

Integrating technology within meetings

* * *

The second annual IMEX focus group survey of buyers' attitudes in the MICE sector towards the use of technology (conducted in November 2008), incorporates the views of over 60 specialists from seven countries across Europe, plus the USA. The seniority of respondents is reflected in their job titles, which include: DMC; president; travel purchasing manager; congress manager; managing director; meetings planner; and international convention manager. Approximately 80% of participants are corporates or agencies, the balance representing associations. This piece of research is a companion study to the IMEX analysis, Meetings Marketing on the Internet that concentrates on the views of suppliers.

* * *

Findings suggest that technology is now being integrated more extensively within the planning and staging of meetings, training courses, workshops etc. Figures for 2008/9 indicate increased use of electronics within most of a checklist of 11 suggested technology options, as follows:

	2007/8	2008/9
* Searching the web for suitable venues/destinations	88%	90%
* Online registration	74%	74%
* Distributing papers and agendas to participants and others	50%	58%
* Checking websites for venue availability	48%	54%
* Using high-tech presentations to improve communication with delegates	44%	46%
* Booking meetings venues online, by email, or via RFP	41%	47%
* Video-conferencing involving speakers or VIPs from afar	27%	35%
* Booking meetings venues using online booking engines	17%	24%
* Electronic voting within sessions	12%	25%
* Virtual forums and delegate chat rooms	11%	12%
* Distributing speeches by webcam to non-attendees	9%	18%

Against the background of global economic concerns, and therefore likely budget scrutiny, it is noticeable that the largest proportional increases involved widening event outreach and engagement to non-participants, namely through video-conferencing, circulating papers, and distributing speeches to non-attendees. There is also growth in online booking.

more electronic participation

With meetings costs now more of an issue than 12 months ago, it is not surprising that there has been a significant increase (to 51% from 35%) in the number acknowledging that some face-to-face events could be substituted by virtual get-togethers. That said, the following comments hint that such substitution is not popular or considered particularly effective: *'eye-to-eye is the only viable forum for essential networking'*; *'no .. because vital personal relationships are not possible using electronics'*; *'only partially ... for internal company meetings where people probably already know each other'*; *'ok ... you save money, but the cost may be to fail to deliver the message, the scope and the whole purpose of the event'*. In contrast there are those who argue that *'electronic conferences aren't ideal, but can be done'*.

'greener trend'

Asked if electronic meetings would become more popular as a consequence of concerns about travel-related greenhouse gas emissions, the trend is manifestly greener. Compared to a percentage of 22% supporting this argument 12 months ago, the current proportion is 48%, with a typical comment *'it is inevitable that we now must think this way'*. On the other hand strong opinions for maintaining a high level of face-to-face meetings include, *'meeting personally is too important to cut out but certainly we now select destinations reachable by train'*; *'carbon reductions can't override the case to stage important executive get-togethers'*; and *'if people still want to travel they will – despite the environmental cost'*.

technology expected

A majority of buyers (62%) now confirms that delegates expect advance technology to be part of staging their events. This is most true, they say, for younger 'technology-savvy' personnel, and for any conference that seeks to seem 'cutting-edge'. There were warnings, however, that power-point presentations are a poor substitute for a good speaker, and that round-table discussions are far more productive than webcam transmission.

tips

Finally, research participants offer technology tips both for colleague buyers, and for the venues that they use. Five characteristic suggestions for professional planners include:

- *'always be open and ready to try the latest ideas'*
- *'make sure the venue provides dedicated bandwidth for your event'*
- *'leave enough time to test the appliances ... and always have a technician on hand'*
- *'the electronic highway has already robbed us of human contact ... so don't let it take over every aspect of a meeting'*
- *'replace roadshows with a live video of the speaker transmitted'*

around the country'

And five hints for hotels typically include:

- *'forget overhead projectors as representing the past – now offer pc-based presentation systems'*
- *'make sure your website has downloadable key facts, is easy to access, and avoids postage-stamp-sized pictures'*
- *'offer technology at reasonable rates'*
- *'don't score own goals – such as encouraging applications for registration on-line but then requires a booking by fax'*
- *'double-check the equipment you are offering prior to the event'*

To sum up: there is no doubt that meetings planners are embracing electronic opportunities and talk with increasing enthusiasm, for example, about their wider use of voting equipment, beamer presentation techniques, on-line registration and booking, and more. Equally, a strong lobby identifies with the irreplaceable human dimension to a MICE event, in a range from building trust to friendships, to making contacts and learning from others.

* * *

IMEX would like to thank those MICE professionals who responded so thoroughly to this research.