, you can expect there to be a cost. (In their experience, Fyne says, even clients who say they just need site selection often call back for transportation assistance or on-site registration.) With [21st Century Group](#), these services can be arranged with the company once the site-selection process has begun. And, with HelmsBriscoe, if you need full-service meeting management assistance (housing and registration, group air, logistics, budget oversight, event management, etc.), it is available through their subsidiary, ResourceOne.

You won't be alone in drawing on a third party for help. As organizations have downsized their meetings departments and cut back on expenses, a growing number of planners are relying on outside contractors to save them time and money. The question is, how do you find one that's right for you?

When researching these experts, the first place to start is recommendations from other planners. Then, look for “a company that has been in the industry for a long period of time and has built partnerships with every major brand and most independent hotels worldwide,” Vigil says. You'll also need to perform the same due diligence you would when selecting any other vendor (see sidebar for tips). Then, after confirming that the company can help you achieve your meeting goals, “it is all about rapport and connection,” Fyne says—two areas where even planners who are new to the field excel.

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## CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING A HOTEL SITE-SELECTION COMPANY

When qualifying a company to provide hotel site-selection services, planners should review the following areas of expertise.

### Stability

- Years in operation
- Tenure and experience of account representatives
- Client list; references/testimonials
- Number of meetings per year
- Industry reputation

### Services

- Range of services
- Client-communication process
- Frequency of communication
- Presentation of search results
- Response time
- Cost

## Destination and Industry Knowledge

- Capacity to work with client-preferred destinations and properties
- Destination expertise (e.g., U.S. vs. international, or downtown vs. resort)
- Industry contacts
- Awareness of new properties, expansions and renovations
- Trends in contracting (attrition, F&B minimums, new types of charges, etc.)

## Additional Considerations

- Ability to work with multiple contacts within client organization
- Geographic location of offices
- Ability of site-selection company to deal with experienced and inexperienced planners
- Availability of account representative throughout process
- Lead time required to book meeting
- Site-inspection arrangements
- Overall philosophy of site-selection company

—*Courtesy of 21st Century Group, Inc.*

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