

## Globalisation pushes multi-cultural planning up MICE agenda

The third annual IMEX report on multi-cultural strategies identifies trends and issues, and meetings organisers say relationship challenges are increasing.

\* \* \*

Responding to gender considerations... managing religious expectations... coping with dietary preferences... and planning for events involving representatives of more and more nationalities. These are among key issues that are highlighted as dominating the multi-culturalism agenda for meetings organisers in a new poll by the IMEX exhibition that involved around 100 MICE sector executives from a dozen countries. Respondents reflect opinions from eight European countries, plus Brazil, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. In nearly half the cases (48%) these buyers say they plan up to 20 events annually, with around a third (34%) arranging 21-50 events a year, and 18% involved in from 51 events upwards. The spread is from two to 600 events with participating numbers ranging from 10 to 2500 (averaging 100-200), involving in some cases up to 40 nationalities. It should be emphasised, however, that the views that follow are to be taken as pointers rather than specifics, of relative rather than absolute accuracy. That said, the research suggests the growing expertise which planners increasingly have to apply in managing their multi-cultural events.

Participants were asked to rank those cultural values of delegates that they believe most influence their work (**Table 1**). Comparative figures from 2005 and 2006 are included below, but should not necessarily be taken as revealing a trend because the range of countries reflected has varied each time. That said, there is a broad correspondence in the pattern of answers with a hint that the question of attitudes towards status at work is viewed as of growing relevance.

<b>Table 1: Perceived cultural values</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>'06</b>	<b>'07</b>
* <i>Individualism v Collectivism in a Society</i>	1 <sup>st</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
* <i>Rules v Relationships in an organisation</i>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>
* <i>Corporate status which is designated v earned</i>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd=</sup>
* <i>Orientation in society which is focused towards the past and present v the future</i>	4 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>
* <i>Internal v External sense of control in an individual</i>	5 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
* <i>Decision-making in an organisation that is hierarchical v egalitarian</i>	6 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>
* <i>Subdued v Expressed feelings/emotions in a person</i>	7 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	3 <sup>rd=</sup>

In a second comparative analysis (**Table 2**) MICE organisers were asked to rank those trait aspects of individual delegate behaviour that they felt influenced their planning.

<b>Table 2: Perceived delegate traits</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>'06</b>	<b>'07</b>
* <i>Alternative approaches to negotiation and compromise</i>	1 <sup>st</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>
* <i>Varying national styles of leadership</i>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>
* <i>Differing understandings on contracts and business agreements</i>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
* <i>Varying approaches to informality, politeness and etiquette</i>	4 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>
* <i>Alternative styles of motivation</i>	5 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>
* <i>Contrasting interpretations of acceptable meetings behaviour</i>	6 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>
* <i>Alternative religious backgrounds</i>	7 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>
* <i>Differing management language</i>	8 <sup>th</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
* <i>Varying national attitudes to younger and older people</i>	9 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>
* <i>Contrasting attitudes to gender</i>	10 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th=</sup>
* <i>Contrasting attitudes towards punctuality and time-management</i>	11 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th=</sup>
* <i>Contrasting attitudes towards humour</i>	(-)	3 <sup>rd</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>

An inference may be drawn that whilst contrasting approaches to work continue to matter (i.e. questions of negotiation, leadership, management language, punctuality etc.), there is growing awareness of issues arising from gender and religious differences.

Open-ended questions inviting verbatim comments tend to confirm the pattern suggested above. For example, recommended tips for handling delegates from contrasting cultures include (verbatim comments):

- *'plan for daily prayers and the timing of Ramadan, but ideally steer well clear of all religious festivals'*
- *'give a list of options for services for all religions'*
- *'food and faith – the two key sensitivities'*
- *'the hot topic now is ladies wearing scarves and how fellow delegates can relate to a person whose face you can't really see'*
- *'seating can matter to those from Asian countries because their decision-making tends to be more group-focused and formal'*
- *'avoid making advance assumptions about the behaviour of delegates from different nationalities: respect them all, listen to them all, ask each what he or she expects, and even learn to say please and thank you in their respective languages'*

Asked whether they expect that multi-culturalism will become an even bigger concern in their MICE activities in the future an important majority of planners (approximately 60%:40%) answered yes, and this is a distinct polarisation of opinion compared to 2006 (when the yes and no answers were broadly equal). The most commonly offered explanations focus on globalisation, the new economic achievements of so-called 'emerging countries', and the influence of e-commerce in making international contact easier and more efficient.

Finally, **Table 3** summarises the comparative views of buyers towards the particular meetings traits of nationalities that they increasingly recognise and feel it important to plan for in their work.

**Table 3: Perceived meetings traits by nationality**

	<b>'07 (first/second)</b>	<b>'06 (first/second)</b>
<i>Most results-oriented</i>	<i>British/American</i>	<i>British/German</i>
<i>Most relationship-oriented</i>	<i>Russian/African</i>	<i>Italians/Spanish</i>
<i>Most harmony-oriented</i>	<i>Swedish/Norwegian</i>	<i>British/Belgian</i>
<i>Most likely to talk most</i>	<i>Italian/Danish</i>	<i>American/Italian</i>
<i>Most likely to talk least</i>	<i>Asian/African</i>	<i>African /Austrian</i>
<i>Most willing to compromise</i>	<i>French/Dutch</i>	<i>Swiss/German</i>
<i>Most dialogue-oriented</i>	<i>British/American</i>	<i>French/Dutch</i>
<i>Most likely to interrupt</i>	<i>Spanish/Danish</i>	<i>Caribbean/Dutch</i>
<i>Most respectful of the chairperson</i>	<i>Asian/German</i>	<i>German/Portuguese</i>
<i>Most agenda-focused</i>	<i>German/American</i>	<i>Japanese/French</i>

The last IMEX poll reported that multi-cultural factors could seriously affect meetings ROI (Return on Investment), notably in the sense that effective decision-making and successful inter-relationships achieved during the event would be the key to satisfactory post-event productivity. Offered in the 2007 poll is the additional observation that planning for cultural variations is increasingly also a cost factor – e.g. translation services, multiple menus, additional facilities for religious practice, contrasting social programmes, etc. – and that such allowances must also be taken into account.

- Ends