

Make local colour a central feature

By Edgar Hirt, President, International Association of Congress Centres, and Managing Director of Congress Center Hamburg.



advantages based on their location. A centre in a “signature” part of a city has more chance to reflect its individual surroundings than one in an outlying industrial area. But whatever limitations there may be, there is always the chance to make sure the centre makes a statement about its destination.

Programming: Clients often look to centres for ideas on suppliers and experiences to enhance events, and centres need to be ready not only with concepts, but also with suggestions as to how these can be made possible. A centre’s management is often in the best position to make good recommendations for programming that helps create a special experience. When these can be combined with centre amenities, it is even better – delegates have a positive experience, centres gain more revenue and planners find

the added benefit of having 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.

Convention centres that play a role in creating this, be it through design and décor or subsequent programming, will be helping ensure the future of our industry.

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While attendance is still one of the biggest factors defining success for a congress or convention, in the internet age it is no longer driven primarily by the need for new information – delegates need to justify their time commitment with such other benefits as networking and developing relationships with colleagues and clients.

At the same time, with the travel experience often less attractive now because of security and other factors, it is important that attendees arrive at their destination expecting an element of excitement. Delegates may be more demanding nowadays; many are seasoned travellers, so there is an even greater need for destinations to deliver an experience which is not only pleasurable, but which also differentiates their part of the world. The scale of the job now is such that everyone at 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 spend most of their time in the centre, it can be argued that the ambience of the building has a disproportionate role to play in shaping the uniqueness of the experience.

Traditionally, a convention centre

has been simply a vehicle for the program, 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 amenities, technology and servicing so they can base their planning on what are now largely international standards.

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

1 Design and décor: From the overall architecture through the selection of art to the ways in which a centre interacts with the surrounding area, there are many opportunities to ensure it reflects what could be termed "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 could be expected in Germany. Many conference centres have actually been designed to reflect distinctive, regional features in their architecture, with distinctive shapes and components. Other centres clearly have



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