

FINDING THE RIGHT VENUES



What city will I next select? The minute you ask yourself this question, you are already thinking of why you will have to eliminate the other many suitable venues and you know you'd better make the right choice and be ready to defend it!

Text Danièle Vranken, Secretary General of FAIB

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM A DESTINATION?

Because it features the 'catching' aspect of the programme, it should attract or intrigue, but at least interest a large majority of delegates. Indeed, the location of an event is generally one of the first questions one is asked. By definition, participants travel a lot, have little to no time to spare but still expect the trip to be worth the while.

This starts making the life of a congress organiser already less easy, and gets the elimination process into motion. The selection procedure should include, as a basic principle, a site inspection of the venue(s) prior to making the final decision and avoid disappointing experiences...

The major criteria for choosing a destination are:

Accessibility: delegates must be able to travel from their home country without wasting precious time in airports/train stations waiting for connections or struggling through a harassing journey where all that can will go wrong, and will definitely put them off from attending any of your future events as negative experiences are often assimilated to the organisers in their minds...

The interesting aspect of the location is key in attracting delegates and their partners to stay or join the social programme which is often a unique opportunity to meet with peers in an informal yet fruitful way.

It is up to the conference organiser to create such a subtle atmosphere by selecting places for the social events which will facilitate contacts, whilst giving a general overview of the places visited. Here again, it is a matter of striking the right balance and my personal recipe would be: not too many museums or exhibitions, comfortable transportation means, pleasant / unusual sites and, above all, good food in a nice place... Generally speaking, conference delegates do not wish to be considered as 'tourists' yet like to experience original discoveries.

The venue: Depending on the number of delegates, associations often opt for a suitable hotel, preferably typical of its region, that participants will remember. However, hotels also have to meet strict quality criteria for meeting facilities (e.g. size, comfort and equipment, general amenities) and be fully equipped to cope with all aspects of the conference, in particular audiovisual requirements (now taken for granted) but as importantly ensure top quality of service.

Once your basic needs (location, capacity, number of rooms, meeting/catering facilities) are secured, your checklist for hotel/venue site inspection should include:

- General condition of the venue; access, parking, gardens, lobby, interior decoration, furniture, toilets, etc.;
- Flexibility to adjust layout/capacity... of all conference space to last minute changes;
- Good visibility within meeting spaces (no pillars), control natural /artificial (dimmer) light if applicable;
- Check possible nuisance sources (noise, kitchen smell, smoke from dedicated areas...) and ensure that no refurbishing work is planned during your stay;
- A/V equipment (whether outsourced or in-house): wi-fi in meeting rooms; adequate microphones and public address; appropriate screen visible from whole room.

- Put yourself in your delegates' shoes when checking guest rooms, free wi-fi facilities (or clarify details about costs), wi-fi areas free of charge, opening hours of public areas (restaurants, bars, business centres...)

To avoid loopholes, it is essential that all partners (be it hotel(s), PCOs/DMCs, conference centres, restaurants, sites visited, etc.) receive clear instructions from one central interlocutor on the organiser's side that make their work easier and measurable. What is also key is that the selected **hotel/**

- Also check with your insurance broker if it is worth considering an event cancellation insurance.

KEY ROLE OF CONVENTION BUREAUX

Consulting the local convention bureau should be one of the first moves when selecting a destination. Their neutrality makes them a valuable interlocutor in recommending a venue, social event activities, involving local dignitaries, extending various kinds of supports, including the indispensable site inspections.

IN A NUTSHELL, THE KEY WORDS IN EVENT ORGANISING ARE 'PARTNERSHIP' AND 'PROFESSIONALISM' WHICH ARE ESSENTIAL IN MAKING YOUR EVENT SUCCESSFUL!

venue - and in general all parties involved in the organisation - cooperate in close partnership to make the event a success. There is nothing more frustrating for a meeting organiser than having to constantly be in conflict with hotel management or staff to get the right level of service instead of being able to fully concentrate on delegates and on the smooth running of the event itself.

A few tips of items to include/not underestimate when preparing your event:

- Read the proposed contracts very carefully, particularly concerning the penalties foreseen for rooms/space blocked for you but not, finally, taken up or used for your event (consider including in the initial contract a clause whereby the supplier agrees to provide you with a booking list clearly showing that any space not used by your people and about to be charged to you has not been sold to another party).
- Remember to subscribe an organiser's liability insurance as most venues will turn back to the organiser in case of incident (even by one of your delegates).

BUDGET

Nowadays, the budgetary constraints have of course an important impact on selecting a destination / venue. However, what really matters is the value for money criteria that can justify a somewhat higher fee for better quality. When preparing their proposal, suppliers, PCOs and/or DMCs should closely liaise with their prospective customer to assess the adequacy of the offer and prices.

In a nutshell, the key words in event organising are 'partnership' and 'professionalism' which are essential in making your event successful! Anticipation and consideration of a Plan B to 'worse case scenarios' goes without saying ...

The FAIB is the Federation of European & international associations operating in Belgium; its 275 members organise many events of varying size, audience and budget. For further details: Danièle Vranken, Secretary General FAIB, t. +32 2 641 11 95 - <http://faib.org>

For information about UIA, please visit www.uia.org