

# ANY COLOUR YOU WANT, AS LONG AS IT IS BLACK

ACCORDING TO THE STORY, HENRY FORD USED TO SAY THAT CUSTOMERS COULD GET THEIR MODEL TS IN ANY COLOUR THEY LIKED, AS LONG AS IT WAS BLACK. DESTINATION MANAGEMENT OFTEN FEELS AS THOUGH IT IS SUBJECT TO THE SAME LIMITATIONS. IF MY EXPERIENCE IS ANYTHING TO GO BY, TODAY'S ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES ARE INCREASINGLY FRUSTRATED BY THE EXPERIENCE OF ORGANIZING CONFERENCES. THEIR CHOICES SEEM TO BE EVER MORE CONSTRICTED, JUST WHEN MEMBER DEMANDS ARE MULTIPLYING.

Let's start with the world in which we operate. The travel and tourism industry has changed since September 2001. For better or worse, visa restrictions and border-crossing formalities have tightened in a number of countries. This makes it harder to bring in foreign delegates and speakers. In my association, we even had one case when we could not obtain a visa for our Chinese Vice President, despite his carrying an official passport. This was at the height of the SARS outbreak, and his company is headquartered in a province that was heavily touched. On the flipside, the number of destinations that members consider appropriate from a safety and security perspective has declined, further limiting choices. This also has had the effect of increasing competition for "prime" convention locations.

The result is that venues have become increasingly demanding, sometimes leading the cynical association executive to wonder just who is the client and who is supposed to be offering a service. Venues sell themselves as one of the Seven Wonders of the World, but their service often falls short. They seem to be convinced that the only reality is the one portrayed in their marketing materials, which unfortunately contains a totally subjective perspective. In the September issue of Association

Meetings International, Rob Spalding called for impartial evaluation and accreditation of meeting destinations. I can only say "hear, hear"! To counter this trend, associations depend on their networks of peers to gain perspectives on new sites that are likely to meet their needs. Third-party endorsements from trusted sources are essential to judge whether a destination can really deliver on its promises.

When they return to previous destinations, organizations can rely on their own memories, but a change of management can make all the difference at a venue. At IFA, we recently refused to sign a contract with a conference venue that had previously provided very satisfactory service. The new management proved completely intransigent during negotiations, despite our excellent reputation in the city as a client following an earlier conference. If they were so unwilling to make concessions to win our business, we could not imagine how inflexible they would be once the contract was signed. To the delight of their competitors, who felt that this attitude reflected poorly on the destination overall, we stood our ground and refused to do business with the venue. The venues we did use for that event provided excellent service, and we had an extremely successful meeting.



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On other occasions, we have been able to get around difficulties with a venue by leveraging our relationship with the regional office of large convention hotels. Indeed, since IFA has an imperative to rotate its meetings around the globe, specific venues see us as one-off customers, but their corporate colleagues understand our importance as a long-term customer at the group level. This gives us more weight at the bargaining table. For smaller associations that have fewer opportunities to build relationships with specific venues or groups, destination management companies can be invaluable allies. On behalf of their clients, they are repeat customers, and the volume of business that they bring to venues makes it easier for them to obtain attractive terms. Working with such companies does entail additional costs, but it can greatly reduce stress and risk while increasing effectiveness and the quality of the overall conference package.

Good negotiating skills and creativity are important for associations as they strive to come out on top in destination management. Sometimes you will still be stuck with black as the only possible colour, but at least you can secure the accessories that make that "choice" acceptable.