

SVC TechCon Site Selection: A Multi-Faceted “Process”

A Challenging and Important Task

Selecting a site for the annual SVC TechCon is a most difficult task that relates directly to the success of the SVC TechCon. There are three groups of stakeholders that make up the SVC and each has specific criteria that make the TechCon site work for them. Let us address the needs of each group individually:

Conference Attendees

- Invigorating and informative technical program
- Interesting group of attendees and exhibitors with which to network
- Ease of access, foreign and domestic
- Reasonable room rates
- Good meeting space
- Meeting dates that do not conflict with other meetings/events

Tradeshow Exhibitors

- Good traffic
- Reasonable labor costs
- Good exhibit space

and the Society itself

- Ability to generate a good networking atmosphere, satisfy attendees and exhibitors, have reasonable meeting room rental and food/beverage costs, and have net revenue to pay expenses of the SVC during the year.

With this in mind, the following factors all come into play:

1. The Facility

- a. A critical feature of the facility is that it needs to have Exhibit space of 75,000 sq. ft. in one contiguous area to accommodate the SVC’s growing number of exhibiting companies, the Vendor Innovators Showcase area, poster presentations, scattered informal seating to facilitate networking, and sufficient space to accommodate an Internet Cafe area, and at least six evenly distributed food and beverage stations for the receptions and lunches that are held in the exhibit hall.
- b. The facility must have enough meeting space to accommodate four concurrent Technical Sessions, the Education program and numerous small concurrent meetings.
- c. It is crucial that the meeting space and exhibit space are in close proximity to each other and to the Headquarters hotel. It is ideal to have the exhibit space and the meeting spaces for technical sessions on one level, and under one roof, so that networking between conference participants can be facilitated and maximized.
- d. The meeting and exhibit space needs to be available on dates that do not conflict with other meetings in our technology at which our exhibitors and attendees participate.
- e. It is important that there be good Wireless Internet and cell phone coverage in the exhibit space that can be readily accessed by exhibitors and attendees. The WiFi is provided by SVC to attract conference attendees into the Exhibit area and reduce costs to the exhibitors. The number of available freight docks in the facility is also important to the exhibitors for fast load-in and load-out.

The number of hotel properties in the US that meet the needs described above is very limited.

One level of compromise is to allow the exhibit space to be one level away from the meeting space and connected by a short escalator. SVC found that the Hyatt Regency hotel in Chicago in 2008, had that layout, and was sufficiently acceptable in many other ways to warrant a “repeat” TechCon in 2011. The Orlando World Center Marriott in 2010 fit the basic criteria described in section (1), but did not however meet some other desired criteria. This property is not currently a top choice for rebooking in 2013, although about 50% of our exhibitors did vote to return to this property in 2013.

Convention Centers are another possible compromise, but we need relatively small ones in which the SVC attendees do not “get lost” or have too far to walk between their hotel room, the technical sessions and Exhibit. The ideal goal for SVC is to use a small convention center that is directly attached to a Headquarters hotel that is large enough to accommodate 700 sleeping rooms on the Peak night – which is the night of the day that the Exhibit opens. This is not as easy to locate as it might sound if one wants to be in a city that meets the other criteria described below. The Santa Clara Convention Center and attached Hyatt hotel used in 2009 were sufficiently acceptable to warrant a “repeat TechCon” in 2012.

2. The City

- a. The city should be in close proximity to industrial, research, government, and academic institutions so that prospective attendees can be reached using targeted marketing campaigns.
- b. Ideally the city should be easily accessible by non-stop flights (or with no more than one flight change) from cities in the



The meeting space must be sufficient to accommodate four concurrent Technical Sessions, the Education Program and numerous small meetings.

US, Europe and Asia.

- c. Accessibility by car, rail or a short flight by air from a significant percentage of the US industrial/academic population is an advantage.
- d. A city that has geographical beauty, or areas that offer cultural or other unique interest can be “a draw” to conference attendees – especially if the attendee can perhaps attend only one conference per year.

The fact is that it is always necessary to accept compromises between the different needs and preferences.

In the top tier of most desirable US cities such as Boston, Chicago, Washington DC, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and San Francisco – to mention just a few – the meeting space rental costs, hotel sleeping room rates, food, and labor costs, can be high. Accepting meeting space and sleeping rooms over off-season dates can reduce some of these costs – but these dates are generally not attractive to SVC stakeholders. Second tier cities have more reasonable costs but often cannot meet other important criteria. The fact is that it is always necessary to accept compromises between the different needs and



The Hyatt Regency hotel in Chicago was a popular destination in 2008 which has made it a “repeat” TechCon site for 2011.

preferences.

Second tier cities are carefully considered. However often SVC stakeholders cannot access the city conveniently, and the design of the convention center involves a long walk and/or several escalators between the technical session meeting space and the exhibit hall. In many instances the nearby hotels are not attached to the convention center – or the attached hotel is too small to accommodate the majority of the SVC registrants – thus making networking a challenge.

- e. The SVC Strategic Plan directive is to locate a set of “homes” for the SVC TechCon in three geographically diverse regions – on the east coast, the west coast, and in a “central region.” This directive poses challenges in itself because facilities are not always available on dates that meet the criteria in the rotation years.
- f. A city that has restaurants and other attractions in close proximity to the facility has advantages. A plus to the attendees is to get away from the hotel environment.

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A plus for the exhibitors is the ability to readily entertain customers.

g. One of the comments we often hear is “Why doesn’t the SVC hold the TechCon in the Northeast, particularly the Boston area, where there is a high concentration of companies and individuals that are key to our Society in this area”? The problem with having the SVC TechCon in Boston (and even Baltimore) – which are two top choices – is that since we are not a large Group (by convention center standards) we have to be “married” with another larger Group in order to get any Convention Center meeting space at all - then the availability of sleeping rooms becomes a problem. This challenge is being worked on. Desirable second-tier cities such as Pittsburgh and Providence have other challenges to them - primarily that relate to the distance between the Exhibit space and the meeting space and this is a critical factor.

3. Contract Negotiations with Convention Centers and Hotels

After a facility is identified and desirable dates are defined, the convention center contract and/or the hotel contracts are negotiated. Being unable to negotiate satisfactory contracts may be a reason that a site is not chosen. The “puzzle is solved” only when the major criteria are met with as few compromises as possible.

These negotiations include:

a. Meeting and Exhibit Space Availability and Costs

In many cases the most desirable Exhibit space is only available to Groups using over 1,500 rooms on the Peak night. Unless it is possible for SVC to fit into meeting space that is not being used by another major Group, it is not possible for SVC to negotiate for space at all. This fact makes it often impossible to book many years in advance. Boston is an example of a city where this is a major challenge. Obtaining desirable meeting space without excessive costs and high room rates is difficult.

b. Room Rates

Confirmed room rates that are as low as possible. A block of rooms at the Government rate is also required.

c. Room Block(s) in the hotel(s)

The room block must meet a certain size criteria in order to obtain the Exhibit and meeting space that SVC needs without charge. If a specified (negotiated) percentage of the room block is not met SVC incurs additional charges. If the room block is too high the SVC may not be able to meet the minimum. If the room block is too low, late registrants may not get a room and have to find accommodations elsewhere.

d. Cut-off Date

The Cut-off date is the date after which the hotel can sell the unsold rooms in the SVC room block to the general public. This date is typically 30 days before the first Saturday of the conference. In many cases SVC has not picked up all of our available rooms in the SVC room block before the Cut-off date. For the past six years the Headquarters hotel has been sold out by the Cut-off date. If sold out,

it is almost impossible for SVC to get more rooms after the Cut-off date – it is therefore important that presenters, registrants, and exhibitors book their hotel room at least 30 days in advance.

e. Cancellation Policy

The cancellation period refers to the time frame after which the first night reservation fee can be charged by the hotel if the room is cancelled. The on-line Passkey hotel reservation system, used by SVC, allows for modification of arrival and departure dates and the reservation name can be changed if the cancellation and replacement names are changed at the same time.

f. Food and Beverage Minimums, Quality, and Service

Both convention centers and hotels typically require certain minimum expenditures for food and beverage which is negotiated and tied to the room rate and cost of the meeting space. If these minimums are not met the SVC must pay a fee. The quality and service associated with food and beverage events are typically higher in hotels than in convention centers but the associated costs are always higher.

In Conclusion...

The Future Sites Committee receives input from many entities, including the exhibitors, conference attendees, the Program Committee, Exhibit Committee, and Board members. All constructive and helpful comments are factored into recommendations to the Board. We receive a great amount of input but unfortunately much of it is not constructive because the suggestions do not meet the criteria we must work with, and in fact many suggestions only offer a city and nothing else.

The Board of Directors makes the site selection decision, based on reports from the Future Sites Committee, which outlines the pros and cons of each site. The Board understands that there is NO “perfect facility” available in the cities of primary interest to SVC.

Hopefully, our attendees and exhibitors who read this article now have a better understanding of the challenges that relate to site selection for the SVC TechCon and why it benefits the SVC (and themselves ultimately) for everyone to book their rooms in the SVC Headquarters hotel(s).

Bulletin readers are invited to suggest specific facilities that fulfill requirements in sections (1) and (2) above; we are always open to a good suggestion!

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The SVC will return in 2012 to the Santa Clara Convention Center and attached Hyatt hotel used in 2009 based on the ability of the site to meet selection criteria.