

## **Climate change pushes green issues up MICE agenda**

### **- IMEX poll shows increased support for eco-tax**

News headlines that increasingly focus on dramatic weather conditions – heatwaves, droughts, hurricanes, floods etc. – and the effect these experiences are having on wildlife and nature, appear to be changing the attitudes of event organisers towards the environment. The third annual IMEX ‘focus group’ survey on this topic suggests that apparent climate change is pushing green issues higher up the agenda of MICE decision-makers. Buyers in 10 countries in Europe and Scandinavia were consulted, plus a smaller sample in selected ‘emerging markets’ (for comparative purposes). The job titles of those who responded characteristically included general managers, managing directors, agency owners, marketing communications managers, PCOs, international congress managers, and corporate travel advisers.

#### **majorities**

Significant majorities now display evidence of eco-awareness, with 75% reporting that they, or colleagues, ‘have taken environmental considerations into account’ when planning a meeting or incentive programme. A total of 66% believes that ‘they, or colleagues, probably would ‘deliberately avoid destinations/venues known to have a poor environmental record’.

Survey participants were asked to rank in order those green practices that they have applied to their events, and replied as follows:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Recycled conference material
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Selected a hotel known for its environmental programme
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Viewed wilderness or animal conservation areas
- 4<sup>th</sup> Encouraged delegates to travel by public transport at the host destination
- 5<sup>th</sup> Involved an inspirational speaker on the environment
- 6<sup>th</sup> Undertaken fund-raising or other support for green causes
- 7<sup>th</sup> Chosen an airline/cruise company/car rental firm for its green credentials

- 8<sup>th</sup> Paid for carbon emission offsets to neutralise the greenhouse gas effect of delegate travel

The top three differ only slightly from the previous two polls (hotel selection rising above viewing nature), but in fourth place is an option newly included in the listing (encouraging use of public transport). Another new option (paying for carbon emission offsets) is currently in 8<sup>th</sup> place, but may well rise rapidly in future given the number of such sponsorship programmes now available.

### **eco-tax**

Buyers are still broadly equivocal as to whether an eco-tax is desirable, with 54% (compared to 46% in 2005) in favour of discussing the idea. Typical comments in support include: 'yes, but the amount should be small and hardly noticeable' ... 'yes, if used strictly for environmental activities' ... 'yes, because it will make participants more aware'. Typical comments against, include: 'no, because such funding should be paid by taxes in the host country'; 'no, because delegates are not bothered about what the world will be like in 50 years' time'; 'no, because the money may not be spent on green projects, and instead be lost through corruption'. Association leaders broadly support the concept, but are concerned that such a tax would make their programme pricing less competitive.

### **'bigger issue'**

A higher proportion than in 2005 (80% compared to 76%) agree that 'the environment will become a bigger issue in the coming years'. This they explain characteristically as a consequence of 'television reports, almost daily, that warn of unstoppable changes to the climate'; and as an 'outcome of increasingly frequent national disasters'. In contrast, doubters argue that climatic change is due to 'natural cycles, not pollution', and that 'this is simply a current fad in which interest will gradually level off'.

In responding to the question, should the MICE industry as a whole 'take the environment more seriously into account', the clear majority (67%) said yes, mentioning the likely pressure that will otherwise arise from media. On the other hand, there were those who drew attention to the worse record of other industrial

sectors (notably that of manufacturing in certain emerging economies), and almost all felt that the lead and example-setting should ideally come from governments.

### **tips for politicians**

Tips offered by the meetings and incentive travel buyers for politicians to consider include: 'give more tax relief to eco-friendly organisations'; 'spend more central funds (e.g. from flight taxation) on saving nature'; and 'do more to explain the seriousness of the issues that are arising'.

None of the above has had much influence on the perceived potential of electronic communications/video-conferences to become a viable alternative to face-to-face events. Fewer than 15% feel that this is likely to happen, citing factors such as the importance of inter-personal chemistry, trust, and relationship-building. Generally it is suggested that such 'virtual contact' has now already peaked.

Slightly more buyers now acknowledge that MICE participants will in future 'show their concern if environmental issues are not taken into account when planning their events'; this figure has risen to 62% from 58% in 2005. Some feel that it is up to event organisers to take the lead in responding to environmental change, whilst agencies are almost unanimous in saying that there are limits to the amount of influence or pressure that they could try to apply to their clients in respect of green thinking.

### **'top 10 countries'**

Voting for the top 10 countries that they identify currently as displaying most environmental leadership, the IMEX survey respondents reported (in alphabetical order): Canada, Costa Rica, Germany, Greece, Ireland, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Sweden, and the UK.

Asked similarly to identify green-minded suppliers resulted in considerable praise for Ritz Carlton and Shangri La amongst hotel groups; for Cathay Pacific and Lufthansa amongst airlines; and for P&O and Silver Sea Cruises amongst shipping companies.

## **exhibitors**

Buyers were invited also to rank in order of importance those green responses that they would most like to see from MICE suppliers attending exhibitions. In sequence these actions were identified as:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Print brochures on recycled paper
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Plan to create little waste on the stand
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Focus particularly on green opportunities at the destination
- 4<sup>th</sup> Take action to support environmental objectives in a positive way  
(e.g. sponsorship of carbon emission offsets)
- 5<sup>th</sup> Display strong commitment to electronic communication
- 6<sup>th</sup> Offer support for wider green initiatives being undertaken by industry and environmental organisations

Among comments endorsing such action were 'this is the way to ensure that our industry doesn't face decline in the future'; and 'there is an emerging need for us all to lobby against destinations and suppliers that act negatively towards the environment'. In contrast was the opinion, 'the industry will not be ready to take serious action for at least another three to five years'.

## **emerging countries**

Finally, the small focus group from the emerging countries (Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Mexico, China) revealed latent, but less well articulated or strongly held, opinions on environmental issues. A tendency is displayed to expect governments rather than the MICE industry to take the lead, and for doubts to exist as to whether green considerations would grow in importance in the immediate future. That said, there is already some commitment to re-cycling, viewing nature sites, and selecting hotels known to operate environmental programmes. However, very little support was offered for the idea of an eco-tax with sources of funding instead viewed as the sole responsibility of governments, rather than individual delegates.

## **greener RFPs**

It may be concluded that, generally speaking, the MICE sector has taken another step forward over the last 12 months towards embracing the environment in its planning. Perhaps, therefore, the most pertinent comment was that of one particular agency which noted that major corporate clients 'increasingly are now looking for

evidence of green values in the contractual RFP documents that they issue, and in the implementation of the events that we organise on their behalf. Whilst this may still be only an example of 'early adopter' practice, it nevertheless represents a significant raising of the stakes for the whole industry.

Ends.