

Trends in International Association Meetings from North America

2014 Survey Report

March 2014



Executive Summary

Over the past few months, we asked qualified association meeting planners who plan at least one event outside of North America to share their expertise and experience in the international meetings market.

Our first annual survey on trends in programs, research and planning, and site selection reached a database of more than 2,000 qualified planners, and we received 88 responses. Results show that the overall outlook for international association meetings and events is positive for this year and beyond, with budgets and average event attendance expected to increase or stay steady in the coming years.

As expected, Europe dominates as the primary location for international meetings, though Asia has made a strong showing in recent years and the Middle East appears to be in the radar for future meetings. We noted that a significant percentage of association planners expressed willingness to repeat locations for their largest international events. Location and cost are the driving factors for site selection, though association planners showed less concern for destination reputation, suggesting that emerging destinations have a role to play in association meetings and events.

Convention bureaus and tourist boards (destination marketing organizations, or DMO) play a crucial role in facilitating the research and planning stages of an association meeting. Planners rely heavily on DMO for such services as site visits, marketing materials, impartial advice, venue finding services, and bid support. Traditional means of researching destinations remain popular with association meeting planners despite the growth in other technologies and media, emphasizing the need for DMO to maintain up-to-date websites and electronic meeting planners guides in order to market themselves effectively.

Overview: Assessing the Global Landscape for Association Meetings

With the global economy on the rise again, associations have renewed their focus on international events to grow their memberships, market their services, and bring North American members to new markets. To better understand the trends and landscape of this global marketplace, we have conducted the first survey of North American-based associations that plan conventions and conferences outside of North America. Our survey was conducted from late 2013 to early 2014, reaching our database of more than 2,000 qualified association planners.

Understanding the Decision Makers

Though associations are streamlining the planning process, convention bureaus and tourist boards still play a critical role for meeting planners

In total we received 88 responses to our survey. Approximately half of the respondents (48%) reported being in-house planners for associations, 16% reported being CEOs, and 14% of respondents were association executives. In addition, 16% of respondents were from an association management company, and only 6% were third-party meeting planners. The majority of these planners reported the ability to research (60%) and recommend (85%) a destination, but only 39% had the ability to make a final decision. For most associations, the final decision making body is the board of directors (49%), though for some associations an executive committee (26%) or a site selection committee (22%) make the final decision.

The typical lead time for planning an international meeting is more than one year, with 43% respondents taking between 1-2 years, and 39% taking more than 2 years. However, a significant percentage of planners (17%) reported taking less than 1 year to plan a meeting, meaning that for many associations, decisions come quick—and indeed, 24% of the survey respondents reported that the final decision came less than a year in advance.

During the research and planning stages, convention bureaus and tourist boards are a crucial resource to planners, with 83% of the survey respondents reporting using their services in one way or another, including site visits (74% of respondents), marketing materials (52%), impartial advice (51%), venue finding services (45%) and bid support (45%). When researching for an international event, planners still prefer traditional marketing materials provided by convention bureaus, including the bureau website (used by 75% of respondents) and meeting planner guides (used by 38% of respondents), meaning that an informative and user friendly website and electronic meeting planners guide should remain on the priority list for convention bureaus to market themselves effectively (**Figure 1**). New technologies and media are less popular, including online meeting management (27%), social networking sites (16%), travel blogs (12%) and destination apps (7%). Other important resources to planners include regional hotel sales offices (47% of respondents) and local association chapters (43%), and some associations are now using the services of destination management companies (34%) and professional congress organizers (37%) as well (**Figure 2**).

Figure 1. Research Resources Used by Association Meeting Planners

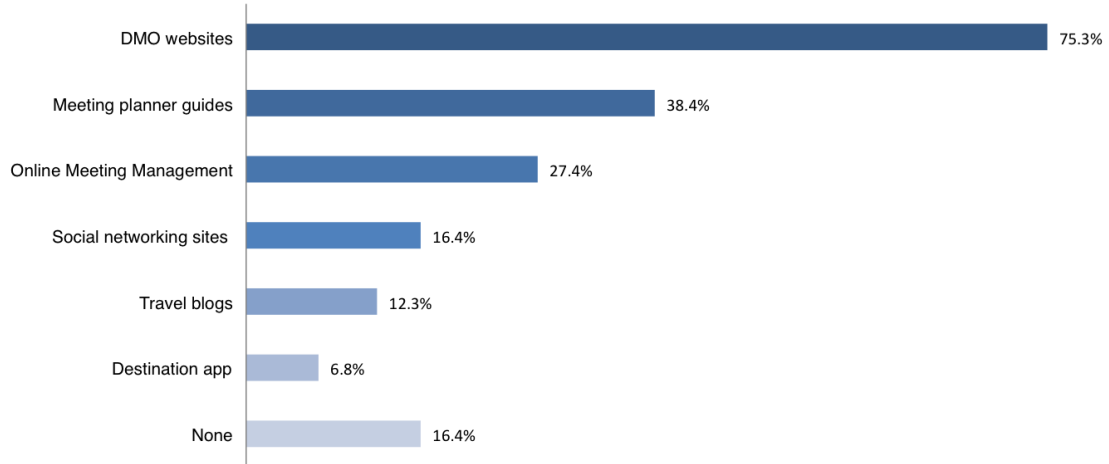
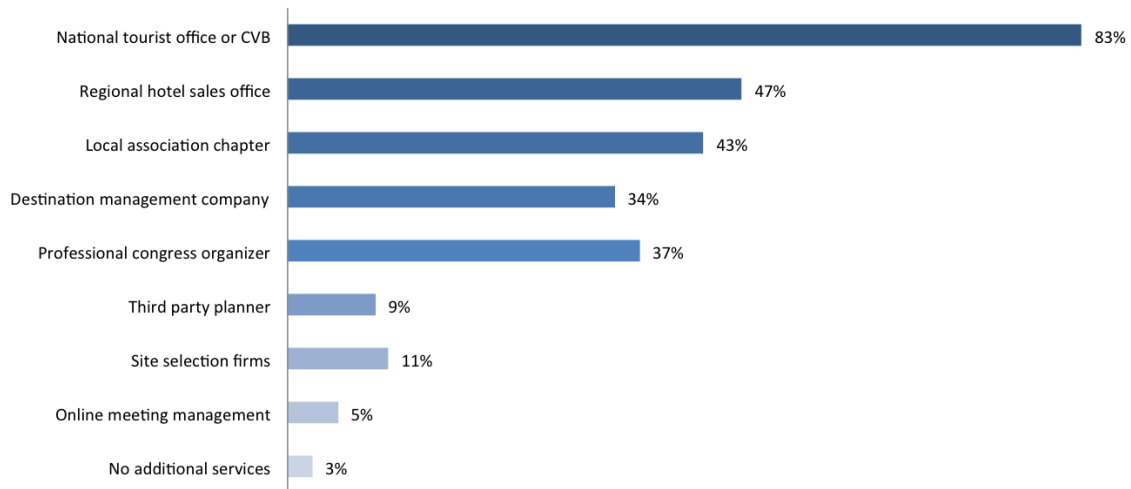


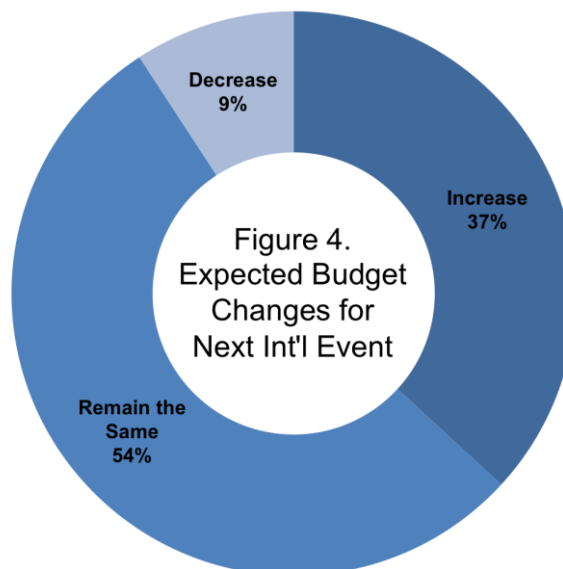
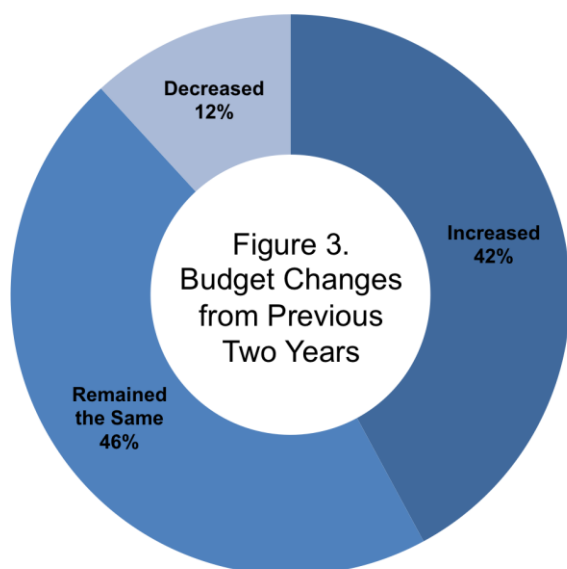
Figure 2. Planning Resources Used by Association Meeting Planners



Positive Outlook for 2014 and Beyond

Budgets and attendance at international meetings are on the rise and will continue to increase

Among survey respondents, 88% reported that their program budgets have either increased or remained the same over the past two years, with an average budget increase of 14% (**Figure 3**). The outlook for this coming year is also positive: 37% of respondents expect that the budgets will increase for their next event (**Figure 4**).



Average attendance at programs has also increased or remained the same over the past two years, according to 77% of the respondents. Nearly 40% of respondents to the survey report an increase, while only 23% report a decline. What's more, the highest percentage of respondents (32%) has more than 1,000+ attendees at their largest meetings, and planners report that the average percentage of delegates that travel from the U.S. to international meetings is 30%.

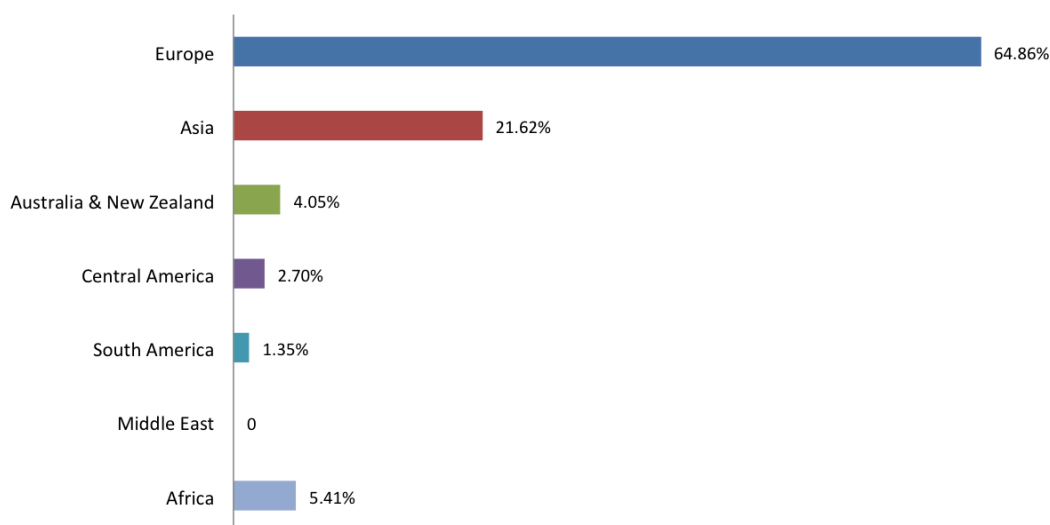
For the meetings, international hotel chains were the most common type of venue, used by 84% of the respondents. Convention centers (used by 62% of respondents) and independent hotels (used by 58% of respondents) were also used frequently. Hybrid meetings have not become prevalent for association events—only 24% of respondents reported incorporating such technologies. However, this number may rise as virtual meetings become more and more popular, and cities with reliable technology and connectivity will stand to benefit.

Trends in Site Selection

Repeat destinations are likely for largest international events; emerging destinations will also play a role

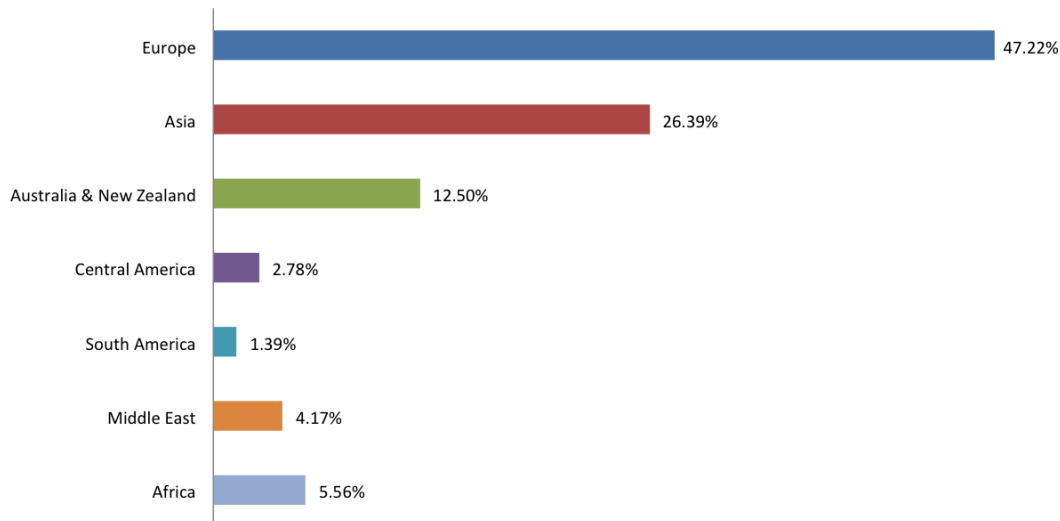
When it comes to site selection, Europe remains dominant in hosting international meetings: 65% of surveyed planners hosted their last international meeting there, with three-quarters of those respondents specifying Western Europe as the selected region. Asia was also popular among association planners: 22% of respondents hosted their last international meeting there. Among those respondents, 36% selected China, 21% selected Japan, and 29% selected Southeast Asia, with a number of planners specifically listing Malaysia as the location of their last event. **(Figure 5)**

Figure 5. Location of Last International Meeting



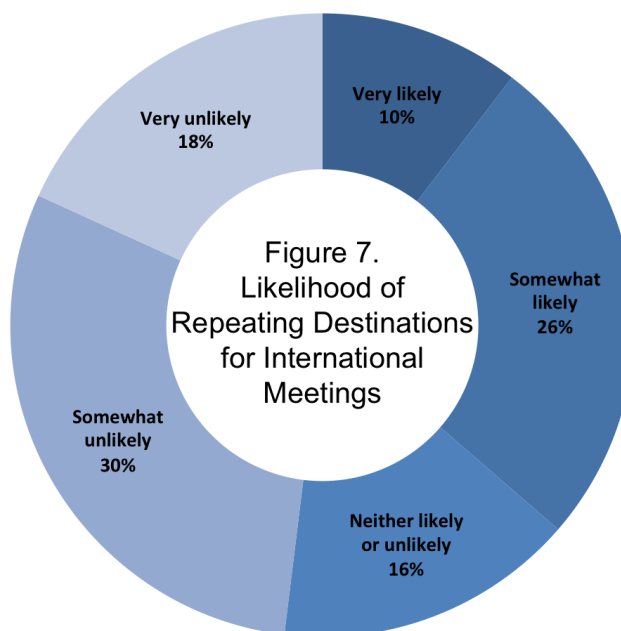
For their next international meeting, nearly half (47%) of respondents are planning to host in Europe, with two-thirds specifying Western Europe as the region. Interestingly, a number of respondents specifically mentioned Turkey as the next meeting location. Approximately a quarter (24%) of respondents reported planning their next international meeting in Asia, with the specific location split relatively equally between China, Japan, India, and Southeast Asia. Other regions are piquing the interest of planners as well: although 4% of planners hosted their last meeting in Australia or New Zealand, 13% plan to host their next one in that region. Even though no planners held their last meeting in the Middle East, 4% report hosting their next meeting there. **(Figure 6)**

Figure 6. Location of Next International Meeting



For many destinations, repeating business is likely—36% of respondents indicated they are “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to repeat destinations for their largest international events (**Figure 7**). More than half of the respondents (53%) also reported that their association programs follow a specific rotation, with many alternating North American cities with international destinations.

The two key factors that play a role in site selection are largely location (important to 86% of respondents) and cost (81%). Other aspects that weigh into the decision are the destination appeal (76%), size of meeting facilities (68%), accessibility (64%), and safety and security (61%). Less important to planners are the range of accommodations available (50%) and the reputation (30%) of the destination.



Conclusion

A strong year lies ahead for international association meetings and events

Our first annual survey on association meeting trends predicts a positive 2014 for the international meetings and conventions marketplace, especially as budgets and event attendance increase in the coming years.

We will conduct this survey annually to keep an accurate pulse of the marketplace and we will continue to monitor trends as they evolve. We anticipate that Europe and Asia will continue to remain dominant in hosting events, with many destinations seeing repeat business from their largest clients, though we do see planners exploring and experimenting with emerging destinations. Convention bureaus and tourist boards will remain the most important resource to association meeting planners, and play a key role in attracting business to their respective destinations.

Lastly, we look forward to seeing how technology will change the landscape of association meetings, from the use of hybrid meeting technology to the use of social media and apps in the planning and bidding process.

Marketing Challenges Intl. Inc. offers comprehensive marketing and consulting services to global destinations seeking to target the North American meeting and convention markets.

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