

Meeting Industry at the Crossroads

Few are the industries that can boast that the current economic crisis has not affected them, and the meeting industry is not one of these chosen few. During the boom years, pickings were rich, attracting numerous freebooters whose motto was “with cash, anyone can organize an event.” With event budgets plummeting and a growing demand for greater accountability, planners are now obliged to justify the events that they organize, provide added value and generate higher ROI, while facing up to stiffening marketplace competition, notwithstanding a process of natural selection sparked by the steep economic downturn.



Despite the pressures of survival in the current climate, new trends and approaches continue to emerge. This hardly means there will never be a return to the sumptuousness of yesteryear, but the idea of an event as a form of luxury hospitality is on the road to extinction.

Arguably the most important industry movement resides in the differentiation between the tourist and meeting industries. Tourism is hospitality; meetings and events are investments. Although hospitality does play a sizeable part in the process, it is not the main objective. Companies invest in events to obtain value, and the planner’s job is to maximize this value for all stakeholders. As this can only be achieved through improving on format and content design, more than ever planners must reinforce or change participant behaviour so as to create significantly greater value for stakeholders.

So, we encounter experiential marketing, or as defined by Wikipedia, the art of creating an experience that results in an emotional connection to a person, brand, product or idea. The concept originated in 2000, but the approach to connect with target markets is only just now generally acknowledged as a more effective method of reinforcing or changing behaviour than conventional media techniques.



In fact, MPI's EventView 2009 study shows that 53 percent of executives believe that event (or experiential) marketing is the best discipline to accelerate and deepen relationships with target audiences. Nevertheless, to be fully effective it requires large doses of creativity. As well as knowing how to present ideas to clients and convince them that they will create the value they are looking for, the pressure is on planners to be consistently creative.

New technologies, when used correctly, also provide a way of improving participant experience. Blogs, social media, Web videos and platforms such as Twitter disseminate information and collect value feedback before, during and after event; QR codes retrieve leads; planners issue electronic tickets and conduct audience polls; and software programmes help with organization and management. The wise use of new technologies not only improves participant experience, but reduces costs, yet another basic requirement in the current economic climate, and one that is probably here to stay.

Cost reductions aside, green initiatives promise to be more than a passing trend. Although the current crisis has slowed down the implementation of environmental initiatives, recent research—IMEX, Convention Industry Council, etc.—shows that planners, participants (and sponsors) are increasingly aware of the impact that meetings and events have on the environment—above all as regards transport and organic and plastic waste—and are eager to collaborate in green programmes. Given budget restraints, expensive carbon footprint offset programmes can be cost prohibitive, but there are a large number of less ambitious initiatives that can make a difference, such as harnessing new technologies to cut back on paper-based methods of data collection and promotion, recycling food waste, substituting drinking fountains for bottled water, using recyclable badges and lanyards or even choosing a closer destination or venue to cut back on transport costs and pollution. Every bit counts.



Ironically, one of the chief side-effects of the current economic maelstrom will be an increase in competition. Many planners will have fallen by the wayside, but event stakeholders will continue to demand innovating experiences that provide them with maximum value at lowest possible cost. This is the challenge that planners will be expected to face in the future, and to achieve all event objectives, many will find it necessary to hone their professional skills. With initiatives such as MPI's CMP certification programme and Maarten Vanneste's Meeting Architecture manifesto, the professionalization of the industry is now a reality, and ultimately, it will be up to individual planners to keep up with the pace of change.

Germany Is Top Association Meeting Destination Outside U.S.

The International Congress & Convention Association in Amsterdam has released its 2008 association meetings statistics, placing Germany once again at the top of the list for association meetings outside the United States. And Berlin remains the most popular meeting city in Germany. ICCA rankings cover meetings organized by international associations that take place on a regular basis and rotate between a minimum of three countries. As has been the case since 2004, the U.S. and Germany hosted the greatest number of association meetings (507 and 402 respectively). In the third and fourth positions are Spain, with 347 meetings, and France, with 334 meetings. In fifth place is the United Kingdom with 322 meetings.

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