



The competition gets fiercer

What is the opinion of foreign PCOs, Convention Bureaus and international associations regarding the Netherlands as a congress venue? Angelique Lombarts and Nicolette van Erven consulted some of the parties concerned and got quite a lot of feedback.

This was presented in six discussion theses to the participants of the fourth Congress by design Debate which was held in the Nationaal Militair Museum at Soest. The general message was clear: the competition is getting fiercer and the Dutch congress sector will have to better present itself, if it does not want to miss out.

MATERIAL FEATURES

The first question/thesis chairperson Angelique Lombarts asked the foreign parties, was about the main

AT THE TABLE:

- Chair: Angelique Lombarts, AloAconsultancy
- Eric Bakermans, NBTC
- Monique André de la Porte, Utrecht Convention Bureau
- Bart Klaver, Den Haag Marketing
- Joyce Wittelaar, Rotterdam Partners
- Marc Horsmans, Amsterdam Marketing
- Marlies Steinebach, Amsterdam RAI
- Kirsten Vosmer, World Forum Den Haag
- Vera Gouw, Nationaal Militair Museum
- Jeanette van Namen, JvN Congresmanagement
- Nicolette van Erven, Congress by design
- Monique de Brabander, Congress by design

reason for choosing the Netherlands as venue for the organisation of a congress. Apparently, the material reasons were decisive, with an important role for the infrastructure. The excellent accessibility of the cities, the vicinity of airports with connections to a large number of destinations. An other material factor was the high level of quality of the hotels. Also mentioned was

the fact that many cities have sufficient international appeal and dynamics. Eric Bakermans was not surprised. "Each developed country has these facilities to win congresses and other large-scale meetings. The attendance of a sufficient number of delegates is also important, but certainly not unique for the Netherlands." "This result makes me proud", said Marlies Steinebach. "The material reasons in the form of facilities and products must be adequate to be able to realise a congress. Obviously, we more than meet these requirements."

EMPHATIC FACULTY

The attendees mentioned an other issue: immaterial aspects, including areas like hospitality, emphatic faculty and understanding of the nature of the business would, for the parties, constitute a reason to not choose for The Netherlands. Steinebach recognised this. "I know that concrete mistakes have been made in this field. I admit that in the past I also underestimated this process. To name a specific case: I had been quoting for five years. When the end of the bid came into sight, it went wrong because we assumed we were going to win. We underestimated the process. What is also not really helpful, is the self-confidence we sometimes display, which sometimes can wrongly be interpreted as arrogance." Bart Klaver agreed: "Apart from the fact that we come across as rather direct, we are also quite outgoing. This is also apparent when we attend trade shows and talk to everybody. On the one hand, this is our strength, but on the other I can imagine that this creates a forceful, almost arrogant image to the public." According to Bakermans, this does not have to be a problem when approaching the corporate market, but in general, the association market is a bit more demure. There, you must remain in constant touch right until the end of the bidding procedure. "At the end of the line, one person can spoil it all. You must certainly not underestimate this person." Steinebach agreed: "Self-assurance in itself can help you in the discussion with the congress organiser. But a board with which no personal contact was established can not appreciate an attitude that is too laconic or amicable. You really have to watch this."



Marc Horsman

QUANDARY

Horsmans agreed, but also knows from experience that clients will not take advice. "And then you are in a quandary. As destination, you want to discuss the various possibilities with the client, but this does not work when this party is not prepared to listen to you but does tell you exactly what to do. You must work this out together."

Kirsten Vosmer recognised this: "Sometimes a client is surprised when I ask what the congress is all about. That is no great basis for a discussion. Because although you may have all material facilities in perfect order, if you do not know what the theme of the congress is, you can not adapt these to perfectly suit the event."

"I sometimes see that the client has not considered certain aspects of the event", Klaver indicated. "Or that within the association, there is a certain problem which can be revealed by means of direct questions. This may be regarded as inquisitive, nosy, but we just want to have a clear picture."

APPROACHING THE CLIENT

How to approach an association in a bid procedure and the arrangements for a congress is and remains a delicate process. The attendees admit that they have gained some experience in this field, but also indicate that there is room for improvement in the sector, certainly compared to the international competition. Jeanette van Namen also works as



Joyce Wittelaar

PCO for international clients, and thanks to her extensive experience she could write a book about it. "These experiences vary from non-verbal communication like 'O, they are here already' to discussions on things that are totally irrelevant. If the Netherlands do not want to miss out, attention must really be paid to this." Klaver: "I once had to take over a guided tour. A junior sales representative making a personal phonecall during that tour, does not create a very good impression. Consequently, I had to repair the damage afterwards." "At one location you get a full, hospitable reception, at the next they are obviously not well prepared for my arrival", said Nicolette van Erven. "In many other countries you get a royal reception."

"It is partly because of this that we have developed a sales training for junior staff", Horsmans said. "The training offers information on how to sell your destination, how best to collaborate, but also which role the various parties play, like PCOs, DMCs. For the average sales person, this is not always obvious."

POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

Klaver opined that making a good impression also depends on the involvement of the local politics. "A delegation traveling to Bogota, is received by the Prime

Minister. Here in the Netherlands a mayor or city council member does not always realise what impact he or she can have on a reception. Rolling out the red carpet is not always in the DNA." Horsmans: "Also important is the way a delegation is received. We consider it amusing when the deputy mayor arrives on bicycle, but a German delegation will not appreciate this."

Steinebach: "On the one hand, the politics realise the importance of congresses or a city, but just supplying a large sum of money is hardly sufficient. The mayor or city council member must also be personally involved." "Fortunately mr Abouthaleb (Mayor of Rotterdam, ed.) is very much aware of this", Wittelaar stated. "He has indicated that, together with all stakeholders, he wants to pay more attention to the port as USP for water-related congresses. This immediately alerted the network related to the port. When a mayor makes such a statement, it mobilises the entire city."

It is obvious that partly because of the immaterial shortcomings, associations do not opt for the Netherlands as the destination for their congress. Monique André de la Porte indicated that it would help if she knew the exact reason for this. "The Convention Bureaus for one would be grateful if they could receive a bit more feedback from the associations. But often no response





Nicolette van Erven



Angelique Lombarts

is given." According to Lombarts, this might be caused by cultural differences. "Dutchmen are rather direct, but a Belgian will try to find an other way to make clear that something is not up to his standards. This, by the way, applies to a great many cultures. It would help to use an independent person to make an assessment." "I once organised a site inspection for a large group of Belgian meeting planners, and had them state independent comments on this afterwards. They were not so demure then, because they were extremely critical about things like the locations, but especially about the food."

NATURAL LINK

The third theme was discussed. This had to do with the fact that a natural link with the congress's nature is important to the choice of a destination. The presence of a leading scientist in the board of an international association is also helpful. Is the congress sector sufficiently aware of the natural connections present, and are these made to good use?

Bakermans: "As a party in the congress sector, you should certainly be aware of the scientific developments so you can also approach people for a congress; nowadays this is done more often than before. Although no congress will come to the Netherlands purely for the country itself. It is always a joint pro-



Bart Klaver

Eric Bakermans



ject of the city, the venue and the other stakeholders." "The problem is partly the lack of time and money for research to explore this further", Klaver said. "That is why now, the link often stays superficial. Regarding The Hague, I opt for the existing profile like 'The city of Peace and Justice'. Fortunately, the city council has given Den Haag Marketing more money we can use to do research. But I would like to see the general profile of The Hague more pronounced, giving us more scope to present ourselves to the city as a well founded connection in the corporate area."

Wittelaar saw a growing involvement of the parties in Rotterdam. "As a destination, you hold a strong position if all stakeholders, political, corporate and educational, maintain good relations and are aware of the others' activities. Then you can really present a city."

TRANSPARENCY

An other issue that was discussed, was that the transparency regarding the costs should be improved. Bakermans thought that the locations, among other factors, could contribute to this. "Sometimes an association wants to receive a quotation with a final amount. But if this results in a participation price per person, I still do not know what I will get. Or a wrong offer is made that does not cover the demands of the association."

Steinebach did not recognise this problem. "On the contrary: you see that foreign locations are relatively cheap, but consequently, all sorts of costs are added. The last couple of years I get more and more positive feedback on the Netherlands, because we do make clear what we

deliver, and that what we deliver is of high quality." Bakermans agreed: "In southern European countries government buildings are often made available. But if you get something for free, you actually have no right to complain. Including when afterwards, you have to pay extra for all kinds of things."

Horsmans stated that more transparency in communication might also be helpful. "There are always two sides to the story. If one party sets hard demands, the other party can not always perfectly meet these. If the demanding party is stubborn, it will not work. Much better would be if you look for each other's weaknesses and make each other stronger."

SPONSORING

The fifth thesis was about sponsoring. A financial contribution or funding in kind plays an increasingly important role in awarding a congress. Players in the sector should be clear about the possibilities and include this in the budget.

"You see this happen in lots of sectors, not just in congresses", Lombarts explained. "It also has to do with associations who are struggling to attract and keep members. I am very curious about the way the Dutch sector handles this and how you can make sure that it stays transparent."

"This is how it is done in The Hague, and it more and more becomes standard procedure", Vosmer indicated, "although it concerns a very small part of the congress budget. Speaking for myself, I would rather do something extra that complements the client's demands." "A

client can certainly appreciate a monetary contribution”, said Monique de Brabander. “Exactly the fact that cities like Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague have a promotion fund, is considered an added value compared to other cities. This can really win a client for you.”

“I think it is a nice gesture to use a contribution in the form of a subsidy to, for instance, invite people who otherwise are unable to attend”, said André de la Porte. “In that respect, we prefer to be active regarding contributions”, Steinebach added. “Think about arranging visums, pointing out certain regulations, opening doors that otherwise remain closed.”



Joyce Wittelaar

POSITIVE IMAGE

Concluding, Lombarts asked the attendees how the image people have of the Netherlands and its cities can be made more positive. “It boils down to the fact that you must keep on investing in hospitality”, Bakermans said. “Here, around this table, this realisation seems obvious, but this also applies to the rank and file and the next generations. We have an important role in this.”

Steinebach: “You may have had a good training, but especially with the younger generation the attitude is often too amicable, too fraternising. The way people are addressed is very important. If, in the presence of an association, you find a subject not very interesting, it is not done to check your email under the table.”

“I am glad to hear that the suggestions offered in the field of politics, culture and society regarding sensitivity are embraced by the Dutch congress sector. Fortunately, our shortcomings are recognised, so we can work on this together”, said Lombarts.



Jeannette van Namen