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In the Netherlands we have the saying *the holiday season is the cucumber season*, the off-season.

We traditionally complain because our venues are empty and nothing is organised. But does that really count for knowledge dissemination or social events? Or is it just a lack of innovative thinking or entrepreneurial guts?

Cucumber season... S

First of all, when does this cucumber period start and when does it end? The more up-north one goes, the earlier in the summer holidays starts... sometimes even already half June while the Latin countries take their months' rest up from the beginning of August. Of course the main holiday period coincides with the holidays of the schoolgoing kids. **However with demographic changes in Europe, holiday patterns are changing. So the question arises how and what has been changed or is changing in the conference industry?**

A new European life-style

To start with, the demographic changes. It is no news that Europeans have less kids than half a century ago. In some countries having no kids and choosing for a bachelors' life and career has gained over the traditional pattern of mar-

riage and kids. With the increase of educational levels of the population, normally related with careers, life-styles etc, it looks like this is not just a trend any longer but a steady evolution. Of course, also the fact that people live longer is influencing work patterns: there are tendencies (or musts because of increased retirement costs) to work longer, the penchant for a more balanced style of life where (family) care and continuous education have become a normally accepted part of life, sabbatical leaves and all kind of more personal arrangements have seen light. With these changes also the holiday patterns have changed and more and more people avoid the summer period for their leave of work.

Summer: a low season yet?

Looking into our industry and trying to find out if the holiday season is the cucumber season of our in-

dustry, I noticed a few things. Checking upon the various conference-calendars, I found a few observable facts. To begin with, it seems that the majority of scientific conferences and especially the ones in the so-called exact sciences (physics, chemistry, etc.) take place in the business high season period whereas the social sciences have a tendency to organise conferences (also) during July and August. Next, looking into UN or EU or other (inter)governmental agencies, one can construe from the various calendars that they follow the traditional holiday pattern and almost nothing takes place during the summer months.

In cases of emergency and crisis political and diplomatic life continues as normal.

Last but not least, on the corporate side no big events are taking place except for the more social events like golf tournaments, tennis cham-

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It is time for the conference industry to innovate: why not combining knowledge with pleasure, for example? Rome would be the perfect city



...silly season?

ships etc. for which clients have been invited. Clearly, with a few exceptions, the summer months are the cucumber months in the conference industry. **Strangely enough, the demographic changes seem to have left the conference industry mostly unaffected.** The conference patterns did not alter dramatically during the last decade, nor did it change the flow of sort of conferences. So we still complain when it is low season and we do not earn anything.

A possible solution

However with the changes in demographics I already mentioned, we would expect innovations in the industry. For instance, why not capitalising on the increased interest of life-long learning combined with social activities? Organising conference alike events in which knowledge is combined with pleasure let's say art and history of

Rome between 1800 and 1850 linked with walks through the city. Or, why not a summer course about the various cultures? Not on a high scientific level, but intertwining daily life subjects (gastro-nomic knowledge and cooking, for

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instance) with more educative subjects as learning about the various backgrounds of the cultures and countries? Or else, a conference on the history and evolution on Mid-

dle-East policies or Far-east economies to mention a few subjects. Not for politicians or scientists but for normal people trying to grasp why actual difficulties and challenges exist and to comprehend better non-Western people. Just a few examples where the conference industry could do invent new activities, for different target groups, with challenging formats and contents. What does the conference industry do to tackle low-season periods, how does it anticipate demographic changes and their impacts on the business?

As far as I can judge, next to nothing. It is time that our industry starts to bother about demographic changes impacting our industry. And not just about our changing life-styles but also about the impact of flows of immigrants... to mention just another subject. If only to make sure that we stay in business and with a social face! ●