

Delivering the delegate experience



President of the International Association of Congress Centres, Barbara Maple, argues that organisers and venues need to pool their talents to make a real difference for the delegate.

Maximising the number of delegates attending a conference or convention is an objective on which both centres and their clients can heartily agree.

To a centre, more delegates means more local spending, which drives the economic impact their (typically) government owners are looking for. To the client, more delegates mean more revenue, and as many meetings these days are a principal source of revenue for their respective organisations, good attendance is often not just a 'nice to have' but a matter of economic survival.

However, good attendance is increasingly not just about good event promotion. Today's convention delegate is increasingly an experienced and sophisticated traveller with limited time and high expectations. Attracting them to a congress or similar event requires that the organiser and their suppliers deliver an experience that is both rewarding and enjoyable, and this in turn means a coordinated effort. Which raises the questions of what makes for a good event experience, and how can all parties work together to deliver it?

One of the most obvious answers is programme content. In order to justify investing the time required to attend a convention, delegates have to feel that they will take away information and insights that they would not otherwise get. This creates a real challenge for event organisers, as so much information is now available through sources like the internet, that there's little specific content that delegates can't get whether or not they choose to attend. However, the way that the information is delivered, and the ability to interact with those presenting it, as well as with other delegates, can make all the difference. For this reason, there's a lot more emphasis these days on audience interaction and participation, the kinds of things you can't easily replicate through remote communications technology.

The ability to network and build or reinforce personal relationships creates value for delegates. This again distinguishes the 'face to face' experience from what's possible via other communications vehicles, and for that reason there's a lot more emphasis on this aspect in today's event programmes.

It's been said that meetings are now less about content and more about 'validation': the ability to become more comfortable with information by being able to interact with the source of that information. This, again, is influencing how meetings are structured, with more emphasis on networking opportunities and sessions that encourage exchange rather than the traditional 'one way' presentations that used to characterise so many meetings.

But even this may not be enough to persuade some, whose networks are already up to speed. This is where the delegate experience comes in, that unique set of experiences a delegate takes away from an event.

Part of this experience has to do with the actual destination and facility where the event is taking place.

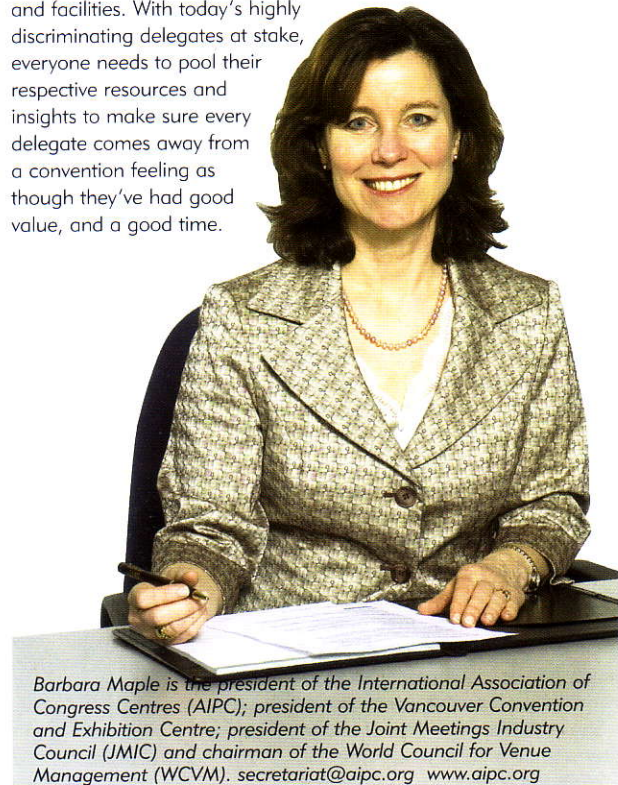
If the destination is seen as attractive and the facilities accommodating, delegates are much more likely to have a sense of

personal enjoyment to go along with whatever learning and networking activities they're engaging in. This is where both planners and centres need to make an effort to make interesting and engaging aspects of the local community and culture accessible to delegates. For a meeting to be unique, it needs to incorporate aspects of the local experience into the overall package and give delegates a sense of having 'been there' rather than simply attending a series of sessions that might have taken place anywhere.

At the same time, today's 'connected' delegate wants the comfort of feeling they can stay in touch with their business or professional activities while away, and this is where available technology can make a big difference.

Some of these requirements, such as programme modifications to achieve more effective delegate interactions, are best dealt with by meeting organisers. Some, like facilities and communications technology, are largely the role of the centres. But all can benefit from an approach to planning that engages both planners and centres in a co-operative effort to make sure the event is as satisfying and productive as possible.

Organisers know their delegates. The centre knows its destination and facilities. With today's highly discriminating delegates at stake, everyone needs to pool their respective resources and insights to make sure every delegate comes away from a convention feeling as though they've had good value, and a good time.



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