

Business events meet politics for a new global dynamic



The turning tide of international events presents challenges, but also opportunities, for the meetings and events industry

by Rod Cameron

Meetings and conventions – where they are held and how they approach gathering together their content – are affected by many different factors, including the influences of global and regional politics. In the face of a lot of political disruptions this past year – from Brexit to the US Presidential election and the promise of more dislocations in a number of European countries – it is not unreasonable to wonder what impact all this may have on our business prospects and even the future of the industry.

But already there are a lot of reasons to believe that the shifting global relations causing so much concern in many circles may well have a minimal effect, or potentially even be beneficial to, the meetings industry. For one thing, impacts on global markets – which generally don't like shocks or uncertainty of any kind – were much less dramatic and shorter-lived than anyone expected, with any initial reactions quickly absorbed and readjustment and recovery underway within days, if not hours, of the initial shocks. This doesn't mean that effects won't be felt, but whatever the final balance turns out to be, it will be years in the making, with a lot of bumps to be expected in the meantime as situations play out.

It's worth keeping in mind, however, that the meetings industry responds to some very different forces. To begin with, a very large proportion of events are in fact local or regional, and these make for a very stable base of activity in any destination. At the same time, many events on rotation are driven by academic and professional needs rather than business ones, and these are unlikely to be much affected, just as association events were practically untouched by the

global financial crisis which unfolded within recent memory.

Secondly, factors important to most planners and their respective organisations are unlikely to be much influenced by local or regional politics. The selection criteria when it comes to organising conferences and events is generally based on where events feel they need to go in order to respond to the distribution of markets and members, the potential for new markets and members and, increasingly, the opportunities to link up with institutions and programmes that respond to the priorities set by the organisations in question – none of which are going to be particularly influenced by political changes taking place on a global scale.

Other factors – such as the quality and attractiveness of the destination product itself, including the meeting facilities, the complementary hotel product and the availability of other amenities essential to the delivery of a great event – are once again unlikely to be impacted by much wider political issues.

Another key site consideration – certainly since the belt-tightening that accompanied the last global recession – is cost structure, and here there may actually be benefits accruing to some. In destinations where there is a currency impact, for example, this may actually create an advantage as

organisers see opportunities to get access to desirable destinations at discount prices – and there is often even further potential for more beneficial tax arrangements depending on how this factor plays out in the future.

Finally, there may even be a silver lining effect to be had here; already, academics, researchers and associations with international connections are reacting to travel restrictions in certain countries with well-articulated arguments around the value of meetings to their respective areas, and overall to the global advancement necessary for maintaining economic progress. This situation is in fact mobilising an influential group of people that has not always been a staunch defender of the industry, and those voices may be even stronger than ours in raising the alarm and reversing some of the more drastic tendencies being seen when it comes to restrictions on travel proposed lately.

So, a looming catastrophe? Not likely. In the end, meetings and conventions will mostly do what they have always done – create valuable forums for people to exchange knowledge and support the advancement of business and their respective professions. In that regard, their role may turn out to be a force for good where it's most needed – helping to bridge the gaps created by changing political alignments. ◻

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AIPC represents a global network of more than 185 leading centres in 59 countries, with the active involvement of more than 900 management-level professionals worldwide. It is committed to encouraging and recognising excellence in convention centre management, based on the diverse experience and expertise of its international representation, and maintains a variety of educational, research, networking and standards programs to achieve this. AIPC also celebrates and promotes the essential role of the international meetings industry in supporting economic, academic and professional development, and enhancing global relations among highly diverse business and cultural interests.

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