

## Meetings Industry calls for political intervention

- **economic benefits justify government support, say industry specialists**

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*The second annual IMEX review of how MICE specialists assess the support of politicians for their sector involved over 140 buyers and suppliers. Countries represented include ten across Europe and Scandinavia (totalling nearly two-thirds of responses); plus Russia, Turkey, USA and Canada, United Arab Emirates, India, South Africa and Costa Rica. Among the job titles of survey respondents are: general manager; director; president; senior vice-president; senior project manager; international research and marketing co-ordinator; ceo; PCO; event planner; and association administration manager. Alongside agency experts and meetings/incentives organisers, the supplier contacts included executives in convention bureaux and tourist boards; hotels; congress/exhibition centres; and leading industry groupings.*

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Central to this research is an assessment of which issues currently are considered the most important for the MICE sector and therefore should be tackled by politicians/governments. Ten topics were ranked for their 'seriousness', as follows:

	2007	2008
<b>Ranking</b>		
• Investing in world-class meetings industry infrastructure where necessary	5 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>
• Invest more in airports – flight capacity; visitor infrastructure; standards of welcome, etc.	9 <sup>th</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>
• Environmental responses to Climate Change	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
• Providing more funding for international marketing	7 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
• Invest in attitude-changing campaigns to make host community populations more welcoming towards incoming delegates and appreciative of their contribution to the local economy	10 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
• Make Visa and passport control/customs service more efficient	1 <sup>st</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>

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|---|-----------------|------------------|
| • Increase confidence in perceived levels of security (whether threats of terrorism, crime, etc.) | 8 <sup>th</sup> | 7 <sup>th</sup>  |
| • Ensuring meeting suppliers are appropriately professional and accredited                        | 4 <sup>th</sup> | 8 <sup>th</sup>  |
| • Providing more funding for training to increase the professionalism of meetings industry staff  | 3 <sup>rd</sup> | 9 <sup>th</sup>  |
| • Offering Value Added Tax reductions to delegates from overseas                                  | 5 <sup>th</sup> | 10 <sup>th</sup> |

These findings suggest that investment-related and funding concerns now tend to dominate industry thinking, a significant change in emphasis from 2007. This may well be an outcome of the global economic downturn that has made the large-scale financial support of governments both more desirable, and necessary. Perhaps the magnitude of the sums seen as essential has served to marginalise concerns relating to more administrative topics, such as visa applications/passport control, VAT re-imbursments, and staff professionalism and supplier accreditation.

At the same time, this generalised hierarchy inevitably disguises variations in priorities from country to country. Three examples include: a correspondent in the *Netherlands* who rates investment in infrastructure as most important, but relegates the issue of climate change as being of least consequence; a *USA* association planner who places the environment as of first priority, but supplier accreditation of least importance; and a DMC in the *UAE* who thinks visa/passport/customs services are the prime concern, and offering VAT reductions as mattering least.

### **governments that impress**

A slightly higher proportion (52% compared to 45% in 2007) of research contributors is willing to endorse the commitment of their governments to the meetings sector. And examples of wholehearted praise were common in response to the question 'How have your politicians impressed recently in their response to the meetings industry?' Answers include (verbatim comments):

- *'their increased visibility at professional meetings'* **(Belgium)**
- *'their contribution to excellent infrastructure in Vancouver'* **(Canada)**
- *'inclusion of the meetings industry in the national tourism plan'* **(Norway)**

- *'promotion of our MICE industry, worldwide'* **(Croatia)**
- *'investing in a new convention centre'* **(Turkey)**
- *'taking decisions on VAT reduction issues'* **(Italy)**
- *'our municipality is now very understanding of the impact that the meetings sector has on our city'* **(Netherlands)**

### **governments challenged**

On the other hand there were also quoted examples of how governments are being challenged as to their MICE sector commitment. Examples include:

- *'the tax burdens on our visitors'* **(India)**
- *'insufficient investment in our convention and exhibition infrastructure'* **(Croatia)**
- *'unwillingness, generally, to do more to fund the MICE industry'* **(Bulgaria)**
- *'unwillingness of many politicians to appear personally during congresses'* **(Germany)**
- *'our government has many problems on which to focus, and so they don't give enough time or interest to tourism'* **(Russia)**
- *'they continue to underestimate the financial advantages that meetings bring to the country'* **(Belgium)**

### **suggestions**

This report concludes with a sequence of the positives, and suggestions, that the MICE sector is keen to communicate to those in power.

First, there is widespread admiration for many convention authorities around the world, with the 10 most mentioned (alphabetical order) being: Australia; Austria; Brazil; Estonia; Finland; Germany; Singapore; South Africa; Switzerland; and USA. Also highly regarded are France; Mauritius; Spain; and Thailand.

Second, industry experts have put forward questions for inclusion on the agenda at the IMEX Politicians' Forum in May, 2009. Ten examples follow:

- *'How do you see the meetings industry fitting into your economic development agenda?'*
- *'How do we get politicians themselves to lobby their government*

- colleagues on behalf of our industry?'*
- *'When did you last mention the words 'meetings industry' in your official speeches or in Parliament?'*
  - *'Have you any accurate idea how much meetings and incentive delegates spend each day?'*
  - *'What exactly are the strategies of the European Parliament towards the meetings industry?'*
  - *'Do governments adequately acknowledge the genuine connection between*  
*the quality of life in host communities and meetings expenditure?'*
  - *'How can we make sure that politicians will not begin to tax the meetings industry as a lucrative source of revenues in the future?'*
  - *'Why do so many countries continue to make it unpleasant for visitors to obtain a visa ... particularly as often these are being paid for?'*
  - *'How can we get governments to divert a proportion of flight taxes towards investment in MICE infrastructure?'*
  - *'How can we make it easier for international delegates to attend meetings in the USA?'*

Third, a listing of 10 changes that MICE leaders would particularly like to see introduced by politicians in their respective countries in the near future:

- *'Allow us more freedom, more flexibility, more creativity' (Germany)*
- *'We need more accurate data for the value of the industry' (South Africa)*
- *'We need to link the meetings industry portfolio with that of economic development' (Canada)*
- *'Invest more – now – in our MICE infrastructure' (Croatia)*
- *'Set up a pre-finance and guarantee fund to help planners of international association meetings' (Norway)*
- *'Promote our conference cities' (Belgium)*
- *'Do more to assess and check the carrying capacity of/social impact upon our host communities given increasing volumes of meetings delegates' (India)*

- *'Improve the appearance of certain of our major airports'* **(USA)**
- *'Increase the globalisation of our meetings marketing'* **(Italy)**
- *'Make it easier to refund VAT to those arriving from overseas'*  
**(Netherlands)**

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**IMEX would like to thank those industry professionals who participated in this poll.**

Further points that readers would wish to put to politicians at the IMEX Forum may be forwarded by April 15 2009 to Carina Bauer ([carina@imex-frankfurt.com](mailto:carina@imex-frankfurt.com)).