

Site Belgium – Dries Jacobus

Dries Jacobus of Borealis and Site Belgium President since a couple of months speaks from the heart about the main challenges that occupy him and his industry most.

“It is a fact that the past 18 months have been very hard for the industry and it is mostly because of an excellent 2008 that most are able to survive. One could say that the incentive industry was overlooked and left aside by most and times remain difficult.”

“Politicians and also partly the corporate market have difficulty in understanding the specialized and professional industry we represent. We are still thrown together in one basket with the other tourism and travel companies. Well, if it were my choice I would say we are not even a tourism industry; we are working on the whole in a marketing and communication environment. Travel is indeed part of our service, but we do much, much more than travel. It is also up to our industry to repeat this time and time again, but we have the disadvantage to work in a niche market and therefore our voice is not very loud...but brave nevertheless...!!”

“It is very clear that the market has changed, it is also clear that many companies/corporates take advantage of this situation. It is now up to the organizers to see to what degree they want to engage in a rat race.”

“I do see a very positive trend: the lead times for requests are once again getting longer! We are starting to get requests for 2012 which, until a couple of months ago, was unheard of as far as incentives are concerned. Another clear evolution from the clients’ side is that everybody is either overstressed and therefore needs everything today, or they have mellowed. People have become people again. We still have to deliver, but clients have become much more understanding.”

“It is clear that we have a competitive disadvantage as far as tax incentives are concerned. There is still no uniform (read clear) tax and VAT ruling. Who knows nowadays how to invoice for a mix of local and international clients who book via Paris for an event that takes place in the Middle East? What needs to be done about the invoice that needs to split the services for Belgians and foreigners? What’s up with VAT rules on incoming business for event companies and DMC’s? Even something fairly simple such as the lowering of the VAT in restaurants was a very difficult birth: 12% on food, but still 21% on beverages. One needs a special university degree to understand all this!”

“How is it possible that Belgian (regional, provincial, communal, etc..) instances have still not seen the light about the fact that they have to start working on a more international scale? A city like Bruges is no longer a competitor of Ghent or Ostend but of London, Paris or Amsterdam. Everybody is still fishing in the same little pond to try

and catch the larger of the small fishes, but in the meantime the other European cities run away with the real big catches. It is unacceptable that there are no debates about this, that no (large) investments are made and worse, that we, the industry, are not at all involved!”

“Congress and meeting facilities in the whole of Belgium (with a few notable exceptions) are rated way under the European average. This makes promoting a region double difficult, if not near to impossible...!

And that is the crux of the challenge at the end of the crisis. Come out stronger, don’t just survive. Have a vision and direction, don’t be a fire fighter...”

“I am proud to say that our industry has sustained very little loss, which is an illustration of our flexibility and resilience and of course our professionalism and know-how. It shows that our industry is growing up and maturing. NOW is the time to become real professionals in every sense of the word and show the market what our industry is really all about. These means producing better presentations, working along stricter budgets and minding all costs and choose more efficient ways of using our energy. We have had time to work on all these aspects, now the moment has come to adapt them. Adapt or die.”

“Together with this process of becoming more professional and giving the clients better service, it is now also the moment to review the system of commissions and management fees. Many different solutions are in use today but there is no clear line. I suggest that we, as an industry, together with the trade press, could set up a roundtable discussion on this subject. Let’s find out how we can come to some form of unity as we risk loosing our way.”

“The most important message to the government and the outside world today is the request to understand us and not always see a motivational event as an occasion for giving gifts & presents and extra-legal advantages. That is far too narrow minded. The output cannot always be measured in money. How about the improved relationship with a client or supplier? How about the information on competitors you received during an incentive? What about the long-term relationship building after an incentive? Surely, all that is more than worth the effort and may not be underestimated?”

“We most avoid at all cost a situation as exists in Holland where taxes up to 80% (!!) are charged. I call that “murder of an industry” no more, no less. What if tomorrow the price of bread, or hospital cost, or a beer would double? The papers would not be able to print all the reactions that measure would bring about and barricades would be put up at all street corners... But we have to accept it in our sector? I, for one, cannot agree with this situation.”

“Luckily we have not reached that point yet, but motivational events should be encouraged with tax reductions in order to be more competitive with the neighboring

countries, instead of being punished. Most of our incoming business comes from the surrounding countries. A tax reduction would result immediately in an increase of business to Belgium. That is the way to make a difference, definitely not with more taxes!”

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