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Notes



Trade Shows and Conferences in Dubai: Gateway to the Middle East

By Michelle Bruno

Dubai, one of the seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates, is well known for its modernity and hospitality. Although an economic slowdown in 2009 put the brakes on some of the business activity in the city-state, the location, amenities, and service levels are still a main attraction for foreign trade show and conference organizers looking for exposure in the Middle East. However, despite the modern look and abundance of English-speaking professionals, there are differences in business practices and cultural nuances that must be taken into consideration.

Newcomer, APCO International, recently held its first international conference, complemented by a small trade show, in Dubai. The group selected Dubai because local agencies had expressed an interest in their offerings. The association represents the public safety communications industry and deals primarily with government agencies. It first sought the guidance of an international consultant to help lay the groundwork for building the event. "The Dubai economy has regained its momentum. It has an infrastructure and is still the central hub of distribution from other

countries. Before, [Middle East] buyers purchased directly from Europe or India. Now they go to Dubai," says Cherif Moujabber, President of Creative Expos and the international trade show expert who worked with APCO.

Besides the time difference and the organization's aggressive timeline, APCO's Lisa Williams, senior manager of events & corporate outreach, encountered some other challenges in executing the event. For instance, the methods for attendee acquisition differ in Dubai compared to the U.S. and Europe. For instance, direct mail and email are less effective for initiating contacts with buyers. Most of the emphasis is placed on face-to-face meetings with top representatives from the prospective agencies and groups.

To facilitate the meetings, APCO enlisted the help of Moujabber to recommend several Professional Conference Organizers (PCOs). The firm APCO selected facilitated meetings to introduce the event to buyers and to follow-up. The Dubai Convention Bureau was also instrumental in the success of the event. Representatives from the Bureau attended many of the meetings with the PCO and prospective attendees. "In Dubai, you have to meet in person with decision mak-

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Aerial shot of Dubai's Jumeirah Palm Island.



VIP conference seating is deliberate.

ers. You must get buy-in from the senior level management before you can move forward,” Williams explains.

Business and cultural protocol is very important in Dubai. For example, seating arrangements in the conference sessions are very deliberate. “In Dubai the VIPs sit in the front of the room in comfortable chairs with coffee tables,” Williams says. The rest of the audience is seated behind in theatre style. Williams was careful to extend her hand in greeting only when a hand was extended to her. Although some areas of the region require highly conservative attire for women, Dubai is more open and business suits (slacks, jackets, knee-length skirts) were more than adequate for female attendees and conference employees. The PCO and hotel staffers were very helpful in making sure that APCO staffers were advised of the customs.

From a logistics perspective, Dubai functions similarly to the U.S. The event was held in three sections of a ballroom—two of which were devoted to the trade show, and a third to the conference sessions. A general contractor prepared an online exhibitor manual and

participants ordered services via the Internet. They also printed conference signage locally. Exhibitors shipping equipment to the show had to adhere to strict deadlines for documentation in order to obtain import approvals in time. Although conference programming is new to Dubai according to Williams, the trade show format was very well received by the attendees.

As APCO plans its return to Dubai in 2012, it will be making some changes. A post-show meeting with the general contractor revealed that signs in Arabic (as well as English) would be helpful for the future. Renewing the endorsements from local agencies will be completed sooner rather than later for 2012. [In 2011,] we received endorsements two weeks before the event and hardly had enough time to put their names on the event website,” Williams says. Having a PCO involved was critical the first year and will play a prominent role next year. As an organization new to the international arena and Dubai, the support of an international expert, PCO, professional hotel, and service-oriented convention bureau was invaluable.

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