

**Association meetings analysis '07 – growing demand;
challenging issues; positive outlook**

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The 4th annual IMEX survey of the association meetings sector incorporates the opinions of nearly 200 respondents in 17 countries (Europe; Scandinavia; Russia; Ukraine; USA). Characteristic job titles of those participating include: director of conference services; member services manager; association manager; executive director; secretary general; professor; executive scientist; CEO; MD; corporate affairs manager; president; VP operations; conference manager; communications manager etc. Represented areas of membership focus include: medicine; biosciences; education; training; science; advertising; women's issues; cosmetic surgery; health; engineering; sport; business travel; insurance; publishing; marketing; religion; and design.

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For the fourth consecutive year the IMEX research identifies increased attendance at association meetings during 2007 with those noting a 'significant' or 'slight' rise in participation climbing to 70% (compared with 68%, 64% and 56% in the three previous surveys). Similarly the proportion revealing their confidence for the next 12 months in the continued growth of their meetings activities has risen again – to 73% (71%; 69%; 62%).

Offering reasons for their positive outlook the association planners typically draw attention to 'improved marketing and preparation' ... 'growing global interest in our field' ... 'more focused networking and outreach programmes' ... 'stronger internet presence' ... and the 'more targeted selection of destinations that really appeal'. Where comments point to a less buoyant figure the explanations include 'too many competitive meetings in our sector' ... and 'difficulties in attracting funds and sponsorship'.

Also important in many cases has been tighter control on the costings of events because of the advantages this brings to the sense of overall value, and the scope to attract participation from 'less rich' emerging countries. Perhaps significantly, a

smaller proportion than in the two previous years (58% in 2007 compared to 65% in 2006, and 60% in 2005) reported increases in their overall costs at the chosen destination (accommodation, transfers, social programmes etc.) with explanations including 'deliberately selecting low-cost countries', and 'getting better rates through pre-negotiation further in advance'. Planners also report stronger control of their central organising costs for meetings with the proportion acknowledging annual increases in this context falling to 53% (from 60% in 2006), offering explanations including 'stricter budgetary management' and 'achieving better results for our expenditure'.

ranking of influencing factors

Association meetings organisers were again asked to rank a choice of 10 considerations (or 'influences') that they believe matter most in their event planning (Table 1).

Table 1	2007	2006	2005
<i>How to offer better value-for-money meetings</i>	1 st	2 nd	1 st
<i>How to devise conference programmes that appeal to the broadest audiences</i>	2 nd	1 st	2 nd
<i>How to negotiate with hotels, convention centres and airlines</i>	3 rd	3 rd	5 th
<i>How to respond to the multi-cultural preferences of delegates</i>	4 th	5 th	-
<i>How to appeal to younger delegates</i>	7 th	5 ^{th=}	7 th
<i>How to attract higher overseas attendance</i>	5 ^{th=}	8 th	3 rd
<i>How to integrate electronic communications into the meeting</i>	7 th	4 th	6 th
<i>How to keep up-to-date with so many changes in the meetings market</i>	8 th	10 th	8 th
<i>How best to work with suppliers in different countries (with different standards)</i>	9 th	6 th	4 th
<i>How to manage issues of security</i>	10 th	9 th	9 th

It may be noted that there is a broad parallel, year on year, with previous findings though noting the increased importance attached to attracting younger participants, and the reduced relevance of the issue of working in different countries with

suppliers operating to varying standards. It seems also that security is a factor considered under control and therefore of reduced consequence.

challenges and issues

The option to detail their perceived challenges and key issues for the future attracted a plethora of replies from association meetings planners. Ten (verbatim) comments that characterise this weight of opinion are: *'choosing a destination easily reachable by 1000 delegates'; 'fitting our events into busy academic years with contrasting vacation timetables'; 'increased competition between associations offering conferences in overlapping fields'; 'how to increase participation by 25%'; 'how to make our meetings 'greener''; 'time pressures on delegates as people get busier'; 'increasing the interaction between attendees'; 'responding to increased concerns amongst delegates over flights and therefore their reduced willingness to travel long distances'; 'attracting more sponsorship to the programme without compromising the integrity of the event'; and 'ensuring the optimum relationship between the cost and performance output of each meeting'.*

irritations

Respondents were also asked what irritates them in the context of meetings planning. Ten verbatim comments that characterise their views are: *'the growing cost of speakers'; 'visa problems'; 'increased time wasted at airports'; 'the whole issue of gratuities'; 'poor levels of response by venues to emails or telephone messages'; 'insufficient recognition for associations from delegates for all our hard work'; 'hotels that treat proposals for small conferences with less attention and application'; 'inconsistency across cultures even for the same global hotel brand'; 'excessive, inefficient and variable standards of airport security'; and 'unexpected, but damaging political/terrorist incidents in the intended destination'.*

macro-trends

Research participants were asked next for their views on macro-trends affecting the MICE sector including the engagement with emerging countries, corporate social responsibility, multi-culturalism, the use of technology, and issues of sustainability.

In respect of attracting delegates from emerging countries a mixed set of responses varied from *'very encouraging growth potential for us – notably Russia, India and*

China, to *'a difficult problem because such delegates need to be subsidised or sponsored'*.

Relatively few respondents report undertaking a CSR initiative to mark their event. Examples of those that did include: *'we insist wherever possible on Fairtrade and/or organic goods'*; *'we try to employ local suppliers'*; *'we offset our event carbon-footprint with an energy-saving project in an orphanage'*; *'we made a donation to an Aids charity'*; and *'we staged a workshop by our Board of Directors for local university students'*.

Multi-culturalism is a theme already well advanced within the association sector because so many organisations draw from literally dozens of countries. Unsurprisingly, views on this are largely positive, including: *'it is becoming our highest priority'*; or *'it has widened our scope for selecting destinations'*; or *'the diversity of thinking is a very real advantage'*.

Electronic participation in meetings may soon become higher on the agenda than hitherto, with those advocating such outreach mentioning opportunities for *'video-meetings within our own association'* and *'the use of technology to improve the registration process and speed up translation'*. Those doubting the value of electronic support refer to the *'importance of personal chemistry at meetings'* and *'the difficulties of getting electronic participants – who don't attend the event – to pay any fees'*.

Surprisingly, given media emphasis on climate change, many association buyers have yet to make environmental issues central to their event planning and programming. Among typically negative reactions to this challenge are the following (verbatim) comments: *'this is not a topic of discussion for us'*; *'it has no influence'*; *'we choose locations for political considerations, not environmental factors'*; and *'it is on our agenda but not yet impacting on our meetings'*. More positive insights are: *'our eco-criteria for venues and destinations have substantially increased'*; *'it is now rated highly enough for us to decide to stage several smaller regional events rather than one major continent-sized conference'*; and *'participants are becoming more and more critical of the environmental costs of staging meetings ... and train access is becoming more relevant in site selection'*.

tips

Asked to offer tips to colleagues, association event planners proposed dozens of suggestions that are characterised by the following 10 (verbatim) examples:

- *'involve previous organisers of the event for their expertise'*
- *'make your delegates feel appreciated and involved'*
- *'always attract a top personality to open the event'*
- *'work with local universities in order to benefit from their voluntary support'*
- *'focus entirely on the rationale of why the event is actually being held'*
- *'keep to a tight schedule and stick to the agenda'*
- *'even double-check the obvious'*
- *'choose destinations where delegates want to go, not where you think they ought to go'*
- *'send frequent short newsletters to participants and prospects'*
- *'don't underestimate special interest groups within an association as a source of creative energy'*

common mistakes

Asked also to identify the most common mistakes that association event planners tend to make, among dozens of suggestions are the following 10 (verbatim) characteristic examples:

- *'not making enough effort to ensure the invitation is attractive and reflects the key issues and benefits of attendance'*
- *'simply repeating the content and formula of previous conferences'*
- *'not treating delegates as individuals'*
- *'not approaching each event as if it is being organised for the first time'*
- *'over-reliance on suppliers and not having watertight contracts with all of them'*
- *'forgetting to reply to even the most irritating emails from potential delegates'*
- *'selecting speakers too late'*
- *'not planning early enough or communicating the provisional programme well in advance – even though changes will be made'*

- *'assuming you know what delegates want – you don't!'*
- *'forgetting that even the most simple decisions and agreements can still be misinterpreted'*

positives v negatives

Finally, IMEX research respondents were asked to balance the strengths against weaknesses in their assessment of the future for their work. Among positives are: *'the professionalism of the meetings industry and of MPI'; 'the advantages of using new technology'; 'options created by low-cost airlines'; 'our growing global network'; and 'the new competitiveness of rail travel across Europe'*. Among negatives are: *'fears of terrorism/expense/member apathy'; 'no-shows'; 'criminality in some host countries'; 'the challenge of finding new destinations'; and 'coping with busy delegates who want shorter events and to travel shorter distances'*.

The balance between such pluses and minuses will clearly shape the scale and style of the association meetings market in the years ahead, but at present the impression created by this research is that confidence levels are high and that the future looks bright.

- Ends.