

Top ten meeting and incentive tips and trends for hoteliers

Great Hotels Organisation, the London-based hotel sales and marketing alliance representing 3-5 star hotels under the brands **Great Hotels of the World**, **Special Hotels of the World** and **Metro Hotels** has announced its top ten meeting and incentive tips and trends for hoteliers.

1. Budgets are growing but still a deciding factor

The meeting and incentive market is slowly becoming more optimistic following a considerable contraction throughout 2009. Budgets are cautiously growing in comparison to last year and are predicted to increase further in 2011; however this is still very much a deciding factor when it comes to booking a venue. Many companies are again realising the importance of face-to-face meetings (corporate clients in particular) and the number of meetings, incentives or events organised through GHO's MICE desk have increased by 30% YTD in comparison to the same period two years ago, a figure forecasted to rise further in 2011.

2. ROI is even more important than ever

Proving return on investment (ROI) is a big challenge that is becoming increasingly important for buyers as companies start to invest again in meetings and incentives. Although budgets are slightly higher this year, they are highly scrutinised by CEOs and buyers need to prove that every penny spent has a recognised return. With this in mind, special offers and packages are becoming more popular as buyers look for value for money and added extras.

3. Shorter lead times

Shorter lead times are becoming a noticeable trend, often booked only a few months before the event is to take place. The lead times for events booked through GHO's venue-finding desk increased by 40 days in May 2010 – a difference of over seven weeks in comparison to the same period two years ago. Many companies are wary of booking too far in advance in the event of cancellation or postponement which in some cases is associated with hefty fees whereas some are simply taking advantage of favourable last minute rates and packages.

4. Relationships are key

There has never been a more important time to invest in face-to-face meetings between suppliers and buyers. Buyers with short lead times are more likely to go to suppliers with whom they have a good relationship as they can rely on them for a fast response and the need for flexibility. Suppliers who want to win business should be investing in face-to-face meetings and focusing on creating good working relationships with buyers.

Investing in Great Hotels Meeting Forums or Road Shows are both cost-effective ways of developing new relationships.

5. Flexibility and value for money

In an ever-changing market, buyers are looking for flexibility, added value without extra cost and fast responses to RFPs. Suppliers need to be flexible with a variety of deciding factors such as dates, price, cancellation and deposit procedures and payment options in order to stay ahead of the competition. Responding within 24 hours to a RFP is vital to create a good first impression and suppliers should work with the buyers in partnership to make sure the event can go ahead. Great Hotels Organisation offers "Your Event, Your Choice" - a promotion giving buyers flexibility and choice in order to help them plan a successful event.

6. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

CSR and environmental awareness continue to be hot topics for the meetings and incentives market. Many buyers are specifically seeking hotels that have addressed some elements of sustainability and green programmes as companies aim to reduce the environmental impacts associated with meetings.

7. Spa and golf not as important

With bigger but highly scrutinised budgets, buyers are focused on getting the most out of their money and on the bare essentials - with decreased attention on spa and golf facilities. The "no-frills" approach focuses on the basics and team-building activities, if any, are often incorporated into the body of the meeting with little or no time allocated for specifically for networking or incentive activities.

8. More business, less pleasure

During the height of the recession, many businesses cut down on pure incentive trips, focusing their budgets on business meetings. Incentives will be slowly coming back on the menu towards the end of 2010 and throughout 2011, albeit more discreetly than usual. The pre- and post-dinner networking activities traditionally incorporated into meetings are making a steady comeback.

9. Emerging destinations

Popular destinations for enquiries coming through GHO's MICE desk throughout the past year include Barcelona, Paris and Berlin. New destinations such as Tallin, Vilnius and Sofia are also growing in popularity as companies seek cost-effective venues in up-and-coming destinations.

10. Social media grows in importance

The world of social media is creeping into the meetings and incentive industry. Face-to-face contact is still seen as having the most value, but many buyers are utilising social media tools such as Tripadvisor to seek feedback on venues as well as developing relationships through Facebook with suppliers they've already met. Suppliers are also promoting their venues through Facebook and Twitter.