



The Conference market: all the fun of the fair

The UK conference and events market is now worth a massive £8bn. Hotels are still the number one location, but Bridget Baker is finding unusual venues and innovative facilities are becoming increasingly popular choices for clients

The development of meeting and convention facilities has long been seen as a key way of attracting high-spending visitors to a destination. Twenty-five years ago the largest purpose-built venues were often only found in seaside resorts. Now there is a huge choice of facilities allowing conference organisers to host their events in venues spanning all over the country.

According to the latest Meetings Industry Association's UK Conference Market Survey, hotels are by far the most popular choice of venue for holding corporate events. But with hotels accounting for three quarters of the market, this is just part of the story. Unusual venues including museums, theme parks, stately homes and sports stadiums now make up for 18 percent of demand.

Why has this happened? According to the latest estimates from the British Association of Conference Destinations the UK conference market was worth a massive £8bn last year. Statistics from the UK Tourism Survey show that conference delegates also spent around £99 per night compared to the £56 spent by leisure tourists. No wonder, then, that this source market is therefore very attractive to all kinds of venues and destinations.

As more pressures are placed on budgets in the current economic climate, the management at more unusual venues have recognised the opportunity to generate a new and lucrative income stream by hosting events. Whereas football stadiums were frequently deserted on non-match days, they can now be seen hosting meetings and functions. Museums and other visitor attractions offer an appealing backdrop for cocktail parties and product launches. In the past these events often had to be hosted outside normal opening hours. To avoid this conflict, however, many newly-opened attractions now have dedicated space - that was allocated at the design stage - with the business meetings and functions market in mind.

So what are the secrets of success when seeking to incorporate meetings facilities into an unusual building or new project? If developing them within an existing building there are likely to be more constraints than with a new build project on a brownfield site. One of the major issues to consider is the need to identify the source markets that are likely to be attracted to the venue. It is then a question of developing a facility that is well designed and efficient to operate and use, and therefore able to meet the requirements of your potential clientele.

A fine example is the Magna Science Adventure Centre in Rotherham (pictured, right). This former steelworks opened as a visitor attraction in 2001. With a vast range of space available at the site, a significant events business has been established alongside the futuristic technology centre and high-tech playground. The centrepieces are the Big Hall and Magna Arena. In effect a 'black box', this space can be transformed for all manner of uses including conferences facilities able to accommodate up to 2,500 delegates, banquets, product launches, and exhibitions. It's even large enough to host a fun fair!

Not everywhere will have the luxury of this extensive space and will need to adapt smaller rooms to meet the needs of their target market. There are, however, many opportunities for smaller buildings to provide interesting spaces for conferencing facilities. The former East Sussex County Council headquarters in Lewes, for instance, has been converted to the Pelham House Hotel (pictured, above) with the former council chamber frequently hosting presentations and dinners.

As the credit crunch continues to take hold, more diverse venues are seeking to eradicate the difference by offering their facilities to the events market. If these spaces are well designed, we are likely to see their market share of this valuable sector increasing. 🏠



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