

Local challenges: global solutions



AIPC vice-president Edgar Hirt underlines the importance of making global knowledge count in the local economy.

As an industry that deals to a large degree with international clients and events that rotate through many parts of the world, we spend a lot of time looking at international trends and the implications of issues such as the globalisation of business activities. While this is useful in creating a broader context for our activities as congress centres, the reality is that most of us are heavily occupied with events and conditions much closer to home.

The question becomes: how can we benefit in our local situations from the experiences and expertise of those in other parts of the world?

To begin, we need to recognise two realities. First, we do operate in a global industry, simply because the expectations of clients are becoming universal.

As mentioned, many clients rotate their events through many different countries and facilities, and so come to have a wide basis for comparison. This, in turn, leads to them reaching their own conclusions about what is possible, practical and economical, and that shapes what they expect to get when they come to any facility in the world. At the same

time, it is clear that we as congress centres all work in a local environment shaped by conditions in our own countries and cities. A very large proportion of our business is regional and we are heavily impacted by everything from regional economics to local politics.

How can we and our customers then benefit from our understanding of global issues? I believe there are three important ways:

First, we can learn by example. In the world of congress centres, there are variations of practically every imaginable form of facilities, operations, economics, governance, funding and marketing, and all these have

something to teach us. From such a wide array of choices it is possible to select those models that most closely approximate the conditions we ourselves are working under and that therefore respond best to our local challenges. In this way, more efficient local models develop and everyone from the owners of the centre to the customers who use our facilities benefit.

Second, the ability to refer to global issues and examples often helps guide local decision-making. Most owners and governments (who in our industry, are often the same people) take comfort from knowing that the direction they are intending to take is consistent with what others are doing elsewhere. At the same time, they can be encouraged to take action to avoid situations where experience in other countries has shown there are potential problems. As an example, we have all seen the results of overbuilding capacity, where too much space ultimately leads to lowered government investment and reduced quality of services and facilities for clients.

The better the quality of decision-making, the more likely it is that these kinds of problems can be avoided; and decision-making benefits from having the best possible information available as to the consequences of various courses of action.

Finally, the emergence of global standards helps improve the local product because it creates clear and well defined objectives for centre owners and managers to focus on. In the absence of universally accepted standards, every centre is forced to develop their own, and these can vary widely. The result is that clients never know exactly what to expect, and must invest heavily in their own research and analysis to ensure they will get what they need and expect from any particular centre.

By having overall standards, even recognising that there will be lots of variation based on local or historic factors, there can be a level of confidence that there will be no unhappy surprises that impact not only clients and their delegates but ultimately damage the overall reputation of the industry.

The largest part of a congress centre's business will always be regional, and the most important operating issues will always be driven by local conditions. However, by looking at ways to apply global lessons to these local challenges and opportunities, we can improve the output of our centres to everyone's benefit. That's why our international connections are so valuable, and why organisations like AIPC will continue to play a valuable role into the future.

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