

September 2008: 'Meetings planners demonstrate 'green' leadership

- IMEX poll reveals growing MICE sector 'responsibility'

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Few doubts remain amongst organisers of conferences and incentives as to the importance of displaying environmental responsibility in the coming years. Whilst some acknowledge that global economic concerns will slow such progress, others argue that the MICE sector is manifestly identifiable as a cause of travel-related emissions, and that action consequently is essential and inevitable.

These views are among the central conclusions arising from the fifth annual IMEX 'focus group' survey on the greening of business tourism, and owe to responses from over 120 buyers in Europe (eight countries), plus others in Canada, the United States, Singapore, Argentina and Australia. Typically those responding are senior figures within the industry, with job titles including: CEO; director, event planning; corporate travel manager; corporate and events manager; president; professor; general manager; training co-ordinator; and meetings planner.

Around half work within agencies; the corporate buyer category features sectors as varied as engineering, oil and gas, banking, and pharmaceuticals; and approximately 1 in 10 manage associations. For comparison purposes replies from German buyers are separated from the wider international answers.

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Survey results indicate that buyers now are consistently 'environmentally savvy' for this issue to influence their decision-making, as **Tables 1 and 2** suggest.

Table 1: 'Buyers who would deliberately avoid destinations/venues known to have a poor environmental record'

	2008	2007	2006
International	79%	73%	66%
German	72%	N/A	n/a

Table 2: 'Buyers who acknowledge having taken environmental considerations into account in their work'

	2008	2007	2006
International	80%	75%	74%
German	73%	N/A	n/a

To illustrate the growing strength of opinion on these topics is this additional comment from a MICE specialist in Canada: *'We minimise travel by hiring local freelancers ... buy offsets for any unavoidable intercity travel (whether air, rail or road) ... replace paper with e-publications, and any essential printing is double-sided on certificated recycled paper'*. A further insight comes from a US expert: *'I present a 'green' philosophy statement to clients and advocate adoption at board level'*. Another has adopted *'a mindset that reduces consumption, re-uses, re-purposes, and recycles'*.

Respondents were asked to give examples of the ways in which 'you have begun to practice a greener approach to both your working and personal lifestyles'. A US buyer impressively reports: *'we use a water dispenser instead of plastic water bottles; recycle all paper materials in the office; organise a green programme wherein employees earn points for being green; sponsor and maintain a green garden at the city zoo; provide bulk refreshments during events rather than individually-wrapped items; and require hotels to provide recycle bins'*. On the other hand an Australian association planner admits, *'strangely, green issues are not yet on the radar with our members (other than in respect of recycling), so this is not a factor in determining which venue gets our work, nor in affecting evaluations by participants'*.

A more structured assessment of how MICE organisers have now introduced and ranked environmentally-aware strategies to their events is reflected below:

Table 3. 'Which of the following green practices have you applied to meetings you organise?'

	International		German	
	2008	2007	2006	2008
* <i>Recycled conference material</i>	1 st	2 nd	1 st	1 st
* <i>Selected an hotel for its environmental programmes</i>	2 nd	5 th	2 nd	5 th
* <i>Selected a location close to attendees</i>	3 rd	1 st	N/A	2 nd
* <i>Undertaken fundraising for a good cause</i>	4 th	7 th	6 th	7 th

* Encouraged delegates to ride-share and/or travel by public transport at the host destination	5 th	3 rd	4 th	2 nd
* Viewing wilderness or animal conservation areas	6 th	4 th	3 rd	4 th
* Selected a transportation provider for its green credentials	6 th	10 th	7 th	8 th
* Provided a carbon offset programme to neutralise delegate travel emissions	8 th	9 th	8 th	9 th
* Involved an inspirational speaker on the environment	9 th	6 th	5 th	6 th
* Measured the environmental footprint, or impact, of the meeting	10 th	8 th	N/A	10 th
* Assessed the ability of suppliers to measure environmental and social impacts/effects	11 th	11 th	N/A	11 th

Note: In 2006 this question offered a smaller number of reply options

green issues matter

There is little doubt that meetings planners will incorporate environmental approaches in an increasingly rigorous way. As with 2007, respondents were unanimous that green issues will matter more in the coming years. The proportion acknowledging that industry buyers will have to take the environment more seriously into account has risen again - to 84% (77% in 2007; 67% in 2006). Characteristic points of view include: *'our committed response has to be voluntary now ... or it will become compulsory in the future'*; *'we need to police this sector more seriously'*. Exemplifying a contrary opinion, however: *'my experience with meeting planners is that they tend to encourage the opposite – with conspicuous consumption the order of the day, and with little more than lip service applied to environmental issues'*.

'eco-tax'

Significant perhaps, is the widening support for the idea of applying an 'eco-tax' on the conference market – for example, to be levied on flights, hotel stays, the use of congress centres, and so on. The proportion accepting such a sustainability charge

in principle has risen sharply in 2008 to 68% (49% in 2007; 54% in 2006). The spectrum of differing views included: *'yes, but who collects, and who receives?'*; and *'no, we're already taxed out – it will just be a money grab'*. A more polarised argument proposes that *'over time it needn't be a small charge, but a steadily increasing fee for environmentally damaging practices and should aim for at least a 70% reduction in the carbon footprint of meetings'*.

Challenged to rank those actions that they felt planners should introduce in order to decrease the environmental impact of their events, the following priorities were identified:

Table 4: 'Actions to cut the environmental consequences of meetings'

	International		German
	2008	2007	2008
* <i>Pick a location in or around a city with good transportation options</i>	1 st	1 st	2 nd
* <i>Pick a city that is close to the majority of attendees</i>	2 nd	3 rd	1 st
* <i>Calculate the full ecological footprint of the meeting</i>	3 rd	7 th	6 th
* <i>Provide convenient and timely transportation options that are low-impact and offset</i>	4 th	2 nd	5 th
* <i>Provide detailed instructions for the selection and use of these transportation alternatives</i>	5 th	5 th	4 th
* <i>Calculate and offset emissions</i>	6 th	6 th	7 th
* <i>Suggest partnering and/or provide co-ordination (a message board) so that attendees can share rides</i>	7 th	4 th	3 rd

A further buyer recommendation is that industry organisers *'learn more about the methods and implications of combining and linking live with virtual meetings, and also national/international gatherings with smaller regional and local events. The trend towards such hybrid meetings seems pretty much inevitable, but the challenge is how to improve the outcomes and educational value of these events'*.

RFPs

Given the strengthening of the greener meetings lobby it is hardly a surprise that significantly more buyers now confirm that they have edited their bid manual/RFP to insist that suppliers demonstrate their environmental values. Whereas the proportion acknowledging this practice in 2007 totalled just 20%, only 12 months later the figure (international buyers) has reached 42% (though 32% for Germany). Characteristic views include: *'there is a need for venues to demonstrate that their sustainable practices are not just theory, but are also actioned'*, and *'it is essential to obtain a copy of the environmental policy of the suppliers'*. One buyer now uses a *'green meetings checklist that specifically asks about left-over food, the hotel's recycling programme, the laundry programme, if lights are left on when meeting rooms are not in use, and whether staff are trained in green initiatives'*. Probably pointing the way forward are remarks like, *'we now include a contractual clause insisting that green practices are implemented'*, and *'we make it clear to suppliers that our decision-making on where to go and which suppliers to use increasingly expects accreditation for environmental and corporate social responsibility initiatives and we now request evidence of five of their green/CSR initiatives that they wish us to take into account'*.

Finally, IMEX again sought buyers' advice identifying a ranking in importance of those green initiatives that it is felt suppliers attending exhibitions ought to introduce.

Table 5 provides a summary:

	International		German	
	2008	2007	2006	2008
* <i>Print brochures on recycled paper</i>	1 st	1 st	1 st	2 nd
* <i>Plan to create little waste on the stand</i>	1 st	3 rd	2 nd	1 st
* <i>Focus particularly on green opportunities at the destination</i>	3 rd	5 th	3 rd	4 th
* <i>Take firm action to support environmental initiatives (e.g. offset carbon emissions)</i>	4 th	4 th	4 th	6 th
* <i>Display strong commitment to</i>				

<i>electronic communication</i>	5 th	2 nd	5 th	3 rd
* <i>Offset support for wider green initiatives being undertaken by industry and environmental organisations</i>	6 th	6 th	6 th	5 th

A summing up of this research suggests that a growing proportion of MICE specialists (especially in North America) adopt the view that environmental considerations must now inform their planning: for instance, typical comments include: *'how can it not'*; and *'we must all do something for the climate, for the planet*. Another notes that *'fuel as a major cost factor now affects all aspects of the meetings industry and therefore helps drive the sustainability argument'*. Such standpoints prompt one commentator to call for *'a meetings mechanism to help us to connect both with planners who have already staged events in particular destinations and can share their green lessons, and also with others who now incorporate credible technology that reduces the carbon impact of their meetings.'*

Clearly there is a widening perception that more must be done in the cause of greener business tourism. As one buyer succinctly puts it, *'there is no finishing line to improving our effects on the environment ...'*

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