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” CONVENTION CENTRES OF THE FUTURE – WE ALL HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY

ONE OF THE MOST interesting – and challenging – conclusions from our AIPC Annual Conference was the idea that the expansion, redevelopment and updating of convention centres may be moving from an occasional undertaking to something that is largely continuous. This is interesting for centres themselves and their suppliers and clients.

The essential challenge centres face is that they are long-term investments in an industry that is changing rapidly. They must remain relevant and competitive for years despite being constrained by the fact that once built, they have limited flexibility in their actual structure. In recent years, changing market expectations have had to do with not just things like programs and services but even the size and arrangements of spaces.

In addition, there are many other new demands, ranging from new technology to sustainability. Sometimes these can be satisfied with changes to operations; often, it requires much more. The result is that even if the new demands can be satisfied in an existing structure, they can be expensive and difficult to implement.

A big issue is that there is a great deal of convention centre product out there. This means competition and thus no centre can afford to remain behind. If a centre is fortunate enough to have good customers, it must do everything it can to avoid driving them away through a lack of appropriate facilities. This means much more work for managers; they need to become ongoing project managers as well as operators. What it means for customers is the opportunity to shape the facilities they use.

The greatest imperative in centre design today is flexibility. Knowing we will never be able to predict future demands exactly, the best approach is to design-in the ability to adapt. But it helps to have the best possible idea of what the future demands are going to be, and this is where the customers come in. Event organizers are best positioned to anticipate new directions in meeting formats and by communicating this to centre managers, they help not just the centres but themselves. And the more managers are aware of future trends the more likely they will be to get the kinds of facilities they want and need.

This is something to keep in mind

as we contemplate a time when centres will have to be updated much more regularly and there are many ways to encourage better dialogue. For their part, centres should design their post-event surveys to better capture the information and insights clients have about how building changes would create a better meeting environment, instead focussing solely on service. Clients should look at the input process as an investment in their future and take the time to think through what kinds of changes – whether in an existing building or a potential future one – would make the most sense for their needs.

The same applies to centre suppliers. These are the people who often know the limitations of a centre and the expectations of clients as well as or better than centre staff themselves. Yet they may often focus more on immediate activities than sitting down to organize this knowledge in a way that can be used for decision making.

Let's take advantage of this trend toward more regular updates as an opportunity for all to take a part of the responsibility to get the best possible input in designing the convention centre of the future. ¶