



Podcast

Heike Mahmoud, Hartmut Hofmann
and Thorben Grosser



Welcome to the sixth MICE Innovation Session. My name is Thorben Grosser, and I will be your host for this session dedicated to the topic “Convention Center of the Future.” I am delighted to welcome Heike Mahmoud and Hartmut Hofmann from the CCH as experts to our show.

Heike Mahmoud is COO of the Congress Center Hamburg. For those of our listeners who happen to live underneath a rock and have never heard of you, would you be so kind and explain once again what you do in your job and where your expertise is?

HM: (chuckles) ... Who live underneath a rock... well, really. First, what are my responsibilities? In March of last year I moved from Berlin to Hamburg, where I now have the most fascinating job in the German meetings industry: reopening this wonderful Congress Center that is being built there at Dammtor, and doing so together with the entire team. That is really an exciting task.

TG: I am happy to hear it. We are celebrating another debut today: for the first time we are welcoming a second guest to our show, Hartmut Hofmann. He heads the production department at the CCH and is thus probably one of Germany’s leading experts on events center technology. Hartmut, what does a director of a production business unit do?

HH: Well, basically everything Heike doesn’t do. (Laughs) I make sure that all the nice great customers Heike brings to our center will get what they want at their event. As for the “production” part, I head the entire technical team as well as the commercial project management and all those many units that go in between, such as logistics, cleaning, and many more. All that needs to function as one big team.

TG: I’m pleased to have both of you in our show today, and I would like to start by asking Heike about this huge task you and your team are facing: You now have a new convention center, or rather, you do not. How do you market something that doesn’t exist yet?

HM: On the one hand, there is a lot of facts from the architects we can work with, and we have the people on our team, such as technicians and salespeople. Mixing all that with a lot of motivation, pride, and know-how, we reach out trying to sell all the great benefits the CCH has or will have. We can only do that based on facts and figures, but we also utilize a lot of additional tools, such as digitalization and virtual reality tools.

TG: Slow, slow, so you are exploring entirely new ways of selling this center, using new technologies, or how should I imagine that?

HM: Yes, we have recreated the CCH the way it will be, but in the digital world, and we are taking our laptops to our customers or to trade shows to advertise this building so our customers get an idea what they can expect, what everything will look like, the proportions and dimensions, etc. I have to say, while it is a new approach, our customers are absolutely enthusiastic about it. This technology gives them a way to almost physically experience the new center. It really helps them visualize it, and that has been very helpful to us in selling the CCH while involving the city as well. Just presenting an individual building would not be very helpful; we are bringing along the entire city, so to speak.

TG: Let me just make sure I understand: All that virtually reality stuff has been talked about throughout the industry for some time. Wherever you see that in action, it often ends up being more like a little decorative extra, a sideshow of sorts. But you’re telling us that it really makes it easier for you to get your customers to buy in?

HM: Definitely. We have set up a showroom at the construction site where customers can check out and try out certain materials and furnishings, such as chairs, that will be in the new CCH, and the digital technology really helps us in persuading customers to host the next event at our venue in Hamburg. Many of our customers plan far ahead for future events, and we already have some contracts for the year 2025, and inquiries through to 2030. This means that customers need to know for sure they understand what they can expect, and this new technology really helps us demonstrate that.

TG: You just mentioned Hamburg as a city. Of course the CCH, by virtue of its enormous dimensions, is the biggest venue in the city. Are you and your team operating all that by yourselves, or are you part of a larger ecosystem?



HM: Yes, of course we are part of a larger community. When we open the CCH next year, it will forever change Hamburg’s DNA, so to speak. We will have new conventions and new customers in our city, and the hotels and organizations, such as our biggest partner, the Hamburg Convention Bureau, will help us attract new, major conventions and customers to Hamburg. It is all a team effort that we could never accomplish alone. It would be impossible to operate a convention center all by ourselves, especially in view of the fact that we are trying to attract more international customers who need places to stay and restaurants to eat, and airlines to travel, so we have a large number of partners who work with us to make it all happen.

TG: That’s really fascinating. Hartmut, you are in the process of building a new convention center. Its precursor at the same site was first opened in 1973, so that has been quite a few years. It’ll hopefully be a number of years until you have to build the next edition. When you plan to build such a complex, what do you have to bear in mind to make sure it will have a useful life of more than two or three years, considering how rapidly technology advances?

HH: That will depend, of course, on what kind of technology you are talking about. It may surprise you to hear the head of the technical department tell you that in a business like ours, technology is ultimately nothing more than a means to an end.

TG: What do you mean by that?

HH: First and foremost, it is the content our customers want to highlight that really matters. It’s content, content, content – and true content is a rare commodity in this day and age, and the best technology in the world cannot make up for poor content. That is a realization not everybody has understood. Some will try to cover up for the lack of quality content by utilizing spectacular technology. What we in production care about most is that the technology, whether it was developed in the 1970s or just recently, is robust and dependable, that it is user-friendly, and that spare parts will be available for a long time. Whether or not it is absolutely state of the art is not such a big deal to us; I don’t know whether Heike would look at it from a different angle, as part of her sales pitch ...

HM: What?? (Laughs) We only want the very best for our customers! (Laughter)

HH: (laughing) Those two criteria don’t necessarily conflict. What I am saying is that “state of the art” in the meaning of “faster, higher, further” is something marketing cares about a lot, it’s about beating the competition. In reality, all convention centers put their pants on one leg at a time. We share a natural skepticism against what we call “banana technology” ...

TG: What is banana technology?

HH: It ripens at the consumer’s home. (Laughter) Everybody knows what it means in the software realm, where you need a number of updates before your software finally runs even worse than before ... We operate one-of-a-kind live shows where we don’t get a second chance and the margin of error is very narrow. We can’t afford to go by trial and error. Imagine a medical convention where experts present the results of

maybe five years of work, and the presentation is an important step in their career. Of course we use high-end technology too but it must function reliably. If it doesn't, it will be a disaster. So we are more conservative than you might think when we select our technical equipment.

TG: So you aren't conservative because you're afraid of something but out of the conviction that you need reliability and the ability to get spare parts even maybe ten years from now, and new components that will be a good fit for your technical ecosystem?

HH: And because the person operating the system who has the knowledge and the experience to handle it right even in difficult situations needs to be able to control it even after a retrofit. Of course there are event formats that use technology in a more spectacular way, or where the organizers choose technology that is very attention-grabbing. But looking at past events at the CCH, this doesn't happen too often. One time we had a medical convention where a surgical procedure was shown live on-screen in 3D ...

TG: Wait ... You have to explain that. They were showing a live 3D transmission of surgery as it was taking place?

HH: Exactly. Live transmission isn't all that rare at our center. For example, Endoclub Nord does it every year at their November convention, transmitted from several Hamburg hospitals. The convention participants are actually able to ask the surgeon questions about what they're doing, such as why she or he is doing things a certain way, etc. These are educational events, and watching them is fascinating for all of us. One day someone came up with the idea of creating the possibility to do live 3D transmissions to differentiate ourselves from other convention centers. But implementing that takes a lot of effort, including the 3D goggles, all the handling, the rehearsals, and all the technical equipment costs a lot. To be honest, what you see in the end is okay but the real content that is related to the audience is how and why certain things are done, so the live video could have been done in 2D just as well without any information getting lost. That's why in our industry, which in most cases deals with corporate events, conventions, cultural events, etc., you may on occasion have a laser show but that's about it as far as advanced technology is concerned.



TG: Do you sometimes see yourselves as consultants who may have to bring a customer back down to earth and say: a laser show is good and nice, but let's focus on what really matters? Or do you view yourselves as operators of the convention center, as providers of a building who leave it up to the customer to make the arrangements for what will happen inside?

HM: No, the customer is always our top priority, and especially in sales. We do not use high-pressure sales techniques, and we believe it is our responsibility to really listen closely to the customer and what they want. We are, in fact, their consulting partners who give recommendations regarding what can be done at the CCH so they can develop their event to achieve the best possible outcome. We are the ones who know the building and its equipment, we know our service partners, we have a really great network of partners, and we want to spread out all that before our customers. My personal creed is that we want to take our customers by surprise by what we can offer in terms of added value so they can later say: Hamburg really made a difference.

TG: Has that always been the approach of the CCH, or is it something that is just being developed, that is growing? Do you expect this consultant role to become more important in the future? I have never booked a convention center so I'm not sure what that would be like.

HM: I am looking in Hartmut's direction because I've only been here for a year and a half so I can't speak for the time before my tenure.

HH: I believe we've been quite consistent in this respect, providing consultancy services on a high level. That has always been the most important aspect, showing the customer in a professional manner what the building can do. That may sometimes mean dampening excessive expectations, but we never say "no" or "that won't be possible"; rather, we might say "there may be a better way to accomplish that," and make a concrete suggestion how the customer might best achieve their goal, which is to get the message across to the audience. The technology available to us to make it happen has not really changed dramatically. Maybe some of our listeners will be surprised to hear what we believe is most important for an architect or planner to consider when planning or upgrading a building. The answer is, those are rather rudimentary considerations, such as: we need lots and lots of high-voltage electrical connection points, and many ceiling mounting points to suspend heavy equipment from. As Heike just indicated, we are first and foremost hosts who want to provide a building that can fulfill everybody's needs and wishes. That means you cannot design the building for a very limited range of purposes. You have to set it up so it keeps many options open, and develop it with a lot of hindsight. I have been in the convention business for 25 years and been involved in implementing a major addition to the building once before. During that project we realized that the most important thing is to provide a strong data network, especially in view of today's digital needs, and that you can really get customers excited when they see that they can effortlessly connect all their systems inside the building, even highly specialized equipment. Whether it is a major corporate event or medical convention or a big festive banquet like the one we had not long ago – all of which have entirely different requirements – we want to make sure everybody is 100% satisfied, and our rather basic technical systems, as boring as they may seem at first, go a long way in accomplishing that. And then, if the customer wants to add a little gimmick here or there, we can accommodate that easily, and that'll be the cherry on top.

HM: What is really great is that we have such a broad range of customers. We have national and international events of professional and trade organizations, medical conventions, corporate events, many different regional events. One day we will have concerts again, so what we need is flexibility. That is really our keyword tonight, flexibility – we want to be flexible so we can accommodate any conceivable customer preference. That's why many of our assets aren't permanent but movable, for example the furnishings. Only two halls in the CCH have permanent seating, all the others have removable seats so everything can be arranged to suit the customer's needs. We work together with a number of different partners providing temporary furnishings. The same goes for catering, which can be arranged as desired by the customer. Our exclusive catering partner is Käfer Catering Hamburg who likewise offers very flexible services. They also follow the current trend to put the emphasis on sustainability and regional cuisine and avoid using plastic utensils. This enables us to take the lead in minimizing our ecological footprint. I've been traveling a lot lately, going to various trade events and conventions, and to my own surprise – I've never experienced this in such an intensity – frequently the first question we got from customers was: "Is your convention center sustainable, what about its ecological footprint, are you pursuing any particular strategy in that direction? If not, we can end this conversation right now." We are extremely happy to be able to say we will have all of this in place and that our customers will get plenty of information on that subject.

TG: Talking of happy, I'm still a technical nerd so maybe I should ask Hartmut: From a technical viewpoint, what aspect of the new CCH are you most proud of?

HH: I'll have to ask your patience before answering that question – since you used the term "nerd": all this time I've been waiting for someone to drop the big buzzword "digitalization." It really is a big word, and a topic you cannot avoid in the convention business nowadays. First of all, in the convention business as elsewhere, digitalization is a means to an end. In fact, in the events sector the topic is all but done with. What is

typical about digitalization is that it hits businesses pretty abruptly. That happened to us, too, when we were planning for the new building. Fifteen years ago when we were planning an addition, we started to replace some of our outdated analog systems by introducing digital equipment, adding things like remote controls for mixing consoles and the ability to use an iPad from anywhere inside the building to control a mixing console. That proved to be very successful in our new halls, so we decided to install that technology in the new halls of the CCH as well. Then all of a sudden the IT industry, which had discovered that digitalization is more or less a money printing machine, started coming up with new generations of everything, which came as a bit of a cold shower for us because it meant we had to scrap our fancy digital equipment for new equipment and become even more “digital.” All the data, including audio and video, which we used to transmit throughout the building via analog lines had to be digitized, which means we are now mainly using fiber-optic cables. This was a mind shift for us. We had to implement that both mentally and physically. It’s not that this type of digital technology is as indispensable in the convention business as it may be elsewhere, because its major strength – automation – doesn’t play such a big role in our business where we do one-off live events with few opportunities for automation. Another aspect is that the technology is expensive, and the question for us is: what is actually the benefit, other than being able to transmit content a little bit faster and with better quality. When I started at the CCH 25 years ago, we were still carrying those slide carousels around, and the speakers at the events always used to say: “Next slide please!” While that technology is now outdated, the type of content it transports is still essentially the same. Typically, in a medical convention speakers don’t show any sophisticated PowerPoint decks with all kinds of fancy image sequences ...

TG: ... They still do poster presentations ...

HH: Indeed, but what I really wanted to say, and what is quite funny, is that in a way we are back to where we were 25 years ago: an old-fashioned slide has the same resolution as a 4K screen, and when you look at the capabilities of the human eye, it cannot even tell the difference between 4K and a lower resolution unless it is right in front of the display, at a distance of no more than one and a half times the screen height. In other words, we are hyping ourselves into technology our analog eyes and ears can’t even discern, and we spend lots of money just to have it. As I mentioned earlier, we (Heike and I) aren’t quite on the same page there ...

HM: (chuckles)

HH: ... but it is simply a matter of giving good advice to the customer when we sometimes say: you don’t need that fancy technology for that purpose, no matter how fantastic it may appear, because all it will do is cost you a lot of money. So when it comes to digitalization we need to take a slow approach unless we are forced to adopt it. Which leads me to a different aspect, one that actually answers your original question. Digitalization arrived so quickly in the world of event engineering that the professional training programs were unable to keep pace. To handle digital networks for audio and video transmission today you need a trained network technician. We are effectively building a big IP network, and our traditional, experienced, and highly trained event technicians with all their expert knowledge and experience regarding fault analytics, troubleshooting, systems engineering, etc. do not have the skills required to handle those networks. All they see is a cabinet full of blinking switches, and the fault they’re looking for is hidden somewhere in that maze. In the past you did a cross-check and a fault localization routine and then you knew what was wrong and what part you needed to exchange. Now they are unable to tell why there is a fault in one of the audio lines and where. Plus, there is nobody else who would know. Unless you are willing to call a very expensive nerd who can help you. That is a real challenge, and the labor market is swept clean of these experts. The situation in Hamburg is such that places like our fantastic new Elbphilharmonie concert hall attract all the capable people, and so does the cruise industry, believe it or not. We can’t get the specialists we need unless we offer exorbitant pay.

TG: Wow!

HH: The technology isn’t the problem, nor is the building. But making sure the building will be successful in highlighting what’s happening inside, that is the challenge. And if you asked me what it is that we are and

want to be most proud of, it is the team that can manage and control that technology, rather than the world’s biggest projector or whatever.

HM: Not just the technical team but also the entire rest of the team as well, because it is teamwork throughout the CCH, from sales, the coat check and reception personnel through to accounting and controlling – everything is really one big team effort. Since we and our partners want to attract more international conventions, and position Hamburg as a destination internationally, we must ask ourselves how we can accommodate all the different needs and requirements of our international customers, including foreign languages, and how we can properly highlight our unique features and benefits, so we are in the process of building the know-how we need to accomplish that. We need to communicate, we need to listen, and we are determined to position the CCH so the people of Hamburg can be proud of this building. We’ve been talking a lot about conventions, but we want to be more than a convention center. We want to open this house for the citizens of Hamburg themselves. People are curious to see what is evolving here as the construction project progresses, and we feel even those who are not potential event or convention attendees should benefit from the center. It is a great challenge to turn this building into a venue for all.

TG: I am looking forward to it! As we come to a close, I would like to ask both of you: what are the current trends that are most important from your own perspective and from the perspective of your customers?

HH: What I can see is that the traditional dividing lines between formats, such as exhibitions and other event types where people are basically gathered to listen to some speeches or presentations, are dissolving. There is a trend to merge different formats and put even greater emphasis on networking. There is an old cliché that when someone has been at a convention, they will later say that the most important times were the coffee breaks. That’s because the coffee breaks are where networking happens, notwithstanding all the knowledge that is shared in the actual sessions. So the long-term value of such an event has a lot to do with one-on-one interaction. Right now there is a lot of experimenting going on to see how the separation between coffee breaks, lectures, and exhibitions, or even personal activities such as taking care of e-mail correspondence in between, can be dissolved, which means eliminating partitioning walls. That brings along new challenges for event technicians, including acoustics. We need to create a variety of options for people to be able to benefit from the program – aspects such as how can a participant profit in the best possible way, or how much partitioning is necessary to allow for an audience to fully focus



on what is being presented. Then there are psychological factors, for example when the doors of an auditorium are closed for a session and someone who is a bit late or would like to listen in wants to enter but is afraid of everybody staring at them; or the opposite situation, where someone is sitting in a session but is bored to death and would like to leave but doesn't want to be stared at. By creating an open atmosphere where audiences can flow freely, all those concerns can be eliminated and people can profit from the agenda much more. That is definitely a trend, Heike can probably confirm it. We have to give added value to people, not only in terms of the ecological footprint, and whether people travel by train rather than airplane, but by enabling people to make the most of the time they spend at an event. There are technical means to support that, for example silent conferencing, which is a really big trend right now. Some people may be familiar with the concept from silent discos where you can put on a special headset and dance to music without the outside world hearing anything. We use that technology in places where the acoustical conditions are tricky, or in wide open spaces where people would like to listen to some presentation without others being disturbed. One recent example where this was practiced successfully was at the IT Summit in Dortmund at Westfalenhalle. Erecting partitions was neither possible nor desired. There were four auditoriums for lectures where everybody got a special receiver headset to listen. We are trialing that approach here as well, going one step further by using apps and streaming software so everybody can use their personal earphones. This way we can avoid all the handling complications of using facility-owned receiver-type headsets. The thing is, these receivers are very costly, people tend to misplace them, and sanitizing them is an extra chore, so if everybody can bring their own personal device, which most people carry in their pockets nowadays anyway, all participants have to do is connect to the online stream, or its translation. In theory the listeners don't even necessarily have to be on-site. This is where we see our opportunity, and this is where digitalization makes us strong, giving us that added value and potentially even a return on our investment.

TG: I personally would probably prefer using my own cell phone and headphones too. So what is your top trend, Heike?

HM: We are asking ourselves increasingly, and customers are asking us that question as well when they bring their events here: What is the added value? Is it a good idea for people to sit in an enclosed room or convention center for many hours? Or shouldn't we try to bring in all the know-how that is available locally as well? When we host a global or European convention, we need to try to utilize our options more effectively for the benefit of all of Hamburg and the world. So how can we combine the know-how presented, say, at a medical convention with the know-how of the medical institutes we have in the city? When we have a global convention attended by a thousand international professors, each of whom is an authority in their respective field of expertise, we no longer feel it is sufficient to just let them sit in the CCH for three days straight, with perhaps one evening banquet, and that'll be it. We, together with the Hamburg Convention Bureau, want to see everybody – the respective community within the city, such as Hamburg university, which is on the national academic excellence list and is going to play a key role in this context, and the event attendees coming from elsewhere – we want to see all sides benefiting from such a convention. We need to explore how new concepts can be developed and implemented, maybe by establishing new start-ups. The other thing is, how will people perceive Hamburg? Of course, every visitor sees the city through their own eyes, but we want to enhance the way visitors experience the city by suitable means, such as social media, and let the world be more aware of Hamburg so that when people come to visit the city they will be eager to experience it and absorb it like a sponge. In our social media and press communications we put a special emphasis on that. We will inject a lot of energy into these efforts to make sure the whole world knows we are opening next year.

TG: Sounds fascinating! I just remembered, when I was studying event management, we were shown a standard model and being asked, why do people attend a convention? In the classical model, there are three answers: they go there to network, to educate themselves, and to get entertained. When I teach university students myself today, I always show that model to my students. Now there is a new study by IAEE, I believe, who wanted to find out whether that old model still applies. What they found out is this: today the three key reasons to attend a convention are no longer networking, learning, and entertainment, but networking, learning, and getting to know the city, so there has been a certain shift there. Well, that's it for today, thank you very much, Heike and Hartmut, for this insightful conversation!