

Quality has many dimensions

By Edgar Hirt, AIPC president and managing director, Congress Center Hamburg

In the highly competitive congress centre market, everyone is talking about quality. The reason is simple: quality means value, both to event organisers and to the delegates who are the ultimate end-users of our products.

But the meetings business is all about face-to-face interaction, which means quality takes on a whole new meaning beyond the amenities, equipment and technology we offer. It's really all about how to deliver the best possible experience, and that in turn is a matter of how planners and suppliers can work together to create a quality product.

By this definition, quality entails a major investment of time and energy, not only to develop the product itself, but in the kind of relationships that give everyone confidence in how the event program will unfold. It is about a planning process that involves reliability, transparency, value and, above all, a good understanding of the client's needs and aspirations. And because we're talking about people, it also means recognising and addressing the emotional element of personal interactions.

To a congress centre, this means several things, all of which we need to remember if we are to stay competitive:

Firstly, it means that one of the biggest investments we need to

make is in our staff. These are the people who must ultimately deliver the product. They are the front line of interface with our clients. As a result, we must be able to hire, train and motivate a capable and professional team that will deliver both the quality and consistency of service needed to give planners confidence.

Secondly, it means we must remember that quality is not a static definition – it changes and evolves, and what today is a luxury may tomorrow be simply an expectation. We need to be constantly aware of what is happening in the market, what our competitors are doing and what developments offer different ways of approaching even the most obvious tasks. In a world – and an industry – where news travels fast, clients are quickly aware of what new opportunities have emerged, and we need to be just as quick to respond to these and be able to offer them.

Thirdly, we need to appreciate that maintaining quality is an ongoing commitment, be it in staff training, upgrading amenities or maintaining finishes. In order to do this, we need to be able to convince our owners of the importance of continuing investment. Having made an initial investment in venues and services, it is often hard for owners to accept that

this is only the beginning, and that regular upgrades to respond to changing client expectations are just part of the process of staying competitive. With new and renovated centres appearing in the market every day, clients have more choice than ever before.

Finally, we need to recognise that we depend on the support and participation of our communities to create a true quality product. Congresses and events today are more than ever about a delegate's total experience – not just that part that takes place within the walls of the congress centre. For that reason, we need to work at convincing our communities that they are part of the product, and that they will benefit from a successful event in many different ways.

Together, all these requirements put pressure on the congress centre manager, but that is just the price we have to pay to be successful. Quality means value – both to the client and to the centre itself, as it is possible to achieve revenue expectations only if the product is competitive. For the sake of both our clients and the owners who have invested in us, we need to regard quality as an essential and ongoing element of our operations, and invest time and resources accordingly.

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