

Crisis Phase 2 – Is there light at the end of the tunnel?

2009 has not been an easy year and this current year has not taken the best of starts. Nearly one year after we interrogated the different Presidents of the associations of our industry, we thought it was time to ask a few of them again for their opinion on...the crisis, because, unfortunately, the crisis is not over.

Are we looking at the light at the end of the tunnel or is it just a mirage? Here is what the 2 presidents of MPI Belgium (Meeting Professionals International) and BHA (Brussels Hotel Association) had to say.

Kathleen Bertier – President MPI Belgium, 2009–2011

At CONFEX (Feb, 23 – 25 2010) in London, I attended a seminar about industry trends by the huggable and ever upbeat Rob Davison, senior lecturer at the London based Westminster University. One slide explained how I feel about who will survive the crisis: “The supplier who offers exceptional value & service without compromising their sustainability credentials.”

This statement applies to my day job as director of congress bureau Meeting in Brugge as well as to my commitment as president of MPI Belgium chapter. I am interchanging hats constantly, as you will notice throughout this testimonial.

From day one in phase 1, I believe that this crisis offered new opportunities for growth. It was a time to take a good look at our strengths and identify ways to invest for the time beyond the crisis.

At MPI, an educational explored the crisis = opportunity issue at the time when the corporate market plummeted. During international trade shows IMEX & EIBTM, all of us looked for any information on how our sector was affected – and especially on how our business partners & colleagues were coping.

As a convention bureau with a PPS structure, I was happy that my team at Meeting in Brugge agreed to project a positive attitude at all times. We decided we would not indulge in gloom & doom messages, but would take positive action to show our partners we fundamentally believed in a bright meeting future for our city. After all, we did not lose our USP's overnight, did we?

Beautiful Bruges remained UNESCO world heritage site. Nothing had affected Brugge's walkability and its continued efforts on sustainability. Cultural happenings & plans were not affected and further investments were made in charming & professional hotel accommodation.

A convention bureau, or an association like MPI needs to project a confident image, looking at strengths, dealing with weaknesses and bending threats into opportunities. Keep the faith!

At Meeting in Brugge we took three initiatives to invest in our future as a convention bureau:

1. We applied for the DMAP accreditation – a quality label – with DMAI – destination marketing association.org to comply with procedures of the industry's standards on: mission, customer service, management, human resources, sales & marketing, technology, strategy, development & training. This accreditation belongs to the CVB and is valid for a duration of 4 years.
2. Cornerstone of our sales & marketing plan in 2009 was to encourage & further develop **individual** site visits and site inspections. The idea was to invite meeting planners to get to know our destination and show them what MiB can offer in terms of support. We want to be the first partner that comes to mind when someone at any time wants to organise an unusual conference in a one-of-a-kind destination: Brugge. These one-on-one no-strings-attached-visits are certainly labour intensive considering a staff of three, but this investment is compensated by the privilege of building a great long term relationship with our guest. In 2008 we conducted 52 site visits, in 2009 there were 90. With 15 visits in Jan & Feb 2010 we are well underway of reaching our new target of 100 this year!
3. I accepted to commit further to Meeting Professionals International by accepting to become the Belgium chapter's President, following in the footsteps of a charismatic Milo Vergucht. Building a strong & dedicated team, all volunteers, became a top priority. Soon the

need arose to match flamboyant ambitions & matchless enthusiasm with a strong reality check: we all have another job and some of us even have a life ! “if you need something done, ask a busy person”, is an idiom that applies to MPI Belgium.

When the going gets tough, the tough get going. When the opportunity arose to bid for the privilege of hosting the 1st Forum of Sustainability in the Meetings Industry to be held in June 2010, Meeting in Brugge did not hesitate: the conference innovative concept by Charles–Eric Vilain XIII, organised by MPI Belgium and with the wide support of other European Chapters and the industry, needed to come to Bruges.

The mission of the Forum is a PERFECT match with the vision of Beautiful Bruges on the sustainability issue. Surely, one must agree: I am one lucky person wearing two hats in perfect harmony while showing we do not compromise on sustainability credentials.

The official launch of the project as well as revealing the logo and opening registrations on the website is kept under wraps until MPI's teaser seminar during EMIF 2010. Make sure to visit EMIF to be in the know first. Meanwhile, follow the daffodils and mark your calendars: destination Brugge 27–29th June.

Patrick Bontinck – President BHA

How have the Brussels' hotels weathered the storm? The overall occupancy seems to have stabilized to acceptable levels although there are still big differences from month to month. For example: April & May are not looking well at all for the moment, but it is also a fact that bookings both for individuals and for groups, come in later and later. The biggest problem is the average room rate which took quite a hit over the past year and has great difficulty in restoring itself. It usually takes 3 to possibly 9 months for the average rate to stabilize after a crisis and this coupled to the fluctuating occupancies will make for a very difficult first semester in Brussels.

Once July 1st, when Belgium takes the Presidency of the EU, we foresee some stability not only in Brussels but also in the rest of Belgium. The second half of the year, barring unforeseen circumstances, should be good and should help bring 2010 up to the level of 2009, even if the start of 2010 will have been markedly less performing than the first months of 2009.

On the whole we see a change of mentality by the buyers: even more shopping around and very price conscious. Low cost is an expression that has also reached the hotel industry although in P. Bontinck's opinion there is still a market – be it smaller – for the luxury products.