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Feature**Certifiable**

Hotels like to flaunt them, but do the myriad stars, diamonds and other certifications matter to meeting planners?

By Gary Tufel

Meeting planners and the media are in the same boat when it comes to their exposure to certification-boasting hotel content. Quality seals and canned taglines litter hotel press releases and home pages, and it's presumed that anyone reading the materials understands their meaning. The icons appear like a modified deck of playing cards, hearts, diamonds, leaves and stars that all stand to help market hotels and influence hotel client expectations, but only for those who understand what all of these certifications actually mean.

Diamonds and Stars

There are a number of opt-in certifications and designations hotels can earn—the best known include the American Automobile Association (AAA) Diamond Awards and the Mobil Five-Star system.

Meeting planners pay attention to some of these systems, particularly the better-known ones; planners say the AAA and Mobil ratings are the most relevant. But others rely more on their own ratings, as well as those on Web sites.

For the AAA [which also comprises Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) ratings], each attraction, lodging and restaurant listed in its guide is selected after a thorough, unannounced

free of charge to AAA/CAA-approved establishments, and approximately 32,000 hotels throughout North America and the Caribbean are AAA approved and Diamond rated .

To apply for evaluation, properties must first meet 27 cleanliness, comfort, security and safety requirements. Properties selected for evaluation must demonstrate quality guidelines required for AAA approval, and approved properties are assigned a rating of one to five AAA Diamonds, ranging from simple to luxurious. The Diamond Awards are used to indicate the extent of services, amenities and decor.

The *Mobil Travel Guide* has rated North American hotels and restaurants since 1958, awarding up to five Stars for hospitality. The Mobil Star ratings provide travelers with recommendations supported by actual field staff inspections at thousands of properties each year. During each inspection, hundreds of criteria are considered. Currently there are about 50,000 hotels in North America, of which *Mobil Travel Guide* recommends about 9,000.

David Gabri, president, CEO and owner of Associated Luxury Hotels, calls the AAA and Mobil ratings the most important, most recognized and most depended upon by both meeting planners and leisure travelers when it comes to getting a handle on the quality of various properties.

Gabri says these ratings provide buyers with criteria for judging a facility's quality and character—not just in terms of food and beverage, but over the entire experience—and offer a consistency that makes it easier to compare sites. And Gabri believes that buyers definitely use these ratings in their decision-making processes. There can be, however, significant differences between a Four- and Five-Star rating, Gabri says.

But ratings serve another purpose: they tell hotel managers where improvement is needed. And a lower rating doesn't mean a hotel is bad; it merely reflects information on pricing and level of service—valuable for all travelers.

The ratings are so widely known and respected that hotels use them in their ads and Web sites and display them prominently at front desks.

"These ratings are an important part of who they are," Gabri said.

Other awards, such as Pinnacle, Gold Key and Planners Choice, Gabri says, are meaningful and prestigious, but are not perceived on the same level as the AAA and Mobil designations.

Ratings are usually performed annually, and hoteliers receive reports after ratings are done. The ratings are opt-in and inexpensive, usually costing a property less than \$200, Gabri says. Because of this, if a property doesn't participate in a ratings system, planners should ask why (it may merely be because a renovation was in the works during the site inspection).

"The designations are important, but so are recommendations," Gabri said. "Those who say, 'I had a great meeting'—that carries a lot of weight." However, ratings systems provide standards with which to measure properties against each other, he says.

Some Don't Want a Five

Gary Rosenberg, CMP, partner in the meeting planning company Rosenberg & Risinger, The Meeting Professionals, agrees that in the United States, the AAA and Mobil ratings are the benchmarks of hotel ratings.

“For my clients I want Four-Star or Four-Diamond ratings, especially with regard to service and cleanliness,” Rosenberg said. But he notes that some hotels don’t want to be Five-Star because they’re aiming for a particular niche.

For planners, the primary value of a ratings system is the ability to match a facility to clients’ needs. Some want highly rated properties, as that provides clients with an indication of the quality of service and price range.

Judi McLaughlin, CMP, senior director of industry relations for Maritz Travel and MPI Philadelphia Area Chapter member, agrees that some properties don’t want Five-Diamond ratings.

“That requires such things as sinks outside bathrooms, as well as 24-hour room service that offers three meals a day,” McLaughlin said, agreeing that AAA and Mobil are the most important certifications. “They’re the only ones we see customers paying attention to. But some are opting out of Mobil, because it’s not as focused on meetings but more on leisure travelers. Many customers use *Condé Nast Traveler* polls, which have prestige—attendees are familiar with them and perceive them as being more esteemed and glitzy.”

For many planners, ratings serve the same function as they do for the public: they provide grades on service and on the physical properties of sites.

Because of guidelines for pharmaceutical meetings, however, pharmaceutical meeting planners are no longer allowed to meet in Five-Star hotels, or any that even sound like Five-Star properties, McLaughlin says. There are even certain brands that Maritz won’t use (even for internal meetings), and McLaughlin says they’re starting to sort properties by ratings.

Other Ratings and Certs

While saying that AAA and Mobil ratings are the most accessible, Barry Brantley, CAE, CMP, regional manager for HelmsBriscoe and MPI Gulf States Chapter member, notes that Zagat has offered not only its well-known city restaurant guides but also hotel and golf course guides for years.

“They’re pretty aggressive and more selective than some, and they concentrate on mid-level and high-end hotels,” Brantley said.

All the ratings systems are useful in new markets and as a snapshot for initial approval of properties, he says. He’s also been on inspection tours with hotel-rating personnel and seen first hand how they work.

“They use good criteria. They’re mostly concerned with amenities and cleanliness, including lighting, clean carpeting and secure spaces, but not from the meeting room perspective,” Brantley said.

He uses the Internet for information on properties.

“For example, TripAdvisor.com is for leisure travel and offers content on restaurants, attractions and hotels and is indexed,” Brantley said. “Although we’re looking for meeting information, our attendees are still individual guests looking for regular amenities. But meeting planners should take all ratings with a grain of salt.”

Whereas some ratings are concerned with cleanliness, lighting and whether employees are in uniform—among other things—TripAdvisor.com is concerned with the entire experience, he says.

“For instance, in Cancun, Mexico, because of hurricane and water damage, TripAdvisor.com listed information about water damage to mattresses in certain hotels that had led to bed bug problems,” Brantley said.

Some companies—such as HelmsBriscoe—have their own proprietary ratings systems to inspect the nuts and bolts properties offer. Brantley says that his company’s system is based on post-event evaluations and offers up-to-date meeting information.

McLaughlin says that ratings matter but perhaps only in general.

“If meeting and incentive properties have the facilities and services we require, they will be at least Four-Star properties anyway and we don’t have to ask what the rating is,” she said. “The ratings are important, but they’re not part of every presentation. If we’re talking about a five-diamond property, though, we will reinforce that.”

Certifications are also important for high-end incentives, McLaughlin says, noting that golf course ratings are being used more often as well. And ratings are including such items as kiosk check-ins and high-speed Internet availability.

Green Ratings

Rosenberg says his company makes sure leftover food is distributed to the needy, and that some hotels don’t change sheets daily for their events—an initial attempt at greening events.

Rosenberg’s perception is fairly standard regarding the way planners and attendees are embracing green events. However, the green movement is progressing much further.

Green buildings are healthier for people, better for the environment and cheaper to operate, says Taryn Holowka, U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) communications manager and Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-accredited professional. That’s why the USGBC promotes “green building” through its LEED Green Building Rating System, which provides independent third-party verification of building design and performance.

On average, LEED buildings cut energy use by 30 percent to 50 percent, use 40 percent less water and generate 70 percent less solid waste.

Peter Templeton, USGBC vice president of education and research, says that of the 771 LEED-certified U.S. buildings, three are exhibition or convention centers and four or five are hotels or lodgings. But that number is growing: currently, about 52 projects are

LEED-registered, including the Salt Palace Convention Center expansion in Salt Lake City and a dozen other convention center projects.

“Meeting planners are absolutely looking for our green certification and want to know what it means,” Templeton said. “We’re getting increasing numbers of inquiries from the industry.”

The green movement is being driven by attendees, customers and enhanced public consciousness due to interest in such consumer-accessible green icons as *An Inconvenient Truth*, energy-efficient light bulbs and hybrid cars.

“There’s more awareness, and our clients will look at it more and more,” Brantley said. “About one in 10 bring [green meetings] up now, but that will grow.”

Gabri adds that green ratings are important, but particularly to certain markets, such as environmental groups and companies and associations that insist a property have certification from an organization such as the USGBC.

Of course, LEED is not the only green lodging project.

- The Green Lodging Program includes nearly 100 green hotels throughout California, including two corporate partners—Hilton Hotels and Kimpton Hotels—which have implemented corporate environmental policies throughout their hotels nationwide and are reducing their environmental footprints. The program encourages state and local government travelers to seek out and give preference to these certified green hotels.
- In Thailand, Green Leaf-accredited hotels are committed to environmental conservation through the implementation of an in-house program that fosters environmentally friendly practices, including the efficient use of energy and water, water management, recycling, proper waste management and policies that favor the purchase of products and services from equally committed, environmentally friendly companies.
- Since 1995, Green Seal has partnered with the lodging industry to promote environmentally responsible products and practices within lodging properties. Green Seal’s campaign to educate U.S. hotels focuses on how environmental efforts improve the bottom line *and* benefit the environment by providing technical guidance, case studies and certification of green hotels—including certifying lodging properties that meet the Green Seal environmental standard.
- Green Globe is a global benchmarking certification and improvement system for sustainable travel and tourism, based on Agenda 21 and the principles of sustainable development endorsed at the United Nations Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992. It provides companies and communities with a path to sustainable travel and tourism and focuses on issues such as greenhouse gas emissions and energy efficiency, conservation and management.

The USGBC’s Templeton says green hotel certifications are still relatively new and there is no predominant national or international standard. Most of the green standards are local or regional in scope and have had limited acceptance in the industry. There are significant differences in what each standard covers and whether or how they verify performance varies widely.

“We support the intent of all the programs, [but] the proliferation of green hotel standards has created a good deal of market confusion,” Templeton said.

While LEED certification is the predominant standard for U.S. green building, it is designed to address environmental and health priorities across all building types and not specifically hotels and hospitality properties.

“Therefore, since it is not a customized green hotel standard, it treats many of the objectives differently than the other programs,” Templeton said. “For example, to evaluate water conservation, some hotel-specific certification programs will rate whether or not a property has a towel and sheet reuse program in place, where LEED will assess designed and measured water usage based on fixture flow-rates and metered performance. Due to the widespread recognition of the LEED brand within and beyond the hospitality industry, many hotel owners are looking to earn certification to demonstrate their commitments to sustainability.”

For its own meetings and conferences, the USGBC incorporates green guidelines into its contracts to encourage hotel partners to adopt sustainable practices. At this time, too few properties have gone through certification for the USGBC to reference any one green hotel standard or even LEED in place of specific guidelines. Therefore, the USGBC uses its own guidelines to outline practical steps each property can take to reduce impact on the environment and human health whether or not it intends to pursue LEED or green hotel certification.

“We hope that our education efforts and their experiences implementing the guidelines will encourage and enable these hotels to achieve a green certification in the future,” Templeton said.

According to Nancy Wilson, CMP, Green Meeting Industry Council (GMIC) director, Meeting Strategies Worldwide principal and MPI Oregon Chapter member, meeting planners looking for green venues won't get any useful information from the AAA ratings.

“They are terrible on the green issue,” she said. “People don't really require the level of service they measure.”

An example she cites is wastefulness of replacing soap simply because the hotel logo is washed off, presuming that the soap is to be used by the same guest.

The GMIC provides resources and information to the meetings industry to improve the environmental performance of meetings and events.

Wilson says Green Seal ratings are good ones for environmentally conscious planners to look out for. These ratings examine hotels' operations and not just their construction processes.

“LEED ratings measure construction processes and environmental solutions, such as lighting and adequate insulation,” she said. “Green Seal examines whether environmentally responsible cleaning methods are used, towels are recycled, etc.

“As a meeting planner, I look for green ratings, and more planners are doing so,” said Wilson.

International Hotel Certs

Hotel ratings systems vary from country to country. Didier Scaillet, MPI's vice president of global development, notes that the International Hotel & Restaurant Association (IH&RA) has extensively researched hotel ratings systems worldwide, finding that in some countries, U.S.-style automobile or other associations provide hotel ratings; elsewhere, ratings are done by governmental or national commissions.

In addition, private groups such as the *Michelin Guide*, Relais & Châteaux and The Leading Hotels of the World offer guidance and information to travelers and meeting planners.

Martti Wichmann, group marketing director of MCI Geneva and MPI France-Switzerland Chapter member, says the ratings systems in Europe are national, and every country has its own system. For instance, in Switzerland, ratings are done by an organization called Hotelleriesuisse. The French government's rating system uses stars; for U.K. hotel ratings, the English Tourism Council uses a star-based system, as does The Automobile Association Limited and the Royal Automobile Club. There are about 30 European countries and 30 different rating systems, Wichmann says, and many hotel chains often use their own ratings as well.

AAA and Mobil don't exist internationally, and there are no overseas equivalents, McLaughlin says. Throughout Europe, planners will find a star system, but it's not well policed, she says.

Such variations and the lack of standardization in systems have led to an understandable level of confusion—and that's without even getting bogged down in the properties claiming to be of the non-existent six- and seven-star strata.

Elizabeth Carroll-Simon, IH&RA director of industry affairs and international relations, says her association undertook a major survey of hotel classification schemes around the world with the U.N. World Tourism Organization in 2004.

The survey offers a comprehensive overview of classification and ratings systems worldwide, and provided a comparative analysis of its findings in 31 countries for the private sector and 89 for the public sector. Of the countries surveyed, 83 had an official hotel classification scheme, but only 23 countries boasted official classification schemes covering hotels, apartment hotels, motels and inns. Classification is mandatory for all establishments in 46 countries. In 55, classification is necessary in order to obtain a license to operate; in 32 others, establishments can operate without being classified.

Following an extensive audit and analysis of the grading systems, the IH&RA contends that current national hotel classification and grading systems already give an indication of the level of standard offered by a hotel in that country or region, enabling consumers to make an informed choice. It found that setting up an international hotel classification scheme is an “unfeasible and ill-founded undertaking.” Hard and fast quantitative criteria (room size, height of ceiling, construction standards, language proficiency, etc.) vary from country to country and

even more so from one geographic region to another. Qualitative criteria remain highly subjective, particularly with regard to delivery of services. In addition, consumers already have access to a broad array of guides and, more recently, to Internet-based sources of information. And tour operators and other bodies, including online travel agencies, often establish their own rating systems providing enhanced, current evaluations, which IH&RA feels bolstered its opposition to an international ratings system. **TMP**

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Sidebar 1

Hotel Heart Health

In addition to the cornucopia of qualitative ranking systems for meeting facilities, there are also medical certifications for hotels, one of which, the CardioReady-certified meeting space—developed in conjunction with the American Heart Association (AHA)—seeks to provide the foundation for an industrywide standard and emergency cardiac care guidelines in the event of sudden cardiac arrest (SCA).

CardioReady, in conjunction with StarCite, is working to reduce death from SCA through education, certification and promotion of proper implementation and usage of Automated External Defibrillators (AEDs). It is estimated that SCA kills more than 500,000 people in the United States each year—3 million worldwide—and AEDs are the only known effective treatment.

Anthony Stanfar, StarCite vice president of technical development for CardioReady, says hotels are significantly behind other types of large public venues in the adoption of AEDs as part of a complete cardiac emergency response program. It is estimated that less than 10 percent of hotels and meeting facilities have an AED, let alone a complete program that follows best practices. Many hotels make inaccurate claims of readiness for health- and safety-conscious corporate travel and meeting managers, Stanfar says.

CardioReady certification provides national standards and a formal certification program to validate that a facility follows best practices and is truly ready to respond in the event of a cardiac emergency. In addition to reduced exposure to liability, a CardioReady-certified facility can market its certified status as a competitive advantage for health- and safety-conscious clientele.

To receive CardioReady certification a hotel must meet certain requirements, including having a staff certified in AHA cardiopulmonary resuscitation and AED use; proper placement and maintenance of AEDs throughout the facility; a cardiac emergency readiness plan; and compliance with local, state and federal guidelines.

The cost of certification runs about \$1,500 to \$3,000 a year—up to \$7,500 for the largest properties—and about 35 properties are already certified, with another 100 properties considering certification, according to Stanfar.

But CardioReady certification is not yet widespread enough to become a must-have for meeting planners and a perfect match for medical meetings.

“Planners can’t demand the certification from properties they book because not enough properties are doing it yet,” Stanfar said. “It’s a chicken-and-egg situation; most people think that most hotels already have defibrillator machines in place.”

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