



BY CHRISTINA PAPPAS



## Staying Ahead Of Demographic Changes

**G**one are the days when conference rooms and hotel meeting spaces were filled with middle-aged men, basic banquet food and minimal technology. As much as countries differ, research shows there are major similarities in demographic

changes occurring around the globe. These changes, which we have already begun to see, will continue over the next 50 years and directly affect the global meeting- and event-planning industry.

The largest global demographic change is the rapid growth in the world's population, which is forecast to reach 8.3 billion in 2030. Life expectancy is projected to increase in most of the world, and households and families are becoming more diverse. All of this will affect the meetings industry in a number of ways.

Around the world, we're finding that the meeting attendee population includes an increasing number of women, a more diverse community and much older attendees than we have seen in the past.

With more women travelers, a high priority on their list will be **additional security**. If you are arranging accommodations and expect women who are traveling alone, think ahead and ask the appropriate security questions at your hotel of choice. Additionally, meeting topics and flexible formats will be shaped by the growing number of females traveling to meetings and conferences.

Increased diversity makes it especially important to know your attendees. What **cultures and religions** are rep-

resented in the group you are planning for? Are any holiday observances taking place during the time of your program? Does your group comprise people with specific dietary restrictions? For example, the basic sweet and salty snacks or a hot buffet serving chicken or beef are no longer meeting delegates' expectations. Chefs will need to be more creative and flexible with their offerings. These are all things to keep in mind during the planning stages.



The older generation can impact meeting logistics as well as your meeting format. Older attendees will look for **accessibility** and present more specific needs in traveling, hotel accommodations and around the meeting space. But the implications extend significantly beyond getting around; they affect the meeting format, even the credentials and demographics of the speakers and presenters.

As one generation continues to re-

main in the workforce, however, we must also think of the new, younger generation that is just entering. Millennials thrive in a fast-paced environment and are more comfortable with technology and social media. This demographic change is a hurdle for meeting planners. Generations think differently and have different expectations. To keep ahead of the game, you'll need to focus: What is important for each type of attendee? What is the best way to reach them and keep them engaged? **Customization** at meetings and trade shows will continue to grow in importance in order to capture and retain the different generations.

Also, with the increasing use of social media and technology, a different type of attendee is starting to come into play around the world — the **virtual attendee**. With busy schedules and advancements in technology, attendees, presenters, keynote speakers and others may opt out of physically attending the program. Innovations such as face-to-face conference calling from multiple locations and Skype allow this to happen whether attendees are in close proximity or across seas and time zones. Even without their physical presence, it is important to capture these virtual attendees. Consider using social media to replicate the experience and engagement that occurs on site. Host a hybrid event that combines a "live," in-person event with a "virtual," online component.

Every meeting and event planner's goal is to execute a seamless program and have the client and attendees leave happy, satisfied and thinking positively about the experience. Anticipate these demographic changes. Know whom you are dealing with, and do your research. The more you know, the better! ■

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