

# What's in a name?

GEOFF DONAGHY DISCUSSES MAKING A CONVENTION CENTRE 'INTERNATIONAL'

Convention centres worldwide comprise a wide spectrum of facilities, with few invariable constants, even in terms of fixed definitions (Congress centres? Convention centres? Conference centres?).

At the same time, there is increasingly a blurring of such distinctions as do exist, with what were formerly more exclusively focused facilities like exhibition or special event centres adding new kinds of function spaces in order to diversify their business potential and respond to new trends, such as the inclusion of more educational components into trade show programming.

The same is true of the term 'International'. In an increasingly global industry, there are legitimate questions as to what that designation implies, and when applied to a convention centre, what assurances it should give clients who are looking for the right kind of 'fit' for their event.

For many centres, the application of the designation often simply reflects the aspirations of owners and managers – an expression of their interest in being able to access more than simply local or regional business. But at a practical level, there's a lot more to it.

First of all, 'International' as a function of an organisation holding an event is again a term that is pretty loosely applied in our industry. In my view, it requires three measures: first, that membership be comprised of representation from different countries;

secondly, that leadership is similarly distributed and third, that events have a global vs. simply a regional rotation. And while that is a pretty straightforward definition, in many parts of the world it is less than rigorously applied, adding another level of confusion.

However, if we accept that definition, it follows that centres that consider themselves to be 'international' are those actively pursuing those kinds of events – and that means at the same time, they need to be prepared to respond to their needs. That carries some important responsibilities.

First, it means recognising and addressing the standards and expectations of groups that rotate worldwide, and who are looking for some level of consistency in terms of spaces and services, including areas like food and beverage and technology.

While most events that rotate do so in response to the distribution of their membership (or the pursuit of potential members) their programmes generally have certain requirements attached that are largely the same wherever they go. That means a centre must be able to supply these in order to be considered.

Secondly, a non-domestic organisation will likely have formal requirements that are more complex, or at least different, from those coming from within the same country. Again, a centre pursuing this business must have the capability and flexibility to be able to respond.

Third, it needs to be understood that this is not simply a centre-specific exercise.

The centre itself is only one part of the overall destination experience, so an 'international' designated centre also has a role to play in ensuring that other destination partners such as hotels, bureaus, suppliers and satellite venues are also capable of meeting the broader and potentially more diverse range of client expectations arising from this group. Without this, even the most internationally-oriented facility can fail to deliver the overall quality that will be expected by demanding international clients.

But there's another side to the equation. As important as consistency and standards are, they should not come at the expense of losing the unique qualities that are a desired part of the experience of travelling to different parts of the world.

Delegates to an international event are attracted at least partly by the opportunity to experience local customs and cultures, sample different food and enjoy off-site activities that represent what makes that destination different. The centre has a role here, too, needing to play an active part in delivering on those expectations.

In the end, it's a balance; to be truly 'International', and enjoy all the business benefits that designation implies, a centre needs to be prepared to address the full range of expectations that accompany such events.

At the same time, they need to take on some responsibility for delivering the kind of unique experience and qualities that make their destination distinctive. ■



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