

# VIRTUAL MEETINGS: WHAT ARE THE PROSPECTS?

Edgar Hirt evaluates whether a virtual problem is looming in the meetings industry

The sudden emergence of virtual meetings as a real factor in the meetings industry has left a lot of people struggling to decide if they represent an enhancement to more traditional formats or a threat that will eventually end up replacing face-to-face meetings. In reality, the answer is likely to be a “bit of both”.

In trying to determine where this issue is leading, it helps to take a look at how it developed. The emergence of virtual meetings can be attributed to four things, any one of which would have advanced the level of interest in this format.

The first is the lingering effect of the recent global recession, which created a lot of concern over cost management and led to questioning the value of meetings-related travel. Anything that could enable participation in essential business interactions while reducing or even eliminating related travel expenses was obviously pretty attractive in this situation, and virtual meetings certainly met this requirement admirably. The real question was whether or not such meetings could actually deliver the same kind of results, which brings us to the next point.

At the same time, the technology was getting a lot better – what only a few years earlier involved delayed reactions, fuzzy images and a real sense of disconnection has been replaced by real time interactions with the kind of resolution that was able to convey a lot of the reality of a meeting situation far more effectively. This will only get better in the future, which means that users can expect further improvement as the various formats evolve.

Third, the way for virtual meetings was being paved by a lot of other forms of electronic interaction that made it much less foreign as a way of relating to transactions. A whole generation is moving into place for whom Internet-based interfaces are the primary means of communication, and these had already penetrated more traditional meetings formats extensively via pre, post and intra communica-



tions that were increasingly associated with meetings. And, finally, there were increasing concerns around the impacts that meetings, conventions and exhibitions with their associated travel were having on sustainability and environmental concerns. Meetings by definition involve travel simply in order to gather people together from different places, and while this

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is likely a lot more efficient than the multitude of smaller meetings that might have to take place in order to achieve the same volume of interactions, they made a tempting target for those looking to assign blame for things like climate change and excessive energy use.

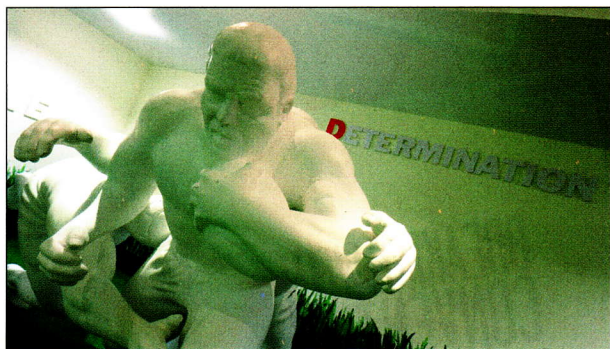
All of this created fertile ground for the promotion of virtual meetings as a viable and attractive alternative. The real question, however, remains: do virtual meetings actually deliver the full spectrum of benefits of their face-to-face counterparts – and if not, does it really matter considering other benefits to be achieved such as those described above? As an example, the cost-savings realized in a period of economic downturn are likely to remain attractive even as conditions improve, and sustainability concerns aren't likely to go away anytime soon.

The current view of many in the industry is that the need to meet face-to-face will remain, and that more than anything virtual meeting technology will strengthen the value of meetings and conventions by expanding their scope and reach to participants, presenters and even content that would not otherwise be accessible. Some of the early research supports this notion. However, the real question is whether or not this is a kind of transitory stage that will lead to greater comfort with accessing group discussions and presentations without actually having to attend – and if, as some now argued, they will drain rather than drive attendance over the longer term.

The fact is, none of us know the answer to this – and even the answers we are getting today may not be what actually happens as both the formats and the technologies evolve even further. However, the one thing that can be said is that virtual meetings are now a reality and need to be addressed from that perspective. As professionals involved in the industry, we all need to not just keep a close eye on how this develops, but actually play as much of a role as we can in its outcome. ◦



Edgar Hirt is the President of the International Association of Convention Centres (AIPC); and Managing Director of CCH, Congress Center Hamburg. AIPC represents a global network of 170 leading centres in 54 countries with the active involvement of more than 750 management-level professionals. It is committed to encouraging and recognizing excellence in convention center management. AIPC also celebrates and promotes the essential role of the international meetings industry in supporting economic, academic and professional development and enhancing global relations amongst highly diverse business and cultural interests. For further information please contact [marianne.de.raay@aipc.org](mailto:marianne.de.raay@aipc.org) or visit [www.aipc.org](http://www.aipc.org)



## LONDON

England's famous Rugby Union stadium, Twickenham, has outlined plans to promote its expansive events space to Middle East planners. Known as the 'Twickenham Experience', the stadium boasts more than 7,000 square metres of space across a wide variety of venues. The Rose Suite can cater to 1,180 people in reception style whilst the exclusive and intimate Cellar – a haven for wine lovers – seats 14 and is where star rugby players and VIPs often gather for private dining. There's also the Live Room – a state-of-the-art auditorium with a double-height roof that acts as a blank canvas for conferences, AGMs and staged events for an audience of up to 600 plus the option of 150 pitch-facing hospitality suites for meetings or private corporate gatherings.

To follow 'Twickers' on Twitter, log onto @twickersevents.

## BRUSSELS

The International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC) has announced the results of their second member outlook survey, which show some modest gains in business activity and confidence levels but no overall robust recovery. The survey also demonstrated significant regional variations that correspond to respective economic performance. Overall, the majority of centres in Europe and North America reported only modest revenue growth (2-3 per cent) in 2010, although Australia and Asia indicated stronger growth (9.3 and 21.6 percent respectively). As a result, Asian centres have much more optimistic expectations of future business revenues and price increases than other regions. With a 70 percent response rate from 170 AIPC member centres representing 53 countries around the world, AIPC claims the survey provides a highly reliable and geographically comprehensive picture of global convention centre conditions. [www.aipc.org](http://www.aipc.org)

## GLOBAL

Reed Travel Exhibitions and The Association of Corporate Travel Executives (ACTE) have announced a joint collaboration across all events in their IBTM portfolio ([www.ibtm.com](http://www.ibtm.com)).

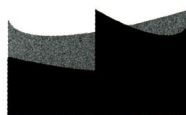
The strategic partnership will ensure a unique level of knowledge, insight and expertise is delivered directly to the corporate hosted buyers who attend each of the IBTM shows.

Craig Moyes, Group Exhibition Director for the global meetings portfolio of events, Reed Travel Exhibitions commented: "The business and corporate travel community is an intrinsic part of the meetings industry and has been expanding steadily, this year we are making business travel a key focus across all of our shows."

ACTE will deliver an educational series of sessions pertinent to face-to-face meetings in the context of business travel. The sessions will focus on how industry professionals make the most of face time and developing technology to best enhance the corporate travel experience.

Serving more than 31,000 executives in more than 80 countries, ACTE is a not-for-profit association established to provide executive-level global education and peer-to-peer networking opportunities for the industry.

## LONDON



### UK VENUE SHOW

A host of top British event venues and keynote speakers have now been signed up for the inaugural UK Venue Show, which takes place at London Olympia from February 1-2, 2012.

The show, which focuses on the "great British venue" aims to provide a "forum for buyers and decision makers of corporate events, product launches and experiential campaigns as well as seasonal parties and smaller meetings".

London landmarks, independent properties and exhibition centres are amongst the exhibitors lined up while the programme of high-profile speakers will include Chris Vaughan, production team leader on the Take That tour and Stuart Cornish, head of the Metropolitan Police Olympic and Paralympic venues planning team who will headline the Access Sessions.

The UK Venue Show will run alongside the Event Production Show and is supported by Association of Event Venues (AEV). "The show is shaping up well and should be a benchmark for others as we lead in the trade show season," said event director Tanya Cohen. "Our central London base and focussed approach to our exhibitors has helped us fill a gap in the market that venues are keen to get involved with." Visit [www.ukvenueshow.co.uk](http://www.ukvenueshow.co.uk)