

Scott Taylor, chief executive of Glasgow City Marketing Bureau, said politicians could gain greater leverage from investing in convention centres by looking at the return on objectives rather than just profit or return on investment. If they want, say, a cardio-thoracic or a chiropody conference, they should consider what the city would like, what has the greatest strategic fit and have a clear understanding of the economic clusters of their city and the economic aspirations of their universities. They should profile all the opportunities for investment, company spin-off, research, etc, hosting such a conference would bring when the best minds in that field are coming into their city. It goes much deeper than just holding a conference. If you can exercise that value chain, he said, as economic agencies convention bureaux have the opportunity of getting not just one hit but two, three or four and that's where the industry needs politicians to help.

2. How can the meetings industry raise itself in the list of political priorities and engage better with politicians?

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Alex Kloszewski, chairman of the Warsaw Destination Alliance, came up with some significant figures he had compiled last year. Warsaw had 10,000 hotel rooms with a 67 per cent occupancy rate and about 40,000 sqm of conference space but not one entity which could seat 15,000. Between them, they represented 30,000 jobs and a total revenue of 1.6 billion euros, of which 20 to 25 per cent was taxes in one shape or form. He reasoned that, if they invested four million euros in a new venue in Warsaw, right next to the stadium, it would bring about one billion euros in additional revenues, create another 15,000 jobs per year and produce 180 million euros in various taxes, thereby helping to grow the government's business as well.

Ulrik Nilsson, chairman of Boras City Council, Sweden, said the most important message for the industry to convey to politicians was that conferences would attract people to their city. "We need to use this sector as a booster for the future. That's what should be at the top of the list. We are not so concerned about money. Just try to convince us this is actually the way to develop cities."

Annette Stavenow added that politicians are human beings and different things are important to them. "So you have to meet, tell and show. If you start making politicians feel this is important, something will happen. Create the passion and start something going on in the heart of the person."

ICCA's Martin Sirk said he had recently attended the announcement of a major new extension to Fiera Milano convention centre in Italy, an event combined with the presentation of awards to doctors, business leaders and university professors instrumental in winning international meetings for the city. "Because they were there, the mayor made a major speech and top economic advisors were brought in. When you talk about emotion and pride, it was spot on. They were being recognised and provided the link for spending the money and at the same time motivated those ambassadors to go away and win more meetings."

Kathleen Bertier, director of sales, Meeting in Brugge, Belgium, called for leadership from politicians. "If you are in convention bureau or convention centre, you are really ambitious for your city and want to win bids. If you do, it is always good to have a politician whose door you can knock on, who will ask what else you need and give you more potential to engage the entire community." Her second point was that politicians whose cities compete within a particular region should combine to show leadership for their whole region, in her case Flanders and the cities of Bruges, Brussels and Antwerp "You are very welcome to come to Flanders," she told the assembled company, "but especially to the most beautiful city of Bruges."

Lutz Vogt, managing director of the German Convention Bureau, agreed it was necessary to get politicians involved when a destination is hosting a major conference and give them a platform to help convey the message of what it is all about to the public. "If the press just reports there is a conference taking place, then nobody cares. You also have to bring in interested people from the public and let them explain that if,

say, the conference is to do with health, then it's about people's future. If we don't get the acceptance of the people of the city and the region, the politicians will stay away and not support us."

John Greenway chipped in to say the way to a politician's heart is to show him how you can help deliver his or her political objectives. He liked the idea of industry 'Oscars', such as in Milan, and thought something like that could be combined with Vogt's ideas. "Many industries invite ministers and shadow ministers to annual meetings and dinners to make speeches. You should do the same, because you then put them on the platform and they will understand the value of the industry."

4. How is the meetings industry responding to the changing environment and sustainability issues?

Jon Hutchison of Business Events Sydney asked about free trade and travel and how to avoid the perils of protectionism and embargoes on travel. His concern was how politicians can encourage their own voters to travel to overseas events. "We see protectionism popping up like little bush fires all over the place. It's often not as overt as America experienced but it's seen as an implied community responsibility - doing the right thing. How do politicians address this issue as we know protectionism is tremendously dangerous for world trade and developing world relationships?"

Acknowledging the high level of competition in other countries, for Katarzyna Sobierajska the only way to encourage inward travel within today's difficult market is to create a unique, very competitive offer.

Conny Brannberg, regional councillor, West Sweden, and president of the Municipal Council of Skövde, said, when making new policies, Swedish politicians always include sustainable development. It is a high priority as far as tourism is concerned. How can we get this industry to do things in a green way, he asked.

Didier Scaillet said there is already a lot of focus on calculating the carbon footprint of flying to meetings but a measurement tool doesn't exist yet which encompasses electricity and water waste and so on. As a follow up to Kyoto, the UN is organising a major summit on climate change in Copenhagen in December and a global reporting tool specifically for events is being developed which will be implemented at that meeting. The UK has already developed BS 8901 on sustainable event management and there is a strong chance this will become an international standard. But, he said, the industry might become a casualty of the whole CSR agenda because it has not been proactive enough. "The Environmental Protection Agency is currently working on regulation in the US and if we don't go with a solution first, we will be regulated."

Kathleen Bertier commented that Bruges is a pilot city for hybrid buses and all council buildings are run on green electricity. "We are very lucky to have a mayor who is very keen that Bruges has the purest air and he recently announced that all site inspections for conventions will be made either on foot or on bicycle. Bruges is tremendously walkable and when you have a USP like that you should highlight it," she said. "So you can

either come in sensible shoes or visit the city on our website in your slippers and pyjamas!" But her plea was for a blueprint or checklist for hotels and convention venues to help them with their green policies.

Helena Nyhus agreed that there should be a campaign to decide on what is environmentally good about meetings because that is one of the tools politicians can use in the argument for supporting them. "If you keep saying you're behind on this and haven't started collaborating yet, well, sorry, but we will lose."

John Greenway suggested the industry should create a certification process that provides a kitemark for buildings in which people stay or hold meetings. He also believes that money would not be put into air or road transport unless people were going to be allowed to travel but, unless they can travel in a green way, they will be stopped. "The creation of wealth across the world is at risk if people are not allowed to travel efficiently and in a way that is sustainable. And you, the meetings industry, are part of that argument."

5. How can the industry optimise its potential in partnership with governments locally and nationally?

Nicolas Le Brun, president, European Federation of Associations of Professional Congress Organisers, wondered if public authorities, be it at local, national or European level, are conscious of the role they have as generators of meetings during a challenging economic downturn and how many of the politicians present actively generate meetings.

Krzysztof Celuch, manager of the Polish Convention Bureau, backed Olivier Lepine's idea of promoting the image of Europe collectively, especially now it includes Poland. And he agreed with John Greenway that the most important activity for the meetings industry was to work together and concentrate on its good points.

Philip Heylen, deputy mayor of Antwerp, Belgium, explained that life in politics is very short and he urged the whole of the tourism sector to get together for dialogue with politicians as they don't have time to attend a whole host of different events to talk about what is essentially the same thing. He said it's fine to unite in a crisis but what will happen in two or three years. "Never waste a good crisis. It should be very important that the unity expressed at this Forum should continue, but make it easy for us. Some of the politicians here have been talking about public opinion and this is really important because politicians are only doing the job for a certain time. So it's very important for us that if you do something you do it in dialogue with public opinion."

For Maria Szreder, chairperson of the Tourism Development Commission of Warsaw, the problem is not so much lack of money as lack of trust between the public and private sectors. "We try to create this trust because without it we can't help the private sector to be stronger." She felt that Warsaw is in the same position as other cities were many years ago and hoped that at such a forum in ten years time Warsaw will be able to say it is now a member of the great family of developed cities.

To sum up, Michael Hirst asked the panel if they thought we are making the most of the crisis. For John Greenway, one of the conclusions to be drawn from the Forum was that the meetings industry is in a position to tell governments it is part of the solution they are seeking for the economic revival of their countries. Katarzyna Sobierajska and Helena Nyhus agreed that, although a crisis always hurts, it is an opportunity for the industry and government to seize the chance together to turn a bad situation into something good.