

Meetings ROI 'strongly influenced' by multi-cultural planning

Second Annual Report on Multi-Cultural Strategies amongst MICE planners in Europe Issues, lessons, predictions and trends identified in comparative polls

Evidence that organisers of global events now acknowledge that meetings return on investment (ROI) can be 'strongly influenced' by sensitive or insensitive planning for multi-cultural differences is offered in a new IMEX poll.

The exhibition's second annual report on Multi-Cultural Strategies involved over 100 respondents representing nine countries in Europe. The majority of replies were from decision-makers at the level of, for example, project director, manager-international communications, managing director, director, and congress/event manager, with the characteristic types of event ranging from association congresses to incentives to large-scale corporate get-togethers. The number of nationalities typically involved in meetings averages over 15, with illustrative case-studies including totals of 25 (e.g. China, Hungary, Japan, Slovenia, USA); 30+ (e.g. EU countries, New Zealand, Thailand); and 35+ (e.g. Australia, Mexico, Middle East). The range of sizes of event is from 10 to 1000, with the average involving between 100 and 200 delegates. (The research was undertaken [as in 2005] in the months of November and December).

ranked values

The meetings industry specialists were again asked (**Table 1**) to rank those values in multi-culturalism that they felt had the biggest influence on their work. (The 2005 position is given in brackets)

Table 1:

- 1st *Individualism v Collectivism in a Society (1st)*
- 2nd *Rules v Relationships in an organisation (2nd)*
- 3rd *Subdued v Expressed feelings/emotions in a person (7th)*
- 4th *Orientation in society which is focused towards the past and present v the future (4th)*
- 5th *Internal v External sense of control in an individual (5th)*
- 6th *Corporate status which is designated v earned (3rd)*
- 7th *Decision-making in an organisation that is hierarchical v egalitarian (6th)*

Interestingly, four of the five top concerns remain in the same positions. The apparent rapid rise in relevance of the question of feelings/emotions may reflect a greater understanding of this complex trait. In contrast, the lower rating of the question of status may suggest it has become an 'obvious' and readily recognisable issue for which it is rather more straightforward to make allowances.

In a second comparative analysis with 2005 (**Table 2**) the event planners sampled were again asked to place in order of importance the issues of individual behaviour that they felt affected their work. (Note: in the 2006 survey to the topic of punctuality was added the words 'and time-management', whilst a new [12th] optional answer was introduced, namely 'contrasting attitudes to humour'). Positions for 2005 are bracketed.

Table 2:

- 1st *varying national styles of leadership (2nd)*
- 2nd *differing management language (8th)*
- 3rd *contrasting attitudes towards humour (-)*
- 4th *contrasting attitudes towards punctuality and time-management (11th)*
- 5th *alternative approaches to negotiation and compromise (1st)*
- 6th *differing understandings on contracts and business agreements (3rd)*
- 7th *varying approaches to informality, politeness and etiquette (4th)*
- 8th *varying national attitudes to younger and older people (9th)*
- 9th *alternative styles of motivation (5th)*
- 10th *contrasting attitudes to gender (10th)*
- 11th *contrasting interpretation of acceptable meetings behaviour (6th)*
- 12th *alternative religious backgrounds (7th)*

Points of interest are that contrasting leadership styles again prove most challenging to event organisers (and see also the rise in the relevance of differing management language). Possibly also noteworthy are the apparent importance of the words 'time-management' in increasing the importance of this issue, and the immediate resonance of the new option 'contrasting attitudes to humour'. It is possible that religious requirements are now more adequately understood and allowed for.

Such analysis was explored further in open-ended answers and a selection of verbatim comments follows. Planners highlighted ‘the importance of giving personal attention to each and every delegate as if they were all special’, and acknowledged ‘how badly misplaced can be the use of humour and irony’. ‘An overly straightforward and open an approach by the organiser can offend some nationalities’, because the ‘hard part is to recognise who likes to control as opposed to those who like to be controlled’. Offered advice includes ensuring ‘open clear communication at all times’ ... ‘if in doubt, be conservative’ ... and ‘be certain to behave in each country as do the locals’.

future

Two broadly balancing sets of responses can be identified to the question ‘will multi-culturalism become an even bigger dilemma and concern in the future?’ On the one hand are those who argue ‘no, because as the world gets smaller, so do our national differences’; on the other there are those who suggest, ‘yes, because politicians keep on polarizing the differences and help to make non-existent issues more of a problem’.

nationalities

Finally, this report introduces a topic that seeks to demonstrate how focused planners now can be in appraising the potential behaviour of individual delegates. They were asked to vote for those nationalities which they felt exhibited the following meetings traits (**Table 3**).

Table 3:

	First	Second
<i>Most results-oriented</i>	<i>British</i>	<i>German</i>
<i>Most relationship-oriented</i>	<i>Italians</i>	<i>Spanish</i>
<i>Most harmony-oriented</i>	<i>British</i>	<i>Belgian</i>
<i>Most likely to talk most</i>	<i>American</i>	<i>Italian</i>
<i>Most likely to talk least</i>	<i>African</i>	<i>Austrian</i>
<i>Most willing to compromise</i>	<i>Swiss</i>	<i>German</i>
<i>Most dialogue-oriented</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>Dutch</i>
<i>Most likely to interrupt</i>	<i>Caribbean</i>	<i>Dutch</i>
<i>Most respectful of the chairperson</i>	<i>German</i>	<i>Portuguese</i>
<i>Most agenda-focused</i>	<i>Japanese</i>	<i>French</i>



In conclusion it should be stressed that this last question, and indeed the whole IMEX survey, is indicative only of a set of relative opinions and should not necessarily be taken to have meaning in any quantitative sense, although it does hint at a growing awareness of the potential variables associated with multi-culturalism. Asked 'whether meetings ROI could be strongly influenced by such an awareness' the overwhelming majority of replies said yes, and took the characteristic line: - 'positively, if individual differences are respected and accepted, but negatively, if you ignore them and then offend the participants.'

- Ends.