

Wi-Fi Available Here | Rejuvenate Meetings

The demand for free Wi-Fi at hotels and venues grows.

By Lisa Plummer



In this hyper-connected world, where everyone seems to be surgically attached to their laptops, smartphones or other wireless devices, it only makes sense that more people expect Wi-Fi connectivity wherever they go, including at meetings and conventions. To meet this growing need, more hotels and meeting and convention venues are wired and ready to offer various levels of bandwidth to customers. But in this day and age when anyone can walk into a coffee shop and access the Internet for free, many facilities realize it's no longer enough to offer state-of-the-art wireless technology — attendees want it to be free as well.

For some meeting planners, wireless connectivity, including complimentary access, is an important consideration when choosing a hotel and meeting venue. As attendees become more technologically sophisticated, Wi-Fi availability has become increasingly important. And for a budget-conscious group, complimentary access is a big bonus.

In the last few years, several major brands have begun offering free basic Wi-Fi at many of their mid-range properties as a standard feature in their lobbies, guest rooms and meeting spaces. For almost two years, Hyatt Hotels and Resorts has offered free wireless at its 153 Hyatt Place properties nationwide, and Hilton Worldwide's mid-level brands, Hilton Garden Inn, Hampton Hotels and Homewood Suites, offer free Wi-Fi access at all 2,500 properties across the country.

Besides offering free Wi-Fi in the lobbies of its two D.C.-based hotels, the Beacon and St. Gregory Hotels, Capital Hotel and Suites has recognized the growing importance of complimentary Wi-Fi by including it in its Value Enhanced Meetings Program. Wireless is just one option planners can select from the program's menu of services, and according to Hector Torres, Capital vice president, free Wi-Fi can add up to a big cost-savings for those groups heavily dependent on wireless.

“Our hotels are featuring Wi-Fi as one of the many options meeting planners have to enhance their meetings savings,” Torres says. “This option can normally cost as much as \$300-\$500 per conference room on top of room rental fees, which can easily bite into a meetings budget.”



Although every group has different needs when it comes to wireless technology, for those attendees who simply want the freedom to check their e-mail, connect with their families and home offices, or surf the Internet, finding meeting and convention venues that offer free Wi-Fi is getting easier for planners. These days, many convention centers have established Internet “Hot Spots” in their lobby or food concession areas, while some have made Wi-Fi accessible throughout their facilities.

The Alliant Energy Center in Madison, Wis., is such a convention center. Although it charges fees for more advanced wireless services, free basic Wi-Fi is available throughout the entire building, so visitors have the freedom to stay connected wherever they go. Implemented two years ago in response to growing customer demand, the free system has proved to be an added incentive to help attract business, says Ted Ballweg, Alliant's assistant center manager.

"The free Wi-Fi in our convention building is a must," Ballweg says. "People coming to meetings need to be connected, need it quick and need it everywhere. For some people [no Wi-Fi access] is an annoyance and for some it's a deal breaker. We're just trying to keep up and be where people are."

Although the system is free to convention guests, it's not free to run, so the facility leverages sponsorships to help offset some of the cost, Ballweg says. Although the response to the system has been overwhelmingly positive across the board, Ballweg says the free wireless has been especially valuable for groups attending longer events and international guests. So if free, facility-wide Wi-Fi is working for the Alliant, why aren't more convention venues following suit?

"Free is the challenge, because everything's got a cost to it," Ballweg says. "With revenues being tight right now and opportunities for new revenues not being readily available, it's going to be hard to take something that's generating revenue and reduce that. If you offer it for free, the revenue previously generated from it goes away and there's nothing to replace it — except more bookings."

Yet, for many hotel and convention properties, finding a balance between what it offers for free versus what it charges for basically comes down to simple dollars and cents. Building the necessary infrastructure to house the technology, providing wireless services in-house or accessing it through outside Internet providers, as well as covering operating costs isn't cheap, especially for those venues offering state-of-the-art technology. While some hotels may be paying for simple DSL lines able to handle only a few connections at one time, properties offering more advanced technology must be more selective about what they give away in order to be cost-effective.

The Sheraton Dallas Hotel has had to play such a balancing act. As one of Dallas's largest convention hotels, it boasts cutting-edge wireless amenities that have the capability to serve up to 50,000 wireless users simultaneously. Understanding that more guests are expecting free Wi-Fi accessibility, Sheraton recently came up with a companywide solution. Enter Link@Sheraton, a special lobby lounge and business area featuring complimentary wireless, PC workstations, webcams and printers. Guests can log on, surf the Internet, Skype and check e-mail, free of charge, according to Ray Hammer, general manager of the Dallas Sheraton, whose hotel boasts a 6,000-sq.-ft. Internet lounge.



"We chose to have Link@Sheraton available throughout our hotels because we do acknowledge there is a need for [free Wi-Fi]," Hammer says. "We try to provide that service while at the same time be able to provide for our more sophisticated client as well."

Those technologically sophisticated clients will find a host of technological upgrades at the hotel, which were part of the property's \$90 million renovation project, completed last year. Besides 100,000 square feet of wireless coverage that includes the property's 1,840 guest rooms and 230,000 square feet of meeting space, 75 pay phone booths were converted into high-speed Internet stations that guests can plug into, Hammer says. Although the hotel is willing to negotiate prices and services with groups, Hammer says when it comes to basic versus high-quality wireless, you get what you pay for.

"There's a whole difference between the infrastructure we have and what some of these hotels are offering as free Internet access," Hammer said. "They may not have the bandwidth, the infrastructure or the technology. By saying I have free high-speed Internet, it's a pretty broad statement."

No one knows this better than Smart City Networks. As the provider of wireless and telecommunications services to 40 convention centers across the country, the company is very well versed when it comes to the cost of high-speed Internet connectivity. According to David Langford, vice president of technology, whether it's the event or the venue providing the service to attendees, free Wi-Fi isn't really free — someone is ultimately paying for it.

“Free is to me a matter of perspective,” Langford said. “Who is it free to? At Starbucks, McDonalds and even at your hotel, it's being funded by someone else. Whether you provide [Wi-Fi] or outsource it to a company, there are costs. The struggle right now is how to get that cost covered and deliver a service to the ultimate user you want to supply it to at the price they want to pay.”