

International Meetings



BY CHRISTINA PAPPAS



The FAQ List

Even the most seasoned meeting planner will, at times, encounter new challenges, questions and problems when planning a meeting abroad. This list of frequently asked questions is designed to help you navigate these unforeseen issues that

sometimes arise. Remember, international meetings have tremendous potential to grow your business, but small errors can end up costing big bucks. So feel free to reach out to me regarding questions large and small.

I'm worried about losing money due to exchange rate fluctuations. When should I sign contracts?

There is certainly risk involved, especially when dealing with large contracts, as slight per capita price increases can dramatically impact your costs. However, this risk can largely be avoided. First, ask your suppliers if they will negotiate in guaranteed U.S. dollar rates or fix an exchange rate at the beginning of the negotiation process. While you may not benefit from rock-bottom prices, this will save you the headache of having to think about the issue any further.

If you cannot get this guarantee, or if you're seeking to limit costs, you will need to monitor exchange rates daily and sign your contract when the rate appears to be at a low point. Sites like oanda.com give long-term rate estimates, from which you can determine when to sign contracts and build attendee fee structures. But since these rates are just predictions, consider giving yourself a buffer of 5 to 10 percent

to avoid any unexpected variances.

I have bulky materials to get to the meeting site. What's the best way to do this?

While it would be nice to create all essential materials just steps from the conference venue, in most venues this is simply not practical. Shipping overseas requires careful planning; it simply can't happen overnight, especially with large materials. Be prepared to wait at least one to two weeks, depending on size, for your materials to arrive.

Moreover, overseas shipping costs, before customs costs are even factored in, are often double the fees paid domestically. Your packages will likely be subject to security screenings and other inspections by customs, which can cause significant hiccups if you've failed to label your materials properly or have ignored guidelines provided by your international shipping partner.

In short, make sure you get cost and delivery estimates long before your shipping deadlines, and ensure that all boxes are packed and labeled properly.

Are there any extra costs I should be aware of when planning a meeting overseas?

Yes! While there are plenty of advantages to holding meetings overseas, you will need to account for a variety of costs not faced domestically.

First, many countries charge a value-added tax, which can be as high as 25 percent on goods and services purchased in country. Second, in the U.S., the cost for booking a meeting room is usually waived as a courtesy to the meeting planner. Abroad, this is not

the case, so expect to pay for the meeting room(s), even if food and beverage and lodging are purchased as well. Third, travel costs for your guests, yourself and any materials you plan to ship tend to be much higher, perhaps even double that paid for domestic travel.

Finally, as with any group event, pay attention to attrition allowances when booking

hotel blocks; you don't want to end up paying for empty rooms.

Unfortunately, there is no legitimate way to avoid these extra costs. However, you can best deal with them by making yourself aware of any hidden costs associated with the country you will be visiting and factoring them into your budget from the beginning.

How and when should I schedule my meeting?

The most important part of any conference or meeting is making sure that delegates actually show up. To ensure this happens, consider the length, timing

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page. Beyond that, the meeting professional can see which devices downloaded the app, when app usage (engagement) was high and low, which session descriptions were viewed, which sessions and speakers were most popular, which sponsor banners were clicked, and who's talking about what booths or sponsors.

Data generated at all points in the event cycle is vital to future meeting planning, specifically to:

1. Evaluate marketing activities and revise messaging to improve event promotion.
2. Adjust session topics, room assignments and setups.
3. Negotiate projected bandwidth.



Users always ask for "simpler" and "easier to manage," said Jonah Wolfram, communications manager, EventMobi. So make smart layouts a priority.

4. Focus on topics of interest and quality speakers/presentations.
5. Measure return on investment/objective for sponsors and exhibitors.

One app, multiple events?

The short answer is yes, especially for similar meetings throughout the year. *Example:* After one EventMobi client received extensive training in the client manager system, it recognized

that the app's scalability and ease of use could be used, not just for an annual event and a leadership summit, but for other meetings and activities (such as sharing sales documents on new products or providing a personal app to top

clients for their visits).

"Theoretically, you can save money, but you lose something," Briggs cautioned. "You may not be able to include all the specific information, because the views become too complicated. It can bring down the experience, and I'm a big fan of keeping the audience engaged." ■



One web-enabled app from EventMobi was used to send attendees a templated notification so they could view in their e-mail an end-of-day recap with a link to a highlight clip.

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and schedule of the program.

Remember that it takes longer to travel to an international meeting, so an event that is short may not be deemed worthwhile by attendees who need to travel a day on either end to get to and from the destination. Also, examine where your attendees are from and what holidays they will likely observe. Just as you wouldn't attend a meeting on Thanksgiving, don't schedule your East Asian collaborative event in the middle of Chinese New Year celebrations. Finally, the evening of day one may not be the best choice for a major reception, as many travelers will be weary from jet lag.

It may seem a cliché, but always put

yourself in the shoes of your potential attendees and consider whether you'd view this as a worthwhile experience.

I want to hold a meeting overseas, but I'm having trouble nailing down the details. What local resources can help me finalize my plans?

Local businesses and governments are just as eager to have your business as you are to bring it to them. Therefore, local officials can often be your strongest allies in planning your meeting. Just like at home, the local convention and visitors bureau or chamber of commerce can be very helpful. Similarly, the Association of Destination

Management Executives (adme.org) is a great resource for finding a good destination management company with local connections.

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These tips — although just a primer — should put you well on your way to planning your meeting abroad. But there are plenty of other issues to consider, including cultural and language differences, customs and visa issues, hotel booking and contract negotiation, payment collection, and crisis prevention. In short, while there is much to be done, a long lead time and careful planning will ensure that you can tackle any challenges you encounter. ■