

# The new look of security

As security demands escalate for major events, the meetings industry looks towards convention centres for assurance

Convention centres, by definition, host many high profile events, and with participants and topics that can sometimes attract the wrong kind of attention, they have long been preoccupied with security. But even so, this area was given a new urgency in the period following terrorist attacks earlier this decade, and the results have probably forever changed how both centres and their clients view the subject.

For one thing, the breadth of security concern has increased significantly. Formerly the almost exclusive domain of facilities and meeting planners, it quickly became a hot topic for association and corporate executives who realised the impact it could have on event attendance. Insurers also got into the act, in some cases insisting that security measures needed to be demonstrated before they would provide coverage for attendees. Even the host community became a factor, as public support for major events became, to at least some extent, a function of how much confidence event organisers and facilities could assure them that security issues would be properly dealt with.

But good security isn't just a matter of putting the required equipment and procedures in place. It's also about what kind of environment delegates find when they attend an event - in other words, about striking an appropriate balance between effectiveness and unobtrusiveness, so that attendees can have confidence without being overwhelmed by visible evidence of security measures. While there is a need to be able to demonstrate security, it shouldn't intrude on sessions or impede the actual activities and interactions that are the reasons for attending a meeting or convention in the first place.

As a result, centres have spent a lot of time and energy in recent years fine-tuning the overall security process - and the results have been a significant improvement, not only in their own tactics but how they interact with other parts of the industry and even their host communities. Here are a few key lessons that have been learned:

- First, the process of risk assessment has quickly become a matter of course for major events or those with identifiable sensitivities. The kinds of specific information generated by such assessments are now a critical factor

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in determining not just what level of security risk may exist, but what the best approaches may be to responding.

- Secondly, facility owners and managers contemplating renovations or expansions came to realise the extent to which building design influences security. By considering security-related issues as part of the design process, centres could actually “build in” greater security and make the job of



developing procedures much simpler and more cost-effective.

- Third, the importance of taking a coordinated approach to security came to the forefront. However exhaustive facility security measures might be, they could not stand alone, and the linkage with clients, local and regional officials and even national intelligence offices became an integral part of the planning process.

This, in turn, created a new emphasis on coordination of multiple players and their respective communications and operations protocols.

As a result, the overall importance of good communications and teamwork emerged as likely the most important overall factor. Security planners quickly came to realise that in an operational situation, confusion and a lack of good operational structure could end up being the biggest threat to a successful

outcome. In response, the planning process has come to be as much about how well various groups work together as it is about the nature and extent of the actual security threat.

The result of all this is that the security process has become

much more sophisticated - and in doing so, has at the same time been able to become less obvious. The physical presence of security staff and equipment can be reduced when both they and the procedures required to use them effectively are imbedded in the facility programme - and that's good not only for the safety of participants but also for the working atmosphere of the event itself. ■

- Barbara Maple

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