

THE LATEST EVOLUTIONS IN INCENTIVE TRAVEL

A SITE Belgium networking and educational event

What will the future bring for incentive houses and incentive travel? Will there even still be incentive travel as we know it, or will it swiftly evolve into something else? What do venues, DMCs and incentive organisers need to change to adapt to the current and future market? Interesting questions for an interesting meeting. SITE Belgium invited three different speakers to talk about the topic from three different points of view.

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Holiday Inn Brussels Airport was not just the location for BBT Online's B2B Workshop on 15th January. No, before the festivities started, SITE Belgium held its first educational and networking event of the year in the hotel's grand meeting room. Quite a crowd had gathered early to be there, so the seats were basically all taken. After a short introduction by Frank Bouckaert (De Buck Agency), the newly elected SITE Belgium President, three speakers would talk about their views on the evolution of incentive travel now and in the years to come. Each of them came from a different branch of the industry.

For the hoteliers, Dion Maes (Holiday Inn Brussels Airport) was invited. The DMCs were represented by Hugo Slimbrouck (Ovation Global DMC) and Jan Samyn (Seauton) would speak for the incentive agencies. Let's find out what they had to say and whether they came to a mutual conclusion.

Personalised service and connectivity

Holiday Inn is an airport hotel and thus obviously less focused on incentive travellers (although they can organise a great event, as would be proven later that evening). This said, Dion Maes still had his say about what hotels needed to change to adapt to a quickly

evolving market. Business is becoming more and more tailor-made, which makes it progressively more difficult to sell standard package deals. This December, 60% of the hotel's business was specifically tailor-made for the client. This trend will not go away. To please the next generation of business and incentive travellers, personalisation has to go up even more.

Easy and reliable connectivity to the hotel's services from all of the client's own devices is a second factor that needs to be ensured – without any hustle or problems. The rise of Virtual Reality and the technologies that come with it could be an asset to hotels willing to incorporate this into their offer. It could help giving guests that extra bit of 'wow-experience'. Who knows? You might soon be able to check into a hotel in Brussels, and virtually look out over Montréal or Sydney when you look out the window. The possibilities are endless, but in the end it's all about triggering as much senses as possible. The complete experience is what counts.

New trends in incentives and events

Hugo Slimbrouck acknowledges that the event and incentive industry is changing. But these changes should be seen as opportunities to grow your business



Jan Samyn - Seauton

rather than problems. For example: the fact that we are all constantly connected to each other, allows the info that is shared on a conference to reach audiences outside of the venue and even on the other side of the world. Capture and encourage this stream of information, and you can use it as another way of selling. The same goes for recycling and the emergence of zero waste events. Embrace this new evolution, implement it on your events and become an expert on it to attract a new audience.

DMCs need to evolve if they don't want to become obsolete. They need to focus on what's important and valuable for the client. The access they have to the local market for example, the working experience with the local suppliers, the familiarity with local customs and the knowledge of truly unique and authentic experiences and venues. Uniqueness and authenticity is the new luxury these days.

New technology is a benefit, so use it to reply to questions swiftly, to suggest well-presented incentive programmes almost instantly and to adapt them efficiently when needed. Even more important and

really needed to survive is to understand the business of your clients. Talk to them and understand what they want and need before making your sale. Selling is more asking than telling.

Events and trips need to be personalised as well. Everyone is unique and this needs to be recognised. And all of your events should also tell a story with a beginning and an end – a story that is worth taking a picture of and sharing. Most important of all though, is not to forget that actual human contact is still the key factor for a successful event or incentive. The technology is a tool to be used, the human behind the technology is what really matters.

Are incentives dead?

'Incentives are dead: long live incentives!' These are the words Seauton's Jan Samyn started his presentation with. His company barely organises any incentive trips in the classical sense of the word any more – as in companies sending their employees on an expensive tropical trip as a reward. In 2003, 50% of Seauton's turnover was made on incentive like these. In 2018, it will be around 5%. This massive decrease would cause a



Clockwise from the left: Dion Maes (Holiday Inn), Hugo Slimbrouck (Ovation Global DMC)



New Site President Frank Bouckaert (De Buck)

SITE Belgium

SITE Belgium has a new board. President for 2018 will be Frank Bouckaert (De Buck Agency). Other board members are Jean-Pierre Cornelis, Sophie Coumont, Hugo Slimbrouck, Koenraad Pevénage and our very own Karin de Grauw.

SITE is the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence. It wants to serve as a source of expertise, knowledge and professional connections that will catapult and sustain professional growth, and help build the value of extraordinary motivational experiences worldwide.

www.sitebelgium.be

lot of people to panic. But if you know and feel change is coming, the best way to deal with it is to adapt to it before it is there. And this is exactly what they did.

Why did this percentage go down so drastically? According to Jan, it was because of the profile of his clients. A lot of them were multinationals in the pharmaceutical or automotive industry. Their industry had changed, as had the perception people had of it. Expensive company trips that serve no real practical purpose don't fly well with the public in times of crisis. Their European multinationals gradually switched from 100% incentive programs to content based programs with a semi spectacular look and budget friendly feel and a soft touch of professional fun.

Seauton worked with them, created new models for them, and evolved towards creating more content and education driven events for them, in close cooperation with the industry's associations. Content is always key these days: less trips, but more meetings, product launches for the press, seminars and congresses. It's

all about education and sharing information. Does this mean traditional incentives are going to be extinct in a couple of years? Not really. There are some market opportunities left. Small to medium sized companies often still go for the good old incentive trip (although the competition for these clients is ruthless). Asian, South-American and African companies are now looking for the big incentive programmes their European and US counterparts were booking 20 years ago.

The leisure market could be an opportunity as well. Groups of friends that have the money are looking for the same authenticity and special feeling of those traditional incentive trips, and are sometimes willing to pay for it. Despite these opportunities, it is inevitable that some agencies will disappear. Protectionism and conservatism never work. So be open-minded and find new strategic partners. The only other option is to find a new job.

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