

International Meetings



BY CHRISTINA PAPPAS



Differences In Marketing

At times I've been challenged by meeting professionals who want to know: Is there really a difference between marketing domestic and international meetings? Other than change in location and maybe a different language being spoken,

when you get right down to it, they ask, isn't marketing a meeting the same no matter where you are? The answer is always pretty much the same: No!

With our economy rapidly globalizing, many companies are increasingly holding meetings and conferences around the world. However, with 196 countries; countless languages spoken; and hundreds of borders, time zones, cultural and business differences — not to mention entry requirements and other logistical issues — marketing an international meeting can be a daunting task. But don't worry! I've compiled a few useful tips and steps on how to make the leap from marketing a domestic meeting to an international one in no time.

Do your research. It goes without saying that the key to a successful meeting — no matter where it's held — is to do your research. While it may not be as pertinent when preparing for a domestic meeting, when putting on conferences outside the U.S. it's extremely important to research time zone differences, exchange rates, major holidays, dates of other citywide events and general world news to ensure that your event does not have any schedule conflicts.

Establish lead time. Marketing a meeting or conference outside the U.S.

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generally takes a lot longer. Make sure you give yourself a lot of **prep time** to deal with any unforeseen roadblocks, delays or hitches. Expect extensive contracts, negotiations and travel planning to take a great deal of time. This means you need to reach out to meeting attendees early to inform them about all of the various regulations surrounding international travel. Visit the U.S. State

spected in the execution of the event — from start and end times to serving alcohol during lunches, incorporating local themes and customs in the social events, which colors to use in décor, and much more. However, recognizing and accommodating cultural differences in the marketing of the event is also important.

Example: Hierarchical business structure differs among cultures. In India, an employee would automatically address an older executive as "sir," as opposed to the U.S. custom of addressing colleagues by their first names regardless of age or title. Keep this in

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Department's website (state.gov) for an in-depth, international traveling checklist, including everything from passport and visa information to travel alerts and requirements by country. This can be a helpful tool for attendees preparing for international travel.

Understand cultural differences. Many meeting professionals recognize that cultural differences need to be re-

mind if your e-blasts or mailings are customized with attendees' names.

Also consider punctuality. **Example:** In Scandinavian cultures, time is viewed as very critical. If a train is running just a minute late, there will be a palpable tension on the platform. However, in countries closer to the equator, time is not always as critical. Keeping these

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about and examples of Pecha Kucha, see pechakucha.org; for a humorous video explaining the correct way to pronounce Pecha Kucha, see <http://bit.ly/14QPIF>.)

■ **Ignite.** An Ignite is like a Pecha Kucha on steroids. Instead of 20 images shared for 20 seconds per image, an Ignite is 20 images shared for 15 seconds per image for a blistering five-minute presentation. As with Pecha Kucha, the challenge is on the presenters to tell a compelling story using the most appropriate images within the time allowed. It's also worth noting that not every kind of content lends itself to these short formats. (For more about Ignite, see igniteshow.com.)

■ **Story Slam.** A story slam is similar to

a poetry slam, with which you may be more familiar. Storytelling is perhaps our oldest art form. This format allows participants five minutes to tell a story, usually following a chosen theme. No notes are allowed, and the stories must be told, not read. Storytelling competitions are popping up in cities around the United States, including New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, but the appeal of stories is universal, and everyone can tell one. They are ideal vehicles for sharing information because they tend to connect with us on an emotional level. And what we connect with emotionally usually stays with us longer and supports more change. (For more about StorySLAMs, see themoth.org.)

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Keep in mind that these alternative

presentation formats don't work in every situation. Generally speaking, the more complex the content, the more these types of participatory formats make sense. Also, because these formats are new and different for presenters as well as audience members, they require skill, expertise and especially time to implement and execute well. Presenters need to rethink how they organize and present content for maximum effect.

Finally, and most importantly, the ultimate measure to determine if these new formats are successful is this: Are people learning more efficiently and effectively? Because if meeting participants aren't retaining more information from your formal educational programs and applying it back to their jobs, everyone is just wasting time. ■

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divergent views in mind can be very helpful when promoting your meeting, because attendees' anticipation of when they will receive promotional and registration materials for events can differ widely. And don't be discouraged if those attendees living in countries where time is not always as critical are late registering. It's not because they're not interested, it's because what might be considered late in one country is early in another!

It also may be necessary to utilize different forms of **communication** for various cultures. When making contact with U.S. suppliers in preparation for a meeting, it may be appropriate to send an email. In other countries, however, information is transmitted differently. Some cultures prefer email; some prefer more personal forms of communication, such as a letter or personal phone

call. Some cultures prefer a lot of information all at once, while others don't.

Think about the communication barriers present — a translator or interpreter may be needed. Avoid jargon, sports analogies or colloquialisms — clear language works best when working with international contacts and resources. The bottom line here is to be flexible in your communications.

Reach out to contacts and resources. Many times, the key to a successful international meeting is utilizing local resources. Relying on local contacts, such as the regional convention and visitors bureau, is crucial in helping to make the right connections to pull off a well-coordinated meeting. Establishing such initial contacts will facilitate other key relationships and develop credibility. Other great resources for help in planning international meet-

ings are local chapters of Meeting Professionals International (mpiweb.org), the Professional Convention Management Association (pcma.org), ASAE-The Center for Association Leadership (asaecenter.org), ICCA-International Congress and Convention Association (iccwORLD.com) and other professional organizations. They can steer you in the right direction for suppliers as well as help you understand local customs and taboos. They also may have resources to help market and promote your meeting that you wouldn't otherwise have.

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Whether it's your first time marketing an international meeting or your 50th, these guidelines will help ensure a successfully researched, organized and culturally sensitive meeting. If all goes well, attendees will be eagerly awaiting your next meeting abroad! ■