

Diary: Global PCO Forum Seoul

Hiroyuki Sugano, Senior Researcher,
MICE Research Institute

The Korea MICE Expo took place on June 29 and 30, 2011, at the Coex Convention and Exhibition Center in Gangnam, Seoul's business district. Various seminars and symposia are held in conjunction with the exhibition, making the Expo the largest gathering for Korea's meetings, incentives, conferences and events (MICE) industry. Over the last few years Korea has made a unified national effort to promote MICE activities, and this event gave visitors a keen sense of the country's strength in the field. Latest Union of International Association (UIA) statistics show that Seoul is the world's fifth-ranked convention city, and this news was met with resounding applause when it was announced at a reception held during the Expo. Korea's MICE industry shows no signs of losing momentum. On June 29 I attended the Global PCO Forum Seoul hosted in conjunction with the Expo by the Korea MICE Association and the Korean Association of PCOs. This article reports on the forum and my impressions of the event.

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Within the context of the wider MICE industry Expo, the purpose of the Global PCO Forum Seoul was to bring together professional congress organizers doing similar work around the world for a series of seminars and symposia focusing on the PCO market, providing them with opportunities to discuss a wide range of issues and market trends. As noted above, the forum was hosted by two organizations: the Korea MICE Association (KMA) and the Korean Association of PCOs (KAPCO). Since KMA President Esmond Oh is also a KAPCO board member, these two associations enjoy a close relationship. Including Japan, four countries responded to Korea's invitation to sit on a discussion panel, the others being Singapore, Malaysia and the United States of America. We were joined as panelists by the representative of a Korean PCO and Professor Heekon Hwang, Hallym University of Graduate Studies. The audience consisted of people involved in the

MICE industry and students studying in the MICE field. Attendees numbered close to 100, and in-depth presentations and discussion made for a fascinating forum.

In addition to myself, the panel comprised five members:

- Nancy Tan, Managing Director of Ace: Daytons Direct (International) Pte Ltd., Singapore
- Amos Wong, Managing Director of AOS Conventions & Events Sdn. Bhd., Malaysia
- Greg Talley, President and CEO of Talley Management Group, USA
- Bannie Kim, President and CEO of MECI, a Korean PCO
- Professor Heekon Hwang, Hallym University of Graduate Studies. The university and its graduate school are well known in Korea for their MICE programs.

The panel session was led by MICE consultant Min Hye Yong, and Kim Heeyoung of the PCO EZ pmp acted as moderator for the subsequent floor discussion. This line-up was selected by Jessie Hwa Jung Lee of People-X, a Korean member of the World PCO Alliance (WPCOA), to which the Congress Group also belongs (Ms. Lee is also a KAPCO board member). This may explain why all the overseas panelists, myself included, were WPCOA members.

The forum was a marathon effort, running from 2:00 pm to 6:30 pm. I will report on each of the parts in turn.

Part 1: Presentations

The panelists first made presentations on the situations in their own countries, using the ten-minute timeslots allotted to outline and comment on their own PCO markets. The secretariat had provided a list of questions in advance, and each presentation

addressed those issues. The key topics covered included the PCO market, PCO planning, the convention market environment, PCO revenue models, government assistance, and PCO market issues. Japan was first up, and as all the panelists spoke they shared fascinating insights. For example, as many of you may know the term PCO is not commonly used in America, where “Association Management Companies” (AMC) and “Independent Meeting Professionals” are the most well-known occupational categories. Another interesting piece of information was that Korea now has 283 PCO companies (registration is mandatory), and there has been strong growth in the industry over recent years. The presentations highlighted major differences in business conditions from one country to another. After the session, representatives of the two Korean host organizations told us that they had gained even more information than expected.

Part 2: Challenges Facing the PCO Industry

The presentations were followed by a panel discussion. Moderator and MICE consultant Min Hye Yong led the panelists in discussing common issues and themes in the PCO industry. Professor Hwang kicked off the discussion by talking about conditions for PCOs in Korea. The Professor noted that most Korean PCOs have small staff numbers, and long working hours tend to be the norm. Many of the issues were seen as relating to the increasingly international nature of the work. The other Asian panelists from Singapore, Malaysia and Japan spoke of similar concerns, and the discussion turned to ways of motivating and developing employees. Not surprisingly, people doing the same kind of work sympathize with each other on many points even if they are operating in different countries. The panelists all presented their own insights and suggestions for overcoming such difficulties, and the discussion provided much food for thought.

Part 3: Floor Discussion (Audience Q&A)

The coffee break was followed by another discussion where panelists responded to questions posed by the audience. Ms. Kim of EZ pmp acted as moderator for this session, and panelists answered questions gathered in advance from the floor. The first questioner noted that Korean PCOs have a high proportion of female employees and asked about the situation in other



Panelists on stage at the Global PCO Forum Seoul (the author is second from the right)

countries. When the panelists responded that the same trend can be seen in Singapore, Malaysia, the US and Japan, audience members were clearly unsurprised. Evidently women can offer attention to detail and high standards of customer service suited to this kind of work. I was struck by the many similarities noted by panelists, regardless of national boundaries.

After several more queries, a question was raised about conference sponsorship and sales, which elicited different responses from the panelists reflecting circumstances in their own countries. I would like to see Japan study this area in more depth.

Finally there were direct questions from the floor, and by the time these had finished 6:30 had already come around. The session was highly productive and I felt that despite its length we had still not exhausted discussion. That evening in Seoul filled me with a desire to hold a similar forum in Japan and to build stronger ties with overseas PCOs.

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- ① Planning and consulting services for domestic and international conferences and exhibitions
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- ③ Planning and research for the development of conference and cultural facilities
- ④ Research of MICE projects overseas
- ⑤ Publicity and publishing related to MICE

