

Meetings Marketing on the Internet

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Introduction

To what extent is the internet becoming a significant element within the marketing mix for suppliers (venues, destinations etc) targeting the meetings and incentive travel sector? This topic is the focus of an IMEX survey (conducted in December 2007) that contrasts opinions in two major distinct 'regions' – a total of 20 countries within Europe, the Nordic countries, plus Russia; and second, a mix of 12 countries in the Far East, Central and Latin America, plus North Africa. Broadly speaking, the job titles of respondents in both cases were the same, including for example: managing director; congress manager; pco; director of marketing; director, global sales; and chief of meetings department. In each case the job categories were also basically the same, including for example: global hotel brands; major independent venues; congress centres; convention or visitor bureaux; cruise companies; and DMCs. In total more than 200 marketing specialists participated in this study.

Respondents were asked to rank in order of importance those promotional initiatives that typically characterise the meetings marketing campaigns for which they are responsible.

Table 1 summarises this analysis:

	Europe, Nordic Countries + Russia	Selected countries (Far East; Latin America; N. Africa)
* Face-to-face selling to buyers in their offices	1 st	2 nd
* Strategic business relationships with 'intermediaries' (agencies, DMCs, PCOs, event organisers etc.)	2 nd	1 st
* Site Inspection Visits	3 rd	3 rd
* Marketing via attendance at exhibitions	4 th	4 th
* Marketing via the Internet	5 th	7 th
* Constant contact with buyers via		

newsletters etc.	6 th	5 th
* Advertising in buyer publications	7 th	9 th
* Telesales to buyers	8 th	8 th
* PR in buyer publications	9 th	10 th
* Distribution of brochures/promotional flyers by post	10 th	6 th

Despite the fact that market circumstances will vary enormously throughout the world the findings nevertheless suggest an overall degree of equivalence in the selected promotional preferences. A key exception is the continuing relevance of brochures (and the slightly lesser influence of the internet) in 'Selected Countries'.

Respondents were also asked to identify the proportion of their annual meetings marketing budget that they allocate to internet-related initiatives (e.g. web-hosting and design; enhancing technology; email contact and e-bulletins; online advertising, etc.). Their assessments are reported in **Table 2**.

	Europe, Nordic Countries + Russia Africa)	Selected countries (Far East; Latin America; N.
Percentage of overall budget allocated		
0-10%	53%	70%
11-25%	29%	22%
26-50%	15%	8%
51%+	3%	-

These figures again suggest that the use of the internet is slightly less marked in the 'Selected Countries' grouping. That the gap may be short-lived is indicated in replies to the question: 'Do you envisage that this proportion will grow over the next 12 months?', with 66% in Europe, the Nordic countries, plus Russia answering yes, but 78% in the 'Selected Countries'.

Research participants were asked to list what they consider are the main advantages of marketing to meetings organisers via the internet. **Table 3** summarises 20 of these views (all countries):

- * *Speedy access*
- * *Reaches a wider public*
- * *Connection to target/specific audiences*
- * *Can be kept up to date continuously*
- * *Good permanent contact*
- * *World-wide showcase*
- * *Efficient use of technology*
- * *Saves postal charges*
- * *24/7 availability*
- * *Cost-effective*
- * *Trackable*
- * *Efficient use of buyer time*
- * *No restrictions on content*
- * *Can convey massive amounts of information*
- * *Easy to manage*
- * *Modern touch*
- * *Simple to use*
- * *'Shopping' buyers can find you*
- * *Short-notice options*

Table 4 lists 20 **disadvantages** that were noted (all countries):

- * *No personal contact*
- * *Not targeted to individual needs*
- * *Not always measurable*
- * *No 'feelings' involved*
- * *Need to update regularly and enhance*
- * *Has anyone actually read you?*
- * *Not effective on its own – still need classical marketing initiatives*
- * *Products look better online than they do in reality (and actual service may be poor)*
- * *Spam, spam, spam!*
- * *Flooded/crowded market*
- * *Too much information*
- * *Questions can't be answered directly*
- * *Not everybody participates*
- * *No eye-to-eye contact/anonymity*
- * *Too much choice*
- * *Buyers overwhelmed with many unsolicited messages*
- * *Cost of development*
- * *Campaigns can seem aggressive*
- * *Can't tailor-make offers*
- * *Seeing is believing – but not possible via the internet*

These identified shortcomings aside, the venue and destination marketers were able to report many successful campaigns targeting meetings buyers. Such projects have included: news-zines; the launch of online reservations; the distribution of personalised emails on a large scale; 360° show-rounds on the web; the promotion and programming of individual appointments during the IMEX exhibition; and the successful completion of RFPs.

Survey respondents pass on the following dozen tips for more effective use of the internet in meetings marketing to buyers:

- *make sure the campaign is 'exciting', original and differentiated*
- *before using the web always talk personally to the target buyer*
- *work at improving the quality of the chosen audience*
- *be client-driven*
- *be honest, clear and specific*
- *do more, now, faster*
- *develop a 'customised' section of your website*
- *personalise your messages*
- *be fully accessible in only a few clicks*
- *use a different approach and language online to that applied offline*
- *have a distinct and specialised e-marketing strategy*
- *use bullet-point textual descriptions and be brief*

Finally the research suggests that marketers in many cases are still acquiring the necessary experience that is necessary in exploiting meetings industry cyberspace. Asked to rate themselves in terms of the skills appropriate to this environment the venue/destination specialists described themselves as follows:

	Europe, Nordic Countries + Russia	Selected countries (Far East; Latin America; North Africa)
* Highly competent	6%	5%
* Probably average	55%	41%
* Would like to learn more	39%	54%

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Note: A separate IMEX survey considers the attitudes of buyers towards the use of electronics within the MICE sector. It is entitled, Integrating Technology within Meetings.