

## DESTINATION MYSTERY SHOPPING

A strategic research project into the quality & service mentality  
of conference & incentive suppliers in Poland

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**>> European marketing & communication agency for the meeting & incentive industry**

## >> A DEFINITION OF MYSTERY SHOPPING

The purpose of a mystery shopping is to help businesses increase sales and improve employee customer service awareness.

Mystery shopping allows companies to obtain a "snapshot in time". It provides management a method to quickly yet efficiently evaluate their business practices from the perspective of a non-biased customer. Mystery shoppers visit, call or e-mail businesses posing as ordinary customers and provide a detailed evaluation of their experience.

Until now, mystery shopping has been used in a wide variety of industries such as retail, restaurants, financial institutions, convenience stores, service providers, manufacturers, department stores, airlines, hotels, etc.

Practising mystery shopping on a destination level towards a specific group of suppliers of a certain city, region or country is a brand new concept initiated by THEPLANNER.be, who has build up a specific methodology for this.

*The destination mystery shopping towards Polish suppliers has been done via e-mail.*

## >> PROCEDURE OF THE DESTINATION MYSTERY SHOPPING

### 1. Creation of a fictitious company

THEPLANNER.be created a fictitious company, a website, a specific e-mail address of a specific contact person. The company details were the following:

Contact person: Philippe Van Vliet | Managing Director

Company name:

**CONCEPT 360°**

**CONFERENCE & INCENTIVE MANAGEMENT**

T | 0032 50 490 716

E | 0032 50 604 414

E | info@concept360.be

W | www.concept360.be

More details on this fictitious company can be found on [www.concept360.be](http://www.concept360.be), which has been set up especially for this Polish destination mystery shopping.

## 2. Selection of the contacts for the mystery shopping

The Polish Convention Bureau has provided THEPLANNER.be with a list of 39 conference & incentive suppliers who have been contacted. THEPLANNER.be received the following details per contact:

- Company name
- Profile of the supplier (\*)
- Website

As a consequence, the destination mystery shopping was done via a blind start: a blind start of a destination mystery shopping means that THEPLANNER.be does not contact specific persons. We act as a client who starts from scratch: we visit the website of the supplier, look for the right contact person or for an e-mail address and we send out the request for proposal (RFP).

(\*) The Polish suppliers belonged to one of the following categories: PCO/DMC, Hotel, Congress Centre or Convention Bureau.

THEPLANNER.be contacted the following companies:

Furnel Travel	PCO/DMC	Sheraton Kraków	Hotel
Mazurkas Travel	PCO/DMC	Symposium	Hotel
Holiday Travel	PCO/DMC	Mercure Poznań	Hotel
Gromada	PCO/DMC	Jan III Sobieski	Hotel
Profi-Tour	PCO/DMC	Zamek Kliczków	Hotel
Point Travel	PCO/DMC	Orbis CBS	Hotel
Haxel	PCO/DMC	HP Park Plaza	Hotel
Grupa Fabricum	PCO/DMC	Mercure Hevelius Gdańsk	Hotel
Varsovia Tours	PCO/DMC	WDA	Hotel
Grupa A-05	PCO/DMC	PKiN	Congress center
Horyzont Travel	PCO/DMC	EXPO XXI	Congress center
Trip	PCO/DMC	Hala Ludowa	Congress center
Orbis Travel	PCO/DMC	EXPO XXI	Congress center
Meetings Management	PCO/DMC	Warsaw Convention Bureau	Convention Bureau
Jan-Pol	PCO/DMC	Cracow Convention Bureau	Convention Bureau
Bristol Hotel	Hotel	Wroclaw Convention Bureau	Convention Bureau
Intercontinental Hotel	Hotel	Poznan Convention Bureau	Convention Bureau
Le Regina	Hotel	Gdansk Convention Bureau	Convention Bureau
Dworek nad Łakami	Hotel	Bydgoszcz Convention Bureau	Convention Bureau
Novotel Centrum	Hotel		

### 3. Sending out the inquiry

Each type of suppliers received a specific request for proposal. It goes without saying that the request sent out to a conference center was not the same as the one sent out to a destination management company or a hotel, for instance. So per profile, we send out a specific e-mail with a specific request for a conference and/or incentive. The first inquiry was followed by an adaption to this inquiry (new request, change in the number persons, extra needs,...).

In the fictitious inquiry, we also announced that the supplier was competing with suppliers from another city. In this way, we measure how the supplier 'sells' and 'defends' his or her own destination.

This project was strictly confidential, which also implied that the suppliers were not aware of the test nature of this inquiry.

### 4. Sample inquiry

Here below, an overview is listed of the type of inquiries that have been sent out to the four categories of suppliers.

#### **PCO/DMC:**

Destination: Wroclaw or Poznan (or other city in Poland)

Type of meeting: sales meeting

#### **Hotel:**

- 4 or 5 star hotel
- Number of rooms: 37 (double rooms for single use)

#### **Dates & number of persons:**

- \* Dates: 11-14 December (four days)
- \* Number of persons: 37
- \* They need one plenary room (theater style)

#### **Meeting rooms:**

The client would need a plenary room only on 12 and 13 December and on the other days 4 meetings rooms of 10 pax approx. In the meeting rooms the client requests internet connection.

#### **Catering:**

As far as catering is concerned:

- \* 11 December: lunch for 37 persons + coffee break in the afternoon
- \* 12 December: lunch for 37 person + coffee break in the morning & the afternoon
- \* 13 December: only coffee break in the morning & the afternoon
- \* 14 December: only coffee break in the morning

- the average rate for the lunch (including non-alcoholic drinks) is 40 euro per person. Can you inform us what is possible for this rate?

And then also this: our client is also looking at one other destination: Prague. Personally, I am very much in favour of Poland (I have been there already twice). Can you give me some unique arguments to convince my client to come to Poland . That would be very helpful, thanks!

Thank you so much and looking forward to working together with you.

**Hotel:****Dates**

- \* Dates: 13-16 November (four days)
- \* Number of persons: 45
- \* They need one plenary room (theater style) + 4 breakout rooms of 15 pax each

**Rooms**

- \* 45 single rooms (standard double rooms for single use)

**Meeting rooms**

We need one meeting room for 45 pax (school style) + breakouts, however, in all meeting room the client requests internet connection. Is that possible? Is it possible to have 100 sqm extra for a small exhibition?

**Catering**

As far as catering is concerned:

- \* 13 November: lunch for 45 persons + coffee break in the morning & the afternoon  
Evening: dinner 45 persons
- \* 14 November: lunch for 45 person + coffee break in the morning & the afternoon  
Evening: dinner 45 persons
- \* 15 November: only coffee break in the morning & the afternoon  
Evening: dinner 45 persons. They would like to organise this dinner on a special venue. What would you propose?
- \* 16 November: only coffee break in the morning

The average rate for the lunch (including non-alcoholic drinks) is 25 euro per person. Can you inform us what is possible for this rate? The average rate for the dinner (incl. drinks) is 60 euro. Can you propose us several menus?

And then also this: our client is also looking at one other destination: Prague. Personally, I am very much in favour of Poland (I have been there already twice). Can you give me some unique arguments to convince my client to come to Poland? That would be very helpful, thanks!

**A couple of other questions:**

- \* Is it possible to arrange the transfer from the airport to the hotel and back to the airport? What are the rates?
- \* Is there an inhouse conference manager and somebody who is always available in case of technical problems?
- \* In meeting room we would need a big screen and a project + in the break-out rooms (if there are any) just a flipchart.

Thank you so much and looking forward to working together with you.

**Conference center:**

Dates: 8 – 11 January 2006

Medical conference

Number of pax: ca. 300

**Request:**

- We need 300 double rooms for single use.
- 3 meeting rooms of 125 m2 for three days (8-9-11 January)
- one plenary meeting room for one day (10 January)
- Exhibition space: ca. 400-500 m2
- Lunches: buffet (3 days) for 300 pax

That is all the information I have for the moment, as soon as I have more details, I will get back to you.

### **Convention Bureau**

We are a professional conference & incentive organiser, mostly dealing with groups in Europe. Would it be possible to send me the brochure of Bydgoszcz Convention Bureau via postal mail with more information on the services of the convention bureau to conference & incentive planners?

We have a specific request for a conference & incentive project towards the end of this year, but I am just waiting for the final details of my client. I think my client may be interested in Bydgoszcz.

My postal address is the following:

CONCEPT360°  
Sportlaan 15  
8300 Knokke-Heist  
Belgium

Thank you for getting in touch with me before 8 April. To be sure, could you please confirm receipt of this e-mail? Thank you very much.

Let me ask you already these questions:

- Kindly send me more information on the conference & incentive possibilities in the region. When would it be possible to send me the documentation?
- what services does the convention bureau specifically offer to buyers?
- I am looking for historical venues where we can organise a meeting. Can you please advise?
- Can you also advise me on special restaurants and some DMCs?

Before receiving this inquiry, all companies received the following e-mail, beginning of April. This was the very first mail that was sent out:

Dear Sirs,

We are a professional conference & incentive organiser, mostly dealing with groups in Europe. Would it be possible to send me the brochure of Varsovia Tours via postal mail with further details on your services? We have a specific request for a medical conference annex incentive programme in November, but I am just waiting for the final details of my client.

My postal address is the following:

CONCEPT360°  
Sportlaan 15  
8300 Knokke-Heist  
Belgium

Thank you for getting in touch with me before 8 April. To be sure, could you please confirm receipt of this e-mail? Thank you very much.

Looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Kind regards,

Philippe Van Vliet | Managing Director

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## **5. Overall aim of this Polish destination mystery shopping**

The overall aim of a this destination mystery shopping is to have a clearer insight into the following questions:

- How exactly and how quickly do suppliers respond to conference & incentive inquiries?
  - How original do they respond to the inquiry (out-of-the-box ideas)?
  - Do they go for a detailed research? In other words, have they taken the trouble to address the very individual concern of the 'client'?
  - Do they come back with detailed questions themselves?
  - Is there enough cooperation between all the local suppliers? In other words, do they refer to each other when they cannot handle the request (alone)?
  - Do the suppliers understand the wishes of a conference & incentive client?
  - Do they communicate in a professional way (clear offers, friendly e-mails, professional presentations,...)
  - What about their overall flexibility when new requests come up?
  - Do hotels also present activities when asked? Or do they refer to a DMC?
- etc.*

## **6. Timing**

The Polish destination mystery shopping took about 8 weeks to be finalised.

## 1. PCO/DMC

### 1.1 Reaction time to the initial e-mail

The first e-mail was sent out the the PCO/DMC on 3 April 2006. Most of the PCO/DMC responded quite quickly. Herewith below, one can find an overview of the reaction time per company.

Company	Reaction time
Furnel Travel	2 days
Gromada	11 days
Grupa A-05	9 days
Grupa Fabricum	1 day
Haxel	8 days
Holiday Travel	1 day
Horyzont Travel	NO REACTION
Jan-Pol	1 day
Mazurkas Travel	NO REACTION
Meetings Management	38 days
Orbis Travel	13 days
Point Travel	1 day
Profi-Tour	8 days
Trip	43 days
Varsovia Tours	1 day
<b>Average reaction time:</b>	<b>7,18 days</b>

*(Meetings Management and Trip not taken into account)*

From the table below, one can learn that it took very long before MEETINGS MANAGEMENT and TRIP reacted to the first e-mail. The reason for this is the following:

**TRIP.** This company was contacted on five different occasions, including via telephone. E-mails were sent out on 3 April, 11 April, 28 April, 11 May and 18 May. Finally, on 18 May Ms Weronika Gackowksa from TRIP sent us the following e-mail:

Dear Sir,  
I have send Your e-mail to person who is dealing with groups In our company. You should get answer today.

Best regards  
Weronika Gackowksa

However, after 18 May nobody from TRIP contacted us, even not after getting in touch via telephone. Ms Gackowksa did also not apologize for the late reaction.

**MEETINGS MANAGEMENT.** This company was contacted on four different occasions and the e-mails were sent to two different e-mail addresses: [meetings@meetingspoland.pl](mailto:meetings@meetingspoland.pl) and [swroblewski@meetingspoland.pl](mailto:swroblewski@meetingspoland.pl). The mailing dates were the following: 3 April, 11 April, 28 April and 11 May. On 11 May, Mr Wroblewski sent us the following e-mail:



I am sending this answer for the second time. My previous e-mail was rejected by your server.  
Please confirm you received this memo.

Regards,  
Slawomir J. Wroblewski  
President

We informed Mr Wroblewski that we had not had any server problems and he responded as follows:

Sometimes there are so strange situations with internet... Sorry if there was a delay or missing mails.

Generally speaking, the reaction time from quite some PCO/DMC is too slow and the average reaction time of more than 7 days is definitely too long. Apparently, some of the PCO/DMC do not pay enough attention to e-mails that are sent to the general e-mail addresses as mentioned on their websites, e.g. [incoming@gromada.pl](mailto:incoming@gromada.pl), [biuro@haxel.pl](mailto:biuro@haxel.pl) or [congress@pbbp.com.pl](mailto:congress@pbbp.com.pl). Some of them apologize for the late reaction, like *"Thank you for your email. I'm sorry about the delay in replying to your request but we had a big problems with our email. There you can find information about us."*

#### 1.2 Addressing the individual concerns of the client

In the first introductory e-mail d.d. 3 April, we asked if the PCO/DMC could send their company brochure via postal mail because we had a specific request for a conference/incentive. All PCO/DMC were asked to get in touch with CONCEPT360° before 8 April. 6 out of 15 PCO/DMC did this. However, non of these 6 PCO/DMC checked afterwards if CONCEPT360° actually received the brochure or not. Most of the PCO/DMC received the introductory e-mail on 3 April. Then CONCEPT360° waited quite long to contact the PCO/DMC again. However, during this period nobody did any follow-up. This is quite unusual: the PCO/DMC receives a request and there is no follow-up afterwards.

Not one of the PCO/DMCs asked for more information about the client of CONCEPT360°. There is definitely a lack of screening the prospect and trying to address the individual needs of the client. Moreover, there should be a follow-up procedure if it takes too long before the PCO/DMC receives news or more feedback from CONCEPT360°.

#### 1.3 Common mistakes in the communication

- CONCEPT360° often had to deal with three or four different contact persons within one company. This is definitely too much. Often, there is not enough communication between these contact persons. As a client, you get the impression that you have to ask the same questions time and again.
- Quite some offers are not sent in an attachment, but pasted in the body of the e-mail. This is not so convenient for a client.
- The name of the documents in attachment do often not reveal anything about the content of the documents. So we had to open all attachments to know what is contained. The names of the

attachments were, e.g. [tlum POCZ[1][1][1].KAWOWY 50], [tlum1 lunch 60 z&sup] or [4D-AH-KAMERALNA1].

- Some PCO/DMC often referred to the websites of the hotels or venues is general, which is not always convenient for a client. It may be better to have the complete offer with all information in one specific document.
- Most PCO/DMC do not do any follow-up: if CONCEPT360° waited some time before reacting to e-mails, there was no follow-up mail or telephone call of the PCO/DMC.
- Only one PCO/DMC took contact via telephone. There is certainly a need for a more personalised client approach.
- CONCEPT360° asked the PCO/DMC for some argument why to choose Poland and not, for instance, Prague. Only a limited number of DMCs gave a clear answer to this question.
- Most of the offers are not well-structured and do not look professional.
- Some PCO/DMC complain about the slow reaction of the hotels.
- There are PCO/DMC who quote the offer in PLN and not in EURO.
- There is a lack of creative and real incentive programmes. The PCO/DMC often propose concerts or normal (bus) city tours.
- The PCO/DMC proposes often various hotels, but gives no real recommendation to the client.
- When the PCO/DMC was informed that the client had not opted for Poland, most of them did not check which cities had finally be selected then and why.
- Most offers are not attractively presented (no pictures, no structure, elements in the mail itself and elements in attachment, etc.)
- Only when CONCEPT360 comes up with specific questions, a couple of PCO/DMC ask questions about the group.
- Most PCO/DMC do not mention if the rates are commissionable.
- Quite a number of PCO/DMC are pushing Cracow as a destination, probably because it may be easier to sell.

## 2. HOTELS

### 2.1 Reaction time to the initial e-mail

Company	Reaction time
Bristol Hotel	2 days
Dworek nad Łąkami	1 day
HP Park Plaza	25 days
Intercontinental Hotel	1 day
Jan III Sobieski	8 days
Le Regina	25 days
Mercure Hevelius Gdańsk	NO REACTION
Mercure Poznań	8 days
Novotel Centrum	7 days
Orbis CBS	7 days
Sheraton Kraków	2 days
Symposium	1 day
WDA	1 day
Zamek Kliczków	8 days
<b>Average reaction time:</b>	<b>7,38 days</b>

### 2.2 Common mistakes in the communication

- Hotels that have no availability on the dates requested do not give alternative dates or do not recommend CONCEPT360° to contact another hotel.
- Some hotels, especially the bigger ones, send to heavy images about the rooms. Some e-mails were more than 10 MB.
- Some hotels referred me to the concierge, they could not answer specific questions, e.g. "Are there special events in the city at the time of our conference?"; "Can you send me a city map via postal mail?". Or they had to contact the Sales & Marketing Department for questions like "What is new in the MICE market in your city?". In some cases, the concierge had to refer me again to an DMC.
- When asking questions about incentive programmes, most of the bigger hotels refer CONCEPT360° to a DMC or event agency.
- Some hotels really give extremely short answers to my questions, as if they are not interested.
- Most hotels quote in PLN, not in EUR.
- Hotels who refer CONCEPT360° to a PCO/DMC mention that CONCEPT360° will receive two invoices: one from the PCO/DMC and one from the hotels. So one-stop-shopping is not possible.
- Only one hotel group (Orbis) contacted me via telephone for more detailed information about my group.
- Most of the smaller hotels react slowly to e-mails, certainly too mails in which I ask a lot of questions.

### **3. Conference centers & convention bureaux**

Most of the conference centers & the convention bureau did not reply at all to my e-mails, even not after getting in touch with them via telephone. The only conference center who did reply to some mails was EXPO XXI and for the convention bureaux it was Bydgoszcz Convention Bureau, Cracow Convention Bureau and Poznań Convention Bureau.

However, the number of e-mails that I have received from these contacts is extremely limited. I had the feeling that these companies were not all interested in the business. Especially for the convention bureaux this is really a pity: they are often the first point of contact for European buyers, so they should certainly be much more active and proactive.

## >> First contact

We started this mystery shopping in April 2006 by sending out an introductory e-mail. For all companies, the e-mail was more or less the same - we just adapted the mail a little bit according to the profile of the company that we contacted. The following e-mail, for instance, was sent to the PCO/DMC in Poland:

Dear Sirs,

We are a professional conference & incentive organiser, mostly dealing with groups in Europe. Would it be possible to send me the brochure of Varsovia Tours via postal mail with further details on your services? We have a specific request for a medical conference annex incentive programme in November, but I am just waiting for the final details of my client.

My postal address is the following:

CONCEPT360°  
Sportlaan 15  
8300 Knokke-Heist  
Belgium

Thank you for getting in touch with me before 8 April. To be sure, could you please confirm receipt of this e-mail? Thank you very much.

Looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Kind regards,

Philippe Van Vliet | Managing Director

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What kind of reactions did we receive? I would like to single out 9 specific remarks I have concerning the reactions that I have received to this introductory e-mail. Of course, my remarks do not specifically apply to the PCO/DMC, but to all 39 suppliers that I have contacted.

### 1. **Screen your prospects**

Only a couple of the companies that I contacted asked me how I had found their company. However, nobody checked who I really was.

### 2. **Pay attention to the client's name**

Quite a number of suppliers did not write my name correctly. This is a typical credibility killer; together with spelling mistakes, for instance.

### 3. Tell me who you are

30% of the suppliers do not mention their full coordinates at the bottom of the e-mail: no job title, no telephone, no fax number.

### 4. Do not use Polish

Some contact persons mention their job title in Polish, e.g. **Specjalista ds. sprzedaży i marketingu**. It may be a detail, but if you work in an international context and, even more, you want to show this to your customers, you should avoid these types of mistakes. The same holds for telephone numbers: mention your country code.

### 5. Watch your English

Quite a number of suppliers make speller and grammer errors in English. Let me give you some examples:

- The **luch** menu includes appetizer + soup + main dish + dessert + coffee or tea + fruit juice (200 ml)
- If your client would consider choosing one hotel there is a possibility of **diversyfyng** types of rooms into the executive and standard ones.
- Intercontinental **has- exceeds** the standard of 4 stars. They are certainly trying to get one more if they haven't done it yet. Marriot\*\*\*\* is a little bit lower **interms** of standard (also older); I guess cheaper.
- Which event from these **i propse** would you like to enrich with such **anattraction**
- We guarrantee high standard of **transladion**
- It is hard to predict what the overall **climete** will be at the time of your visit to Poland.
- Please find below **porposals** of vegetarian menu.

Some companies even do not understand enough what I am asking. When I asked if my client could bring in its own audiovisual material, a PCO/DMC responded as follows:

**Yes - all kind of players to show/broadcast them are available at extra charge - in every hotel**

### 6. Short & unpersonal replies

#### ► Bad example:

Dear Sirs,

We confirm receipt your e-mail. Thank you for this message.

#### ► Good example:

Dear Philippe Van Vliet,

Thank you for your e-mail! Today I'm going to send you our brochure and hope you will find it interesting.

With years of experience [our company] has accumulated great expertise in handling all kinds of groups, from simple meetings and functions through a variety of special interest fields to major incentive groups with itineraries rich in events of all kinds.

Should you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact us.

We look forward to working with you.

There was a DMC who let me wait for several weeks before I received this e-mail:

Mr Philippe Van Vliet, thank you very much for your request. If you need any further information or you have any question please let me know.

#### 7. **No follow-up**

About 70% of you sent me the brochure that I had requested. But one only company - it was a DMC - checked if I *really received* the brochure. All the others did no follow-up at all. And then also this: most of the companies received my introductory e-mail around 3 April. Then I waited some time to contact them again. However, during this period nobody did any follow-up. This is quite unusual: you receive a request and there is no follow-up afterwards.

#### **What can I say about the brochure?**

I asked all companies to send me their brochure and about one third did not do this. What can I say about those who *did*?

1. About two thirds of the companies sent their brochure, but **without accompanying letter** or without any reference to our previous e-mail correspondence. This is of course very unpersonal.
2. Some sent me all the information in **Polish** and also rates sheets in PLN. Perhaps a suggestion also for the hotels: it would be good if they immediately make a difference between rack rates and group rates.
3. Most of the companies do not send enough or too general information about the **destination itself**, which is certainly a lost opportunity. I am sure that the Convention Bureau Poland is also producing interesting publications. However, nobody sent me one of these brochures. Suppliers should 'sell' *the destination* in the first place, that is where it all begins.

## >> First reaction to a detailed RFP

About 10 days following the initial contact, I send my detailed request for proposal (RFP) to the suppliers. What did my briefing include?

- My client was looking for a conference venue for 20 up to 300 persons (*depending on the venue*);
- I needed a hotel & a meeting venue;
- I asked some information about catering;
- I asked for the difference between Poland and the Czech Republic.
- I wanted to receive an offer within three working days
- I wanted some proposals for incentive activities

What can I say about the reactions that I received following my e-mail? I have singled a couple of specific remarks.

**1. No answer to my e-mail**

8 companies did not send me any proposal. Even not after contacting them telephone and explaining them that we needed an offer urgently. One company, for instance, waited several weeks before sending me the following mail:

**Dear Philippe Van Vliet, please let us know if your request is still live? If yes, we will get busy with an offer.**

**2. Short unpersonal replies**

'Short and unpersonal replies' was especially a problem for the hotels.

Example:

**Subject: Congress in Wrocław**

**Date: 19–22 September**

**Number of person: 27**

**Accommodation: 5 stars hotel Radisson SAS in Wrocław**

**Rooms: DBL for SNGL use**

**Price per person: 312 Euro (3x b&b)**

**Price for 27 persons: 8 424 Euro**

**Plenary room: 560 Euro for 2 days**

**Coffee break: 1 701 Euro/7 coffee breaks/27 persons**

**Lunch: 40 Euro per person**

**2160 Euro/2 lunches/27 persons**

**Total price: 12845 Euro**

**Payment to 31 August**

**We also would like to propose you an excursion during the convent:**

**Facultatively: Sightseeing of Wrocław- by bus: 675 Euro/27 persons**

**Please for the confirmation if you accept our offer**

**3. Make sure that there is a better cooperation with the hotels**

My detailed request for proposal was sent out to a certain DMC on 28 April, but I only received a reply (after several reminders) by 12 May. However, the offer was not complete yet. The PCO/DMC wrote:

**In reference to your request pls find our offer in the attachment. The offer is not complete yet. Pls excuse me for the delay in my response but I had to wait for the informations from the hotels.**



Other example:

**9 May:**

I enclose my proposal of itinerary for you - tomorrow I will send you the budget chart - I am still waiting for the hotel price offers... all of them have availability for those dates.

**10 May:**

I still do not have full offers from two of the four proposed hotels. I intervened today but they are in the middle of their high season and therefore there is such a delay in their response.

**17 May:**

Hereby I enclose the budget chart and the itinerary proposal once again. I apologise once again for a scandalous delay - finally I managed to receive the proper information from the hotels.

This is an e-mail from another DMC:

Tomorrow I am in Warsaw. I hope I will have good news for you after my visit, as I have an appointment at least with a representative of one of the hotels I am writing about. I will try to contact the other one as well to complete your budget as soon as possible. Once again I am very sorry for this situation, but I have very limited influence on it.

**4. Try harder to get the business**

One hotel responded as follows to my request for proposal.

Thank you very much for new enquiry. In reply to this request, we regret to have to inform you that we are not able to confirm the availability for hotel rooms. Looking forward to our good cooperation in the future.

One should at least expect that the hotel would give me alternative dates or refer me to another hotel who can handle the group.

**5. Try harder to sell the destination**

**6. If you give information, make sure it is correct**

I asked a DMC if there are certain visa requirements for the guests. And she replied to me giving me a URL that did not work:

<http://http://www.msz.gov.pl/Consular,Information,2345.html>

**7. Do more customer research**

Most companies do not ask me any information about the profile of the group. However, there are exceptions: a couple of companies even contacted me via telephone for more information. Only those companies were able to present me a **proactive proposal**.

So before you can figure out what to propose, you must know **how the client will judge success**. Therefore, it is not all about quoting the lowest price. It is about delivering the right solution. That is the definition of the 'value' of you offer. You have to gain insight into the customer's ambition & desire.

The more creative you can be in combining what you know about the client's needs and goals and what you have to offer, the more likely you are to separate yourself from the competition and develop a truly client-centered solution. **And above all:** try to resist the temptation of recommending the solution that offers you the highest profit margin or the highest commission. Manage your proposals and your business for the long term. It is all about how to contrast your proposal with other, similar proposals.

#### Additional remark about 'customer research':

I would like to go even one step further: you need to know from your customer how they prefer to gather data and how they prefer to make decisions. And if you combine these two characteristics, I think you get **four types of decision-makers**:

1. **Analytical**: facts, accuracy, detail oriented, schematics.
  - they want a lot of detail
  - "How can I decide anything until I know everything?"
  - they are interested in the facts (and often also in the rate)
2. **Pragmatic**: bottom-line driven, values brevity, prefers graphics to words
  - they are interested in the impact of what you will do for them
  - At what price and at what payback
  - they are impatient with details, they don't like it
  - they want to focus on facts, ideas and evidence
3. **Consensus seeker**: feelings, values, concerned about people, responds to colour
  - For them, your commitment is important
  - they are looking for relationships
  - they have a low tolerance for risk
  - Social proof is more likely to be convincing to this kind of decision maker than technical proof. So great references and testimonials are important
4. **Visionary**: concepts, big ideas, long-term view
  - they are not really interested in your product or service. What they are interested in *is whether your product or service can help them accomplish **their** plans*.
  - They want you to be excited about their ideas and to show that you are committed to them.
  - Detail, routine and processes are not what they are looking for.
  - they want to know who else is using your product or service, since they like to be associated with leaders, innovators and winners.

And finally, think about this one: what about situations where your proposal is going to a team or committee (for instance for conferences)?

You should then accommodate the different types of people who are likely to be on a team by structuring your proposal in two parts: the first part is for the pragmatic decision maker. Keep it short, focus on business issues, emphasize on return on investment (ROI) and do not mention a lot of detail. The second part details the whole project and adds testimonials.

## >> Study of the actual offer

I have singled out two factors of which I think that they influence a person's decision-making:

### 1. **Recognition**

Suppose you need a new computer. A sales person from Toshiba knocks on your door and one from the company Kretzenheimer Millennial. The chances are big that you will choose for Toshiba - because you know the brand. So the first and simplest technique that people use to take decisions relies on *recognition*. If a customer has never heard of your company and you send him a proposal, it will be difficult to convince him to work together with you.

And this is the first statement that I would like to make: you should pay much more attention to '**pre-proposal activities**'. This can include phone calls, press clippings, e-mails, newsletters, trade show presence, etc. All this communication tools can lay the foundation of establishing recognition and some sort of a relationship with your customer.

Personally, I hardly receive any news of hotels, DMCs, meeting venues, etc. in Poland in general.

Pre-proposal activities are important. From my experience, I can tell you that you are almost certainly wasting your time if there is no prior relationship, if the buyer/the customer does not recognize you.

### 2. **Single factor decision-making**

So now the question is: how do customers decide when they know your company and your competitors? Well, the customer will judge your proposal on the basis of a number of criteria, mostly maximum three. So you have to find out what factors will be used in the decision-making. As a consequence, you should **ask much more questions** to your customers. Trade shows do the same when they invite hosted buyers. They want to know if the person is worth the investment. Moreover, asking questions also gives you the opportunity to bring in 'other factors' beyond price that may be helpful to the customer in making a good decision and that may give you more of a competitive position.

During this mystery shopping, only a limited number of suppliers asked me detailed questions about the profile of my group, about the destination you will be competing with, etc. They just started with the offer and then they waited for my reaction.

I could learn from the offers that many suppliers do not like writing offers. They use – without realizing it – all kinds of ‘**escape techniques**’. In fact, you can often see three types of escape techniques that people use:

**1. Proposal cloning**

Some of the suppliers make an electronic copy of a previous proposal or part of a previous proposal. But imagine: the client can be a little confused when he sees himself referred to as another company.

**Example:**

*[particular incentive]* is for more demanding companies who wish to have meat on the table, one of the favourites of your Norwegian guests.

Of course, my ‘guests’ did not come from Norway; they came from Belgium.

**2. Data dump**

Data dump means that I received too much unfocused information from the Polish supplier: *"Here is a bunch of stuff. I'm sure something in here will convince you to buy from us. Just keep looking until you find it"*. Short proposals usually get read first, which makes yours the standard by which others are judged.

Customers do not want bulk. And they do not want to do more work than is strictly necessary to understand your proposal.

I have selected a couple of examples of data dump.

**1.** One PCO/DMC started his offer with a full explanation about the architecture landmarks and the history of Wrocław: Ostrów Tumski (Cathedral Island), Wrocław's Town Hall, Wrocław University, The People's Hall etc.

**2.** I asked a hotel to suggest me some restaurants in Poznań. The hotel forwarded me a list of more than 60 restaurants...

Having a lot of choices on the table does not necessarily make negotiation any easier. There can be so many choices that our brain locks up from overload. Why do people walk away from richer choices and potentially better deals? One explanation is that most of us just aren't mentally capable of weighing/comparing all the possibilities. Having more options also leads us to second-guessing. So we do not do any favours for our customers when we offer them too many alternatives. Information overload can block their ability to say yes to any of them.

**3.** Another offer consisted of all kinds of general information about Poland: information about public holidays, working days, the size of the country, the neighbouring countries, the colours of the Polish flag, information about the (PLN) zloty (the number of coins and bank notes in circulation, etc.), information about custom rules & procedures, information about the national railway network, telephone of the fire brigade, etc. etc. This details are not relevant for a first offer.

4. The hotel descriptions that I receive often look like copy/pasted from a brochure, which is less interesting to read. Moreover, in text there is often also information on night clubs, hairdressing salon, clothing boutiques, etc. Adding some personal touch there would be better; if a DMC proposes me two hotels like that, it is difficult for me to see what the real differences were between the two hotels proposed.

5. Some offers look like a story. One company wanted to give me some information on a so-called sword & fire event. And in the offer, the person did it like this:

**In the courtyard two fierce noblemen are talking. The words quickly become more and more fervent and passionate. And words quickly turn into a face off. The fight begins. Two other noblemen try to separate the hotblooded adversaries but instead they are drawn into the conflict....now there are four of them fighting... Not only fist fighting, oh no. The swords are being drawn. From nowhere a gunshot sounds. The fall of the man is spectacular. For a moment in the consternation everyone is lost and fight is suspended. A man is lying on the ground and his friend is looking for a wound. He finds none - so tries to bring consciousness back to his companion, giving him some...alcohol . (...)**

I am addicted to books, but such kind of stories in a formal offer are quite strange...and make the offer too long.

6. Some PCO/DMC quickly recommend some "incentive activities", but in fact these are no real incentives. Let me give you some examples:

- **A banquet in the hotel with a theme dancing show and wine tasting**
- **A Chopin piano concert in Żelazowa Wola - a birthplace of Chopin**
- **2,5 hours bowling in Sport Centre NIKU in Poznan**
- **Football match or Hockey match**
- **An organ concert in St. John the Baptist Cathedral (Wroclaw)**
- **Tickets to National Opera**

There was even one DMC/PCO who admitted that I had not enough knowledge on incentive activities:

**I'm working on the offer for your client and I'm aware of the nature of the event and your expectation , requirements. Generally we are in the beginning with programmes of incentive activities . We have limited experience in this market segment.**

On the other hand, some hotels do not always want to understand the question. I asked one hotel in Poznan if it was possible to have breakfast with our group on a special venue in the city and the person answered:

**Our hotel is well- known of flavorful and rich breakfast buffet served in amiable atmosphere and regional decoration. We are sure that you could not find another place outside hotel**

**offering breakfast service on similar level. I kindly inform that another restaurants in Poznań are not specialized in breakfast services and are open from 12 a.m.**

So the hotel did not understand that my client was just looking for an *other* experience.

**7.** Another example of data dump: one hotel included information in the offer that was not useful for me, like "rooms for disabled people", "laundry service", all details "dry cleaning", etc. This is not really relevant for incentive group.

Not all people like to write proposals, so for this reason they use 'escape techniques'. The first one was "**proposal cloning**", the second one "**data dump**" and the third one is the "**graveyard technique**".

### **3. Graveyard technique**

Some sales people use to bury opportunities that will require too much work. They hide the deals that will require a complex proposal.

Example:

**27/11: Conference - SUN PASSAGE (50 pax); Lunch - TEATRALNA (47 pax) (right picture on <http://arthotel.pl/CM/content.php/default/restauracje> )**

So without any details about rates, this person asked me for an answer. She wanted to know what I thought about her proposal. But she did not take the time to check and add all rates.

**Some are very rude in this:**

I asked one company if it was possible to hire medieval costumes. And the nice lady answered me:

**"I can not understand what You mean by that question. But if You mean renting the costumes, then that should You do by yourself."**

So she did not really present a solution for me (she could have referred me to an event management company).

**Other example of some DMC/PCO:**

→ Can you give me a suggestion for a nice restaurant?

**Answer:** There is the oldest restaurant in Europe "Piwnica Świdnicka" (Świdnicka Cellars), established in 1273. You can see some photos of this place on their website (**unfortunately the descriptions are in Polish**)

[http://www.piwnicaswidnicka.pl/spac\\_schemat.htm](http://www.piwnicaswidnicka.pl/spac_schemat.htm)

→ Can you send me some pictures of the theatre?

**Answer:** I do not think I have any.

→ Can we organise the meeting on the historical venue?

**Answer:** I'd like to explain that it is not possible the meeting in a historical building in Wroclaw , sorry.

→ How much ANSI lumen is the projector?

**Answer:** I do not know, because the hotels do not give detailed technical specifications of the equipment when they prepare preliminary offers.

→ Can we have some breakfasts on a special venue (so not in the hotel)?

**Answer:** Warsaw does not have a specific breakfast tradition like Berlin or Vienna. But if it is a serious idea we might check organising a specialty breakfast in the restaurant at the Warsaw Opera.

→ Would it be possible to send a city map to my postal address?

**Answer:** Only after signing an agreement we usually send the whole set of different informational materials

→ Can you send me some alternative incentive programmes?

**Answer:** I have not an alternative, sorry.

→ Can you tell me what the lunch includes?

**Answer:** Buffet lunch includes: some sorts of salads, some sorts of cheese, slices of meat; hot dishes: fish, meat. The detailed menu we can have after reservation.

→ Can you send me some dinner options & incentive ideas?

**Answer:** I will look around for some interesting offer for your dinner on 15<sup>th</sup> but I guess we may start discussing it when the offer is finally accepted by the client. Same regarding incentive program.

There was one DMC who had sent me several proposals for incentive programmes. However, the proposal was not "incentive" enough. It just contained information on walking tours, concerts, etc. So I asked the DMC for more alternatives and she responded as follows:

**I have already sent you quite a few ideas for an incentive. Please choose which one you like the most and how much time you would like to spend on it.**

## >> COMMON ERRORS IN PROPOSALS

I have selected a couple of common errors:

### 1. **Not answering to questions**

I asked a hotel for the rates for 40 single rooms and they give me a rate of 20 double rooms. One person of a hotel even admitted that she gave me a poor answer:

**“Please note that some answers are quite poor. That is because we are not a travel agency”**

Understand that while companies use proposals to underscore why they should be chosen, prospects who face a pile of five, ten or even more proposals, are actually seeking reasons to eliminate candidates. Companies do not start by looking to select the best proposal. They seek to eliminate all those that do not meet their criteria. That means it is critical to make it as hard as possible to be eliminated during the initial review.

Some suppliers do answer the questions, but with extremely short answers. This is an example of one of the bigger hotels of Warsaw:

- Do all the meeting rooms have daylight - **unfortunately not all of them**
- Is the Internet wireless? **Could be wireless**
- Where are the coffee breaks taken? **In front of the room**

### 2. **No structure**

Quite a lot of offers are not structured at all, which makes it difficult to read and understand. Writing a winning proposal is not only a matter of content. It is also a matter of structure and process. You should make proposals that speak directly to your client's needs and values. Please note that your proposal may be the only means you have of communicating to the highest level of your customer's organisation. You should make your proposals as effective as possible to maximize your chance of winning. And you should try to improve your efficiency so that you can get those proposals done as quickly as possible.

When structuring your proposal, the challenge is to figure out which fact(s) is (are) most important to your client. You should be able to demonstrate you understand the customer's needs and you should focus on the results that the customer wants to achieve.

Then you should 'recommend' the customer **a solution**. When you recommend a solution (rather than giving a description of your products and services), it will sound like you believe in it. And finally: prove you can do it by **giving references**, case studies, testimonials or third-party validation such as awards, etc.

Structuring your proposal is very important. Don't forget that most people tend to say "no" when they are confused or uncertain about the information they are receiving.



### 3. **Language**

Many companies make quite a lot of mistakes in English, I have already mentioned this. However, there are still companies who do not know words like: DMC, AV, VISA requirements, ANSI-lumen, etc.

Examples:

→ What are the VISA requirements in Poland? Some people come from outside Europe...

**Answer: No problem. All common credit cards are accepted: visa, mastercard, amex, dinners.**

→ Can you recommend me some DMCs?

**Answer: I am very sorry, but who are DMC's?**

→ How much ANSI-lumen is the projector?

**Answer: Unfortunately I do not know anything about ANSI-lumen. I can tell You tha if the laptop is newer than 1999 year then it works.**

→ We are coming with an incentive group, what kind of MICE activities can you propose?

**Answer: You can go to night bar. I do not suggest any activties because the weather in Poland is very unpredictable. It might have already snowing but it might no on that time of year.**

→ We would like to give the readers a small booklet on the airplane which can contain interesting conference & incentive related news on the city. What kind of news item could you suggest us? What is 'new' in the city on the MICE market?

**Answer: What is MICE market?**

### 5. **More than one contact person**

Some companies, especially hotels, let me deal with two different contact persons. One for the rooms, one for the conference part and sometimes also the concierge, who gives me information on activities in Poland.

### 6. **Lack of internal communication**

When my contact person goes on a holiday, his of her colleague is not always aware of the total project. However, in Europe, there are an estimated 1,5 million tourism businesses, of which 95% employ less than 10 people. So it should not be so difficult to have good internal communication.

### 7. **Not enough cooperation between the suppliers**

Some hotels suggest me to contact a "travel agency" but they do not give the names. Some hotels even don't know there is a convention bureau in e.g. Cracow. By the way: supplies should never use the word "travel agency" when communicating with an European agency...

8. **No use of deadlines**

Almost nobody uses specific deadlines, so the supplier leaves the complete timing to the client, which is not always a good idea. Deadlines often facilitate rather than constrain or stop progress. But: if you do not treat your deadline as a real one, you risk losing credibility.

9. **Not enough use of differentiators**

Differentiators are not used at all or are not clear. How does a supplier differentiate its offer from the offer of the competitor? Suppliers should realize that an answer to that question is important for them.

10. **Proposals focus too much on the company itself**

If the proposal is not personalized, you may actually alienate the customer. In some proposals, the customer name does not even appear. If you submit a proposal that is filled with text that focuses on your company (a proposal is not a company history!), you are giving the customer an impersonal experience. You are providing him/her with a generic experience that suggest what you have to offer is a commodity – it is the exact same thing for everyone. A salesperson who communicates with customers as individuals wields far more power and influence in today's marketplace. Do not forget that people buy from people. Failing to focus on the customer's needs and objectives right in the beginning of your proposal undercuts all the carefully managed, consultative sales methodology that you followed.

## >> WHAT TO DO AFTER YOU HAVE SUBMITTED THE PROPOSAL

1. Contact the decision-maker after you have submitted your proposal. Ask about the evaluation process. Less than 30% of the Polish suppliers have done this.
2. Try to know how the offer was reviewed (what were the weak elements).
3. Was the proposal different than the one from the competitors? Polish suppliers should try to check it.
4. Win or lose, maintain contact with the client organisation and listen for opportunities that may lie ahead. If you win, find out why. If you lose, try to know why. Finding out why you were eliminated can strengthen future proposals. But then you have to make sure that there is also an efficient and effective bottom-to-top communication. When I informed the various suppliers that my client had not opted for Poland, I asked them to put me on their mailing list, so that I keep receiving news on the company. However, only a limited number of companies did so. This is really a pity.