

Association planners upbeat New IMEX survey indicates positive outlook for 2010

According to latest industry research from IMEX, association meeting planners around the world not only feel resilient in the face of economic adversity but confident about the sector's prospects for 2010.

IMEX has recently undertaken a complete review of its industry research studies. As a result the Association Survey, which is conducted in partnership with ICCA, has a new format and also targets a larger global audience. 100 respondents provided detailed feedback on three key themes - meetings evaluation, corporate responsibility and future trends.

Whilst 65% say the economic downturn has had an impact on their association, the overall effect is more one of careful buying and planning decisions than a reduction in the number of meetings or events.

71% confidently expect to hold the same number of meetings in the coming year, with a further 17% predicting more meetings than previously. Contrary to what might be expected, the number of large meetings respondents intend to plan is largely unaffected. Equally, the way in which association planners are managing their meetings and selecting venues remains largely unaffected by any changes in public perceptions, as experienced in the corporate sector. Nearly 65% confirm that public attitudes have had no impact on their work.

Size of meetings

The largest single meeting organised by 40% of planners was between 200 and 499 attendees. However, for 18% the largest meeting has 500 to 999 attendees and a further 15% will cater for up to 1999 delegates. Regarding the size of their largest meeting compared with previous years, 28% of respondents anticipate slightly lower numbers although the same number (28%) expect numbers to be in line with past events. The proportion of planners expecting significantly higher or significantly lower attendance at their largest annual meeting was nearly equal, at 9% and 10% respectively.

Looking ahead to their attendance at meetings in 2010, 40% of planners expect numbers to be up with just 16% expecting attendance to drop. 44% anticipated no change. However, a small number (14%) stated they intend to make their meetings shorter in an effort to maintain attendee interest and numbers.

Asked for their views on whether costs at their selected events destinations are expected to go up or down compared with previous years, 35% expect a downward trend while nearly a quarter, 24%, forecast a rise in prices. However, the majority (39%) anticipate no change in prices at all.

Changing behaviour

Asked to describe their changing behaviours or buying patterns as a result of economic pressures, 11% strongly agreed with the statement "we intend to select lower cost destinations/venues for future meetings," a statement that was also 'agreed' with' by a further 35%. In rating their level of agreement with "we intend to select lower cost delegate accommodation or lower price hotels," 10% strongly agreed and a further 42% also 'agreed' they would be following such a strategy.

The study also asked planners for feedback on sponsorship levels and financial support. 34% of them confidently expect levels to hold steady and be in line with previous years, with a slightly smaller number (28%) expecting levels to drop somewhat. Funding and sponsorship support remains one of their biggest concerns and the focus of considerable planning effort.

The survey also asked the association meeting planners for anecdotal feedback about where they are concentrating their efforts for the future. A large number of the unprompted responses mentioned the need to continue to achieve good commercial value. However, the withdrawal of industry support for some member organisations was highlighted by some, as was the issue of 'consolidation', which was expressed as 'dematerialized communications' by one respondent. Others testify to working hard to find new ways to keep the association's brand or spirit alive and especially through preparing good content delivered in new ways by excellent speakers.

More specifically 68% feel that focusing on 'maintaining or achieving higher participant levels' is currently very important, whilst 53% view 'how to offer better value for money' as their highest priority. Other key areas include ensuring that 'meetings and events appeal to younger delegates', which was considered very important by 44%. Factors such as 'how to find new meetings destinations and venues', 'how to devise conference programmes that appeal to the broadest audiences' and 'how to respond to the multi-cultural preferences of delegates' were considered 'quite important' by 44% of respondents.

Attitudes to climate change and corporate responsibility

The issue of climate change and the association's carbon footprint appears to be growing in importance for planners this year. Although 61% feel it is no more important than before, a quarter (25%) feel it is now becoming a more important factor. The number that undertakes any socially-responsible activity in their event host communities remains split roughly half and half. 52% confirm they do but 48% do not.

- ENDS