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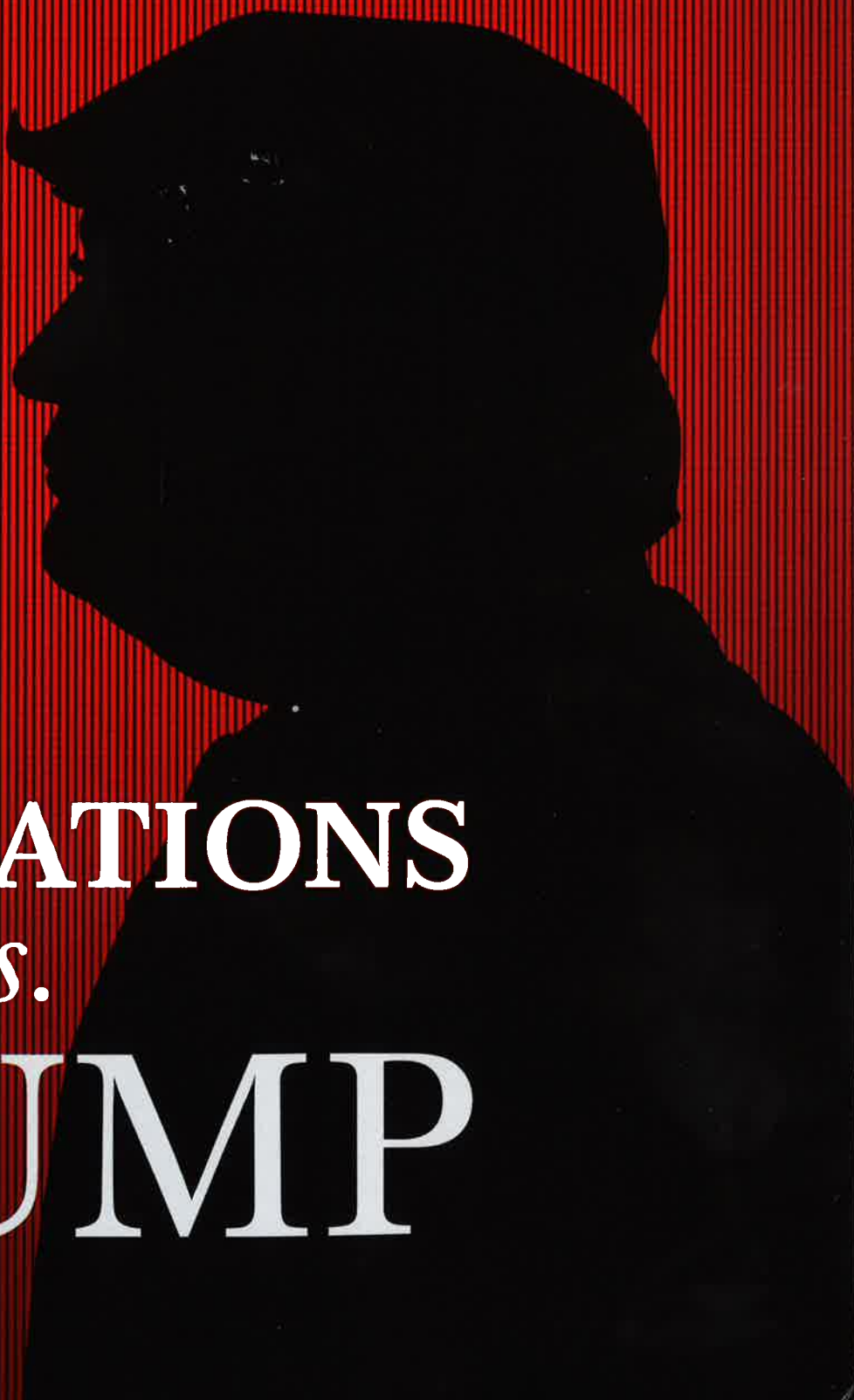
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It is possible to discover a new destination all by yourself, but to feel truly at home you really need to hold the hand of an experienced local. That's when to hire a local DMC to work alongside your own PCO, suggests a recent White Paper. Words by **Rob Spalding**.



The relationship between 'outsider' professional congress organisers (PCOs) and locally-based Destination Management Companies (DMC) can be a minefield. But once cleared, it can be the best, most rewarding route to a successful congress.

That's according to a White Paper by Italy-based AIM Group, which discusses the pros and cons of PCOs and DMCs, raises questions about the effectiveness of cooperation between the two functions, and asks where the added value really lies.

An experienced PCO knows how to organise events anywhere in the world but a local expert can point out features like the hidden attractions, weaknesses, or strengths, of a 'new' destination.

Hans Hanegreefs, executive VP of the European Power Transmission Distributors Association, knew exactly what he wanted for his annual convention in Venice. "We needed a strong local player to be able to deliver the very best celebration of our 15th anniversary, by offering our 400 delegates the magic of Venice, outstanding palaces and the traditions of a destination with a long history. Only a local player could make our event so unique, give shape and colour to our concept."

Therefore the local DMC should help to pinpoint the best suppliers available for any particular kind of event. It should have strong negotiating power and know the local habits and customs. And offer help connecting with the Local Organising Committee.

When the 37th SICOT Orthopaedic World Congress met in Rome last year, Prof. Francesco Falez was chairman of the local committee. "With AIM Group International as the local DMC we created a strong team working alongside the core PCO," he says. "Thanks to this collaboration which started from the bid process, we met the budget targets and reached the high and challenging objectives demanded by SICOT. I can only say that the core PCO came to rely on the experienced local PCO in Rome as a real extension of their team."

The local DMC should be selected with 'anticipation and consideration', advises the White Paper. First, there should be total adherence to the RFP, demonstrating the DMC has understood precisely what is wanted.

Then, the DMC must demonstrate

its ability to work for an international congress. Of course, a profound knowledge of the hosting city, membership of industry associations like IAPCO, ICCA, SITE, etc., as well as the local convention bureau, goes without saying.

"It is our understanding of different cultures and industry practices that helps to ensure our client's events are successful", says Selina Chavry, global managing director of Pacific World, a top DMC. "We work alongside core PCOs and our teams are always searching for innovative offers and new ideas with a focus on the ROI (return on investment) for our clients."

The PCO should also expect its DMC to be up to speed on IT tools ('not to be taken for granted!'), pay close attention to budget and be, wherever possible, *au fait* with the technical or scientific subject of the congress.

A PCO would do well to seek out a DMC which has strong links with the municipality, public transport companies and tourist boards in order to effect security, discounts, promotion and funding from the city, wherever possible.

The PCO should expect to have full support from the DMC during site inspections of social venues and hotels as well as at menu tastings, and so on, to allow the PCO and its client to experience the essence of the destination.

"On one occasion – an international conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, one of

the major sponsors was looking for a local touch," recalled Maddalena Massaro, Hypertension business manager at AIM Group International. "Having a strong local partner on site was the real added value," she continued. "Since coffee is very important in Ethiopian culture, our local partner suggested a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony with

two local ladies in traditional dress preparing the coffee, using a brazier, mortar, terracotta pitcher and cups on a floor covered with fresh grass. So simple, yet our client's booth was the most visited of the entire exhibition."

The core PCO will require the DMC to

limit costs as much as possible, with some complimentary items (i.e. transfers) thrown in. And, with recurring congresses, the presence of the DMC at a preceding congress to promote its own city with tourist material, is crucial. In addition, cost transparency of offers will be at the very heart of the relationship.

The DMC should constantly keep its partner informed about services completed (i.e. hotel rooms reserved, tours confirmed, etc.) Through these constant updates the DMC can demonstrate perfect control over the executed services which, in turn, helps the PCO to adjust the budget and inform the client on the progress of the congress.

In return, there are many things the DMC would like to know about its new working companion.

First off, it would be looking to receive data from previous congresses. Knowing the main features of the event in advance allows the DMC to scrupulously plan all the activities like, for example, the selection of suppliers for the appropriate services.

Next, the DMC has a right to share in the relationship and be invited to attend meetings between the core PCO and the end client.

The DMC needs to be promptly updated about the congress trends, especially in the realms of registrations, sponsors confirmed, etc. And it must be told about the finances. 'It is a complete waste of time both for the DMC, and the PCO, not to receive clear budget instructions,' declares the White Paper. Therefore the DMC should be made aware of the budget forecast for the services of the DMC.

And then, perhaps the crux of the whole affair: The DMC should be considered a partner and not just a supplier to the congress. "Working in a trustful environment is a win-win situation for both the DMC and the PCO, since then the final client will benefit by receiving a better service." ■

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AIM Group International organises over 3,000 events and meetings every year. According to a client's needs, it can be a PCO (Professional Congress Organiser), a core PCO (long-term PCO for associations), and a DMC (Destination Management Company).

From the White Paper

"To succeed in the meeting industry in today's competitive world it is vital to create solutions that go beyond the client's expectations. For a core PCO in particular, a strong relationship with a DMC can make a difference to the services it offers: this is why a core PCO should do its best to achieve that connection"

The DMC should be considered a partner and not just a supplier to the business...