

Meetings become greener as planners acquire environmental expertise

IMEX poll shows conference organisers are becoming more receptive to eco-strategies

Event planners are taking global concerns about climate change more seriously by applying environmental strategies more vigorously to their meetings and incentive travel programmes. This conclusion emerges from the fourth annual 'focus group' survey on the greening of business tourism co-ordinated by the Frankfurt-based IMEX exhibition. Buyers representing 12 countries across Europe, as well as Brazil, Egypt and Russia, participated in the poll. A cross-section of job titles of those responding included: PCO; general manager; business development director; agency proprietor; conference manager; travel purchasing manager; managing director; congress organiser; secretary-general; MICE manager; and executive VP.

Significantly, the proportion of buyers saying that they or colleagues 'would deliberately avoid destinations/venues known to have a poor environmental record' has increased to nearly three-quarters (73%), compared to a figure of 66% in 2006. In one case the planner argued that sentiments have hardened 'to the point of making some destinations untenable'. Those acknowledging that they 'have taken environmental considerations into account' in their work has remained constant, also at around 75%. As an example, one buyer reported 'improved re-cycling of waste ... avoiding unnecessary use of resources ... preferring suppliers whose products use recycled materials ... opting for low-energy lighting on exhibition stands'; and so on. Another 'measures, reports and drives down our carbon emissions', and one agency has 'reduced or eliminated promotional giveaways unless they are sustainable (recycled; biodegradable; recyclable; or edible)'.

To illustrate the degree to which organisers are now environmentally 'savvy', a number of industry brands were identified as achieving sufficiently strong green credentials to have been 'deliberately selected' for this specific reason. Examples include: hotel groups such as Crowne Plaza, Grecootel, Hilton, Intercontinental and Marriott; exhibition centres such as EICC Edinburgh; airlines such as Finnair, KLM

and The Star Alliance; DMCs such as Green Route (Zambia); destinations such as Barcelona and Innsbruck; and rail operators such as TGV railway, France. In more general terms some buyers say they search specifically for 'hotels with the EU flower label or the ISO label'.

Asked to specify and rank in order those green practices that they have applied to their events, the MICE planners replied as follows. *Note: In 2006 this question offered a lower number of reply options and the results are shown in brackets.*

- Selected a location close to attendees
- Recycled conference material (1st)
- Encouraged delegates to ride-share and/or travel by public transport at the host destination (4th)
- Viewing wilderness or animal conservation areas (3rd)
- Selected an hotel for its environmental programmes (2nd)
- Involved an inspirational speaker on the environment (5th)
- Undertaken fundraising for a green cause (6th)
- Measured the environmental footprint, or impact, of the meeting
- Provide a carbon offset programme to neutralise delegate travel emissions (8th)
- Selected a transportation provider for its green credentials (7th)
- Assessed the ability of suppliers to measure environmental and social impacts/effects

In more general terms planners continue to emphasise the importance of environmental considerations to the industry. Respondents were unanimous in arguing that this issue will matter more in the coming years (up from 80% in 2006), with a larger proportion also acknowledging that MICE sector buyers will have to take the environment 'more seriously into account' (77% compared to 67%). Many acknowledge that pressures for such action will mount both from wider public opinion in society, as well as specifically from shareholders concerned about company image. Nevertheless, doubts still exist as to whether there is a case to introduce an eco-tax on conferences (whether on travel, venue hire, registration fees etc.) with a slight fall in support for the idea to 49%, from 54% last year. Some offered an alternative name for this: a 'Sustainability Tax'. A helpful view is that 'increasing costs for

clients and delegates does not solve the problem, rather there is a need to educate them (through lectures, training days, etc.) to make more environmentally-friendly choices.’ Another warns that some clients are ‘not interested in such a tax and if pressed would expect the business travel industry to pay on their behalf’. A further comment is that ‘any payment (whether as an eco-tax, or carbon offset) on its own does not add up to a carbon-neutral event and is greenwashing’. One view is that ‘people will only contribute financially if stigmatised publicly’. An extra point is that ‘until people realise the seriousness of the situation they will not change their behaviour and will react badly to a tax and will not act more responsibly’.

Asked to prioritise future initiatives that they might well introduce to decrease the environmental impact of their events, planners ranked suggestions in the following order:

- Pick a location in or around a city with good transportation options
- Provide convenient and timely transportation options that are low impact and offset
- Pick a city that’s close to the majority of attendees
- Suggest partnering and/or provide co-ordination (a message board) so that attendees can share rides
- Provide detailed instructions for the selection and use of these transportation alternatives
- Calculate and offset emissions
- Calculate the full ecological footprint of the meeting

Event organisers also identified those environmental resources that would be most likely to help their planning in future. Rated most highly was a suggested database of suppliers of products and services for greener meetings, followed by information on the costs and benefits of green meetings. Of practical help, too, would be a checklist of eco- ‘do’s’ and ‘don’t’s’, whilst one buyer called for industry media to publish a monthly report showcasing new green initiatives. That such support material is now becoming essential is signposted by a finding that only 20% of buyers have yet edited their bid manual/RFP to incorporate environmental practices. One procurement manager who does now insist on highlighting the contract-winning relevance of green values commented, ‘this is important because we must tackle

fundamental misconceptions, for example, that environmental options cost more whereas often they cost less.’ Another said, ‘we solicit voluntary disclosure of eco-practices by venues but don’t yet demand contractual compliance’. One highlighted the ‘importance of applying a common terminology – an agreed green meetings standards language’.

Respondents were again asked to rank in order of importance those green initiatives that they felt suppliers attending exhibitions ought to introduce. (*Note: the 2006 placings are in italics*):

- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| * Print brochures on recycled paper | (1 st) |
| * Display strong commitment to electronic communication | (5 th) |
| * Plan to create little waste on the stand | (2 nd) |
| * Take firm action to support environmental initiatives (e.g. offset carbon emissions) | (4 th) |
| * Focus particularly on green opportunities at the destination | (3 rd) |
| * Offer support for wider green initiatives being undertaken by industry and environmental organisations | (6 th) |

This report now selects a verbatim list of characteristic comments from the research participants. The aim is to help readers infer the strength of individual feelings on green issues, whether for or against.

- *‘an eco tax ought to be imposed but it is still too early – people are not yet ready’*
- *‘the realities of changing patterns of weather are leading us all to be more environmentally aware’*
- *‘because some of our clients are very keen on this policy, we have now adopted ‘green options’ for all our proposals (location/venue/supplier)’*
- *‘virtually every country has suffered somewhat already from global warming and I am sure that the effects will get worse’*
- *‘because the environment is now a ‘hot’ issue and scientific evidence is mounting, it will be easier to argue the green case’*

- *'too many companies look only towards cost reduction and are unlikely to be willing to help the environmental issue'*
- *'I doubt that clients would support an eco-tax on meetings because their companies probably already support other green programmes'*
- *'the environment has already suffered enough from the ignorance and greed that arises from the competitive globalisation of business'*
- *'I encourage the use of local suppliers at destinations specifically to reduce the international transportation of materials'*
- *'education is the only way to get the green message across so all meetings planners should now be trained in green issues, as also should hoteliers and MICE agencies'*
- *'we have just started as a new events agency and intend to make green issues our USP'*
- *'is this only a passing fad or will it lead genuinely to a serious containment of greenhouse gases?'*
- *'the threat of 'impending disasters' has contributed to a sense of anxiety which is giving the green issue in this industry a much stronger emphasis'*
- *'on green issues it is time for this industry to walk the talk'*
- *'during all our event registration periods we offer the option of offsetting CO2 emissions and this is then acknowledged on the badge of the delegate'*
- *'serious response will become inevitable as climate change begins to create more visible economic upheaval and as more future jobs and economic opportunities are tied to environmental solutions'*
- *'this industry is in the bulls-eye of risk from climate change – we had better clean up our operations now'*
- *'it is still the objectives of the client that drive the choice of destination and programme although we can influence this to some degree. We are aware of hotel chains and individual properties' activity in environmental management and highlight these in proposals to clients. We are proactive with the information, but in the end it is the clients' decision'*
- *'from an agency perspective we have received an increased number of RFPs and RFIs from buyers that request information on environmental practices. We include such information in proposals and any responses to bids'*
- *'we eliminated giving a full set of paper handouts to all attendees at our recent event and instead provided them with a web link so they could print*

out only the handouts they need. Recycling opportunities were offered to attendees, when available. Requesting pitchers of water instead of bottled water for attendees. Ordering promotional materials made from recycled or organic content when available. Utilising a food donation program when available to donate extra food. Serving 'unboxed' lunches (buffet-style) to eliminate the wasteful packaging of boxed lunches. Using reusable items instead of disposable when possible (silverware, napkins, glasses, etc.). Providing Green Hotel Initiative cards to attendees to enable them to request a more environmentally-friendly hotel stay. Collecting and reusing name badges. Eliminating the envelope from our sponsor brochure mailing.'

The overall impression arising from this survey is that MICE specialists are now looking more eagerly for ways to apply environmental strategies. With an eye to the future these top buyers call for more case-studies of successful green programmes, suggest that environmental suppliers should be accredited, and propose that the industry should increasingly reward those destinations that are greenest by using them the most. This report concludes with a perceptive comment from the chairman of a leading business improvement agency. He writes: 'I am no eco-warrior, but I think our industry should apply self-determined concern and action today for fear otherwise that it becomes an issue of consumer backlash in the future.'

IMEX Green Research Partners:

