

Getting greener together

AIPC President **Edgar Hirt** says convention centres are well placed to deliver sustainable programmes.



The fact that the drive toward sustainability was not deflected in any serious way by the recent global recession strongly suggests that it is a factor which is here to stay. Meetings and conventions will be affected by this, not simply because of the impact of these events themselves but because they often involve long distance travel by delegates, which is itself a target for environmental advocates. And when sustainability concerns are combined with the lingering economic impacts left over from the recession, we get situations like those now being experienced in many areas – most notably the US and UK - where cash-strapped governments are targeting reductions in meetings as a way of addressing both their financial and sustainability concerns.

In this kind of circumstance, it helps to be able to demonstrate that those most directly involved in staging major events like conventions and congresses are doing everything they can to minimise those sustainability impacts that they can actually control. This is clearly an area where both groups need to work together; yet a recent survey of AIPC members indicated that while over 85 per cent of centres had developed policies and programmes to support more sustainable meetings, only five per cent said it had proven to be a 'significant factor' in the client decision, with a further 40 per cent saying it was a 'modest' decision factor. These are hardly numbers to inspire facility managers, yet centres continue to lead the way in developing green programming.

In one sense, it is reasonable that centres should be more aggressive in the greening of meetings, as they have a number of different pressures to respond to. Centres are most often owned by governments whose own policies encourage environmental sustainability. They are also accountable to their respective communities, who typically also want to see centres behave in a sustainable manner. Venues are also subject to local and national building codes, many of which have very specific sustainability requirements, particularly for new buildings.

But the fact that centres have had to respond to these various audiences by creating better facilities and practices should be seen as an opportunity by planners and the organisations they represent. It means that the raw materials for creating a more sustainable event programme are readily at hand. And it is available from the host facility instead of requiring a lot of initiative by the organisers themselves.

Developing a zero-waste or energy efficient programme can be a challenge for organisers who are coming into a community without any real idea of what resources are available or what costs may be involved. But when the centre itself can supply the framework for a more sustainable programme it relieves planners of a lot of work and uncertainty, making it much easier to do what most of their members would like to see them doing.

The cost factor, often a concern associated with creating a more sustainable programme, is changing too. With many sustainability initiatives now embedded in the facilities and operating programmes of convention centres, costs can be spread over a wider business base and can even help lower operating costs for the centre itself. The result is that green programmes, that might have been more costly even a few years ago, are now becoming just a fact of life, particularly in newer facilities where the design has been

configured to accommodate them more efficiently.

The bottom line is things are changing in a way that makes it easier and more cost-effective than ever before to mount a sustainable event programme, and many of the necessary resources are readily available through the host convention centre. It remains for centres and organisers to revisit the sustainability question together in the interest of having everyone pulling in the same direction.

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AIPC is a global network of over 166 leading centres in 53 countries, with the active involvement of more than 650 centre management professionals.

