

CONVENTION CENTRES OF THE FUTURE

Edgar Hirt, AIPC President, says we all have a role to play in planning the convention centres of the future

One of the most interesting and challenging conclusions to come out of our recent 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 and ongoing.

The essential challenge centres face is that they are basically long-term investments in an industry that is changing rapidly and that centres must remain relevant and competitive for many years even though they are constrained by the fact that once built they have limited flexibility in their actual structure. In recent years, changing market expectations have had to adapt to advanced programmes and services, as well as shifting size and arrangements of spaces - not easy things to address when you're dealing with something as solid as a building!

A big issue is the fact that there is a great deal of convention centre product out there - in fact, supply in many areas has increased faster than demand has been able to keep up. This means lots of competition - and no centre can afford to lag behind in that kind of situation if they want to remain competitive.

It's easy to say that if there is more supply than the business can just spread itself around - but we all know that's not how things work. There are a lot of other reasons why organisers choose to go to a particular destination and if a centre is fortunate enough to have good customers they must do everything they can to avoid driving them away through a lack of appropriate facilities. That's why we will always be working to upgrade our centres regardless of how many alternatives may exist.

What this means for many managers is a lot more work - a need to become an ongoing project manager as well as an operator. What it means for the customer is more of an opportunity to shape the facilities they use. The greatest imperative in convention centre design



today is flexibility - on the basis that knowing we will never be able to predict exactly what future demands may be, the best approach is to design in the ability to adapt to changing needs as they arise. For example, multi-purpose spaces and moveable walls can go a long way towards helping centres respond to changing meeting requirements, while good design can also facilitate changes in how buildings operate when this is required.

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But it sure 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 organisers are in the best position to anticipate the new directions that meeting formats may take - and in taking the time to communicate this to centre managers, they are helping not just the centres but themselves as well. The more managers know about future trends, and communicate to designers and others involved in the development process, the more likely they will be to get the kinds of facilities they will want and need in the future.

I think this is something we should all keep in mind as we contemplate a time when centres will have to be updated on a much more regular basis and there are a lot of ways to encourage better dialogue. For their part, centres should be designing their post-event surveys to better capture the information and insights clients have about how building changes would create a better meeting environment - and no as opposed to how they felt about the service they got. As for the clients themselves, they should look on the input process as an investment in their own 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 thing applies to convention centre suppliers, whether they be food and beverage, security, housekeeping or audio visual. These are the people who often know the limitations of a centre and the expectations of clients better than centre staff themselves - yet may focus more on day-to-day activities more than sitting down to organise 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 everyone - and all take a part of the responsibility to get the best possible input to designing the convention centre of the future. ◦

Edgar Hirt is the President of the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC); and Managing Director of CCH, Congress Center Hamburg. AIPC is the pre-eminent international association of convention centres, with a mission of encouraging, supporting and recognising excellence in centre management. Its programmes are directed toward enhancing the profile and performance of its members and their purpose built facilities whose primary purpose is to accommodate and service meetings, conventions, congresses and exhibitions. The AIPC is a global network of over 166 leading centres in 53 countries, with the active involvement of more than 650 centre management professionals. For further information please visit www.aipc.org