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IMEX America 2013  
Executive Meeting Forum

# Summary Report



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## Introduction

Over 11 million meetings are held every day to connect and engage, to exchange knowledge and to find ways to make organizations more productive and profitable. Clearly meetings are here to stay, however as the workforce goes through some radical shifts and the meetings industry continues to evolve; meetings will have to become more experiential, include a more comprehensive technology platform and will be delivered to a diverse, multi-generational audience. Equally important is the need to effectively articulate the value of meetings. This conversation escalated in 2009 with the economic downturn and is still relevant today. The result is more focus on how ROI's meetings can be developed and compelling propositions for why meetings matter.

For the past three years IMEX America has hosted an Executive Meeting Forum designed to bring executives together to share their viewpoints and thoughts on the meetings industry, past, present and future. In 2011 The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company hosted the very first forum and as ardent supporter of the meetings business and heavily vested in the future of meetings, Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company was the proud sponsor of the 2013 Executive Meeting Forum Summary Report. We believe in the value of face to face meetings, the creation of inspirational experiences and the power of the memories that they create. We hope this business continues to flourish and look forward to many years of partnership with IMEX and with the many professionals responsible for creating and delivering exceptional meetings and experiences.



**Summary Report sponsor** The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, L.L.C., currently operates 80 hotels worldwide. More than 30 hotel and residential projects are under development around the globe. The Ritz-Carlton is the only service company to have twice earned the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award which recognizes outstanding customer service.

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## One of the Great Moments of IMEX AMERICA

The IMEX AMERICA Executive Meetings Forum (EMF) convened October 15–16 during the 2013 IMEX America show, as an opportunity for senior corporate planners and executives to share frank, strategic thinking on the direction of the global meetings industry and the opportunities and challenges ahead.

Through a deliberative process on the first day of the Forum, participants identified the following industry issues for more in-depth discussion:

- Tools to consolidate and streamline events
- Driving adoption, compliance
- Demonstrating value
- Global procurement
- Resource management
- Creating a self-service model for internal meetings
- Technology
- Picking the next market

“This is one of the great moments of IMEX AMERICA,” said co-facilitator **Terri Breining**, principal of Breining Group, LLC. “Providing this kind of education is very important.” She acknowledged IMEX Group Chairman Raymond Bloom for his active support of the program.

“The whole principle of having this forum for senior corporate executives is very important to IMEX America, so we’re delighted and very appreciative that you’ve joined us today,” Bloom said.

## Meetings Industry Trends

Co-facilitator **Kimberly Meyer**, founder of Meetings Analytics, pointed to several emerging industry trends moving into 2014:

- An increase in the proportion of group travel booking as transient
- Declining conference per diems for U.S. government officials
- Changes in major industry players, with the American Express Meetings & Events and Maritz Travel Co. discontinuing their partnership through Maxvantage, and Maritz purchasing Experient in 2012
- New revenue opportunities for meetings technology, reflected in the IPO issued by Cvent in August 2013, and the 2012 purchase of StarCite by ACTIVE Network, a company that is now in the process of being acquired by a private equity firm
- Increased reports of outsourcing in meetings media that aren’t necessarily supported by data
- Far greater emphasis on transparency, even in companies that have no specific obligation to report data.

Meyer reported year-over-year trends for hotel occupancy and revenue by region, noting that the choices available to meeting planners vary by region, city, and hotel class. Even for global programs, “it really does come down to your negotiations locally and your ability to convince them that you’ll create the potential for more business.” Meyer said the sheer volume of RFPs sometimes means that hoteliers have to prioritize responses, even if they come from major companies that hotels see as key prospects.

Breining recapped the broader industry trends captured in the IMEX *Power of 10* study, first issued in 2012. The report underscored the need to:

- Rethink the event experience
- Create delegate-centered educational experiences
- Balance meeting costs against rising participant expectations
- Deliver compelling experiences to a diverse audience
- Spot and respond quickly to emerging market trends
- Use events as an opportunity to position company brands
- Respond to closer attention to the economics of business events
- Keep up with changes in the use of meetings technology
- Embrace the role of meetings in the industry value chain and the benefits they offer to hotels and destinations
- Develop the profile and identify of meetings beyond tourism.

“We have to be able to talk about the value of our meetings, both within our organizations and to the communities they represent,” and make that case “beyond budget management and keen negotiation skills,” Breining said. “We must define meetings as a marketing and communication tool, not as a subset of tourism. “Identifying meetings as being in the tourism industry is like saying I’m in the grocery business because I go to the grocery store and buy bread.” But because much of the work in the meetings industry is funded by the hospitality industry, “that connection is inferred.”

In the next decade, according to the *Power of 10 Report*, the meetings industry would be challenged to:

- Evolve a distinct industry persona
- Establish universal economic impact models for meetings
- Prove the relevance and value of meetings
- Think and act strategically
- Nurture agility and flexibility
- Personalize and deepen the learning experience, “which is not an easy task”
- Experiment with different business models and revenue streams
- Adopt value chain thinking
- Acquire, retain, and develop talent and embrace diversity
- Develop tomorrow’s leaders and managers.

The group responded to several of the items in Breining's report. A participant noted that budget cuts often begin with events because organizations don't understand their value. Another group member noted that "personalizing the learning experience will have the most effect on the events we organize, and I think it's the hardest thing to do."

But to make that point and win the argument, a participant said meeting organizers would have to do more than just request a seat at the table. "They're not just going to pull up a chair," she said. "We have to change the conversation." But another participant noted that, while many senior planners interact with their clients as trusted global advisors, the industry's wider persona includes a different set of interests from suppliers. The participant pointed to "a growing chasm" between suppliers' and planners' views, particularly on the corporate side.

The group discussed generational shifts in needs and interests, declining meeting participation rates, and the dangerously slow pace of change in many annual events. Many organizations "end up with essentially the same program with a couple of minor changes," Breining said, even if they start out with best intentions to introduce major change. A participant said organizations have to be careful not to alienate older generations, even as they adapt their programs to serve younger audiences.

Breining encouraged participants to use the research findings in the Power of 10 study to open a more strategic conversation about meetings within their organizations. During the meeting, participants also received individual reports that benchmarked the performance of their meetings programs against the other organizations in the room. One participant discussed how she had used her previous benchmarking results to build C-level support for her strategic meetings management (SMM) program.

## Bringing Meetings Strategy Home

Participants heard a series of TED-style talks that showed how industry trends were playing out in different corporate settings.

**Todd Zint, CMP, CMM**, Head of Meetings and Event Strategy at NFP, said his organization had used meetings to build a common culture and broader engagement across business channels within NFP. He said advance focus groups, thoughtful content, and smart logistics were the key to cultivating trust and building camaraderie.

"Let's not just have an event and be fulfillers," he said. "Meeting professionals within your organization have to align with the business units and their business objectives."

For one particular event, the measure of success was an ambitious target for an increase in non-core revenue. The event exceeded its objective, largely because the program was so carefully aligned with the interests the group held in common, and Zint said the majority of recipients were interested in meeting again.

The group also discussed the processes and dynamics for a company to consolidate and coordinate its meetings portfolio after a major merger takes place.

**Kashyap Biyani**, MICE Head with Cipla Ltd. in Mumbai, advised participants on procurement practices,

opportunities, and pitfalls in India. With more than 20,000 employees, he said the 75-year-old pharma company participates in and plans a wide variety of internal and external meetings, conferences, and exhibitions.

Biyani said Cipla has saved a lot of money and received better value for its spending by consolidating its meetings programs, dealing mostly with national and international chains to get preferred rate on hotel space. Annual conferences are booked at least 11 to 12 months out, another practice that yields price reductions as well as proximity to meeting venues. He advised meeting planners with programs in India to:

- Negotiate rates that include meal plans
- Prepay charges in exchange for deeper discounts
- Take advantage of seasonal variations in occupancy to get favorable rates and preferred properties
- Purchase directly, stay clear of consolidators, and use Free of Cost (FOC) room rates that exclude many of the extras that are included as standard charges.

Participants expressed some concern about prepaying accounts when there is any performance risk associated with a program.

**Carolyn Pund, CMP, CMM**, Senior Manager of Global Strategic Meetings Management at Cisco Systems, Inc., traced her company's successful effort to track and consolidate its meetings activity. The initial drive toward SMM was about cost savings, but also security and risk: when the H1N1 influenza outbreak became a pressing global concern, senior executives at Cisco realized it should be easier to track and report employees' meeting activity around the world, to make sure no one was stranded during an event.

Pund laid the groundwork for the program with presentations to finance, legal, risk, and marketing, making it clear that full visibility into the purpose and location of each meeting was as important as its cost savings. As a result, the company's overall tracking and accountability for meetings became more comprehensive, and the strategy of Cisco's meetings and events portfolio became integrated with event marketing.

The SMM function was moved to event marketing, which is Cisco's core of event excellence, in order to integrate a full-service SMM and not be limited to consolidated sourcing only. Cisco now has fully operational SMM teams offering a comprehensive range of services in EMEA, the Asia-Pacific, India, and the Americas, and all internal meetings must be registered through a common portal.

## Participant Benchmarking Reports

On the second day of the Executive Meeting Forum, co-facilitator Kimberly Meyer presented each participant with a company-specific benchmarking report, which highlighted the performance of participants' meetings programs against the rest of the group. The benchmarking reports from last year, a highlight of the annual Forum, were used to help one participant build C-level support for a more strategic approach to meetings within her organization.

“If you’ve got some really high scores, you can go back to your C-suite and say, ‘look at how well we’re doing’” compared to a group of experienced professionals, Meyer said. Alternately, if the comparisons show areas of opportunity, the study can be used to shore up support and resources to improve the program. She stressed that each participant had received an individualized report, and no one else in the group had seen their results.

The aggregate data showed that:

- EMF participants’ combined meetings spending totalled more than US\$2.4 billion.
- 15 out of 29 were managing key elements of their programs through a strategic meetings management program (SMMP), and another four had fairly mature or mature programs in place. Eight were in the early stages of program development.
- All 29 participants ran meetings in the United States. The majority had programs in EMEA (22), the Asia-Pacific region (18), and Canada (17), and 13 were active in the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). The largest organizations, those with annual sales of \$10 billion or more, had the largest presence outside North America.
- All the participants reported that they managed internal meeting planning teams, and the majority were responsible for planning major or high-level meetings and events, overseeing external planning agencies, managing procurement and meetings consolidation, collaborating with travel management, measuring ROI or business results, and overseeing event marketing.

The reports also addressed a variety of operational issues of interest to corporate planners, driving conversation and discussion within the groups about how to solve ongoing challenges within meetings departments.

## The Trends That Matter Most

In small group discussions, participants touched on six of the eight priority issues they had identified, pointing to a variety of issues and opportunities for the year ahead.

### 1 Tools to Consolidate and Streamline Events

Participants discussed the merits of several different consolidation tools, as well as in-house systems designed by third-party contractors. One table discussion focused on the pros and cons of using the technology to which organizations already have easy access, as opposed to buying a new solution from an outside vendor. An essential feature for any SMM tool is the ability to assign individual event codes and link them back to financial and procurement records.

Many systems are also sophisticated enough to receive bar code scans from trade shows and integrate the information with in-house CRM records, making it easy to plan sales follow-ups and attribute results back to specific forms of customer contact.

The group also discussed simple, proven methods for managing speaker content onsite and archiving presentation

slides for up to six months after an event, as well as productivity tools for sharing folders and tracking spend at multiple levels—from the cost of a single breakfast to overall performance against budget.

## 2 Demonstrating Value

Participants stressed that, for any meetings department, all roads lead to demonstrating value. For many organizations, the value of a meetings program lies in its ability to drive sales and revenue growth. Measurement and organizational awareness of that ROI is the key to securing the staff required to execute an effective meetings program, and making decisions on how to structure and whether to consolidate that activity.

The group discussed strategies for measuring increases in brand recognition resulting from a successful meeting or meeting series, and stressed the importance of identifying SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-Based) meeting outcomes that align with broader organizational objectives.

## 3 Resource Management

Resource management was one of the most popular topics at this year's EMF, with some participants questioning how their departments would keep up with the demand for their services. One senior planner said her team was taking on one new major event per week, usually with little or no advance notice, making it difficult to plan and allocate resources.

For organizations, the overflow of project work in some meetings departments leads into pressing questions about when and how to add staff, particularly given the time it takes to run a recruitment process. "We had people who had 40 open files and they were running like crazy," a participant said. One group pointed to the inevitable risk of service failures when some aspect of an event falls through the cracks.

One discussion group looked at the use of dashboards and CRM tools to manage large meeting portfolios. To support a more systematic approach, one organization shifted from a meeting request form to a simple registration process, to make sure every assignment was tied in to a central system. Some organizations use proprietary management systems that require event proponents or organizers to enter details on metrics, sponsorships, external partnerships, and other key aspects of any meeting. Staff can also take advantage of standardized contracts, pre-approved vendor lists, and third-party sourcing specialists.

But a participant said standardization can be difficult when no two meetings are alike. And sometimes, the available resources are insufficient—in both quality and quantity. The group acknowledged that it's tough to line up new staffing until a meetings department has a solid track record. But one participant said it would be difficult to build the track record she wanted when only one of her four staff were fully qualified for the work they were being asked to complete.

If a meetings program is broken into tiers based on size or complexity, much of the activity can be assigned to administrative assistants or external consultants. But participants agreed that that work must still be overseen by qualified, in-house professionals.

## 4 Creating a Self-Service Model for Internal Meetings

After years of seeking to consolidate the spending and prevent the missed opportunities associated with a more distributed meetings portfolio, some senior planners are now reminding themselves to be careful what they wish for. At least one EMF participant said she was in no hurry to make her meetings program more widely known if it meant taking control of an even larger number of smaller gatherings.

For some participants, the solution is to introduce a standardized, self-service model for small meetings that makes it easier to track spending and manage security risks without increasing the draw on a lean in-house staff team. The system could be available to occasional planners on an in-house website that includes event guidelines, step-by-step processes, vendor recommendations, and financial reporting tools, with backup advice available at a realistic hourly rate. The service could be particularly useful for local meetings organized at some distance from head office.

One participant advised clearing any small meetings model with legal advisors before allowing it to go live.

## 5 Technology

Participants discussed a variety of emerging technologies for meetings, from SMMP tools to RFID and from real-time polling to event apps that are branded to an event and give participants mobile access to all the information they need onsite. Some companies have replaced polling with real-time Twitter feeds that allow organizers to clear logistical snags and even adjust session content on the fly. But many firms outside the technology sector lose the spontaneity of social media by allowing every tweet to be written and approved in advance.

“The real issue is that you can’t control it,” a participant said.

Participants said Singapore and some European cities are above average in responding to audience demand for free wi-fi, particularly from next-generation audiences. Mobile tracking technologies are also making an appearance onsite, raising concerns about participant privacy.

## 6 Picking the Next Market

Participants traced some of the strategic and administrative issues that arise in international meetings. They noted that corporate acquisitions can generate enough unusual volume to skew the statistics for a wider meetings program, so it’s sometimes necessary to track them separately. Differing legal regimes, taxation systems, language requirements, and work ethic all come into play when organizations move their meetings programs onto the global stage.

“Every country has at least some oddities,” a participant said.

One of the discussion groups focused on the need for due diligence to control cost increases and ensure effective tracking of meeting expenditures. The maturity of a particular market or venue often determines stakeholder requirements, and meeting programs must have the capacity and inclination to adapt.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

As the session drew to a close, several participants said they'd appreciated the opportunity to share their ideas and concerns, network with peers, and to hear that other senior meeting professionals were dealing with similar challenges. "There are very few people I can network with," said one participant, and "it's great to build new relationships." Another group member agreed that "we're all pioneers doing this together, and we're all learning. I keep thinking I don't have this figured out, and then I see that no one else does, either."

Several participants said they appreciated the private, planners-only atmosphere, with one planner comparing the session to a witness protection program. "We were insulated and safe," she said. "I was in a room with planners working at a high level, with higher stakes, and I found that very valuable."

A participant said the benchmark report would help him make the case for more hiring for his department. Several group members were grateful for the analytics they received, and for the opportunity to benchmark their own performance against a group of peers.

The session also gave some planners an opportunity to question their established practices. "A lot of the time I asked myself, 'why are we doing it this way?' And I found there really is no right model."

