

# Associations on fire!

THIS was the title of one of the breakout educational sessions at the 55th Congress of the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) held in Sarawak, Malaysia, where I was a panelist.

The reasons I wanted to share this story are because: (a) the session format is new, and you may wish to adopt this in your own event, and (b) it did break barriers, and became a healthy debate between two “opposing sides”.

The innovative panel session consisted of a “no holds barred” question-and-answer format, featuring the panelists on one side and the audience on the other. Five international association executives, including myself, were on the “association panel” side, while the over 100-delegate audience, which consisted mostly of meeting planners, destination and venue marketers, and event managers, were on the “association suppliers” side.

The rule of the “game” was that the audience had the first crack to ask five rapid-fire and frank questions in succession. The panelists, based on their respective rating of the questions (whether easy, moderate, or hard/strategic), have to immediately respond. After five questions from the floor, the panelists then have their turn to ask the audience one question. The Q&A cycle was repeated during the one-hour session.

This sequence literally put those on the association side “in the line of fire”, as they tackled tough questions, like ethical handling of bid proposals, transparency of negotiations, venue selection criteria, appropriate ocular site visits, even nonreply of e-mails sent after meeting in trade shows.

The association executives also had the chance to air their views on issues that include costly accommodation and event venue charges, persistent e-marketing and inflexibility during negotiations.

At the end of the session, the seemingly heated atmosphere turned into an “all’s well that ends well” environment. Both sides ended up happy with the honest exchanges. They also agreed that associations and suppliers should put themselves into a partnership relationship rather than into a client relationship.

From my perspective, I think associations and their suppliers should really not view their relationship as transactional and short term. In fact, this relationship should be the contrary, i.e., they should be partners for the long term, helping each other for the common good of the constituency they both serve, i.e., the members of the association community.