

The global gathering of convention venue executives this year was held in the US for the first time. It was a small price to pay to learn what they must do to make money these days

Venue operators put on a brave face

Convention centre operators have witnessed more change than most over the years. So the theme All About Change at their 53rd general assembly came as no surprise. It is not the first time they have been asked to reflect on the fact that 'continuous change' is the new modus operandi - and it probably won't be the last.

What was new, however, was the choice of venue. San Diego, on the west coast of the United States, was no doubt chosen for the annual assembly of the international association of convention centres -- AIPC -- in honour of recently elected board member Carol Wallace, CEO of the San Diego Convention Center.

Convention centre managers are nothing if not pragmatic and they concluded long ago that change was inevitable and fighting it a waste of time.

"The only logical response is to accept and adapt to the need," was how president Edgar Hirt, of Hamburg, put it, now elected for his second term. He kept his spirits up by expressing delight with the very clear result of the election which recorded 173 votes in his favour.

Host Carol Wallace also made a good job of putting on a brave face. "This is an exciting

interactive digital signage system.

But in the cold world outside the warmth of the San Diego centre lurked a gloomy global economic situation that centres have to face and fight.

"There are a lot of questions about where we are in global recovery, what kind of industry is now emerging from the crisis and what we should be doing about it," said Hirt. But what he heard from David Blanchflower, a keynote speaker, former member of the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee and Professor of Economics at Dartmouth College, can't have cheered him up much.

Blanchflower advised delegates that "a return to robust growth should not be taken for granted and that a long period of slow recovery punctuated by periodic setbacks was much more likely."

So far so good, since venue providers had already decided to inch along the ledge towards modest growth, clinging on to flexibility and exercising caution. The small seeds of hope are that new services can generate value for both suppliers and clients and new ways of organising business relationships can benefit both sides in times that were tough on everyone.

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opportunity to compare strategies, glean insights and explore new opportunities to advance an industry that generates enormous economic benefits," she told delegates.

Hirt subscribed to this wave of positive thinking. "We should be anticipating and providing for changing markets, expectations and technologies on a continuing basis," he advised. "An acceptance of this basic premise leads to a whole variety of new ways of looking at our approaches."

Two other delegates with something to smile about were the Vancouver Convention Centre, the overall winner of AIPC's 2011 Innovation Award for its Service Excellence Program; and Suntec Singapore International Convention & Exhibition Centre for lifting the Member's Choice Award for its Touchpoint mobile

One new approach to revenue generation being tried out was in attracting new attention and investment from governments and communities by demonstrating how invaluable convention centres were in the global scheme of things.

It cost delegates and observers considerable investment in time and money to attend the AIPC assembly and conference in San Diego. Had it been worth it?

"What we learned didn't necessarily make those of us hoping for a speedy recovery entirely happy," admitted Hirt. "But I think we all consider ourselves better prepared for the challenges of the future as a result of what was conveyed in the course of the conference and this is the best outcome we could have achieved."



AIPC represents a global network of 170 leading convention centres in 54 countries with the active involvement of more than 750 management-level professionals worldwide.



Top No good news from David Blanchflower, **Above** Edgar Hirt and Carol Wallace share a glass together, **Below** Delegates advised to explore new opportunities

