

“One cannot manage change, we can only be ahead of it!”

This wise and thought-provoking sentence was part of a virtuoso performance by Eddie Friel OBE, a Visiting Professor at Niagara University and President and CEO of EFA Tourism and Marketing Consultancy who was keynote speaker for ECM Spring Meeting held in Sofia from 16th to 18th March. This three-day event attracted about 100 ECM members and the venue was the Bulgarian capital’s award-winning National Palace of Culture.

Drawing on his vast experience, Friel pinpointed employment generation as the rationale for city tourist offices and convention bureaux, warning that those who failed to create new visitors “had no right to exist”. City tourism organisations were the “champions” of cities, marketing “competitive difference” and – around those differences – charged with developing powerful “narratives” with which to attract conventions and leisure tourism business.

Chaired by Philippe Vignon, Managing Director of Geneva Tourism and Convention, the theme of the seminar was “*Financing Europe’s city tourist offices and convention bureaux – threats, opportunities and solutions*”. He showed how he was leading a radical change agenda within his own organisation, aiming to enhance productivity and inculcate greater commercial awareness.

A survey of ECM members highlighted a pervasive trend away from public sector sources of funding and towards commercial income streams. This survey revealed that the “typical” city tourist organisation has less than 50 staff, survives on modest reserves, and deploys most of its budget on labour and other overhead. The annual income varies widely : just 8% of the respondents reported budgets in excess of 20 million euro, but nearly 1 in 2 operated on budgets of between 300,000 euro and half a million euro.

Stefan Diender, Managing Director of Amsterdam Tourism and Convention Board presented on his organisation’s “hybrid” financial model, while Pere Duran, General Manager of Barcelona Tourism indicated how adept his organisation had become in terms of maximising earned income from bus, TIC and other sales, to the point where annual turnover had reached €35 million.

The seminar also addressed “*Online booking systems - to have or not to have!*”. Burkhard Kieker, CEO of Visit Berlin, and Markus Penz, Strategic Destination Development, Vienna Tourist Board explained how each had recently reviewed this hot topic and reached different conclusions. Berlin retained and revamped, while Vienna outsourced. Katrine Mosfjeld, Director of Digital Development at Visit Oslo, showed how her organization promoted and distributed on the basis of user-generated content, working to a commission-based financial model.

Dieter Hardt-Stremayr, President of European Cities Marketing says: “Eddie Friel OBE was right because we can’t find perfect financial solutions for everything, but we can anticipate and be ahead of the game. This seminar allowed us to share experience around a crucial and ever- topical theme. I am sure that a lot of attendees went back home with a lot of solutions to pressing financial challenges.”

The next ECM meeting - the ECM Annual Conference & General Assembly - will take place in Lyon from 8th to 11th June 2011 and the main seminar will deal with this topic: «*To what extent can cuisine be a competitive advantage and successfully drive forward a city’s marketing?*»

***ECM (European Cities Marketing)** is the leading European association of city tourism offices and convention bureaux, representing 125 members across 100 major cities in 32 countries. Its aim is to improve the performance and maintain the competitiveness of its members through the exchange of best practice and information.

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Some figures based on our network results:

In 2010 the total number of bednights experienced year-on growth of 7.0%. International bednights increased by 6.8%.

The top five European cities in respect of bednights generated by international tourists were London, Paris, Rome, Barcelona and Prague.

More information will be published in the ECM Benchmarking Report in June 2011.