

WEC: A Deep Vein of Optimism

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MPI's 2008 World Education Congress (WEC), August 9–12 in Las Vegas, tapped into a deep vein of optimism about the value meeting professionals can deliver to their organizations, along with growing excitement about the new ideas and strategies, techniques and technologies that will enable them to deliver on the promise.

The conference theme, *Your Future is Showing*, translated into dozens of educational sessions that touched on the major challenges and opportunities facing the global meetings industry:

- The power of digital media and online interaction to reshape our understanding of when, where and how meetings take place.
- The opportunity to meet the demand for personalized content and collaborative learning to maximize participant learning—before, during and after a live event.
- The need to embrace a culture of innovation and keep up with the many trends and new developments that can shape the activity in a meeting room.
- The urgency around green meetings and the drive toward sustainability and corporate social responsibility.
- The relentlessly global character of a meeting industry that offers business opportunities on almost every continent.
- The need for creative, flexible responses to a difficult economy.

The industry's immediate future won't be without challenges. WEC took place against a backdrop of uncertainty over a tough economy, rising energy and food costs and shifting business relationships. From panels and from the floor, meeting planners and suppliers showed that they are prepared to embrace the future with broader knowledge and experience, stronger networks and greater resilience than they have ever had before.

The future is showing, and it won't be predictable. But it will almost certainly be a dynamic and rewarding place for meeting professionals who are prepared to adapt to changing demands and circumstances, engage in continual learning and embrace an unprecedented variety of opportunities to move their organizations and communities forward.

Your Future is Showing: the Future is Here

The future is interactive

The future is integrative

The future is innovative

The future is green

The future is global

Retooling the meetings economy

MPI's 2008 World Education Congress (WEC), August 9–12 in Las Vegas, tapped into a deep vein of optimism about the value meeting professionals can deliver to their organizations, along with growing excitement about the new ideas and strategies, techniques and technologies that will enable them to deliver on the promise.

The future is showing, and it won't be without challenges. WEC took place against a backdrop of uncertainty over a tough economy, rising energy and food costs and shifting business relationships. But meeting planners and suppliers alike are prepared to embrace the future with broader knowledge and experience, stronger networks and greater resilience than they have ever had before.

The future may not be easy, and it won't be predictable. But it will almost certainly be a dynamic and rewarding place, where meeting professionals earn wide recognition and play a significant role in moving their organizations and communities forward.

The Future is Interactive

What do meeting professionals need to know about the new opportunities for business and social interaction on the Web?

How is the Web changing the nature and character of person-to-person communications?

What are the opportunities and implications for meetings?

How would the next generation want meeting professionals to organize their meetings?

The participatory, creative character of Web 2.0 environments mirrors the very best of the interactive formats available in live meetings.

What do meeting professionals need to know about the new opportunities for business and social interaction on the Web?

The Web represents a challenge to face-to-face meetings as younger audiences, in particular, seek out virtual settings for meeting and learning that may be more obviously democratic and offer a more modest environmental footprint than traditional, live venues. But meeting professionals also have an opportunity to build on the power of face-to-face interaction by marketing their events online, deploying the most appropriate online tools and searching for the best mix and balance between live and virtual meetings.

"In the past, the Web was about companies," said Amber MacArthur, vice president and co-founder of MGIMedia Communications Inc. "Today, it is about communities." On the interactive Web, participation and community creation have replaced passive reading, blogs are more important than homepages, broadband and wireless have supplanted dial-up modems and wires and the most cutting-edge players are more interested in sharing information than in owning it.

How is the Web changing the nature and character of person-to-person communications?

Michael Wesch, a cultural anthropologist at Kansas State University (KSU), agreed that digital media have set off a cultural revolution that is forcing people "to rethink a few things," including copyright, authorship, identity, ethics, esthetics, rhetoric, governance, privacy, commerce, love, family—and themselves. He said he had observed the same magnitude of change in a community in Papua New Guinea, where the introduction of the written word into an oral culture led to profound changes in the way people communicated, solved problems and connected.

"The new landscape of media is challenging the old thought of what media is about," he said. "Media mediate relationships. When they change, human relationships change."

In university classrooms and conference sessions, Dr. Wesch said digital media disprove the following traditional assumptions.

- Information is scarce
- To learn is to acquire information

- People must follow along
- Trust authority for good information
- Authorized information is beyond discussion
- Information is hard to find

Rebecca Roth, market research analyst with Ducker Worldwide, said newer tools and approaches allow people who attend conferences to produce some of the content themselves, while engaging with almost all of it.

Dr. Wesch noted the following.

- During the 60 years the medium of television has existed, the three major U.S. networks (NBC, ABC and CBS) have produced 1.5 million hours of programming.
- Over the past six months, YouTube has out-produced that figure, delivering an average of 9,232 hours of new content per day.
- Almost all of the 200,000 three-minute videos uploaded to YouTube every day were created by users, not mass media.
- 88 percent of the material consisted of new and original content.

Meanwhile, the emergence of 112.8 million blogs over the last five years shows that, in a digital world, anyone can create information.

“These technologies give us the ability to change who we are,” Roth said. “With the Internet, the periphery is bringing the important information to the core. This is a paradigm shift in the way that intelligence and knowledge is disseminated.”

“It’s no longer about going out and finding information,” Dr. Wesch added. “Becoming media literate today is a process of harnessing a network in a certain way that sends you information relative to your life.”

Author Douglas Rushkoff agreed that the keyboard and the mouse have created a transparent, open-source culture, creating do-it-yourself media that allow users to participate.

“This is why business reacts with fear,” he said. “They didn’t want people talking to each other—what they wanted us to be doing was downloading stuff they could sell us rather than engaging with one another. They didn’t realize they could create communities around what they sell and do so much better.”

What’s Next?

In conferences as well as classrooms, Dr. Wesch said, the ability to integrate new media will mean that acquiring information is just one part of the experience.

Digital media can help participants learn by acquiring, discussing, challenging, critiquing, sharing and creating the knowledge generated on site. The broader experience will translate into learning environments and platforms that create much more meaningful connections, hence better results for participants, host organizations and everyone else involved with a meeting.

What are the opportunities and implications for meetings?

For meeting professionals, KSU's Kevin Champion said the best use of social media depends on the purpose of the conference to which they're attached.

"Ask yourself why you're having the conference. If the goal is to network, then the online tools you use should reflect that." If the objective is knowledge transfer, select social media that help to achieve the goal. He said most conferences are designed to combine both, so the mix of media should follow that lead.

Champion emphasized that digital tools are useful for getting people of any age more involved in a conference community, and can ultimately help meeting professionals produce better conferences.

"There are individuals from older generations who feel as though they can't use these tools," but "that's not necessarily true," he said. "Older people are read-oriented, and that's still a huge part of some of these new approaches." The point is not to throw out the ways of the past, but to find ways to improve the traditional experience.

Dr. Wesch said building communities online can create an ambient intimacy, so that people's geographic location, and their relative distance from one another, means very little anymore. For meetings and meeting professionals, Champion said social media transcend technology by providing an opportunity to "bring the community together before, during and after the conference."

He said the key is to enhance the face-to-face experience of attendees, and noted that not all social media are as useful as others: Twitter and Second Life, for example, often fail as educational tools.

"Twitter can be a distraction, while Second Life appears to be something that isn't an enhancement as much as a replacement," he said.

Champion said a tool as simple as a blog can continue the conversation started at a conference, advancing ideas while building a stronger sense of community.

"A face-to-face meeting can be made better and extended longer with social media," though "the important thing with a blog is that people have to want to participate."

How would the next generation want meeting professionals to organize their meetings?

MacArthur recommended using wikis to market an event before it goes on site, keeping the information flowing during the meeting and extending the conversation afterwards. She said the format is easy to update, accepts input from multiple users and can provide an interface for conversations and new information.

She said face-to-face interaction has become less important for younger audiences.

"People are spending more and more time online, and this is the way they are communicating," she said. "They wonder, 'Why can't I get a text reminder from my dentist rather than a voice mail?'"

Whether the immediate focus is a conference or day-to-day business, MacArthur said "transparency continues to be the new black" for established organizations seeking to communicate effectively in a digital environment. "People want companies that are really transparent and engage with them in real conversations."

The organizations that thrive in today's online environment are the ones that accomplish the following.

- Maintain a presence on community feedback sites like Twitter.com.
- Blog regularly—and respond to customer feedback.
- Reach out to specific audiences through social media sites like Facebook (for consumers) and LinkedIn (for business networking).
- Tap into the burgeoning market for mobile wireless devices and e-commerce, using Web sites geared to the small display screens on cellular telephones, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and MP3 players.
- Recognize the power and impact of user-generated content, which already influences more than two-thirds of

travelers and an estimated \$10 billion a year in travel bookings.

Resources

- www.Mashable.com
- www.Techcrunch.com
- www.Readwriteweb.com

The Future is Integrative

How can meetings be redesigned to meet growing demand for personalized content and collaborative learning?

What are the best strategies to maximize impact and learning before, during and after a face-to-face meeting?

As meetings evolve and client expectations rise, it will no longer be sufficient to focus strictly on the few days that participants are on site, or to fill those days with meeting content or formats that require everyone to learn, interact or experience the event in exactly the same way.

New forms of interactive design, sharper understanding of generational differences, emerging technologies, virtual meeting options and heightened expectations from participants, meeting owners and sponsors have combined in a perfect storm of demand and opportunity. For anyone interested in organizing meetings in the same old way, just because that's the way it's always been done, the future could be scary...or eerily quiet. But the new face of meetings will open up new prospects for meeting professionals and will extend the scope of the industry itself to a range of new disciplines and areas of practice.

How can meetings be redesigned to meet growing demand for personalized content and collaborative learning?

Several sessions at the 2008 World Education Congress picked up on the excitement surrounding meeting design, but they also underscored the high expectations involved. Consultant Chris Clarke-Epstein, CSP, said participants will get the most out of conferences if information is created and delivered in a way that is meaningful for them—and if they are supported in the process of following through with what they have learned. “Otherwise,” Clarke-Epstein said, “all that time, money and energy is wasted.”

Clarke-Epstein and Cara Tracy, CMP, CMM, director of professional development with the National Speakers Association, said many conference participants leave their sessions with enthusiasm for the information received and ideas generated, but fail to apply that material when they get home. Many participants admit that they attend conferences, take notes, then never look at them again. This means the event's value, and the knowledge its speakers convey, does not last.

Elliott Masie, CEO of The MASIE Center and Learning CONSORTIUM, and Bruce MacMillan, CA, MPI president and CEO, identified learning styles, personalized content and learning environments and the search for the right meeting technology as key factors in effective meeting design.

MacMillan noted that meetings spending in many multimillion-dollar companies increased between 2004 and 2007, despite a broader climate of budget reductions. Masie pointed to the four-day workweek, the “mass customization” of jobs and careers and growing use of mobile electronics as trends that will change the face of meetings.

What are the best strategies to maximize impact and learning before, during and after a face-to-face meeting?

Hugh Lee and James McDonough of Fusion Productions encouraged meeting professionals to focus on the basics of onsite design by directing the following key questions to stakeholders before, during and after a conference.

- What do they want people to *know* (and how much) as a result of this conference?
- What do they want people to *remember* as a result of this conference?
- What do they want people to *do* as a result of this conference?

Before an event, planners can make more focused use of flash e-mail, HTML content, online games and Web-based messages to deliver conference messages. They can also turn to Pageflakes, an easy to use, cost-effective portal that allows users to create their own pages. While participants are on site, the priority is to create a positive, dynamic atmosphere for participant networking.

Afterwards, the challenge is to retain the emotional connection and reinforce the messages generated during the meeting, which can dissipate once a conference attendee returns to the real world. Web 2.0 tools can keep the networking conversation going. Organizers can also build online communities that display webcasts, host discussions, distribute e-mails and run surveys.

Lee and McDonough used the acronym SUCCES—Simple, Unexpected, Concrete, Credible, Emotional Stories—to describe the features that make the “sticky ideas” presented at a meeting memorable.

What’s Next?

Responding to seven challenges put forward by the facilitators, participants in the Future of Learning session stated the following.

- Meeting professionals can respond to changing educational needs by looking at how today’s pre-teens learn and interact, conducting focus groups, using Web-based systems to collect feedback, consulting industry leaders and monitoring attendance to ensure that sessions are advanced enough for intended audiences.
- Meeting designers will deliver more personalized content by soliciting participants’ wish lists in advance, creating or monitoring blogs and other online media to discover hot topics and scheduling open sessions where participants determine the focus.
- While some new meeting technologies might just create clutter, there are a number of clear winners, including trip advisors, universal RFPs, onsite networking devices like SpotMe and virtual tools for site inspections and actual meetings.
- Meetings can meet demand for alternative learning environments by minimizing classroom time in favor of more collaborative, social formats; personalizing onsite options; mixing online and face-to-face interaction; and using picnic grounds, parks, gardens or other relaxed settings to convene live meetings. Square rooms with round tables are far from ideal, and participants said Second Life is too impersonal to allow for genuine interaction.
- Advance wikis and blogs, video previews, virtual trade shows and post-event follow-up and lead tracking can all help improve the quality of interpersonal connections before, during and after an event.
- The industry can address the dynamic tension between high-impact meetings and declining budgets by setting clear objectives; co-locating meetings; holding smaller, regional events; and shifting budgets from high-end production and keynotes to participant interaction and content.
- Meeting professionals can control the environmental footprint of their events by using “green” hotels; recycling paper; reusing signage and name badges; donating flowers, food and office supplies after the event; eliminating bottled water; building menus around local foods; composting food waste; and distributing meeting materials in electronic form.

Meanwhile, Clarke-Epstein and Tracy suggested a collaborative approach to Return on Attendance (ROA) in which participants are encouraged to gather and evaluate ideas during sessions, then follow through after the event. After securing buy-in from host organizations, they said meeting professionals should do the following.

- Coach presenters to include ROA activities in their sessions.
- Create materials to support the ROA process.
- Incorporate the ROA commitment into meetings—before, during and after.
- Help their clients to institutionalize the commitment.

To develop an ROA plan, attendees go through their conference notes and distill key strategies formulated during the event, then pick the top three for evaluation discussion with fellow attendees.

“This evaluative process helps us think through what we want to do and the order we want to do it in, so we’re not overwhelmed and end up doing nothing,” Clarke-Epstein said.

Resolution books, self-addressed post cards and accountability partners can be used as prompts for effective follow-up after participants return home.

“Our job as professionals ... is to make sure that we create systems that support our participants as they go back to the real world, to give them space and encouragement to do the things that will make a difference,” Clarke-Epstein said.

Resources

- www.pageflakes.com

The Future is Innovative

What are the cutting-edge features and experiences that will keep conferences compelling for participants and relevant for hosts and sponsors?

What innovative cultures and mindsets should organizations cultivate to ensure their own long-term survival?

How will meetings and meeting rooms adapt and innovate over the next five to 10 years?

Henry Ford may have believed that “culture eats strategy for breakfast,” but the U.S. industrialist’s observation opens up a continuing challenge for meeting professionals.

In an environment where the continual hunt for “that next idea” leads to baby toupées, Braille tattoos, dog urinals and Muslim or Orthodox Jewish Barbie dolls, it will take time, attention and insight to differentiate passing fads from true innovations that deliver value for participants and impact for meeting clients.

Jeremy Gutsche, MBA, CFA, of TrendHunter.com listed these trends and many more in his session on “unlocking cool,” a process that he broke down into a series of distinct steps: trend hunting, power innovation, infectious marketing and a culture of innovation. That culture, in turn, depends on perspective, failure, creativity and customer obsession.

He said the ease with which a company can lose touch with its market—and lose it all as a result—can be seen in the history of a firm that spent more than a century turning creative ideas into breakthroughs. It invented grammar checkers, electronic dictionaries and laptops, and began building PDAs in 1994.

That company was Smith-Corona, an organization so determined to dominate the world of typewriters that it turned down a strategic partnership with Acer Inc.

“Smith-Corona declared bankruptcy in 1995, while Acer went on to become the fourth-largest PC company in the world,” Gutsche said.

What are the cutting-edge features and experiences that will keep conferences compelling for participants and relevant for hosts and sponsors?

To create a culture of innovation, all industries must start by observing the customer. Gutsche cited the car designer who rode with Detroit inner-city drivers, the airline CEO who flew economy to experience his own product and oil executives who spent hours at their own gas stations to observe demographics and behaviors. He said companies should exude creativity, establishing an environment of freedom, fun and broad idea sources.

“Get inspiration hunting for cool via your customer observations, online, in your market and in adjacent markets,” he advised. In hospitality, cutting-edge features might include in-room massage, graffiti architecture, pre-cooked gourmet meals, glowing bathtubs, pet spas or rooms designed by artists.

What innovative cultures and mindsets should organizations cultivate to ensure their own long-term survival?

Author Douglas Rushkoff described a new vision of interactive media in which the user experience is interpersonal, social and human. As a mechanism for connecting to other people, he said the Internet is not unlike a live event.

“A meeting provides the opportunity to find others who are as crazy about the subject as you are, and it gives you permission to be what you really are enthusiastic about,” Rushkoff said. “The Internet should be this way,” but most companies don’t really want this to happen. “The last thing they want is to get truly social, because that would mean having a conversation about something they don’t understand.”

How will meetings and meeting rooms adapt and innovate over the next five to 10 years?

Sue Tinnish, principal of SEAL Inc., said innovation in the design of meetings and meeting space will be driven by the understanding that 75 percent of onsite learning takes place in actual sessions, compared to only 25 percent in the larger meeting environment. A recent survey by the International Association of Conference Centers (IACC) revealed a wide range of expectations.

- 75 percent of respondents preferred on-demand content and training methods, 72 percent in-person classroom training and 66 percent a blend of both.
- The quality of meeting facility was important to 91 percent of the respondents. Cost was a chief consideration to 90 percent, while 89 percent focused on quality of guest accommodations, 89 percent on food and beverage quality and 85 percent on learning environments.

Tinnish said personalization is one of the keys to effective learning, citing the Technology Enabled Active Learning (TEAL) centers at MIT as leaders in collaborative education. By contrast, Rushkoff said mass marketing is intended to connect the public to a brand rather than to a human. Television is geared to lone viewers who passively absorb the medium’s messages.

“Now interactivity threatens to break all this,” he said. “Instead of just being passive recipients, now we are potentially active creators of media.”

“This is now a contact—not content—universe,” Rushkoff said. “The message is no longer the important thing: you want to be the medium ... the connector, rather than just the connection they’re talking about.”

What’s Next?

Tinnish listed a wide range of onsite technologies that are already in high demand, or will gain popularity in the future.

- High-speed wireless Internet
- Web and video conferencing
- Video projected on all four walls
- Further expansion of touchable screens
- Augmented reality to give people cues and help them understand what to do
- Wristbands with stored data
- Holographic speakers
- Much more flexible room setup

Rushkoff said innovative approaches to conference design will mean tailoring different approaches for specific demographic groups. Rather than trying to persuade more traditional audiences to try interactive techniques like Open Space, “let people be surprised by how engaging it is,” he advised. “In the invitation, say ‘Come only if you want to participate; otherwise, stay home.’”

On the marketing side, he suggested permission marketing as an antidote to information saturation. “Get folks to say if they want to receive materials. Model it as an experiment that will be evaluated by them at the end.”

In the meeting room of the future, there will still be a need for high-level education, networking and strategic planning, Tinnish said. But networking can and does take place during indoor and outdoor sports, in workout rooms, while swimming or during staged games that reflect the theme or purpose of an event.

“Games are going to be required for learning in the future,” she predicted, particularly for younger generations.

Resources

- www.iacconline.org

The Future is Green

What practical steps can meeting professionals take to reduce the carbon footprint and broader environmental impact of their events?

How can planners sort through competing green performance claims and choose destinations and services that are truly environmentally friendly?

Why are green standards and certification important, and how is the process going?

Every human activity carries an environmental impact and releases a certain amount of carbon into the atmosphere, but meeting professionals can do a great deal to meet skyrocketing demand—from clients and meeting participants—for greener meetings.

This is “an amazing time to be in the industry,” said Amy Spatrisano, CMP, co-founder of the Green Meeting Industry Council (GMIC) and principal of Portland, OR-based Meeting Strategies Worldwide. “We have the chance to build a different kind of future.”

What practical steps can meeting professionals take to reduce the carbon footprint and broader environmental impact of their events?

Meeting Strategies Worldwide Project Manager Shawna McKinley said the impact per participant of a typical green meeting includes 781 pounds (355 kilograms) of greenhouse gas emissions, 43 kilowatt-hours of electricity, 3.5 therms of natural gas and 22.5 gallons of fuel. The footprint of a more traditional event would be much higher. Although the average North American generates four to five pounds of waste per day, that total jumps to 20 pounds in a conference or event setting.

Yet studies by the American Hotel & Lodging Association show that travelers genuinely want to conserve energy and help the environment.

“We’re closet environmentalists,” said McKinley. “When we go on the road, our behaviors aren’t all that different. We don’t consider it a compromise in quality ... we want to know how to participate in [green] programs.”

The greenest meetings are the ones where environmental considerations are built in from the start.

“If the right location or venue is chosen, most of the planner’s work is done,” McKinley said. “If you can choose a destination with a [green] infrastructure and sustainable culture, you’re ahead of the game.”

How can planners sort through competing green performance claims and choose destinations and services that are truly environmentally friendly?

But in the absence of a single standard for branding a destination green, she warned that it’s up to the meeting planner to carefully research cities and venues to separate the truly environmentally conscious from those that misrepresent themselves as green. Many individuals and organizations are doing great things, “but there are also a lot of folks saying they are, with no merit to their marketing claims.”

McKinley said planners and suppliers can measure and reduce the environmental impact of their meetings in the following ways.

- Establish green site selection criteria and incorporate them in RFPs.
- Choose green destinations and use Web resources like www.sustainlane.com, www.walkscore.com and the soon-to-be-introduced www.bestplacetomeetgreen.com.
- Use a calculator like www.myfootprint.org or www.carboncounter.org to measure a meeting's carbon footprint, then introducing a carbon offset to compensate
- Ask venues to audit their waste streams and report on waste diversion rates.
- Minimizing paper use and avoiding printed materials where possible.

McKinley cited a dozen or more local innovations—from a citywide bicycle co-op in Paris to hybrid vehicle fleets in Vancouver and Virginia Beach to the wormery that composts food waste at London's ExCeL Centre—that reflect practical green commitments on the part of different destinations.

What's Next?

Why are green standards and certification important, and how is the process going?

Momentum toward green meeting standards and certifications is building for a variety of reasons—from the need for a common understanding of what "green" really means to growing concern over the false or misguided environmental claims that can be characterized as "green-washing."

Spatrisano listed several existing standards that touch on meetings activity, including the following.

- The U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program, which designates efficiency levels in building design and operations
- Green Seal, an independent, nonprofit certification of environmental responsibility
- Green Globe, a certification similar to Green Seal that focuses on hotels
- EnergyStar, a U.S. government-backed energy-efficiency rating for appliances and equipment

But so far, there is no single set of rules for producing a green meeting.

GMIC defines a green meeting as one that "incorporates environmental considerations throughout all stages of the meeting in order to minimize the negative impact on the environment." MPI defines its broader interest in corporate social responsibility according to "our obligation to consider the interests of customers, employees, shareholders, communities and the environment as an aspect of meeting planning and evaluation, so that sustainability can be achieved."

The question is how these elements translate to practical applications. The lack of definition leaves the industry open to green-washing, and even the most earnest efforts can be sidetracked by language barriers, corporate expectations or even the expectations behind VIP programs. Spatrisano and Fiona Pelham, Manchester, UK-based managing director of Organise This, described the range of green meeting standards that are now under development.

- In the UK, the British Standards Institute has introduced BS 8901, a standard that focuses principally on the green practices of businesses and organizations within the meeting industry. Through its 2008 European Meetings and Events Conference (EMEC) in London, MPI was the first organization to be officially third-party certified as compliant with all three phases of BS 8901.
- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is working on an American equivalent to BS 8901. EPA originally reached out to GMIC in the hope of introducing green practices for U.S. government conferences.
- GMIC has been active in the formation of the Green Meetings and Events Practices Panel (GMEP), an effort by the Accepted Practices Exchange (APEX) to set an industry-wide efficiency standard. The panel's nine committees deal with accommodation, communications, destinations, exhibits, food and beverage, meeting venues, onsite services, transportation and audiovisual.

While compliance with the APEX process will be voluntary, the EPA standard may eventually be mandatory for U.S. government vendors. Spatrisano said she hopes to see green components incorporated in existing industry certifications, such as the Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) designation, so that “it would just become part of the way we do business.”

Resources

- www.sustainlane.com
- www.walkscore.com
- www.myfootprint.org
- www.carboncounter.org
- www.bestplacetomeetgreen.com (coming soon)

The Future is Global

What are the latest trends in global meetings and international destinations?

What resources are available to help MPI members tap into the global meetings market?

A number of sessions at the 2008 World Education Congress dealt with the opportunities and challenges emerging in the international meetings market.

What are the latest trends in global meetings and international destinations?

Every region of the world has its own issues, and every international meeting must navigate differences in culture, language, exchange rates, business traditions and even payment terms. But interest is growing in international destinations as the meeting industry, and MPI in particular, adopts a more global attitude.

Latin America

Latin America has a reputation for being friendly, accommodating, laid back and relaxed, said Eli Goren, CMP, founder of gMeetings Inc. Contrary to the region’s reputation, he said Latin American destinations are safe and hospitable, as well as cost effective.

The region is a good choice for a quick, out-of-the-country meeting site: meetings can be put together in as little as three weeks. Groups do book space years in advance, but Gorin said the culture is relaxed and much of the work on any meeting is done close to deadline.

A hotel manager from Latin America encouraged international planners to work with destination management companies, to take good advantage of their authority and contacts with CVBs.

Asia-Pacific

In a region as enormous as the Asia-Pacific, it is essential to get on a plane, conduct site inspections and begin learning local cultures, said David Kliman, CMP, CMM, president of The Kliman Group. When taking first-time guests to the region, he said, planners should provide them with specific culture-related materials.

Current exchange rates make Asia an expensive destination, but exchange rates can also translate into more inbound traffic from the Asia-Pacific to the United States, particularly because the U.S. is now an approved destination for travelers from China.

The Asia-Pacific region has many locations in high demand. The south of India is currently very popular, as is Vietnam. “Bangkok is phenomenal for meetings,” Kliman said. In Bali, people are “gracious by nature” and “the hotels are off the charts.”

EMEA

Eric Rozenberg, CMP, CMM, president of Brussels-based Ince & Tive, said the region composed of Europe, the Middle East and Africa encompasses hundreds of cultures and many languages and religions. He suggested using MPI's CultureActive® tool when planning events, and also encouraged participants to consult colleagues on their experiences in other countries. "The information you need is in this room."

"You will make mistakes," he said. In London, Rozenberg made a social faux pas in a pub when he raised two fingers to order two drinks, only to discover that to the English, the gesture was equivalent to a well-known, uncomplimentary finger-gesture in the United States.

Switzerland and Malta are two good choices for meetings right now because of favorable exchange rates. A participant said various kinds of support are available from tourist boards, CVBs and other local organizations.

Middle East

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is composed of Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain, but meeting industry consultant Daniel Tschudy included Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq and Iran in his survey of the region's cultural and commercial evolution. Referring to the area as the "Wild, Wild East," he drew parallels with Las Vegas, another desert area that has developed into a multi-industry hub.

A slide of 1972 Dubai showed only three buildings on the main road. Today, these buildings have been joined by countless modern, high-rise structures featuring high-design architecture. The population has bloomed to 1.4 million. The imported workforce is so extensive that foreigners now make up 85 percent of Dubai's population, and that figure is expected to reach 97 percent within 10 years.

Elsewhere in the region, Abu Dhabi's 2030 plan factors in sustainability, liveability and connectivity. Bahrain has built a new trade center and Qatar, which had one Sheraton hotel in 1982, has a shoreline lined with brand-new, contemporary buildings. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are both looking ahead to rapid growth.

Tschudy said the Middle East has seen massive investment in mega-cities, global business hubs and regional entertainment hubs for every target audience. The region's airlines are becoming global leaders, and the hotel industry is exploding, all leading to a "war for talent."

What's Next?

Trade is the predominant driver of globalization, said Didier Scaillet, MPI's vice president of global development, and a growing, interconnected global economy has created dramatic new opportunities for MPI members to do business abroad.

"We have tremendous growth in the Gulf region, as well as East Asia and India," Scaillet said, with China and India seeing annual growth in gross domestic product (GDP) of 10 percent and 8 percent, respectively. By 2015, 65 percent of global economic growth is expected to take place in emerging and re-emerging economies. According to www.TopHotelProjects.com, of the 1,700 major hotel projects under way worldwide, approximately 200 are in the Middle East and 400 are in East Asia and the Pacific.

MPI members should be particularly interested in the accompanying human development increases, which create strong demand for knowledge products and education—in effect, meetings.

Scaillet described the shortage of talent in the meeting industry as "the biggest crisis we're facing today." By 2015, 3.2 million hospitality-sector jobs will be created in China, 1.7 million in India, 300,000 in the Gulf and 100,000 in Singapore. An estimated 20 percent of those jobs will be in the meetings and events sector.

"There's no way the talent we have in the pipeline could fill that demand," Scaillet said.

On the positive side, both meeting planners and suppliers can expect a significant amount of business to come from overseas, particularly Asian countries. Scaillet said worldwide economic integration will affect everyone's job eventually, and being part of a global community means greater career opportunities.

What resources are available to help MPI members tap into the global meetings market?

MPI's formal response to multiculturalism began in 2001, with an initiative funded by Walt Disney Parks and Resorts. Over the years, two critical components emerged: diversity and cross-culturalism.

"You can have the best organization, the best strategy, the best processes and the best implementation, but if you ignore the cultural component, you're going to fail," Scaillet said. To address the cross-cultural component of multiculturalism, which relates to globalization, MPI has adopted CultureActive®, an online tool developed by Richard Lewis Communications and used by large multinational corporations around the world.

Cross-cultural misunderstanding crops up mainly in relation to values, communication patterns, concepts of time and concepts of space. CultureActive® helps individuals and companies understand where they stand in these areas and compare their assumptions to those of other cultures, so that everyone can do business together more successfully.

Resources

- [MPI's CultureActive® tool](#)
- www.TopHotelProjects.com

Retooling the Meetings Economy

What challenges will the meeting industry face in a tightening global economy?

What is the unique value that meetings can add to the communications mix?

Where are the opportunities for meeting planners and suppliers? How do those opportunities interact, and what can the industry do to maximize its advantage?

Participants in two sessions on the global economy heard that the current economic downturn is very different from any the industry has seen before.

"We want to understand how we can work together with our suppliers so that we can all make it through this," said Betsy Bondurant, CMP, CMM, president of Bondurant Consulting.

What challenges will the meeting industry face in a tightening global economy?

- A large number of participants reported shrinking budgets.
- Hotels will see revenue per available room (RevPAR) increase by only 2 percent to 3 percent this year, against 20 percent increases in some costs.
- Facilities will be hard pressed to meet planners' requests for lower food and beverage costs—partly because those prices have been static for some time, partly because they are paying more for food and food-related transportation.
- The hospitality sector faces a more fundamental economic challenge, arising from investments in upgrades that were financed at higher interest rates.
- "Occupancy is down, but rates aren't," explained Mike Beardsley, CEO of Inn Fluent, since "[facilities] have to increase their profit margin to pay the mortgage."
- High energy prices are having serious consequences, with airlines struggling to cover costs and cutting flights to survive. Chris Meyer, CEM, CMP, vice president, convention sales of the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority, said every 1 percent decline in air travel corresponds to a 0.5 percent decrease in occupancy. The result: "U.S. hotels could face a decline in lodging demand greater than that experienced after September 11, 2001."

But despite the short-term challenges, participants in one breakout session heard that the industry's fundamentals are strong. After 19 months of research, an economic impact study conducted by MPI Foundation Canada concluded that the Canadian industry organized 670,000 meetings in 2006, welcomed more than 70 million participants, generated \$23 billion CDN in participant spending and created 235,500 full-year jobs—all in a country with a population about one-tenth the size of the United States population.

A week later in Toronto, at the official release of the study, one of the lead consultants on the economic impact study connected the dots from the scale of Canadian meetings activity to the value that meetings deliver. With 670,000 meetings taking place in one year, he said someone is seeing a business impact—and organizations must realize that if they aren't, their competitors probably are.

What is the unique value that meetings can add to the communications mix?

Referring to the global industry as a whole, opening keynote Dr. Patrick Dixon underscored the impact behind the numbers.

“We inspire, drive change, motivate,” he said, adding that nothing can replace the power of human connections—many of which occur at live meetings.

Individuals might read about a topic or see it in a television news report, but on site “something happens inside people that is quite unmistakable,” he said. “I’m talking about a process of revelation.”

What's Next?

Where are the opportunities for meeting planners and suppliers? How do those opportunities interact, and what can the industry do to maximize its advantage?

Meeting professionals are responding to the economic crunch with a variety of strategies, old and new. The common denominators include greater efficiency, a focus on the essentials and reliance on longstanding business relationships.

- Some meeting firms have already introduced strategic meeting management (SMM) programs that offer reliable business for preferred vendors in exchange for volume discounts on guest rooms, meeting space, audiovisual services and catering.
- One large biotechnology company eliminated 50 percent of its internal offsite meetings, and then cancelled an annual national sales event that had drawn 2,000 attendees. By replacing the large-scale production with a series of district meetings, the company could shift to more affordable, second-tier destinations, and found that the stripped-down agendas and budgets were easier to manage.
- Some hotel chains are focusing on cost-saving measures that can be introduced after contracts have already been signed. These might include eliminating labor-intensive practices, such as turndown service, or encouraging meeting clients to plan roll-in buffets or restaurant meals that require less dedicated staffing, but still count toward the food and beverage minimum for an event.
- A softening leisure market could translate into more space and better rates for meetings, particularly in destinations like Las Vegas and Orlando, where guest room inventories continue to grow. Hospitality veterans advised planners to focus on midweek and off-season bookings and “help the hotel understand the total revenue of your meeting” in order to negotiate better rates and packages.
- Close communication with CVBs and local airports may be required to maintain and expand the frequency of flights on which planners and destinations rely.

Embracing the Future

MPI's 2008 *World Education Congress* touched on a dizzying array of issues facing the global meeting industry. Key insights included the following.

- The power of digital media and online interaction to reshape our understanding of when, where and how meetings take place.
- The opportunity to meet the demand for personalized content and collaborative learning to maximize participant learning—before, during and after a live event.
- The need to embrace a culture of innovation and keep up with the many trends and new developments that can shape the activity in a meeting room.
- The urgency around green meetings and the drive toward sustainability and corporate social responsibility.
- The relentlessly global character of a meeting industry that offers business opportunities on almost every continent.
- The need for creative, flexible responses to a difficult economy

The unmistakable message was that the future will be a challenging but productive place for meeting professionals who are prepared to adapt to changing demands and circumstances, engage in continual learning and embrace the unprecedented variety of opportunities within their grasp.

In this respect, the words of opening keynote Dr. Patrick Dixon apply as much to the meetings profession itself as to the events it makes possible. “We inspire, drive change, motivate,” he said. “I’m talking about a process of revelation.”

By Mitchell Beer, CMM, president of The Conference Publishers, www.theconferencepublishers.com.

