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Last year will probably be better known for the travel disruption caused by sneezing volcanoes, European deep freezes at the beginning and the end of the year; devastating floods from Australia to Brazil, Sri Lanka to China and strikes. In this regard 2011 and has not got off to a good start either with Japan, in particular, suffering horribly, and the USA experiencing killer tornadoes. If that is not enough a new Icelandic volcano reminded Europe that it too has the potential to disrupt air travel.

Natural disasters always show us the fragility of man against the elements but it also shows the wonderful resilience of mankind to overcome adversity. We must always look forward but perhaps with a contingency plan in the pocket just in case. Event planners the world over can no longer ignore the “what if” question. It is not just a question of a backup plan but also revised terms and conditions which are fair and relevant in today’s climate. They also have to recognise that we will continue to experience a short lead in market too which means being absolutely clear from the outset the obligations of both parties.

Much has been written regarding the global economies and no doubt with more difficulties still to come. The upturn will surely come but not until debt mountains are effectively addressed and reduced. The issue for the corporates will always be a combination of risk and perception. For those economies which fudge the issue and where uncertainty continues, clients will be wary of commitment. Convincing the budget holder their budget is safe is one thing, convincing the attendees that the civil unrest, which invariably targets transportation, in that destination as a result of unpopular policies or government regimes is much more difficult.

North African destinations experienced the fallout from regional conflict. However they have taken an honest and direct approach to what this means to clients and as a result some have maintained client confidence especially in Morocco. It makes planning with certainty a real challenge. This is a global industry and we need the choice the world has to offer otherwise we will all become very domestic and some would argue, virtual, when it comes to face to face events.

More than ever the trade associations need to combine to lobby and communicate to all, the benefits of our industry as an:

- Employer
- Facilitator of communications
- Exporter
- Motivator
- Educator

The richness of bringing cultures together at physical gatherings is priceless. At times I feel too many associations with too many niche agendas does not help the cause. The market is becoming more fragmented so another reason we do not lose sight of overall common objectives. Maybe it is time to see a global picture and realise, like banking, it is intrinsically and globally linked.

2011 has been a mixed year so far with some doing well, some seeing light at the end of the tunnel and others failing to survive. Whilst consolidation continues with the global agencies driven by clients requiring a global service offering from a single partner; we have seen a myriad of start ups driven by experienced individuals who, for a variety of reasons, have taken more control of their future as a way of staying in this industry. Others have gone elsewhere and that is an overall loss as the balance of talent is now less experienced and whilst cheaper, will suffer from lack of good mentors and standard bearers.

Traditional sales strategies are beginning to fail as it becomes more difficult to secure that face to face meeting. There are a host of reasons why but underlying this is a change of generation (X and Y) who do have a different attitude and thus require a different approach. This includes routes to market, social media and, I believe, more emotional engagement strategies. It also brings into question the ROI on major exhibitions. I keep hearing the same question from exhibitors, "Show me people I don't know not the ones I do". Companies now need client retention and client acquisition plans as one size no longer fits all.

So what does the balance of 2011 hold in store? Here are 5 predictions:

- 1) Employees may well question company spend in areas like sponsorship when economic hardship continues for workers. Companies will need to improve internal communications to ensure employees understand the benefits. The nervousness of FIFA sponsors is a case in question
- 2) Bribery will become a new area of focus for corporates following new legislation in the UK and USA
- 3) A focus on awareness campaigns that appeal to emotions as well as feature products and services. This generation of buyers want to feel engaged and not simply sold a service or product
- 4) Spreading risk through global markets and not global accounts
- 5) Increased supplier encroachment as more within the supply chain extend their service offering. This is a real challenge. Not only are corporates going direct to DMCs but agents are going direct to ground suppliers. This is not sustainable in the long run