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An Insider's Look at the 2016 Philadelphia Democratic National Convention: Hospitality and Inclusion at Work

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Photo Source: [Disney/ABC Creative Commons](#)

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There is a saying in events management, “If the event goes well, the client is congratulated. If the event goes wrong, blame the event planner.” This saying holds true when cities bid, plan and execute a spotlight event, such as the 2016 Democratic National Convention (DNC). The 2016 DNC was held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania July 25th-30th with approximately 50,000 stakeholders who traveled to the city. These stakeholders were comprised of 6,000 delegates with families or constituents, 20,000 media and 24,000 guest, VIPs, dignitaries, donors and “Friends of the Party.”

What exactly is a *spotlight event*?

- The participants of spotlight events are either numerous, noteworthy, or both.
- It appeals to national or international audiences.
- It garners tremendous media coverage.
- The event automatically places its host city into the *spotlight*.

Cities are enticed to host such events because of the direct and indirect economic potential they bring. They also serve as a way for the city to reposition or rebrand its image within the

country as a whole. Hosting a spotlight event such as a national political convention is a major feather in a city's tourism cap.

With spotlight events, all segments of the tourism industry benefit from the offerings presented to the lodging, culinary, retail, and transportation sectors. During the recent DNC in Philadelphia, both hotel occupancy and hotel revenue increased by 10.3% and \$16.3 million respectively as compared to the same period in 2015. RevPAR (Revenue Per Available Room) was 6.6% ahead of what it was during the same time the prior year. It is predicted that the city generated approximately \$200M from the DNC, pending a final report which will be released in late fall of 2016.

Hospitality Planning Used with a Spotlight Event

The Philadelphia 2016 DNC Host Committee and the Democratic National Convention Committee (DNCC), the two independent yet collaborative entities, worked together to ensure that *diversity* and *inclusion* were the primary themes of the event, and that hospitality was fully incorporated into the themes execution. A specific initiative called the *Philly Ambassador Program* was a substantial element in carrying out these themes.

The Philadelphia DNC Host Committee, a nonprofit organization, was responsible for raising funds and offering the city's amenities. These funds help support and sustain the following: [\[1\]](#)

- Arena and Convention Center
- Delegate Experience
- Technology and Communications
- Digital and Social Media
- Housing and Hotels
- Diversity Business Outreach
- Neighborhood and Civic Relations
- Security and Transportation
- Volunteer Outreach
- Philadelphia Legacy

The Host Committee was comprised of leaders with varying backgrounds including professionals of the lodging, events, and restaurant industries. The committee assembled 10,000 volunteers to assist with all the needs before, during, and after the convention. A select 60 volunteers were selected to into the *Philly Ambassador Program*; which provided additional "concierge-like" services to visiting delegates. The selection process of these ambassadors was based on the volunteer's knowledge of Philadelphia and the surrounding area, hospitality experience and the spirit to serve. The Host Committee used this best practice as a result of

their previous experience during the 2000 RNC and then crafted four initiatives to ensure smooth hospitality and a welcoming ambiance:

Initiative #1. The “Donkey’s Around Town” was an installation of 57 fiberglass donkeys, each painted by a local artist, to represent a participating Convention delegation. They were placed in publicly accessible locations across the city and were also used to create a warm reception for delegates at their respective host hotels.



Massachusetts donkey located outside of the Sheraton Society Hill Hotel, July 2016 (Photo Source: [Creative Commons](#))

Initiative #2. The Pennsylvania State assembly passed a bill known as The Fiscal Code which allowed bars holding convention-related events to apply for special permits to stay open later than usual. This gesture acknowledged that the hospitality industry was a significant part of the Convention activities.

Initiative #3. Uber hosted a hospitality tent at the designated pick up and drop off areas at the Wells Fargo Center, the primary venue for the televised portion of the DNC. The tent included charging stations, Wi-Fi, bottled water, and light refreshments. During the last day of the convention, on Thursday, Uber provided ponchos and arranged for staff to escort riders from their Uber to the tent with umbrellas.



Uber tent at the 2016 DNC, July 2016. Photo reprinted with permission.

Initiative #4. The positive outreach from the *Philly Ambassadors* were supplemented by the equally positive welcome and friendliness of the local police. During the 2000 Republican National Convention, Philadelphia suffered scrutiny after the police arrested nearly 400 protesters resulting in numerous lawsuits. It is not unusual for activists to use a spotlight event to “spotlight” their own causes. However, for the 2016 DNC, Philadelphia designated specific, safe spaces for protesters and provided sensitivity training to both city police and *all volunteers*.



Volunteers and local police outside of Philadelphia Convention Center, July 2016. Photo reprinted with permission.

Diversity and Inclusion Planning Used with a Spotlight Event

The Democratic National Committee is the principal governing organization of the United States Democratic Party. In regards to this spotlight event, the Committee is therefore “the client” and worked closely with the local Host Committee in logistics planning and execution. The mission of the DNC is to present the Party’s nominee for President (Secretary Hilary Clinton) and share the Party’s platform to the delegates and the media during the Convention. This year the platform included civil rights, women’s rights, LGBT rights, rights of people with disabilities, and the protection of voting rights, placing diversity, inclusion and equality as the central theme.

This theme was also translated into the event itself. Inside the Wells Fargo Center were designated spaces for prayer, nursing, ADA services, recovery and wellness, a quiet room, and a first for the Convention, all-gender restrooms. The attention that was given to *diversity* and *inclusion* was paramount and notable.

Inclusion planning also considered guests with special needs via “convention troubleshooting” preparations. Delegates and attendees with special needs were provided with designated areas, and scheduled timelines were orchestrated to ensure that everyone was accommodated. For example, protesters inside the arena who supported Bernie Sanders were just as welcomed as Hillary Clinton supporters. In fact, unlike other political officials, Bernie Sanders was present at the DNC the entire week.

Outside of the Wells Fargo Center, protesters were given bottled water, EMT’s were stationed for health emergencies, and the city police was requested to not wear riot gear. This set an overall tone of a non-confrontational and inclusive environment.



DNCC signage at Wells Fargo Arena, July 2016. Photo reprinted with permission.

Unfortunately, if something goes terribly wrong during a spotlight event, the city itself can be remembered with lasting negative images. As previously mentioned, Philadelphia was still remembered for the large number of protester arrest during the 2000 RNC. Chicago is still reminded of the images of the riot-plagued 1968 DNC convention, let alone Miami for the 1972 DNC in terms of a sheer fiasco, or even the 1868 DNC held in New York City whose slogan was “This is a white man's country, Let a white man rule”. The Convention has come a long way since these times as this change has been recorded and duly noted.

Therefore, with all of the bidding, planning and logistical needs of a spotlight event, the event overwhelmingly helps put a city on the map in terms of travel, tourism, and business environment. Further success is most often found when personalized hospitality is provided to all stakeholders. Even more, when themes like the 2016 DNC’s *diversity* and *inclusion* are genuinely felt throughout all aspects of the event, the city, organizing entities, and event are elevated into long-lasting positive spotlight moment.



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