

## **Destination marketing**

**How can a meeting destination become a strong brand? We asked the experts in the Netherlands how best to promote cities, regions and countries.**

text Robert Heeg

Building a brand as meeting destination, starts with a range of necessary conditions. In order to be attractive to conferences, a destination should not only meet these conditions, but promote them actively as well. Not surprisingly, the so called USPs tend not to be all that unique, observes Bas Schot, head of The Hague Convention Bureau. 'Generally, on the various platforms, the destination USPs relate to the same properties: range, capacity, attractiveness, facilities.'

For international travelers, the logistics, such as nearby hotels and the venue location in relation to the airport, are crucial, adds Tim Rosman, chairman of the trade association MPI Netherlands. 'You should also point out the diversity of locations. For instance, some cities have huge exhibition venues, such as RAI Amsterdam or Messe Frankfurt. But they may also have other types of venues within their borders. Think of tailor-made venues for different types of events. Perhaps these are ideally suited for more specialist or smaller-scale conventions.'

### **DNA**

The must-have conditions should be part and parcel of all destination marketing communications. To further distinguish themselves, destinations must build on their brand values, advises Eduard Pieter Oud, co-director of Respons, a research and consultancy company in specialized events, tourism and city marketing. 'From your brand values, you determine what types of business meetings you want to attract. Although you'd still welcome other types of meetings, you don't aim for them. Your profile will last for years and contributes to your uniqueness.'

Schot urges the importance of defining your destination DNA. 'In the case of The Hague, this entails Peace and Justice, and building a better, safer world.' He points out that this is the result of having several institutions within the city's borders, such as the Security Delta, a security cluster working on cybersecurity, and the Peace Palace, which is the location of the International Court of Justice. The Hague is also

the seat of government. 'The city of Rotterdam, on the other hand, is innovative and urban,' adds Rosman. 'It captivates a different audience and different types of fairs. Amsterdam is fun in the evening and an easy place to entertain your guests. So, the look and feel of a place really determines your brand identity.'

### **Big pond**

In establishing brand value, destinations must first ask themselves what they want to achieve by attracting business meetings, advises Oud. 'Do you want as many conferences, visitors and/or spending as possible? Or would you rather have conferences that match your brand values and profile choices? Choosing the latter, enables a much more long-term strategy. For instance, if a city wants to host a fintech conference, it may also want fintech and related companies to establish themselves within its borders. This way, the city can become a durable premium brand for the fintech sector.' Oud adds that setting such long-term goals can make it easier for organizers to get financial backing from politicians.

Destinations have their own characteristics and can connect these with matching customers by using the right branding, says Schot. 'The Hague is not I Love NY or Amsterdam. But it's a big pond out there, and you can aim for conferences that fit your DNA structure.' He explains that The Hague markets itself as ImpactCity; a place where startups and scaleups innovate for a better future. 'For several years now, this has helped us bring the Global impact investing Network (GIIN) to our city. It fits structurally and in terms of ecosystem. There is a great synergy with the conference and what our city stands for.'

### **Feeling safe**

Destinations can sometimes get hit by negative publicity. Last Summer's delays at Schiphol Airport were reported on by CNN and other international news media. This does not necessarily affect your marketing efforts, tells Oud. 'The majority of business events have a long lead time. Host cities are often selected years in advance. On top of that, many issues are of a temporary nature, such as large-scale construction projects in a city or social unrest. But when this does occur just before or during a convention, a promotion bureau must do everything it can to minimize inconvenience for its business guests, especially when you have long-term goals.'

One very specific issue that dominated the conference world in recent times is COVID-19. Although fading as a global problem, local sensitivities still apply, warns Schot. 'As a convention bureau we operate internationally. As such, you have to be aware that rules are not the same everywhere. In the Netherlands we have pretty much abandoned the COVID-19 restrictions, but elsewhere that is not the case. Therefore, you have to make sure that people don't regard your destination as unsafe. For example, I advised venues to leave the hygiene advice signs in place for the time being; this reassures foreign visitors that we are still cautious.'

### **Cheese sandwich**

In marketing to (international) conferences, the networking element plays an important role. 'Business meetings are a people's business after all,' says Oud. 'It's useful to know a lot of people. If you get to know them well, also in a more informal setting, this can help. But at the end of the day, it's all about your product and your story - especially when focussing on association conferences, where board members and decision-makers change regularly.'

As part of your marketing, it is customary to introduce prospects to the city for a few days, tells Schot. 'This way, they can experience the destination fully. For instance, we have the famous World Forum event location in The Hague, so it's nice to organize something for our guests where they are actually *on* the stage. And sometimes we offer a surf lesson on the beach of nearby Scheveningen.' It also helps to connect a concrete experience to such marketing trips, he adds. This can be a lecture by a specialist. Wining and dining are equally important, and this is sometimes underestimated in the Netherlands, tells Schot. 'Over here we are used to getting a quick cheese sandwich between meetings. Internationally, different standards apply.' Small gifts may be part of a marketing strategy, although he stresses that these should never exceed a certain size and weight. 'Your guests need to fly back home, so you don't want to burden them with heavy bottles of wine.'

### **Too crowded**

Whilst Dutch destinations are generally well regarded internationally, a major challenge is the marketing budget, says Oud. 'These are low compared to many international cities. By putting our destination brand values first, we can achieve quite a lot. But in the end, the acquisition of events costs money.' Explaining the

value of business visits to politicians, can be a hard sell. Oud remembers the debate around Amsterdam getting too crowded. Around 2017 the city council chose to cut not only the tourism budget, but also the conference marketing budget. 'This had consequences for the image of the city as a conference destination. And we will see the effects of this for some time, as conferences often have long lead times.'

Schot underlines the importance of the NBTC network, the Netherlands Board of Tourism & Conventions. 'Within this network, a lot of knowledge is being shared. The colleagues of the four major cities also work together closely. After all, we are not direct competitors. In the bid phase, we compete more with the rest of Europe and the world.' Oud concludes: 'You have to keep communicating your brand values in the clearest possible way. But most of all in destination marketing, you need to be prepared for a long haul.'