

# Abroad APPEAL

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Your company sells widgets. You want to build an incentive plan for your salespeople. So you decide to send everyone who sells more than a million widgets on an all-expense-paid trip to Paris. But how do you make your employees feel great and at the same time do it at a price you can afford? Brian Stevens, president and CEO of Conference Direct, a meetings-resource company in Los Angeles, runs into that scenario often. At some point, Stevens says, the client will lean back and say, "It's nice to be looking at the Eiffel Tower, but what am I getting from it?"

It's the kind of question anyone planning an event outside of the U.S. might be hearing these days. With airline prices soaring, the dollar weakening, and new security issues popping up weekly, how can you get the best bang for your buck?

### Whys and Wherefores

The answers go like this. First, know the objectives of the meeting. It's the number one goal—or should be—for all planners. Stevens ticks off three leading possibilities: introducing products or services into a new foreign market, uniting association members or workers from around the world, or training employees. Incentive trips—like the Paris widget event—also rank high on the list, says Michael Gehrisch, president and CEO of Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI).

Next, be realistic about those objectives—and the budget for them—when the planning begins, says Julie Johnson, director of events and incentives for Lennox International Worldwide Heating & Cooling in Dallas, who plans half a dozen international events each year. And expect

roadblocks. A report from Meeting Professionals International (MPI) and American Express says that the top five internal challenges the meetings industry is running into these days are workload, budget changes, shifting goals, organizational growth, and shorter lead times. The top external trends on the list include the state of the economy, travel costs, the rising price of oil, changes in technology, and increasing globalization.

"It may be that you can't do everything," says Johnson. "What would attendees perceive as a good value and yet not offer them the world?" For an event she ran in Prague, Johnson teamed up with a local destination-management company and added tours that attendees could buy on their own. "I would have liked to include more things," Johnson says, "but they're there

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and want to see the sights, so we just made it easier.”

Choosing a location—and doing it as far in advance as possible—is the next most important step. Many organizations still want or need to go outside the U.S., and an international meeting doesn’t necessarily mean a higher price tag. A trip to Mexico or Canada, says Stevens, could be more economically feasible than one to, say, Chicago. “Some for-profit companies whose employees and assets are concentrated in the U.S. tend to move meetings around to show that they’re not just big American-only companies,” he adds. “They are generally looking for a safe, easy place to get to, where English is spoken and it’s not going to cost them an arm and a leg. Not-for-profit organizations commonly will move meetings overseas to show the membership in those countries that they’re inclusive.”

### Popular Places

Overall, says MPI, offshore meeting travel will change little this year from 2005. While MPI client-side planners—i.e., those from corporations, associations, and government or nonprofit agencies—will hold the bulk of their meetings in the U.S, they expect to take 5% of their events to Canada and another 5% to Europe; 1% each to Central and South America; and 3% to Asia. A readership survey by The Meetings Group (publisher of *Corporate Meetings & Incentives* and other trade journals) reveals the most popular 2006 overseas destinations are Europe (38%), Canada (16%), Mexico (16%), the Caribbean (15%), Asia (8%), and other locales (7%).

Canada is high on the list because it’s close, has a favorable exchange rate, and attendees don’t need to do extra paperwork to get there. Vancouver, British Columbia, is now a prime choice because it’s the host city of the 2010 Winter Olympics, says Mark S. Andrew, chairman of the international board of directors for MPI. Americans are flocking to Central and South America, he says, partly because the dollar is strong. Europe seems to be a perpetual

## Special Advertising Feature

favorite, perhaps because the cultures are most like ours, but London is “coming back into the fold,” he says, after experiencing a slump be-

cause of perceived security issues.

Lennox’s Johnson—who says, “Domestically, we’ve kind of run out of destinations”—looks for unusual

## The CMI Paragon Awards



*Readers of Corporate Meetings & Incentives cast their ballots each year for the hotels and conference centers that best handled their meetings and incentive programs. Here are the 2006 winners.*

### HOTELS

<b>Bellagio</b> LAS VEGAS, NV
<b>The Beverly Hilton</b> BEVERLY HILLS, CA
<b>Boca Raton Resort &amp; Club</b> BOCA RATON, FL
<b>The Borgata Hotel Casino &amp; Spa</b> ATLANTIC CITY, NJ
<b>The Broadmoor</b> COLORADO SPRINGS, CO
<b>Caribe Hilton</b> SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO
<b>Cheeca Lodge &amp; Spa</b> ISLAMORADA, FL
<b>Disney’s Grand Floridian Resort &amp; Spa</b> LAKE BUENA VISTA, FL
<b>Fairmont Le Chateau Frontenac</b> QUEBEC CITY, CANADA
<b>Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach</b> CANCÚN, MEXICO
<b>Garden City Hotel</b> GARDEN CITY, NY
<b>Gaylord Texan Resort &amp; Convention Center</b> GRAPEVINE, TX
<b>Grand Geneva Resort &amp; Spa</b> LAKE GENEVA, WI
<b>Grand Wailea Resort Hotel &amp; Spa</b> MAUI, HI
<b>The Greenbrier</b> WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, WV
<b>Half Moon</b> MONTEGO BAY, JAMAICA
<b>Hyatt Regency Lake Las Vegas Resort, Spa &amp; Casino</b> HENDERSON, NV
<b>JW Marriott Cancún Resort &amp; Spa</b> CANCÚN, MEXICO
<b>JW Marriott Starr Pass Resort &amp; Spa</b> TUCSON, AZ
<b>Kingsmill Resort &amp; Spa</b> WILLIAMSBURG, VA
<b>The Lodge at Torrey Pines</b> LA JOLLA, CA
<b>Loews Miami Beach Hotel</b> MIAMI BEACH, FL
<b>Marco Island Marriott Resort, Golf Club &amp; Spa</b> MARCO ISLAND, FL
<b>MGM Grand</b> LAS VEGAS, NV
<b>Millennium Broadway Hotel</b> NEW YORK, NY

<b>Mohegan Sun</b> UNCASVILLE, CT
<b>Moon Palace</b> CANCÚN, MEXICO
<b>The Fairmont Orchid</b> KOHALA COAST, HI
<b>Westin Grand Bahama</b> GRAND BAHAMA ISLAND, BAHAMAS
<b>Paradisus Puerto Rico</b> SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO
<b>The Peabody Orlando</b> ORLANDO, FL
<b>Rosen Centre Hotel</b> ORLANDO, FL
<b>The Sanctuary at Kiawah Island</b> KIAWAH ISLAND, SC
<b>Sanibel Harbour Resort &amp; Spa</b> FORT MYERS, FL
<b>Town and Country Resort &amp; Convention Center</b> SAN DIEGO, CA
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### CONFERENCE CENTERS

<b>The Banff Center</b> BANFF, ALBERTA, CANADA
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<b>Pacific Palms Conference Resort</b> INDUSTRY HILLS, CA
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spots around the world where people might not travel on their own but would want to visit, such as Turkey, the Czech Republic, and Panama. What's hot today, though, might have cooled off by next month, so if you're planning meetings, you need to stay on top of the market. Trade magazines and the Internet are helpful tools, but the meeting-planning industry thrives on three words: network, network, network. "Word of mouth is one of the best resources we have," says Pamela Wynne, manager of corporate meeting planning for Educational Testing Service (ETS), in Princeton, N.J. "I want to know, Where have other people had successes?"

**Not Invented Here**

Networking is important not just for choosing a site but for every aspect of planning. Michele Snock says she would not be where she is today—which is head of Cisco Systems' global meeting-services department—without it. "Sharing best practices is critical," says Snock, whose staff manages more than 1,300 corporate meetings each year

*The **TOP FIVE** internal challenges affecting the meetings industry.*

- 1. Workload increases
- 2. Budget changes
- 3. Shifting goals
- 4. Organizational growth
- 5. Shorter lead times

(about 800 in the U.S. and 500 overseas). "You never want to reinvent anything. Learn how someone else did it and tweak it for your own. I belong to Meeting Competitive Advantage Forum, which includes 19 of my counterparts from some of the largest companies in the country. I learned from my colleague at HP to use the American Express Global Dollar Card to pay for individual meetings, which helps me leverage a partner and be more productive."

Once a location is nailed down, the local convention and visitors bureau (CVB) can help accomplish the goals outlined for the event. CVBs can assist in locating meeting and hotel space, arranging site inspections, dealing with local officials, and linking planners with suppliers and event planners who had successful meetings in that location. "For an event for 3,000 people in Montreal, the Canadian government gave us funds to translate major sessions from French to English," says Bonnie Wallsh of Bonnie Wallsh Associates LLC, in Charlotte, N.C. "I would not have known about that option if we hadn't been using the Canadian tourist office."

The London CVB, known as Visit London, placed 43 North American events in the British capital last year and expects that number to rise by 10% this year. Chris Lynn, its North American sales and marketing director, is based in New York City. Among the special services he has undertaken recently is securing VIP access to the Houses of Parliament for a group to dine with a lord. Visit London also says it offers a variety of ways to meet in the famously expensive city when on a tight budget.

Gehrisch of DMAI, the world's largest association of CVBs, adds that planners should know that in places like Europe, there are PCOs—private contracting organizations—that often work hand in hand with the CVB. "They might do all meeting logistics, facilities rentals, special events, and negotiate with hotels," he says. "The CVB will coordinate the relationship, so it would all appear pretty seamless to the meeting planner."

Other collaborations can be

*The **TOP FIVE** external challenges affecting the meetings industry.*

- 1. The state of the economy
- 2. Travel costs
- 3. The rising price of oil
- 4. Changes in technology
- 5. Increasing globalization

equally valuable. ETS, whose staff plans up to a dozen international meetings each year (plus 700 or so in the U.S.), has set up strategic partnerships with large hotel chains. "They help us plan meetings and we give them volume. We also like standardizations for processes like contracts—something to create efficiencies for both of us," says Wynne. "When choosing hotel partners in countries where we do business, we try and look for properties that have an English-speaking presence and concierge, even to help with little things like changes with an airline, finding taxis, and counseling our people on the safest places to go."

**On the Same Page**

But even though someone in another country speaks English, he or she might not understand American colloquialisms, says Patty Coen, president of Great Chicago Events. "Go back to formal English," she advises, "to make sure everyone is on the same page." And don't think everybody follows American customs either. You need to be familiar with the culture of the destination—and of the meeting's attendees. MPI has just started marketing a web-

based product called the Culture-Active Tool, which helps people conduct business abroad. Example: It points out that while U.S. businesspeople prefer one-on-one transactions, Chinese businesspeople like to negotiate in groups.

When it comes to actual customs, many planners suggest hiring a broker to hustle people and materials through the airport and deposit them at the meeting site. "A customs broker is worth his or her weight in gold," says Walsh. "This is not the place to cut funds." Canada sponsors two programs, Border to Show and Registered Conventions, which expedite materials and participants to events. Whether you're going to Canada or elsewhere, allow time for everything to reach its destination.

For tips on creating contingency plans and more, MPI has compiled a supplement called *Crossing the Pond: A Comprehensive Guide to Planning Meetings in Europe*, which can be found at [mpiweb.org/cms/mpiweb/MPI-content.aspx?id=5704](http://mpiweb.org/cms/mpiweb/MPI-content.aspx?id=5704). Another web resource, *The Meetings Group's Meeting Planner Survival Guide*, is at [meetingsnet.com/survivalguide](http://meetingsnet.com/survivalguide). Among the topics it covers is "Five Tips for Promoting Your Global Event."

There's also a section called "Return on Investment: The Bottom Line." Yes, a stellar site is important, and great speakers and hotels are crucial, but ROI is the name of the game when planning meetings, especially when they are held in pricy international locations. But equally as important as the fiscal return is the personal one. Mark Andrew of MPI puts it this way: "Now more than ever, companies are looking to make sure that everybody is walking away from an event saying, 'I'm smarter, more excited, and have better contacts because of that meeting. I'm also able to do my job much better.'" —Heidi Ernst

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