Market forces favour buyers

If UK convention centres are feeling the squeeze, they are putting a brave face on it. Most say business is healthy now and the future looks promising. Yet, aware how fierce the marketplace is, fewer than half are quoting year-on-year price increases and only half of these go above the current inflation rate. The rest are playing safe and a handful of significant quotes are actually lower than last year’s.

The result, excluding this year’s new entries, is a very minimal overall drop in quoted rates — less than 0.5 per cent but a drop, nevertheless. The average price for the 500-delegate brief is £25,835, compared with last year’s £25,965, and the average for 1,000 delegates is £45,120, versus £45,194. Including the new entries, the average for 500 delegates goes up to £26,460 and for 1,000 delegates to £46,552.

At the same time, the gap between the highest and lowest quotes is rising, by 6.17 per cent for 500 delegates and 3.59 per cent for 1,000. In other words, North Wales is £27,705 cheaper than central London for 500 delegates, and you’d save £42,918 in venue hire alone for 1,000 delegates by going to Torquay instead of The QEIICC in London. So, no better time for buyers to ‘go compare’.

Meanwhile, centres across the country, faced with clients pressurised to show greater return for less investment, are doing what they can to offer value. In London, buoyed by last year’s ‘Olympic factor’, the most notable reductions are at EstCLe, which has reviewed its pricing structures for smaller meetings to provide better and added value. Central Hall Westminster has reduced its rates in order to stay competitive given reduced client budgets. The QEIICC

Difficult conditions for venues mean clients have the upper hand — for now. Angela Antrobus reports on the anomalies of this year’s UK Convention Centre Price Survey has been working to make its pricing and packages more flexible and offer enhanced value, primarily with more varied F&B options. “Despite a small inflation increase, we have been able to show savings or only small increases in a lot of cases,” explains commercial director Sue Etherington.

Simon Maier
TFI Group

The PCO

“What seems clear from this information is the vast array of budgets that can be catered for among the UK’s conference facilities. What is extremely interesting is the difference in order of prices between both lists. It’s tricky to make comparisons without fully understanding what is included or, more specifically, what’s excluded from the price. For instance, venues often make additional and mandatory charges for host and security. In both briefs there is a technical requirement specified but no mention of whether, say, a technicians is required — you would hope for at least one for meetings of these sizes — nor what sort of audio support is required. They would have an impact on the final order.

Free Wi-Fi does not necessarily equal good free Wi-Fi and bad Wi-Fi can lead to very disgruntled delegates. As the average number of devices used per delegate continues to increase, so too does the bandwidth requirement and venues don’t necessarily have the infrastructure to be able to service this. Ultimately, this has the capability to add a significant amount to the total bill.”
Free Wi-Fi

Compared with a year ago, many more centres are offering free Wi-Fi, albeit with very varied basic speed connections, from 1Mbps to 1Gbps. Just how much is supplied 'free' does vary, however, and charges are made for additional requirements. At the SECC, for example, free delegate Wi-Fi is available for a fixed period of time per day. Otherwise, client needs are assessed and costed packages tailored accordingly. The centre has invested in a top-class Xirrus Wi-Fi system.

Venue Cymru makes a small charge for Wi-Fi use in its conference rooms or quotes for private networks if clients need Wi-Fi for all delegates or bandwidth for live streaming of their event.

Olympia's Des Alexandrou adds: "It would be great if we could introduce free Wi-Fi. It seems to be the main thing organisers want included."

For two successive years, Olympia has filed quite steeply rises but, having been shut for six months for refurbishment, now offers superior facilities. And, although the Barbican enjoyed a "storming" 2012, higher costs and value add-ons have pushed up its prices.

In Birmingham, the ICC, which reduced its quotes considerably last year, has created bespoke packages better in line with client budgets, while the NEC, showing a swingeing reduction for the 1,000-delegate brief, is aiming to reposition its offer within the conference market. The opening of Resorts World Birmingham in 2015 will mark the NEC as the UK's first exhibition centre with an integrated leisure and entertainment complex.

Among other big players, SECC, Glasgow, shows a 3 per cent rise in line with inflation. Manchester Central remains hugely competitive and attributes its higher quotes this time to heavy demand in October 2014. ACC Liverpool has increased its prices marginally, now seeing a glimmer of growth in the marketplace. "We feel that our packages are truly that, packaged so that clients need do nothing other than turn up," says director of sales Kerrin MacPhie.

Brighton Centre, now in the top half of the tables since revamping, reports small rises due to annual inflation on food and utilities.

Conf. Centre (500 people) - Brief 1 (c) All prices ex-VAT

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Continued on page 51

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Continued on page 51
### Conference Centre (1,000 people) - Brief 2 (E) All prices ex-VAT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference Centre</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Price Ex-VAT</th>
<th>Price Incl. VAT</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>The Barbican, London</td>
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<td>Arena and Convention Centre Liverpool</td>
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<td>Venue Cymru, Llandudno</td>
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<td>28,640</td>
<td>26,682</td>
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<tr>
<td>Riviera International Conference Centre, Torquay</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>28,640</td>
<td>26,682</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Wi-Fi extra charge
Free Wi-Fi included

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### The Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre

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Visit us on Stand G53 at The Meetings Show UK to hear about our excellent Centre!
Harrogate International Centre has rejoined our survey after several years’ absence and a major extension. Its latest packages include additional services and support in response to the pressures on organisers.

Of all the new entries, Center Parcs Sherwood Forest offers fantastic value for clients after something different but costing no more than traditional venues. Its day delegate rate was recently dramatically reduced and delegates have the bonus of access to its ‘Subtropical Swimming Paradise’. Another Nottingham option is East Midlands Conference Centre, now managed by De Vere, with the brand new Orchard Hotel on site. The addition of unlimited refreshments makes it yet more attractive.

Some low-cost centres, such as RICC Torquay, admit they are finding weathering the recession tough. Income on room hire from associations, its core business, is very low although hotels and restaurants benefit enormously and the centre is of great economic value to the Torbay area.

Venue Cymru, always an amazing bargain, has dropped its prices even further.

“The 2012-13 year saw a slight dip in revenues on the previous years,” says conference and events manager Adrian La Trobe. “We have put a slight rise on room hire costs. However, adjustments in the offer available have allowed us to offer a better price on lunch.”

For now at least, concerns about access to and accommodation in some less central destinations, however misguided, seem to count for more than that healthy sea air! Time to think again?

Melanie Lucas
British Society for Immunology

The association planner

“Given the prices on your lists and prices we have achieved, I imagine that a lot of centres are open to negotiation, especially in months when conferences are less popular. We have always avoided Birmingham ICC as it is perceived to be expensive. So I’m surprised that, for the 1,000 delegate brief, it is in between Brighton and Liverpool in price. We have a large number of parallel sessions so need up to eight rooms. We can do this at Brighton and Liverpool but, realistically, only a handful of venues are available to us. We’ve used Glasgow in the past but, being on the outskirts of the city, it wasn’t hugely popular. We’ve looked at London but ruled it out, mainly due to accommodation costs.

We try to keep our annual meeting as cheap as possible for members. Delegate numbers have stayed healthy over the years, at around 1,200. We have a budget but the BSI does supplement the meeting.”

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