
THE INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

The critical successfactors of a conference destination

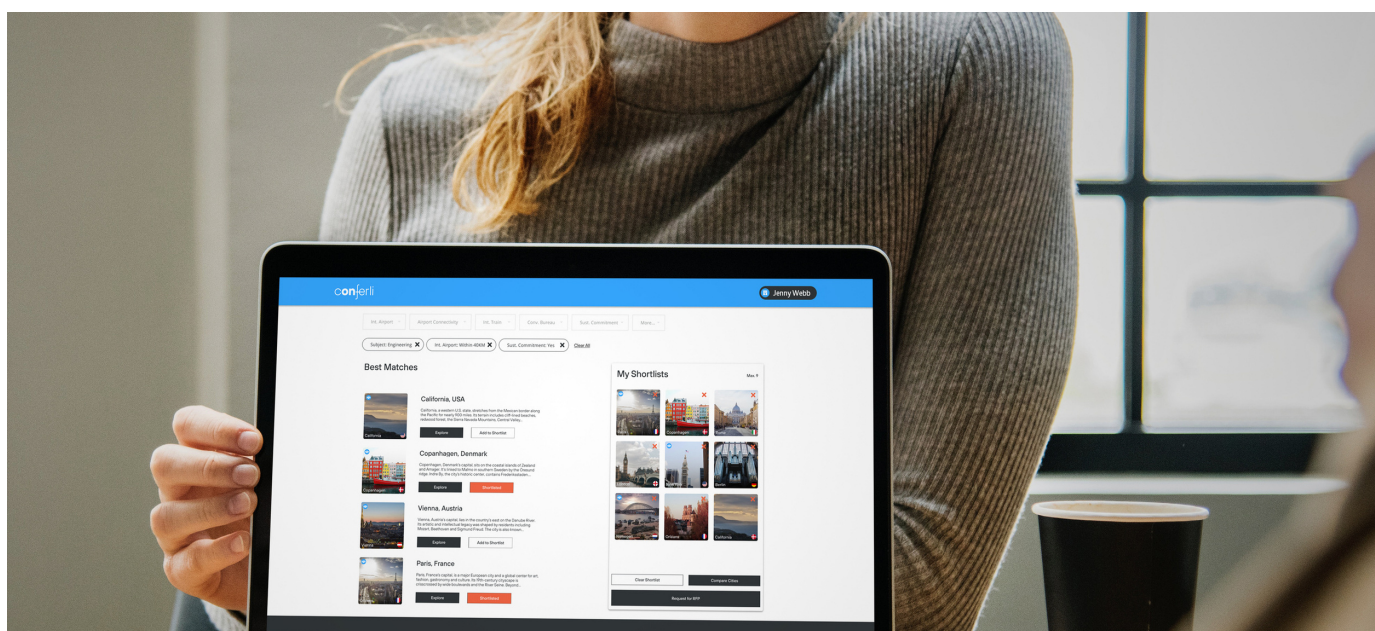


Leuven, Belgium

ABOUT CONFERLI

Conferli is a conference matchmaking platform for organisers, venues and destinations. Our aim is to level out the playing field in the event industry, enabling events of all shapes and sizes to find best-suited destinations - easily and efficiently. We do that by creating access to independent benchmarking data, supported by smart technology and fueled by our passion for the conference world. Associations will get free support on destination matching, shortlisting, benchmarking and the tender process.

www.conferli.com







ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nienke van der Malen has a broad expertise in the event industry, with over 15 years of experience in various functions. Most recently, she worked as Director of The Hague Convention Bureau. Working in the conference industry her entire career, Nienke had one ambition - to build a platform that connects associations, venues and destinations. She noticed that creating and maintaining these connections can be challenging and that the entire event industry would benefit significantly from having better access to each other. This is how Conferli.com was created.

INTRODUCTION

In our previous [Market Study](#) we talked about the challenges associations need to overcome when planning a conference. And how they can be more pro-active than re-active during the tender process of a new conference destination.

Associations are undergoing the change, that finding the right partnerships to battle challenges together, is way more effective than sorting it all out themselves. Destinations are evolving and invest heavily into the possibility to help associations sorting out these challenges. It is proven that destination can be a very valuable partner to help overcome different challenges such as:

-  **Staff shortage/ lack of time to organize the event**
Supporting associations & linking them to the right partners they can help save time & money
-  **Connect with Generation Z and get them involved**
By involving local universities and corporates, the chance of reaching Generation Z will increase (when the right content is offered).
-  **Attract higher quality sponsors**
By linking to the right destination and tap into the ecosystem of a specific destination it will become way more interesting for sponsors to attend.
-  **Increase number of attendees/ attract the right attendees**
By linking to the right destination in terms of accessibility, content and ecosystem more delegates will make the journey to the specific destination.

So knowing how destinations can be of great value we need to be looking at why is one destination preferred over the other, what is the decision to select a destination based on?

In this market study we reflect on the most important factors that are being considered when associations are deciding upon the next conference destination.

How does the geopolitical situation in a destination influence the destination selection process and if sustainability and legacy are taken into account?

Sit back and enjoy reading!

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

This market study is conducted to get a clear understanding of the Critical Success factors of a conference destination. What are associations looking for in a destination, what makes one destination more suitable for conferences than others. A survey was sent to a database of associations, through our destination partners and social media channels. Nearly 80 associations participated in this survey.

The results are examined on a global scale and used to draw general trends, conclusions and recommendations.

It is not our intend to steer the reader in a certain direction. However we will open up the discussion on what could be changed within the industry and how this could be done.

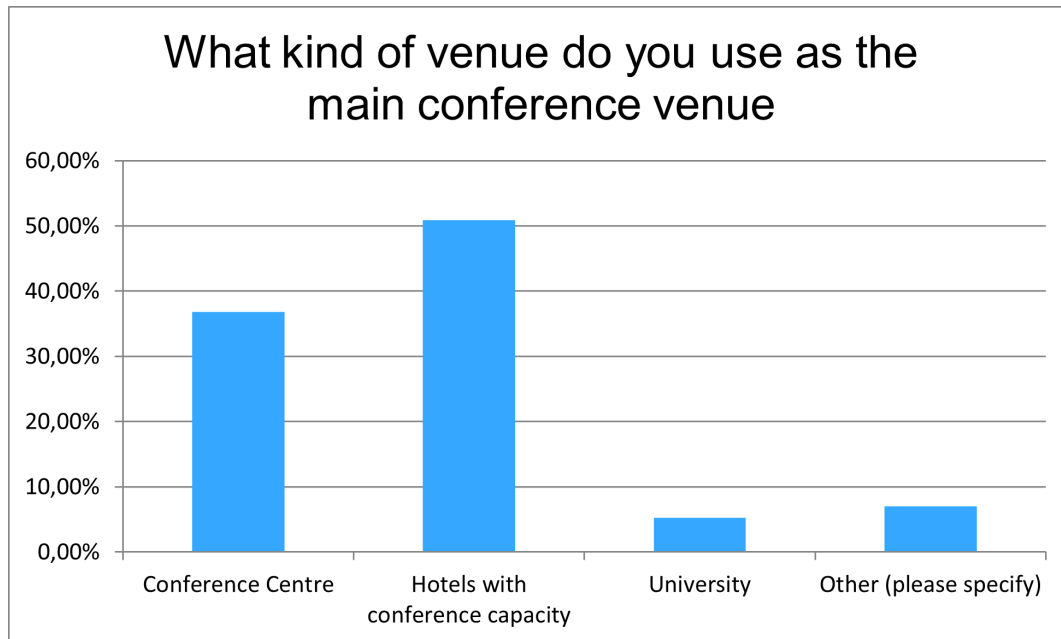
In the report you will find best practices and quotes, these are all collected with the approval from the specific organization.



Amsterdam, The Netherlands

RESPONDENTS

The respondents are mainly based in Europe and are all associations that plan at least 1 conference a year. As a conference venue they mainly use hotels with conference facilities.



Governmental buildings, such as municipalities are mentioned under “other”.

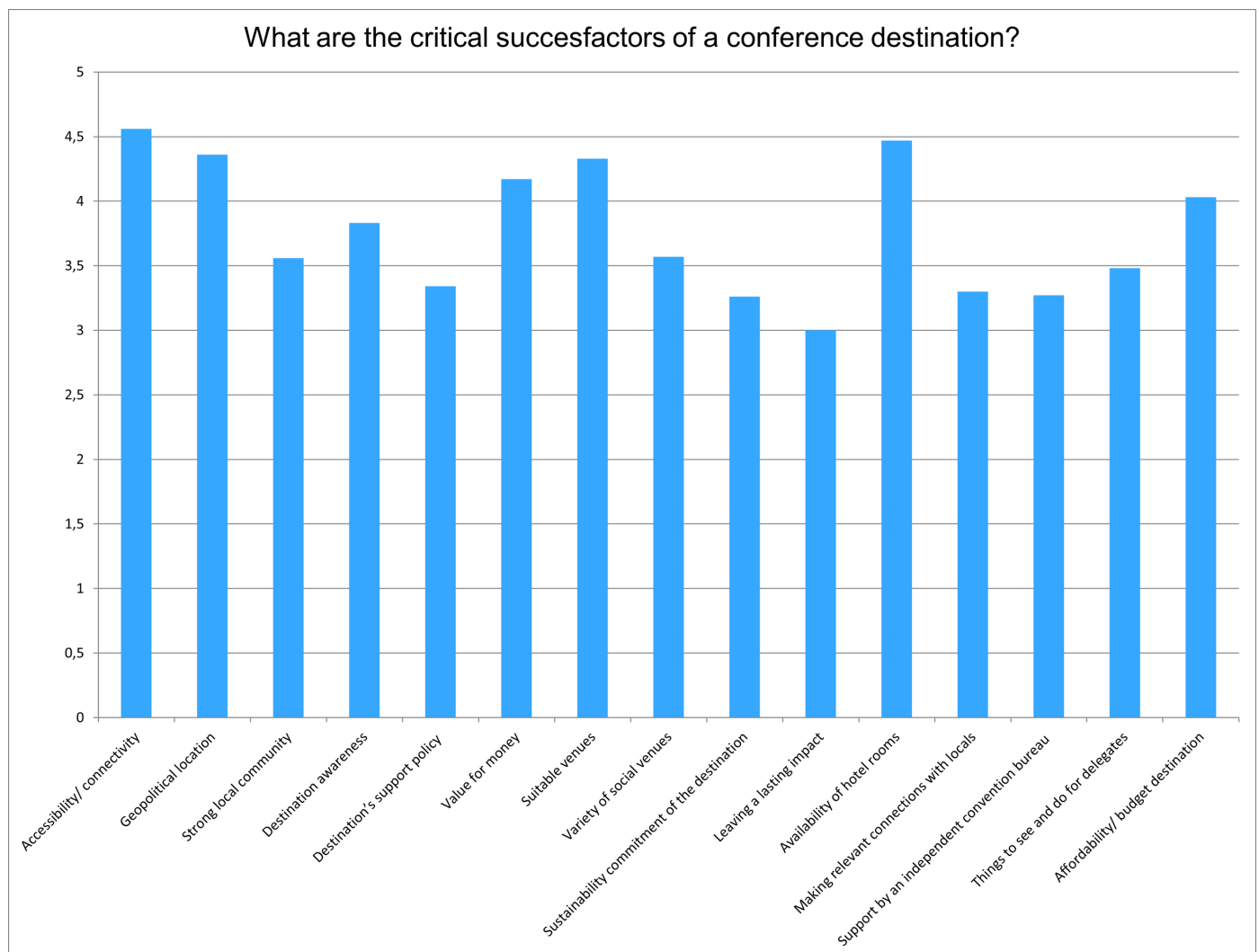


Critical success factors of a conference destination

In the survey different parameters are questioned that are been taken into consideration when deciding for a conference destination.

The top 5, according to the respondents, consists of:

- 1) Accessibility/ Connectivity
- 2) Availability of hotel rooms
- 3) Suitable venues
- 4) Geopolitical situation in the destination
- 5) Value for Money



A destination needs to be easy to travel to, safe, affordable, it needs to offer the right number of hotel rooms and a venue should fit the needs of the conference. Quite straight forward and clear criteria but looking at that, there will be plenty destinations that offer that.

The question that comes up here is how much can you really influence that as a destination and if there are lots of destinations that fit these criteria how are associations make the decision?

Interesting is to see what are the factors that are not the so called "basic needs". What other criteria could be looked at?

- Destination Awareness
- Variety of Social venues
- Strong Local Community
- Things to do for delegates
- Destination Support policy
- Making relevant connections with locals
- Support by a convention Bureau

These above criteria are all based on how 'attractive' the destination is for associations, what brings them to the destination. A destination that everybody knows, might have a higher chance of winning when convincing a board, or the members of an association. When there are a lot of social venues, a more varied social program can be created which increases the chance of a successful conferences. If there is a strong local community of the specific association in that destination, it will enhance the quality of the speakers, sponsorships and connections made. But also the amount of cultural or "bleisure" activities in a city can affect whether a destination is suitable or not, and not to forget the support offered by a Convention Bureau can be a deciding factor. This can be support in terms of finances, marketing or in any other kind of support can help to create a successful conference.

The above criteria will be different in each destination and are crucial for the success of a conference. We call them "distinction criteria" and for an association it will be wise to investigate what the destinations on the shortlist offer in regards to these "distinction criteria".

The last 2 criteria in this research are sustainability and leaving a lasting impact. Currently these are the most bespoke topics in the industry, however they are (not yet) seen as deciding factors when selecting a conference destination. So for now these are called "nice-to-have criteria". However we intent to start a movement withing the industry to change that, and we will reflect on this more in depth in this study.

To conclude:

**Nice
to
have
Criteria**

Sustainability,
legacy / impact

Distinction Criteria

Destination awareness,
variety of social venues, local
community, destination support, things to
do for delegates

Basic Criteria

Accesibility, number of hotel rooms, suitable venue, value for
money, geopolitical situation



Noordwijk. A breath of fresh air

After a day filled with lectures and meetings, it's only natural to want to clear your mind. Take a stroll on the beach, a bike ride in the dunes - or enjoy dinner and drinks at one of our 'gezellige' beach clubs. You never know what great ideas might arise - as ideas become reality in Noordwijk.

Noordwijk. The finest beach of Amsterdam:

- 25 min from Amsterdam Schiphol Airport
- Wide range of hotels in walking distance
- Officially awarded as 'healthy seaside resort' by ESPA (European Spas Association)
- Home to NL Space Campus and ESA ESTEC

More info



NOORDWIJK
CONVENTION
BUREAU

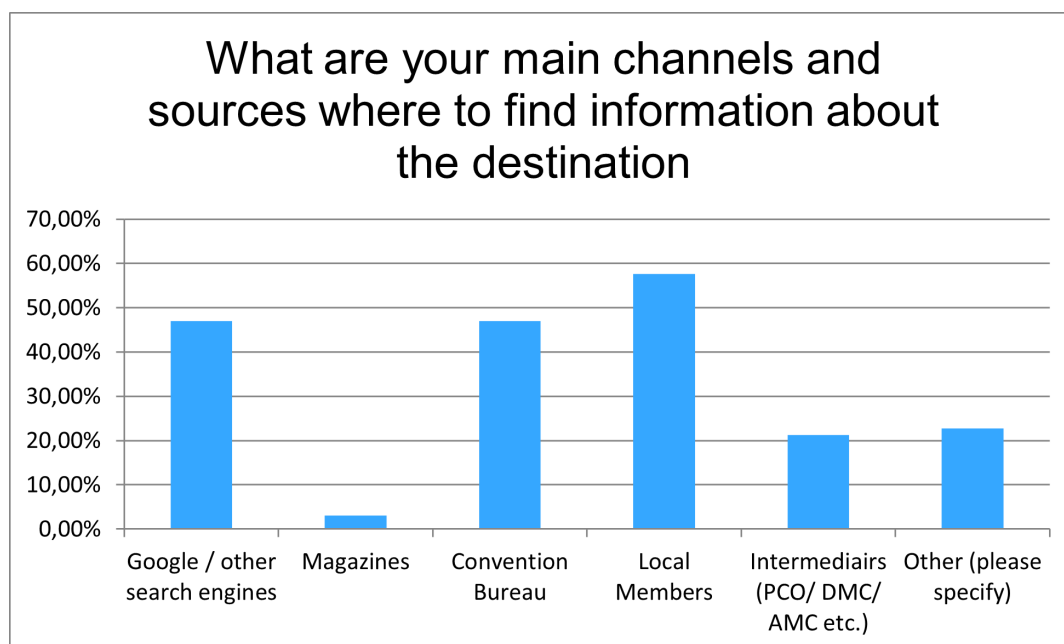


Destination selection process

In Conferli's previous market study, research was conducted regarding the tender process of destinations. So for this current market study we only concentrated on the process of destination selection to find out how that is going. Several different processes are relevant here:

No process in place **PCO** **Hotel directly**
Local community/ Host **Venue finder**
RFP to Convention Bureau
Trade shows **Recommendations/ Word of mouth**
Internet Search **Association Head Office**

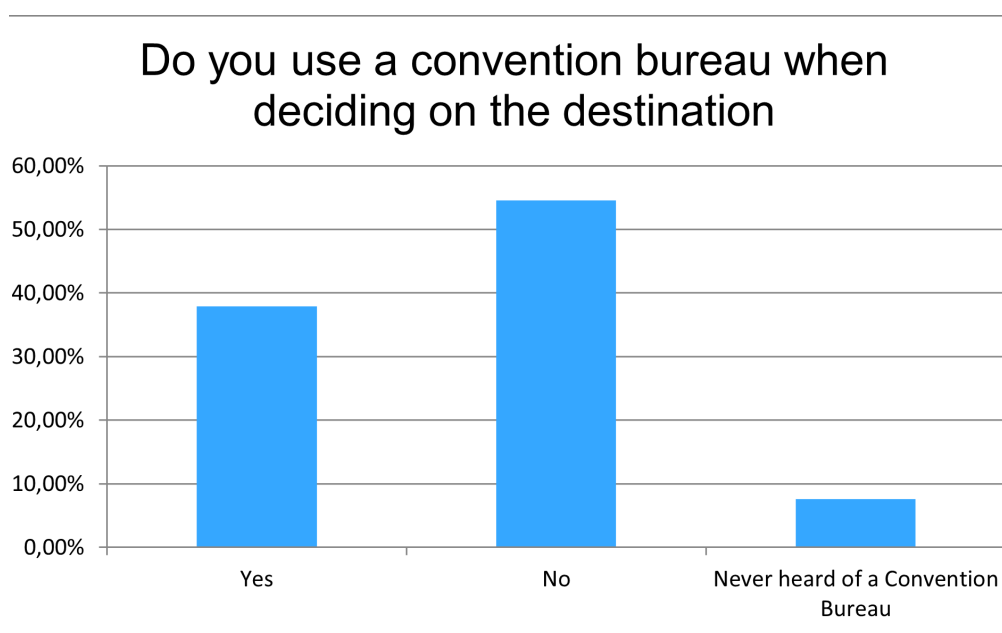
Channels used when searching for a destination



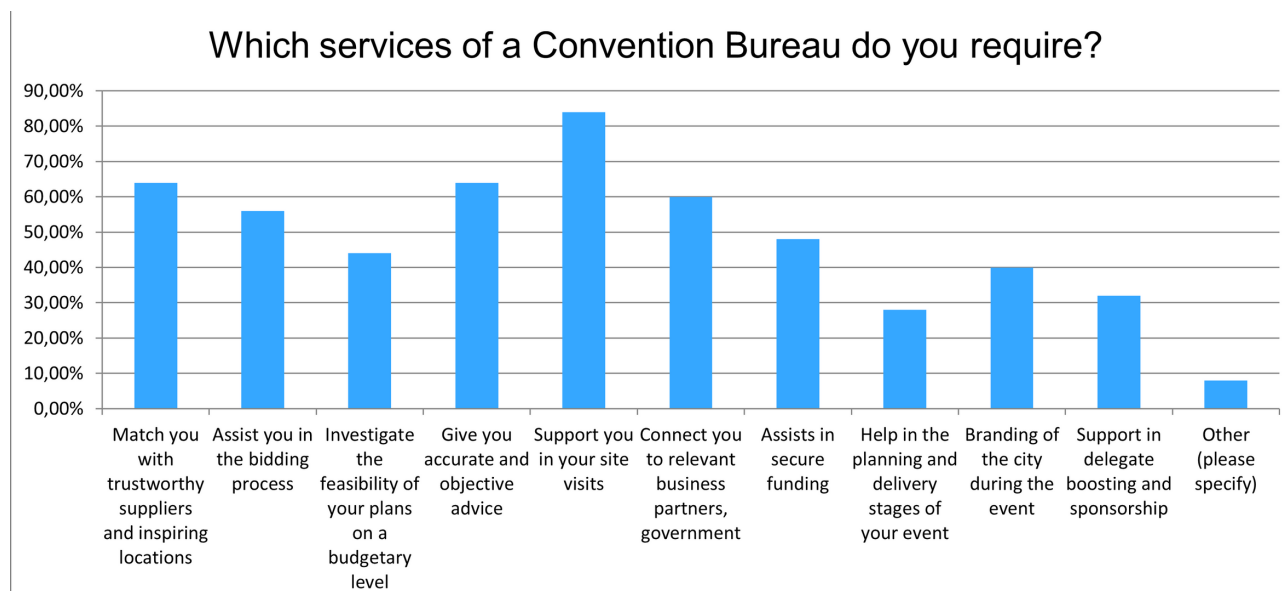
The above graphs shows that most information about destinations is coming from local members. Followed by Google and convention bureaus. Magazines are hardly ever used for the research of a destination. Other ways of research are: attending trade shows, venue & destination finders and industry associations. Furthermore it is stated that other events from related associations are seen as a good way to see how a destination performs when there is a conference, and if all went well, associations tend to follow their example.

Use of a Convention Bureau

According to the below graph, over 50% of associations are not using a Convention Bureau in their selection process. In order to strengthen a partnership and get the most out of a destination in terms of speakers, offsite tours, content, legacy & sustainability, working with a Convention Bureau (Or a Tourism Organization if there is no CVB) at an early stage, is strongly advised.



The following services of a Convention Bureau are used:



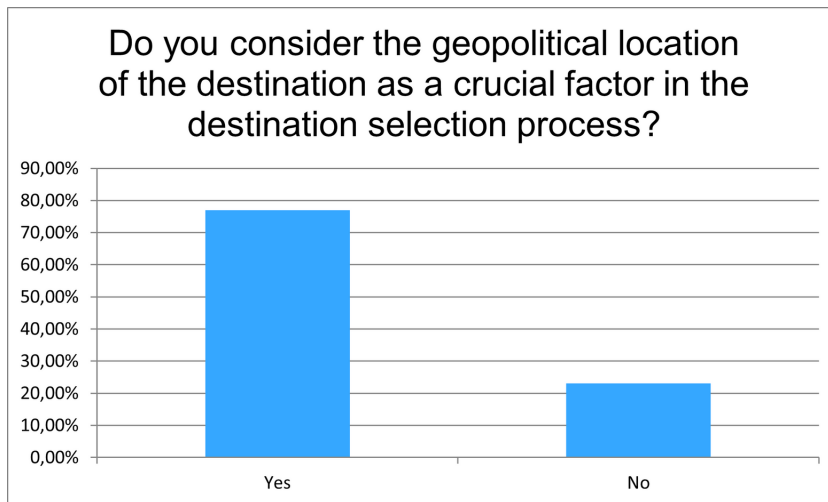
Services used the most are:

- 1) Support during Site visits
- 2) Objective Advice
- 3) Matching with suppliers

Advice on legacy and impact were mentioned at "other services".

Geopolitical Location/ Situation

77% of associations find the geopolitical location of a destination a crucial factor in the destination selection process. As this criteria is also in the top 5 of deciding factors, this comes as no surprise.



"Not considering it, will impact attendance and interest for attending the event."

"Depends on the nature of the event. If it is a highly political event, then the geopolitical location has more importance."

"It is important that the location is safe for delegates (international travel) but not the most vital. This is because we must also meet and engage with members and stakeholders from less secure locations."

"Unless the location is directly in the danger area such as country in war or under regular terroristic attacks, geopolitical situation is less important than some other factors."

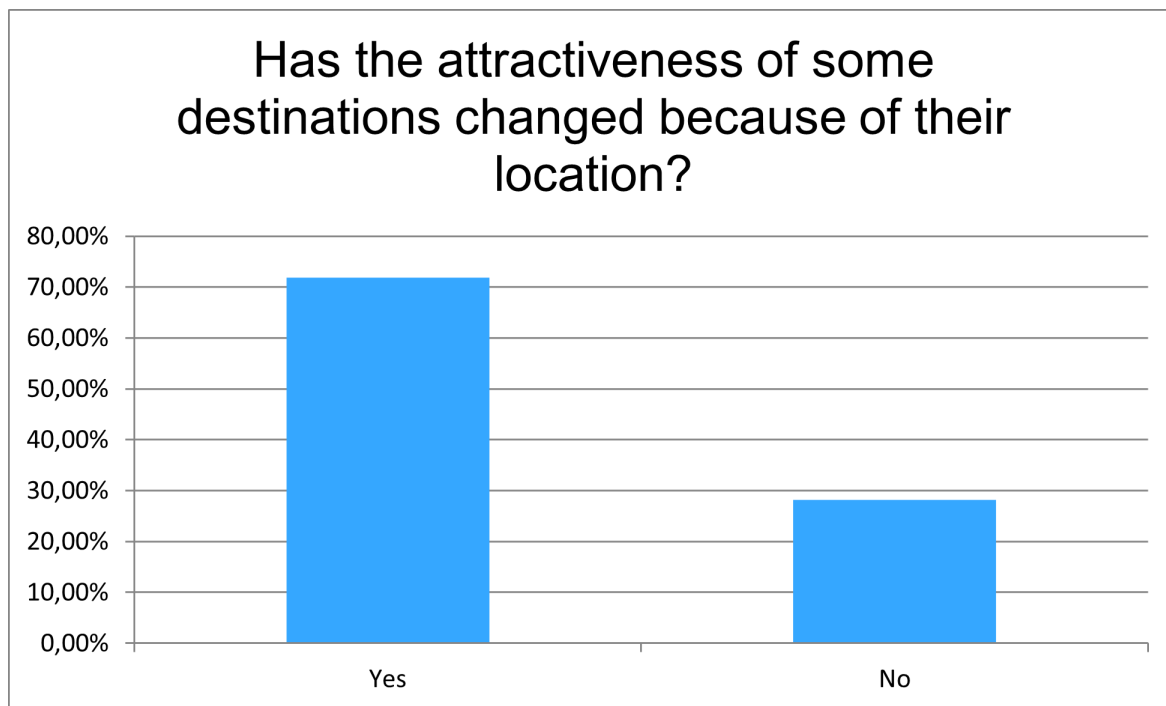
"As an international association, we are sensitive to travel restrictions and flight availability/ connectivity and prices. In addition, we have seen some reluctance to travel to countries close/next to the conflict/ war areas."

"If safety it's not guaranteed then we postpone, cancel or choose another location for the event."

"My association tries to avoid countries in which we could have different kind of troubles such as: war, weak Government and weather instability (i.e.: hurricanes, flood, etc.)."

Associations are looking to match destinations to the attendees demographics and their own presence. Most importantly they try to move the event around, in so called rotation patterns, to offer opportunities to all members to join. Most of the times there are internal politics in place to the destination that occurs. Although most of the associations see the geopolitical situation as crucial 23% is not seeing this as crucial.

In 72% of the cases, associations changed their opinion about destinations because of the location they are in.



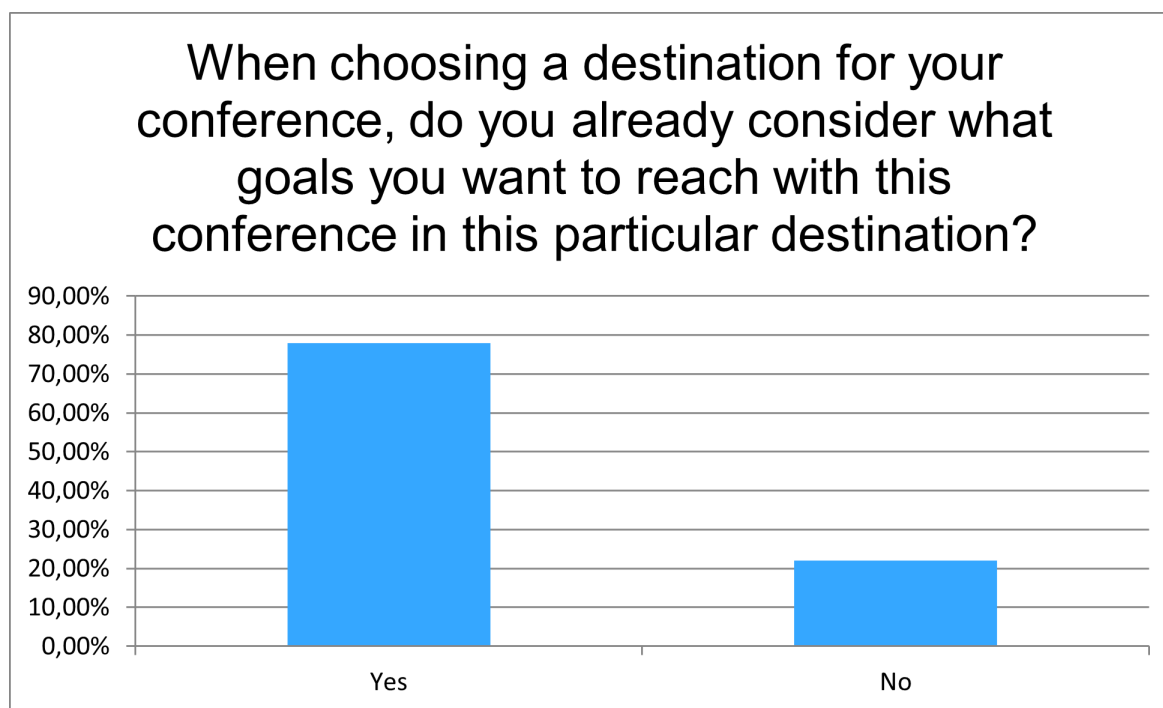
Mostly mentioned here is that it can influence the attendees opinion. If the right destination is chosen it will attract more participants, more media coverage and therefore more resources. Nowadays it is more important for a delegate if the travel is worth the time and money and to be away from home, especially if the event is also offered in a hybrid way. It is harder to prove that attending a conference in person is worth it instead of via the computer. The choice of destination can make the difference here.

Ease of accessibility is becoming increasingly important. Followed by the ease of a destination, the conference center needs to be close to the hotels and the social venues. Destination needs to be perceived as safe otherwise less delegates will make the trip. Also it is stated that there is a big gap between prejudice and real impressions. In order to eliminate these prejudices it is up to both associations and destinations to actively change this, which can mainly be done with the right communication.



Goals

Nearly 80% of the associations have specific goals in mind for the conference they are organizing and how a destination can help them reach these goals. This will underline the idea that partnering up with a destination will be beneficial for both association as well as the association to reach these goals.



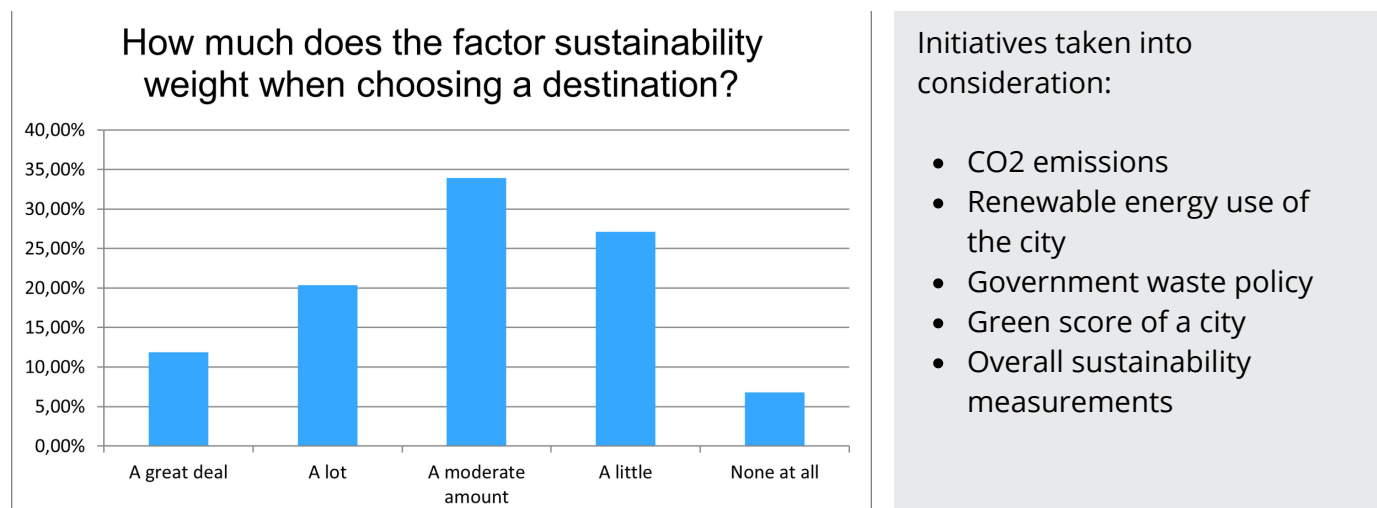
Goals most regularly used according to respondents:

- 1) Attracting new members
- 2) Meeting certain number of delegates
- 3) Stay/ become financial healthy
- 4) Legacy
- 5) Sustainability

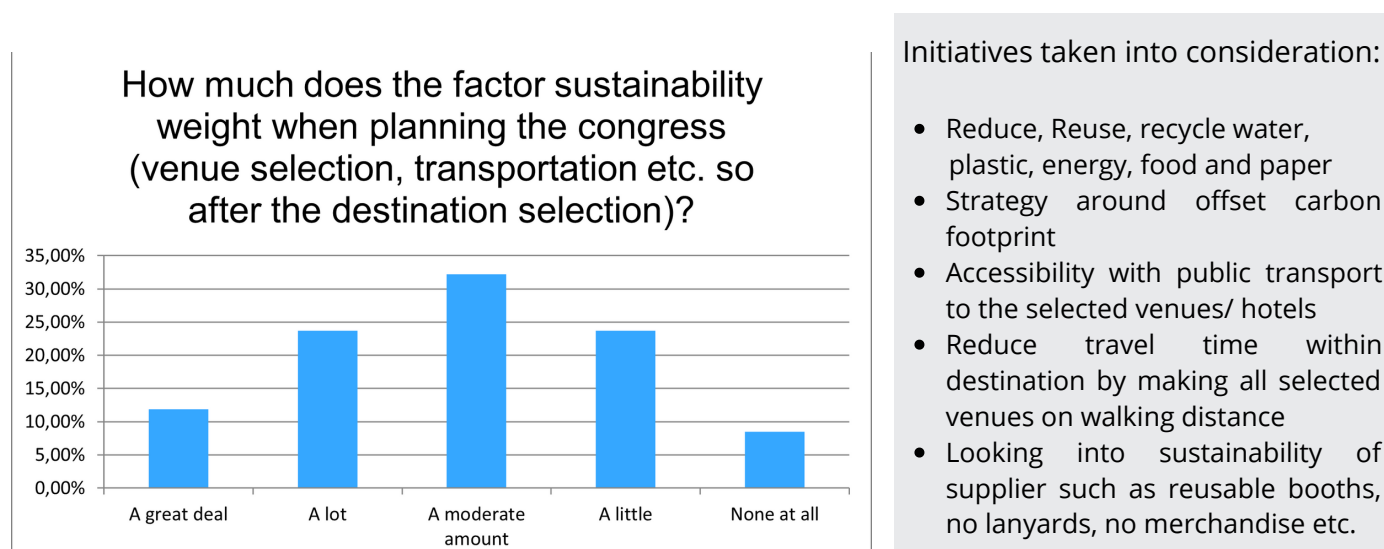
So to conclude, conferences are still a main source of attracting new members and becoming financial healthy. However associations are starting to swift towards sustainability and legacy, having said that it was only mentioned a couple of times.

Sustainability

As sustainability is becoming a bigger part of the planning process, it is seen that it is still considered a “nice-to-have” and not a deciding factor. In the survey it was investigated further.



Looking at the combined results, 66% of the respondents are taking sustainability into account when choosing a destination. They seriously look into the initiatives destinations are undertaking. However it is not a deciding factor (yet).

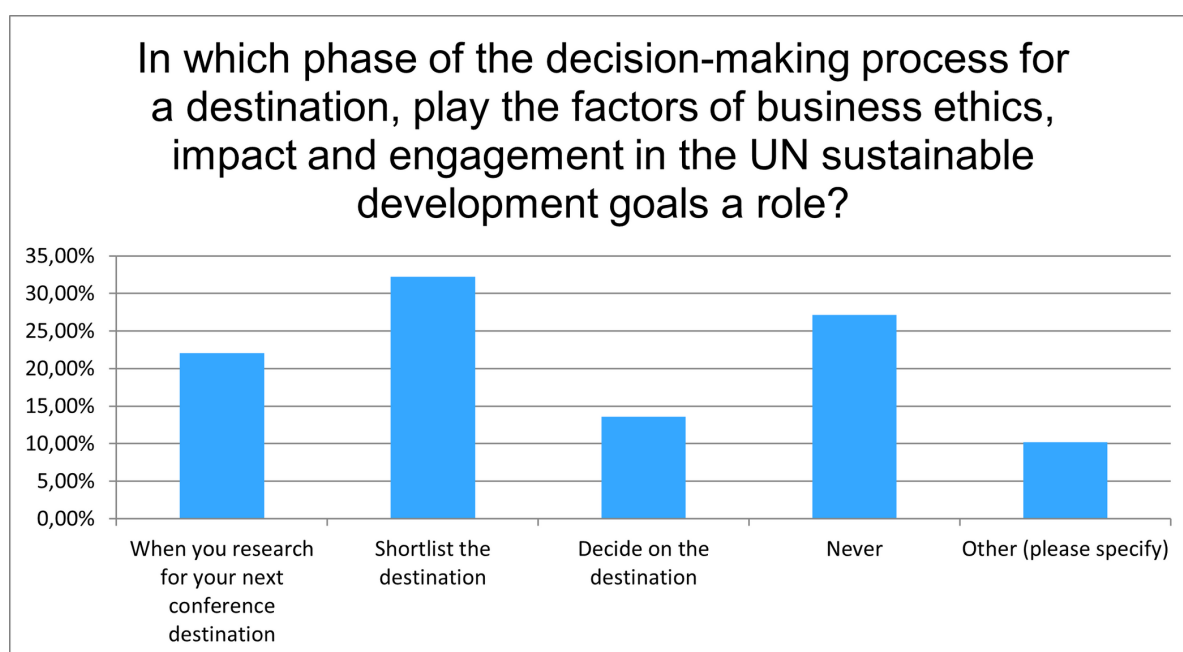


Looking at the combined results a little more (68%) is taking sustainability into consideration when choosing the event venue. Saying that it is more practical to look into sustainability initiatives from venues than for destinations. Venues are offering more hands-on sustainability actions that directly make an impact.

Looking into reasons why sustainability and legacy are not taking into account as much as the other factors associations are saying the following:

- It is not clear what one is offering compared to the other
- There is too much information
- It is too political
- Don't know where to start, there is no practical solution

Considering this and triggered by the [UIA](#) (Union of International Associations) who decided to classify all associations in their yearbook (42.000 active international associations) the following question was raised:



54% of the respondents is already taking the Sustainable Development Goals into consideration when researching or shortlisting destinations, which is a fair amount. However only 13% is seeing this as a deciding factor.



What are the SDG's?

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), or Global Goals are a collection of 17 interlinked global goals designed to be a "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all". The SDGs were set up in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly.



As seen in this market study associations are becoming more aware of the impact they can leave with their conference, they are investigating what they can contribute with their long term goals to the current SDG's. Currently there is no way to easily discover what countries or cities are doing with the SDG's, although a lot of great initiatives are setup. Triggered by this outcome and convinced by the idea that only together we can improve this, Conferli decided to investigate why these factors are still the least important in this specific decision making process.

Why is it not top of mind when making important decisions, that affect the entire association? Recent conversations show that these topics are so general, political sensitive and strategic, that organizations have no idea where to start and how to implement it into their process.

New development - practical tool

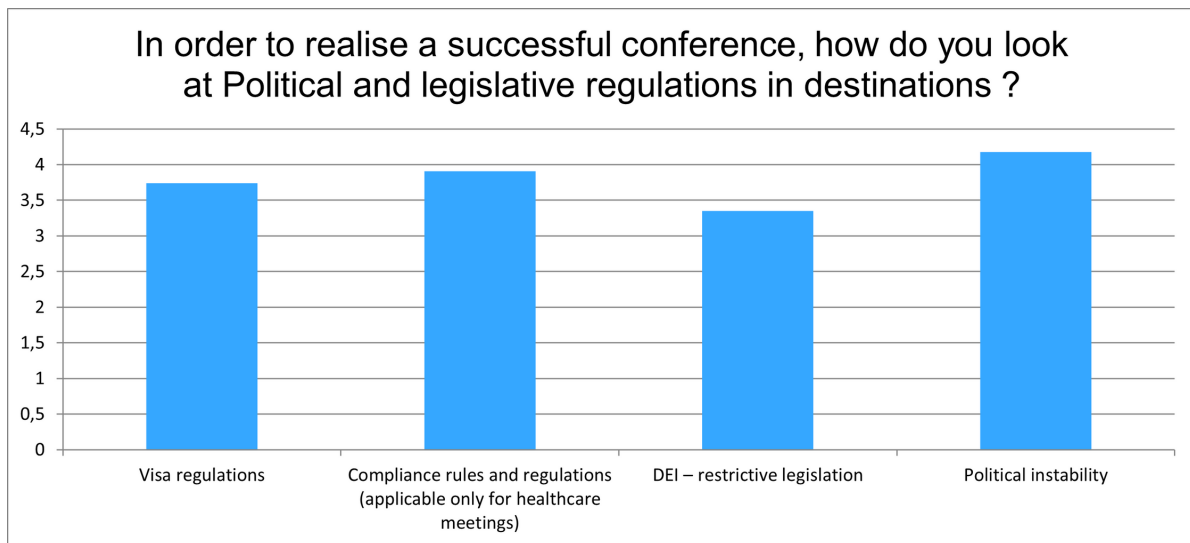
With understanding this, Conferli felt the need to offer support and make it possible to easily start implementing this into the process of the destination selection. It was an easy step to build a new filter, to the existing matching platform, which makes it possible to be matched on a destination's focus SDG's or already achieved SDG's.

With the innovation challenge initiated by [ICCA](#) and [Response Room](#) the opportunity to test the idea was presented. Out of the 30 innovations that were presented, the topic "How the SDG's of a city can contribute on a positive impact/ legacy outcome of your associations conference in the host destination", by Conferli, was won with over 30% of the votes. It seems that the market is ready to work with tools that provide a practical solution to work on a more sustainable future for association events.

A new filter has been created in the matching tool which offers associations the option to select destinations based on their SDG's. With this new feature the choice of a destination can make such a difference in reaching goals and creating legacy/impact. The entire reason of deciding why to choose a specific destination can change due to this new option. Reaching specific long term goals can now be implemented in the start of the process and it opens up the conversation with the destination. From now on associations and destinations can easily find each other on their common goals and strive together to a better future for all.

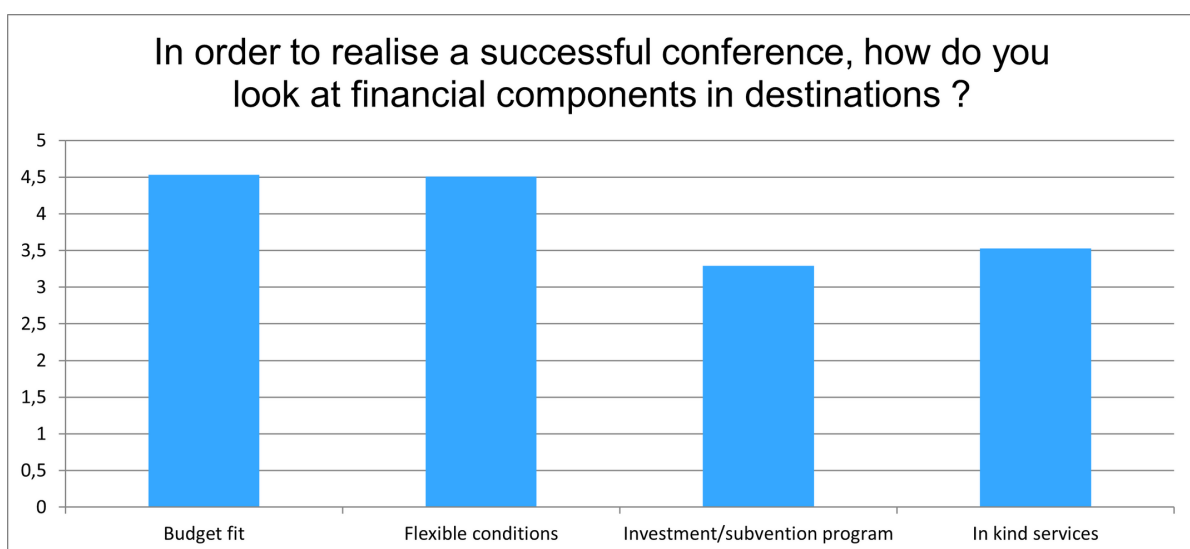
The screenshot displays the Conferli web application interface. At the top, the Conferli logo is on the left, and a user profile for Ronald Webb is on the right. Below the header, a navigation bar shows the current path: City Match > Search > Comparison > Request. A series of dropdown menus allows filtering by location type (Int. Airport, Airport Connectivity, Int. Train, Conv. Bureau, Sust. Commitment) and other criteria. Below these are active filters for 'Hybrid Solution: Broadcasting' and 'Webcast: Yes'. The main content area is titled 'Best Matches' and lists four cities: Helsingborg, Sweden; Vilnius, Lithuania; Toulouse, France; and Copenhagen, Denmark. Each city entry includes a thumbnail image, the city name, and buttons for 'Explore City' and 'Shortlisted'. A modal window titled 'Sust. Development Goals' is open, showing a grid of 17 SDG icons with checkboxes for selection. The 'Filter All' button is visible at the bottom of the modal. To the right of the modal, a 'Shortlist' section shows a grid of city thumbnails, with 'Copenhagen' and 'Toulouse' currently selected. At the bottom of the interface, there are links for 'T&C', 'Privacy', and 'FAQ', along with a LinkedIn logo.

Destination policies



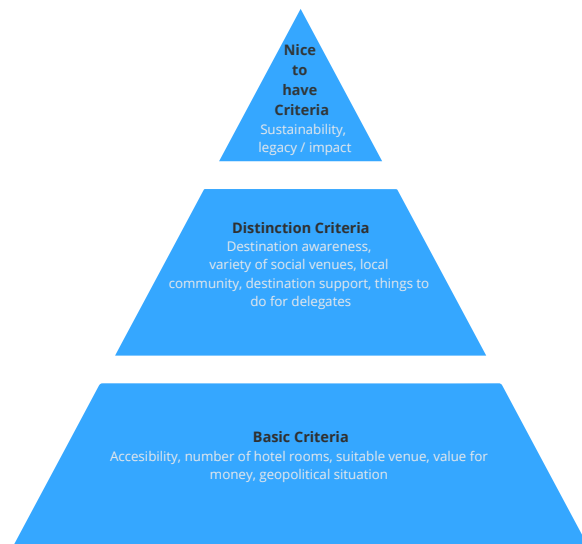
In this case, the political (in)stability of a city is the most important factor that is taken into consideration, followed by compliance rules (health care meetings), Visa regulation, DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) .

In regards to the financial components of a destinations the budget fit and flexible conditions are considered as the most important. Flexible conditions are taken into consideration because of the pandemic, especially contract flexibility is important. Another important aspect is the support a destination can offer with for example in-kind services, such as the help of a Convention Bureau, offering of a welcome reception or city branding. Direct subvention is the least important financial component looked at.



Conclusion

Looking at the critical success factors of a destination the following figure is created:



For associations it is advised to especially look at the distinction criteria of destinations and compare the destinations against each other on all points mentioned in the above figure.

If the right destination is chosen the conference will attract more participants, more media coverage and therefore more resources. Nowadays it is more important for a delegate if the travel is worth the time and money and to be away from home, especially if the event is also offered in a hybrid way. It is harder to prove that attending a conference in person is worth it instead of via the computer. The choice of destination can make the difference here.

Conferli launched a mission to integrate the Sustainable development goals into the decision making criteria of a conference destination to make the current "nice-to-have" criteria one that cannot be overseen.

Flexible conditions and budget fit are considered as very important during the decision making process.

Conferences are still a main source of attracting new members and becoming financial healthy. However associations are starting to shift towards sustainability and legacy, having said that it was only mentioned a couple of times.

In these day and age, where we continuously struggle with how to stay relevant, how to attract the younger generation, how to be mindful of sustainability, inclusion, diversity, equity, geopolitical situations, the energy crisis, perhaps even a possible recession we have to come up with good reasons to continue to meet in person at rotating locations. By opening up the conversation in an early stage with destinations, deciding on what criteria are important for your association, finding the sweet spot in strategies and common goals, leaving a social and economic impact in local society your conference can mean more to your members and possibly even planet.

THANK YOU FOR READING

Questions or suggestions, please contact us



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