

Making sure variety reflects the spice of meetings life



AIPC president Edgar Hirt urges congress centres to incorporate local colour to boost the delegate experience.

These days, everyone recognises the importance of creating an exciting and satisfying delegate experience. Attendance is still one of the biggest factors defining success for a congress or convention, driving revenue for the association that is staging the event. It may, in fact, be the single largest factor in their annual budget.

However, in an age of the internet, attendance is no longer driven primarily by a desire to simply get new information. Delegates need to justify their time commitment with other benefits, such as networking and developing relationships with colleagues and clients.

At the same time, there needs to be a pleasurable component. In a world where the travel experience is often less attractive, due to security and other related impacts, it is important that on arriving at their destination attendees can expect to have an enjoyable time.

But today's delegates are more demanding than previously. Many are seasoned travellers, who have attended events around the globe and have a wide variety of experiences. This means there is an even greater need for the destination to deliver an experience that is not only pleasurable but also unique; something that reflects what makes their part of the world different from others.

In the past, the onus for this used to fall largely on the destination itself and the facilities such as restaurants, attractions and retail opportunities that made up the destination product.

There is also the matter of 'packaging' necessary to deliver all this in an efficient way, given that many delegates have only a limited amount of free time.

Today, the scale of the job is such that everyone in the destination – including the congress centre itself – needs to play a more active role in shaping the delegate experience.

In fact, given that delegates will likely actually spend the majority of their time in the centre, there's an argument to be made that the ambiance of the centre has a disproportionate role to play in shaping the uniqueness of the experience.

To some extent, this goes against conventional thinking. Traditionally, a centre has been simply a vehicle for the programme,

with little thought as to how it may or may not impact the overall delegate experience. At the same time, the expectations of meeting planners are strongly toward consistency of facilities, technology and servicing so that they can base their planning on what are now largely international standards.

How, then, is a centre to distinguish itself and become a greater part of the destination experience? I believe there are two ways.

First, there is the whole area of design and décor. From the overall architecture, through the selection of art, to the ways in which a facility interacts with the surrounding area, there are many opportunities to ensure that facilities reflect what could be called 'local colour'. In this respect, a centre in Africa can and should be noticeably different from one in Japan, and the kind of experience one might expect in France would similarly differ from what you could expect in Germany. Many facilities have actually been designed to reflect distinctive, regional features in their architecture, with distinctive shapes and components reflecting the local vernacular, and these make for very interesting comparisons with the 'big box' design that was so prevalent in many areas until recently.

Other centres clearly have greater advantages based on their location. A facility located in a signature part of a well known city has a much greater opportunity to reflect its unique surroundings than one located in an outlying industrial area. But, whatever limitations may exist, there is always the chance to make sure that the centre makes a statement about its destination, and this should be pursued to the greatest extent possible.

The second opportunity is that of programming. Clients often look to centres for ideas on suppliers and experiences that will enhance their events, and centres need to be ready, not only with concepts but also with suggestions as to how these can be carried out. Centre managers often know their surroundings better than anyone else, and are thus in the best position to make good recommendations for programming suggestions that help create that unique experience. When these can be combined with centre facilities it's even better; delegates get a positive experience, centres get more revenues and planners get the added benefit of having all their logistical needs handled in a coordinated manner.

Experiencing cultural and geographic diversity is one of the most attractive parts of the travel experience and a big motivator for delegates to attend meetings and conventions in different locations. To the extent that centres can become a greater part of creating this, whether through design and décor or subsequent programming, they will be helping ensure the future of our industry.

*Edgar Hirt is president of the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC) and managing director of CCH, Congress Center Hamburg
secretariat@aipc.org
www.aipc.org*