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The Holiday Inn Portland Airport recently unveiled an impressive multi-million dollar transformation

By Andrea Doyle

## READER ROI

- Today's airport hotels have the necessary amenities to host meetings
- Attendees like the immediate access to the hotel without getting in a car or a shuttle bus

# Runway Ready

## MEETINGS AT AIRPORT HOTELS STREAMLINE TIME AND COST

Conrad Hilton is said to have pioneered the airport hotel concept with the Hilton brand's first airport hotel, which opened in 1959 in San Francisco. Since then, airport hotels have developed into an important niche in business travel and, in recent years, these properties have made inroads into the meetings industry.

For planners organizing meetings where convenience or confidentiality is a priority, airport hotels fit the bill. Today's airport hotels offer deluxe amenities like spas, pools, and gourmet dining.

"Airport hotels are getting better and better," says Vince Vito, director of sales and marketing, Grand Hyatt DFW, a 298-room property that is conveniently integrated into Terminal D of the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. "They have shed most of the negative perceptions about quality. Our property is a luxury boutique hotel that happens to be in an airport."

### Hosting Large-Scale Events

A Hilton airport hotel in Toronto convinced Patricia Brusha, a 35-year veteran of the hospitality industry, and co-founder and principal of A Couple of Chicks Digital Marketing and Online Revealed Canada, an online marketing conference, to begin hosting meetings at airport properties. Brusha was at an Meetings Professional International (MPI) tournament at the Royal Woodbine Golf Club, a course that is about a half mile away from Toronto's Pearson International Airport. As planes flew overhead every few minutes, she got the idea of looking into an airport hotel for her nine-year-old conference.

"That was an 'a-ha' moment," says Brusha. "Seeing all those planes made me wonder if an airport hotel had the amenities to host a conference like ours." After a great deal of research and several site inspections, Brusha will hold the Online Revealed Canada in the Hilton Toronto Airport Hotel and Suites in

April of 2014.

Brusha is no stranger to airport hotels; she worked part-time on the airport strip about 20 years ago, when "airport hotel" had a very different connotation. "Back then, it was all about getting in and out," she says. "Most of the F&B was leased out to chains like Kelsey's and Perkins. You wouldn't think of going to an airport property for a meal as an individual, let alone bring a group of about 300."

By contrast, today she finds that "there are amazing food-and-beverage offerings featuring well-known, quality chefs."

The Hilton Toronto Airport Hotel & Suites impressed Brusha immediately. During her site inspection, the entire executive staff welcomed her, even dressing in T-shirts emblazoned with the A Couple of Chicks Digital Marketing logo and the slogan, "Hilton Plus a Couple of Chicks Equals Excellent Meetings."

"I've been in the hotel industry for 30 years," says Brusha. "I know how difficult it

## Airport Hotels



is to get the whole executive team together, let alone all wear the same shirt.” A specialty drink, named the Chicktini, was even created just for her visit.

Today’s airport hotels are full service and possess an abundance of meeting space. The 811-room Hyatt Regency DFW has more meeting space than some conference centers — 93,000 square feet to be exact. When it first opened, the Hyatt Regency DFW had two towers and nearly 1,400 guest rooms. The airport acquired Hyatt’s West Tower to build its international terminal and eventually the Grand Hyatt opened within this terminal with 298 rooms and 34,000 square feet of meeting space. Talk about convenience.

In general, airport hotels are cheaper than those found in city centers. “The cost between a city-center property compared to an airport property is insane,” says Brusha. “We got a \$140 room rate at the Hilton Toronto Airport Hotel & Suites compared to the \$269 we got last year [for a city-center hotel].”

She adds that parking tends to be pricier downtown but is substantially less at an airport hotel. Throw in free in-room Wi-Fi and meeting space, and the benefits of sticking near the airport are clear.

Anywhere from 300 to 400 people will attend the Online Revealed conference, says Brusha, and the group will likely take over the 419-room property. “I like the idea of being a big fish in a small pond versus going down-

town and being one of eight conferences going on the same time,” says Brusha.

### Convenience Is Key

Airport hotels are attracting not only conferences like Brusha’s but smaller meetings as well. NAFA, a nonprofit association for professionals who manage fleets of sedans, public safety vehicles, trucks, buses, and a wide range of military and off-road equipment, recently held its board of directors meeting and educational seminars at the Atlanta Marriott Airport Gateway hotel.

“We generally use resorts or downtown locations for our quarterly board meetings, but I wanted to give this location a try because the property is fairly new and very well-appointed,” explains Matthew L. Marcial, CMP, director of meetings and education for Princeton, NJ-based NAFA Fleet Management Association. “Generally, an airport location would not be my first choice when it comes to this type of meeting but, given our experience, I would definitely consider returning.” The group was impressed by the service, food, and especially the convenient location.

Customers are extremely important to The Boeing Company, one of the world’s largest aerospace and defense organizations, and when hosting Boeing, only the best will do, according to Carl Anderson, a Boeing corporate meeting planner based in St. Louis.

“The accommodations, service, and food

The Grand Hyatt DFW is a luxury hotel integrated into Terminal D of the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport

and beverage must be beyond reproach. It has to be the top,” says Anderson. “Today, most airport hotels meet these requirements.” The Renaissance Hotel at the St. Louis Airport, with 374 rooms, 19 suites, and 37,000 square feet of meeting space, is one of Anderson’s go-to venues. Plus, it is located conveniently close to Boeing’s St. Louis facility.

### Airport Hotels Respect Anonymity

Another advantage of airport hotels that is often overlooked is the high level of privacy that they offer. John Boyd, Jr. of Princeton, NJ-based The Boyd Company, a location consulting company, counsels major corporations on where to locate facilities around the globe. The Boyd Company’s meetings include sensitive discussions of clients’ operating costs and business climate reports as well as relocation, expansion, and consolidation projects. Each meeting typically includes about 10 professionals from accounting, finance, and human resources.

The vast majority of these meetings are also held in airport Marriott hotels. Boyd has found airport hotels are conducive environments for his gatherings. “Companies take painstaking measures to keep their site selection plans that involve hiring and firing patterns confidential,” says Boyd. “The executives arrive, go to the hotel, and get out efficiently, leaving a much smaller footprint.”

He gives the example of senior executives who often travel and stay in hotels under different names — a practice that airport Marriott hotels make very simple. “When it comes to corporate travel these days, minimizing cost and executive time in transit is essential,” says Boyd. **SM Questions or comments? Email [adoyle@ntmlc.com](mailto:adoyle@ntmlc.com)**

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