



M+K magazine Switzerland; edition of February 2013

Which Swiss destination can truly host a 1'000 participant-congress?

Daniel Tschudy

There is a strong competition for the ever-increasing meeting-mandates in Switzerland (meaning seminars, corporate conferences, general assemblies, educational events and also congresses).

Because it is not that easy to obtain space for new purpose-built convention centres, many business hotels increase their meeting capacities. On the same time, pure event locations now also offer 'meetings services', not all of them on a professional level though. Anyway, for the traditional congress organisers (PCO) and meeting planners, the competition is harsh and the situation not easy. They have to battle against a certain over-capacity in meeting-facilities and on the same time against the tendency of corporate organisation, to hold more meetings in-house (saving money and travel time). The fact that meetings are booked at an every shorter notice does not help the matter.

The big international congresses, for example in the medical industry, do run on a bit a slower pace. The main reason is that those 'travelling' conventions often have to be planned years in advance for logistical and statutory reasons. In our country, no destination can handle international full-service congresses with 5'000 or 10'000 visitors, but Geneva and Basel are indeed able to host a bit smaller mandates with 2'000 or 3'000 visitors. So, our cities are far from destinations such as Vienna, for many years the number 1 in the global congress business (as per ICCA-statistics).

Which destination can handle 1'000 international congress-participants?

M+K magazine wanted to know, which Swiss congress destination can truly host a full-service convention for 1'000 international guests. The parameters are as follows: There will be 1'000 participants staying in 'acceptable' single rooms and within 20 minutes walking distances to the conference location. The event will last at least 3 days (thus including 2 overnights) and need a main conference room, one major secondary panel room, several break-out rooms, as well as separate catering facilities for 1000 meals, offices, registration desks, smoker's lounges, luggage storage rooms, as well as exhibition/poster space not in gangways or cellars. And finally, the town must offer shopping- and some nightlife-opportunities.



Only 4 + 5 can answer that call

Although advertisement often promises more, in reality only 4 cities are truly able to reply to the above mentioned needs: Geneva, Lausanne, Basel, and Zurich. With some restrictions (for example quality of hotel rooms, night-life, or break-out facilities), five more can handle an international 1'000-pax with at least 2 overnights, Lugano, Davos, Lucerne, Interlaken and Berne.

Those cities with a valuable air-hub (Zurich, Basel, and Geneva) are clearly advantaged; those towns with a high-speed train connection to major European cities (Paris, Frankfurt, Munich, Milan) can sometimes profit from that as well. The fact is, international travellers arrive often at the last minute, and depart as quickly as they can. Time is money. And direct access to international transport therefore too.

What is important to those Swiss host cities is a valuable USP, and the larger destinations have very valuable ones: Geneva is involved in the global politics, Lausanne hometown to many international sports federations, Basel linked with the pharmaceutical industry, and Zurich a truly global business hub (finances, insurances, laws). The others struggle to find strong tools for their international PR-campaigns: Davos, of course, hosts the World Economic Forum (WEF), but only during 10 days a year; almost same as Lucerne with its world-renowned Musical Festival (only). Interlaken and Berne both have a brilliant new conference hall, but often lack the above mentioned other service facilities. And Lugano does not really have those 1'000 proper rooms – besides some other missing infrastructures. That's why those secondary-mentioned cities hardly get new international convention mandates.

But their sales tools keep promising capacities the cities don't have and a service experience they never acquired. The truth is that only 4 cities, only Geneva, Lausanne, Basel and Zurich, can truly handle a full-service convention as described above. The others should clarify more precisely about their offer, volumes, services and infrastructure.