

## New Trends in Planning Meetings

GLOBALISATION AND economic growth are leading to a surge in the meetings business worldwide. The International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) reports explosive growth in both the number of meetings as well as the market share of the Pacific Asia region in comparison to other global regions.

Technological developments like video-conferencing and virtual trade fairs are expected to have no more than a negligible impact on the meetings and conventions business, estimated by the Connected International Meeting Professionals Association (CIMPA) at US\$96 billion a year. In the words of one industry researcher, "Technology will help you make contact but only eye contact and a handshake will help you build trust."

As the meetings business grows, so too does the level of competition among destinations and suppliers. Meeting planners are becoming very important people in any corporation or association. The planners are becoming very precise about what they want, especially because they get the blame in case things go wrong.

Meeting planners are referred to as people who try to "create ideal societies" for a few days. Their job is to organise events that go off flawlessly, increase the "happiness quotient" of the participants and ensure that everyone leaves energised and rejuvenated. Hence, every aspect of the meeting has to go off flawlessly.

These days, three major components of change are occurring in the industry: the impact of technology, organisational details of the meetings themselves, and related to that, the search for quality speakers.

### Technology

Because almost everyone has a Web site, it is becoming easier to find and conduct business. On the supply side, it

is easier for hotels, convention centres, destinations and national tourism organisations to make contact with meeting planners, most of whose names are in industry marketing databases.

On the demand side, meeting planners are using the Internet to find locations, venues and speakers, as well as to compare rates. Many planners are listing the specifications of their meetings requirements on their Web sites. This prevents a deluge of requests for further information on how to get their business.

Hotel chains and convention centres are also more precisely defining their databases to help planners search for information. Searches can be carried out by specifying a vast range of criteria, including the number of participants, the kind of facilities required, duration and proposed dates of event, and location, to name but a few.

Virtual reality tours of the sites and facilities are also now possible, allowing planners to get online panoramic 180-degree tours of the entire area, both inside and out. Requests for proposals have shifted online, as have registration procedures. Use of e-mail to dispatch meetings-related information is now matter of course. Online auctions have also arrived. They allow venues with available space, especially in low seasons, to try and sell it to the highest bidder.

As many buyers and sellers scramble to set up Web sites, meeting planners with some expertise in technology are warning them not to become victims of charlatan designers who know nothing about the meetings business, promise the world and then fail to deliver.

One often-heard warning is about designers who create *Mona Lisa Web sites* which make no money because they cannot be found on the Internet search engines. One technology expert advised meeting planners



## TRENDS IN GLOBAL MEETINGS

The International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) annually researches its members' views and opinions on trends in the global meetings and convention business. Here are some findings from the 1999 results:

### VENUES

Meetings organisers consider all types of venues but most favour a convention centre with in-house hotel facilities. Convention centres ran a close second. Universities were considered by 30 percent of organisers in 1999 but only used by 19 percent. Similarly, hotels were considered by 29 percent and used by 20 percent.

### SEASONALITY

June and September remained the most popular months for international meetings. The projected figures for June 2000 and 2001 are very high but the situation could change during the course of the year as more details of other congresses are added to the ICCA database.

### LENGTH OF MEETINGS

The average length of meetings in 1999 was 4.5 days compared with an average of 4.8 days in 1993. The trend towards shorter meetings is even more marked in North America where the average was 4.3 days. However, Latin America boasted the longest meetings, with an average of 5.2 days in 1999. In general, meetings last between three and five days.

### SUBJECT MATTER

Medical sciences, science, industry and technology remained the big four in terms of subject matter. Education and agriculture were still important. Interestingly, social sciences and economics changed places with commerce.

### FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS — INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS

The average registration fee per delegate per day in 1999 was US\$102 compared with an average US\$91 in the period 1994-1999.

The average registration fee per delegate per international meeting in 1999 was US\$458 compared with an average US\$ 414 in the period 1994-1999.

The average income from registration fees per international meeting in 1999 was US\$316,159 compared with an average US\$276,218 in the period 1994-1999. The total income from registration fees in 1999 was US\$830 million.

to ask this question of Web designers: "How do you plan on working my keywords (used in searches) into the design of this site?" He then outlined a whole range of tips on what can be done, and focused specifically on what kind of answers to watch out for.

Much the same concern about the downside of Internet technology is also being expressed about audio-visual technology used in the meetings themselves.

Planners are warning that the industry is becoming too "technology-happy" and falling over itself in wanting to try out untested gadgets that seldom work the way the salesmen say they will. Planners are increasingly wanting to ensure that everything is previewed and tested well beforehand. "Don't forget there is a big difference between tools and toys," said one.

Some note that rental of technology is exceedingly expensive with suppliers often tacking on various labour charges and other plus-plus costs that can completely skew a budget. One problem known to crop up is union regulations. Many meetings venues have working hours regulated by unions and if the technology fails to perform at a time outside the working hours, getting help can be both expensive and problematic. This can include lunch hours.

### Speakers

High-quality speakers are charging anything from US\$5,000 to US\$100,000 per appearance with first-class air fare, accommodation and all expenses covered. The amount is estimated to be increasing by about 15 to 20 percent a year.



Speakers come in all shapes and sizes. Some are content heavy, that is, they specialise in their subject area but are not necessarily good speakers. Others are very good public speakers and trained to enlighten, educate and entertain an audience. Depending on the meeting, the latter are more in demand.

As a rule, the most popular speakers are humourists, life-enrichment and change-management specialists, with a growing focus on spirituality. In an age of rapid and constant change, confusion and insecurity, people appear to be looking for motivation and feel-good tendencies.

There is also a demand for more high-end knowledge and entertainment. Audiences want speakers who can give information that they can take back to their work place. Stress and time management is a favourite topic, including balancing family and work-place time, especially for the growing league of baby-boomers. Speakers are becoming increasingly ready to state more controversial opinions and take stands on issues.

Meeting planners like to have a good blend of industry and professional speakers in their line-up. Many are not averse to bringing in public-speaking trainers to help those who may be strong in content and knowledge but not necessarily in presentation and style. "There is a huge difference between reading their paper and actually having them in front of a large audience and getting that human connectivity going," said one meeting planner.

Technology is also making it possible for both speakers and speakers' bureaux to set up their own Web sites. Many meeting planners are going direct to speakers by using word-of-mouth referrals. This helps them save costs, as all speakers pay commissions to the speakers' bureaux, which they don't need to do if approached directly.

However, speakers do retain links with the bureaux. Speakers' bureaux need to have a broad portfolio of faces and talents in their line-up which often includes sports stars, business leaders, leading media personalities, best-selling authors, Hollywood stars, Everest adventurers and even prime ministers, vice-presidents and presidents. This helps bureaux shore up their main selling proposition, which is the ability to find a speaker who will fit in well with the conference programme and deliver precisely what the organisers want.

Bureaux are also good at analysing audience demographics and advising on whether it might be better to feature a speaker, for example, of a particular gender or ethnic background. This can boost the diversity of

programme content. One other major advantage of using a bureau is the ability to quickly find a replacement speaker in case the primary one cannot make it. Bureaux take the risk out of event planning by being available 24 hours a day if an emergency occurs.

Speakers themselves are developing their areas of specialisation. At the recent annual conference of CIMPA in Bangkok, a gallery of speakers strutted their stuff to attract the attention of the buyers.

One humourist described himself as being a specialist in the graveyard-shift – the after-lunch slot when most audiences tend to fall asleep and need someone to wake them up. He also uses a variety of gimmicks, toys and audience participation techniques.

Another motivational speaker from South Africa claimed to draw upon the wisdom of a man he called the last of the great African trackers to help listeners "get back to the path they may have momentarily moved away from" and live a more meaningful life. There is also big demand for speakers specialising in conflict resolution.

One speaker at the CIMPA event said he had established his market niche as being knowledge retention, based on the fact most people who attend conferences and meetings retain barely a small fraction of what they hear or learn. Helping audiences retain more of this allows meeting planners to deliver a better return on their investment in the programmes and functions. Indeed, because there are serious questions arising about how much is actually retained, many planners favour shorter meetings.

#### HOW TO SAVE COSTS WHEN FINDING SPEAKERS

1. Book a speaker who lives in the city of your meeting.
2. Take advantage of speakers who will be in your area for another meeting. This can save as much as 50 percent of your total expense bill.
3. Where possible, book the travel for the speaker yourself.

Source: [www.Getspeaker.com](http://www.Getspeaker.com)

In search of unique and experiential components to programmes, especially team-building activities, meeting planners are bringing in mountain climbers, athletes and flying stunt men.



At one event, a building-block approach was used in which a number of different professionals including a motor-racing driver, a top chef, a management expert and a political analyst were brought together and asked how they each improve performance in their respective organisations. That allowed bits of knowledge to be taken in tandem rather than forcing the opinions of only one speaker upon an audience.

### Organisation

There is an increasing tendency to make participants feel valued by making them a part of the programme and not just passive participants. Ways are being sought to involve them, without making it compulsory, such as through group discussions, story-telling exercises and other participatory activities. Planners analysing the psychology of participants find that the more people feel involved, the better they feel generally as having contributed to the success of the meeting. They want to feel in charge of their time and their decisions.

Meeting planners are also becoming more meticulous about researching the structure of the meeting to ensure that its overall objectives and needs are met. For example, much more analysis is going into studying the grand or subtle messages and the emotions that the hosts want to get out to their audience. More research is also going into the participants, in terms of age, gender mix and ethnic background.

One California-based company, which is both a planner and supplier, organises what it calls "fun experiential programmes" in a variety of applications and mediums, such as networking adventures, interactive tours, treasure hunts and learning-based corporate retreats. The keyword is fun — whatever the message, it is presented and delivered in a fun way, "like Sesame Street for adults," says the owner.

No doubt, security is becoming a big issue, especially in view of growing political instability and protests against international financial and economic institutions. Host destinations and venues can be expected to be asked about security arrangements, and subjected to all kinds of tests and scrutiny to ensure foolproof systems. In addition, convention centres are being asked about their facilities for people with disabilities.

Meeting planners are also drawing upon the services of convention and visitors bureaux (CVBs), which they find valuable because they are free, professional and

impartial. However, it is also true that the more information the planners provide about the meetings, the more responsive they tend to find the CVBs. They also help make appointments for the planners and cut through local bureaucracies. CVBs in Pacific Asia countries are winning particularly good reviews for responding to inquiries and facilitating organisational details.

In choosing venues, there is a major focus on the service delivery aspect rather than the bricks-and-mortar. While familiarisation trips are appreciated, meeting planners know they get a sanitised version of service. One planner said that she often tests the quality of service at a venue by leaving things around and seeing how long it takes to get them returned.

While committee members handling site selection in the past preferred to make inspection trips personally, these tasks are now being left more to meeting planners, especially in view of the bribery allegations which have recently clouded various international sports organisations. However, committee members do retain charge of the final decision. Planners also say that committee members used to get involved in negotiating contracts but found themselves being overcharged. They now tend to let the planners take over.

In the meetings themselves, there is growing use of laptops for note taking, which has to be accommodated for in the seating arrangements.

One critical area is transportation, especially if the convention centres are located away from city centres. Planners narrate stories of bus drivers not knowing where to go, or strikes by unions that disrupt schedules. Ensuring that transportation works punctually and efficiently is critical to the success of a meeting.

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