

Continuing global engagement in the face of terror

Suppliers and clients must stand together to ensure the future of our industry **By Rod Cameron**

Reading the news from various cities impacted by terrorist actions around the world these days is almost enough to make you want to go back to bed and pull the covers over your head. But for most of us—particularly in the meetings industry—that simply isn’t an option; life goes on and that life necessarily involves travel to places that include those unfortunate enough to have been targeted.

But the fact is, there are huge implications that extend far beyond our own immediate reactions. What is at stake is no less than the future of our industry—not just because of the fear factor and the event cancellations and relocations that may result, but also because of the likelihood they will provoke greater security measures and potentially even weakening the cross-border agreements that have facilitated travel in recent years. Together, these could conspire to reduce travel inclinations at a time when industry recovery was just beginning to gain traction in many parts of the world.

So this is clearly not a situation where we have the luxury of passively sitting back and watching events unfold. These incidents appear to have become part of a new reality, and the key question is: what can and should we do in response? There are three things we need to consider.

The first is perspective—maybe the toughest of all in the face of recent coverage—and here there are several aspects. First, the approaches now being taken by terrorists mean that no major destination is truly immune. We can’t operate on the assumption that there are



Potential threat Tougher security could reduce the inclination to travel

“safe” and “unsafe” options anymore. At the same time, media hype notwithstanding, most incidents have been relatively contained—frightening in their viciousness and seeming randomness, but in reality affecting only a tiny proportion of the population even in the most dramatically affected areas. It remains the case that visitors are far more likely to be impacted by any number of other incidents than the actions of terrorists.

Coordinated response

The second factor is vigilance, and again there are several dimensions. Most importantly, we need to accept that we all have a responsibility to our members, clients and delegates to take and support every reasonable measure to manage and minimise the direct threat

in any way we can. This is particularly true for suppliers whose decisions and actions shape the conditions that would form the backdrop for any incident that might occur.

Organisers, facilities and suppliers all have a major obligation to not just secure their own operations but to coordinate with other agencies that would potentially be involved should an incident occur. In fact, a better coordination of efforts seems to have been one of the top recommendations arising from previous incidents.

However, this responsibility also extends to counselling against the kind of overreaction that would place draconian measures on travel overall, as this only serves to create a downward spiral that

would in the end be even more damaging to the industry than the incidents themselves.

Leadership role

And that brings us to the third most necessary action—a measure of defiance in the face of what is clearly an effort to disrupt the values that bring people together in joint efforts to improve global understanding, cooperation and interactions

on so many fronts. Our industry has a proud history in this regard. In previous global disruptions, including both terrorism and recent economic crises, it was typically the case that the business travel

sector—including meetings, conventions and exhibitions—was a leader in recovery.

So far, it appears that this remains the situation today; in most terrorist-impacted cities, early reports are that tourism has been hit much faster and harder than scheduled business events. The clear message is that we have a key role to play in defying the disruptive purposes of terrorist acts by refusing to respond as they would like us to. That means showing leadership in maintaining our event schedules and our rotations in ways that demonstrate our collective commitment to global engagement and participation.

None of this will be easy, but easier choices are not available. What we risk is becoming part of a reaction that produces the kind of success terrorists are looking to achieve—and for the sake of our industry’s future, we must lead the resistance. ■



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