

## **Towards more multi-cultural meetings IMEX Pilot Study reveals trends and issues**

Many meetings that are already multi-cultural in composition, are becoming more so, and event organisers are recognising, and having to respond to, the inter-personal issues that arise, but not without problems. The implication is that more notice is being taken of the importance of cultures and customs in the planning of events.

This introduction to the accelerating trend towards increased multi-culturalism in association and business meetings summarises a pilot study (conducted in October 2004) amongst 300 organisers based in Europe and the United States. A more detailed analysis is planned for early in 2005.

A requirement was that respondents should be engaged in staging at least 25 meetings a year that involve delegates from at least one other country. In fact, 42% of the events attracted from between a quarter and half of their delegates from overseas, and nearly a third (32%) included from between a half to three-quarters of their participants from abroad. Approximately half (47%) of all events involved delegates from five or more countries. Whilst the average was between five and ten countries, in some cases the total rose to 50 or more.

As an example of the multi-cultural complexity that potentially/consequently can arise, one planner recorded attendees at one event from most European countries, the USA, Chile, Argentina, South Africa, Hong Kong, Singapore and Australia. In another instance, delegates were brought together from all over Europe as well as the Middle East, India, China and Canada.

### **issues**

Meetings organisers were invited to identify which inter-personal issues had arisen during the course of such multi-cultural events. They responded as follows:

- *delegates with considerably differing attitudes to time-keeping*

- and punctuality* 54%
- *delegates who have special preferences for certain foods and drinks because of religious or cultural reasons* 73%
- *delegates who do business deals in wholly different ways because of differing codes of conduct in their countries* 41%
- *delegates who contrast in their approach to decision-making (as being more or less collectivist, or more or less individualist)* 60%
- *delegates whose national background makes them more discreet and formal when meeting strangers, rather than immediately familiar and informal* 76%
- *delegates who reflect differing national attitudes towards fellow executives who are noticeably younger or older* 32%

### **other considerations**

Other considerations can be varying cultural approaches to team-building courses and sport; contrasting attitudes towards social programmes; and differing reactions to the presentation of gifts. Also in some countries academic qualifications are held in greater esteem than elsewhere. Specific examples of issues that have arisen range from uncertainties as to the etiquette of bowing in Japan through to what should or should not be expressed from the conference platform because of the need in some cultures to recognise the importance of leaving some things unsaid.

### **structure**

Among solutions recommended by organisers are the staging of management games and challenges that are intended to encourage tolerance and the quality of listening, through to the appointment of a culturally representative panel that works to raise potential difficulties in advance.

Ends.