

Association meetings analysis

Planners and specialist agencies report increasing confidence as their events benefit from greater participation both from EU and emerging countries. They acknowledge a growing awareness of multi-cultural issues.

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The 3rd annual IMEX survey of the association meetings sector attracted detailed electronic responses from over 120 decision-makers in 11 European and Scandinavian countries. In addition, a small number of buyers from the USA and Canada participated for the first time. Typical job titles of those replying are: director general; secretary general; executive director; professor; administration manager; congress manager etc., and within those agencies specialising in the association sector, the key positions include: ceo; conference and events organiser; and managing director. Represented areas of membership focus include: public transport; sports and recreation; health and medicine; finance; foods; education; youth work; entertainment; and various aspects of scientific work.

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Attendance figures for association meetings continue to look positive: combined proportions of planners during 2006 identifying 'significant' or 'slight' growth in participation in their events have risen to 68% (64% in 2005; 56% in 2004). The combined percentage expressing confidence in continued growth for the year ahead has reached 71% (69% in 2005; 62% in 2004).

Among key reasons for this general optimism are considerations like 'attendees are travelling again'; 'growth of interest in our field'; 'we are doing a better job at cost management'; and 'our event marketing has improved'. On the downside, planners note 'increased competition from commercial organisers' that dilutes their numbers; and 'the growing difficulty that delegates experience in trying to get paid leave to attend'. Such future buoyancy in this market may, however, depend on whether and how costs can be controlled: the proportion noting increases in costs at the destination has risen to 65% (up from 60%), and the total acknowledging that their organising costs have increased has risen to 60% (up from 48%). Explanations

include increases in tariffs for hotels and air travel; the effect of fluctuating currency values; and the variations that arise naturally when switching between countries. In response, some planners admit deliberately selecting cheaper destinations (e.g. the Far East rather than Europe; and Eastern rather than Western Europe). Opting to use a PCO has increased costs for some; others report a reduction in their conference charges arising from increasing funding through sponsorship.

hierarchy of influencing factors

Association respondents were again asked to rank in importance those factors which they feel are of most importance to their meetings planning. (Table 1).

Table 1

	2006	2005*
<i>How to appeal to younger delegates</i>	7 th	7 th
<i>How to attract higher overseas attendance</i>	8 th	3 rd
<i>How to integrate electronic communications into the meeting</i>	4 th	6 th
<i>How to offer better value-for-money meetings</i>	2 nd	1 st
<i>How to manage issues of security</i>	9 th	9 th
<i>How to respond to the multi-cultural preferences of delegates*</i>	5 th	-
<i>How best to work with suppliers in different countries (with different standards)</i>	6 th	4 th
<i>How to devise conference programmes that appeal to the broadest audiences</i>	1 st	2 nd
<i>How to keep up-to-date with so many changes in the meetings market</i>	10 th	8 th
<i>How to negotiate with hotels, convention centres and airlines</i>	3 rd	5 th

* Note: The two years are not entirely comparable because a further question (i.e. concerning multi-cultural preferences) was added in 2006.

Whilst the findings do contain differences, there is a broad parallel between the two years – especially in the continuing importance attached both to attracting wider audiences, and offering better value. It is probably significant (in the light of references above to rising costs) that concerns over the negotiation of tariffs have arisen, and that perhaps with travel costs/environmental concerns in mind, more organisers are paying attention to the potential of integrating electronic

communication into the events. Note also the ranking of the additional multiple answer, namely the inferred importance of the issue of multi-culturalism.

challenges and irritations

Decision-makers also used 'open comment' questions to identify those issues and frustrations that affect their work. Among such key challenges (typical verbatim comments) are: 'planning for more dynamic and interactive event formats'; 'coping with the multi-cultural concerns of delegates from Africa and Asia'; and 'especially ensuring that our meetings remain affordable, relevant, and well-attended'. Among the most remarked-upon irritations (typical verbatim comments) are: 'RFPs that are not fully answered'; 'the trend towards later booking by delegates'; 'unpleasant immigration officials – notably in the US'; and 'dealing with suppliers who think that conferences are always a group entity, whereas in fact the participants travel as individuals and consequently have varied timings and changes of plan'.

emerging countries

A further consideration expressed by many respondents centres on how best to facilitate increased demand for attendance by delegates from emerging countries. Questions that arise include trying to provide support funding, overcoming visa difficulties, and working to balance the quality of a programme whilst making allowances for inclusiveness. In addition, language problems can lead to delegates becoming bored and distracted.

environment

Whilst most association buyers admit that global warming concerns have increased during the last year, and that the environment ought to be taken more seriously by the meetings sector, a minority continues to argue that 'this is a political issue so has no relevance to our work'. However, some foresee serious problems ahead, for example, 'a decline in air travel by middle-management', and the 'ethically-enforced selection of only those destinations that offer the highest environmental standards'.

tips and mistakes

Top tips for more successful event planning were volunteered by these key association managers. Ten examples include: 'lots of destination research'; 'short but interesting social programmes'; 'allow delegates to influence the planning of the

event'; 'treat every participant as you would a guest at a wedding'; 'prepare well in advance, and have a plan B'; 'speak more languages'; 'choose only places that people really want to visit'; 'only select excellent speakers'; 'empathise with the culture of the host country'; and 'always double-check that the a-v works!'.

Ten mistakes admitted by planners are: 'taking something for granted in a foreign country and not checking'; 'not making allowances – even in Europe – for different mentalities'; 'over-commitment – trying to do too much with too few resources'; 'trying to please everybody'; 'lack of support in the host country'; 'arranging a poor standard of dinners'; 'not putting everything in writing'; 'poor advertising for the event and not promoting it early enough'; 'trying to make savings on trivial things'; and 'not ensuring a strict division of labour between head office and the local organisers'.

positives and negatives

Finally, the association planners were invited to identify those positives and negatives that are affecting their meetings outlook for the future. On the plus side the key comments include: 'our advancing business acumen and the development of brand qualities for our event'; 'the global growth of learning and networking needs'; 'the expansion of demand both within the EU and from emerging countries'; and 'the ease of communication offered by electronic systems'. In contrast are perceived problems including: 'having to improve the quality of the event, year after year'; 'the ever-present concern over security'; 'the growth of ROI reporting'; and 'persuading participants to agree new formats and changes to the conference programme'.

These points aside, the IMEX research suggests that the association meetings sector displays strong momentum and considerable optimism. Those saying that they are 'very' or 'definitely' confident about prospects for 2007 outweigh by a factor of two to one those who say that they are only 'quite' or 'fairly' confident. The outlook appears good.

- Ends.