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Venues seek to stop espionage game

By Jill James

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Security at business meeting venues has been moving up the agenda of event organisers as more flashpoints of global instability make the headlines.

Conference venue managers and hoteliers who host important meetings are increasingly at the centre of a James Bond-style world where sophisticated strategies and technologies are needed to protect high-profile guests and speakers such as senior executives, celebrities, leading politicians and, of course, their audiences.

Corporate lawyer Riccardo Abbate, a partner in international law firm Trowers & Hamblins, deals with the hotel sector. "Security," he says, "has a number of meanings depending on whom – or what – is being protected."

Mr Abbate says methods can involve setting up simple procedures for dealing with hoax callers and bomb alerts, organising physical personal security or setting up sophisticated surveillance and scanning techniques for sensitive conference and meetings venues.

In a world where lasers can be used to bounce off glass windows and pick up voices in a room, Mr Abbate says there is a need to understand the demands put on a venue by event organisers.

Robert Cole, of security specialists Minimal Risk, agrees. He has about 40 years' experience of security management including conferences and board meetings "Choosing a venue is very important," he says. "Good-quality hotels will know the right procedures.

"Deciding on the level of security is important. For conferences and meetings you need controls on guest lists and should make sure that attendees bring ID such as a passport or a business card with them."

He says: "If you are not careful, event organisers and security organisations can end up working against each other. Security should be there to facilitate the peaceful passage of an event, not to prevent it."

He says low-level screening helps facilitate meetings and conferences "in a nice way". Simple searches are a good deterrent, as is surveillance equipment. Dog searches before events are sometimes necessary, as are seal-and-sweep measures, where venues are kept "sterile" until an event's opening moment.

Mr Cole says professional stewarding companies are a must for some conferences. "And you need to separate hotel meeters and greeters from security staff. Professionally trained stewards are very often concentrating on different things to in-house staff."

Lawyers involved in negotiating the contracts that define security responsibilities at meetings, conferences and exhibitions cover ever-wider areas. Their increasingly large role in security matters at conference and meetings events is confirmed by Adrian Jones, another partner with Trowers & Hamblins, who worked on the contracts for the G20 summit at London's ExCel exhibition centre in 2009.

Mr Jones says that although events such as G20 go beyond normal security boundaries – for example suspending public access rights and public transport links – a number of risk issues could apply equally to ordinary commercial events.

He says that a key part of his role is to work with the venue owner to ensure that the perceived physical and commercial risks are addressed in the contractual arrangements.

“Venue owners should ensure that they make clear to what extent they are responsible for security, and to what extent that falls on the organiser. They should also consider the consequences should the worst happen and their venue be damaged as a result of civil disorder or a terrorist incident connected to the event. Would the owner’s insurance cover both physical damage and the inevitable interruption to their business while repairs are made? If the answer is ‘no’ I would recommend that they seek a contractual commitment from the organisers to cover such loss, or at least try to have the organisers cover any increase in premium to properly insure the event.”

So while the instinct of many an event organiser might be to dial the number of a top security firm, they might also be well advised to call their lawyers and insurance brokers early in the process.

Sylvain Ercoli, managing director of the Royal Monceau hotel in Paris, has hosted political and business meetings for decades at some of the world’s most glittering hotels. He stresses the importance of a hotel’s own security team.

“Liaison with an event organiser’s own security staff is becoming increasingly important,” he says. “Corporations have taken a step forward in co-operating with hotels on meetings security.”

Dominic Bachofen, another experienced hotelier, who runs the luxury Carlton in St Moritz, is used to the security needs of those attending important business meetings. At his Alpine hideaway for the rich and famous, the lobby lift indicators do not even show which floor a guest is getting out at in case they are being monitored by prying eyes.

He says discretion can be the best protection of all. He adds: “The biggest threat is that you feel secure because of all the technology that you can employ. But really what you need are people – good staff – staying constantly alert.”

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Useful addresses

The UK Security Industry Authority is the organisation responsible for regulating the private security industry. www.sia.homeoffice.gov.uk

The Association of Security Consultants is the professional organisation that represents UK independent consultants. www.securityconsultants.org.uk/home

The International Association of Professional Security Consultants has a website that helps you match your meeting or event to a consultant. www.iapsc.org/referral/advsearch

Trowers & Hamlins is an international law firm dealing with security issues: www.trowers.com

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