

## CONFERENCE

## Opportunities to see and be seen

Alan Leesmith, of The Alta Group, asks if the conference season is more important than ever in today's volatile climate



Alan Leesmith

The arrival of autumn heralded the start of the major conference season for the leasing industry with international conferences in almost all the major regions of the world.

We started with the Leaseurope convention in Madrid and moved on to the American industry conference ("ELFA") in New Orleans. Now (at the time of writing) it is the turn of the Australian association ("AELA") in Sydney, The Alta Group's Annual Latin America conference in Miami and, shortly, the annual conference of the China Leasing Business Association of CAEFI in Beijing, and an event by the Russian Association of Leasing Companies in Moscow. In addition, in the middle of all these, there is another European conference.

All of the major association conferences have been, or will be, happening within two months, October and November. The fast-growing market of China held another two leasing conferences (not association ones) earlier this year. It is no surprise that Alta is involved in all of these conferences, whether by providing speakers or sponsorship or as organiser.

The big question everyone has to address at times of economic pressure such as now is, "Can the cost of attending

these conferences be justified?" I suggest that it is exactly at times like these that it becomes even more important to make the time and justify the cost.

Personally, I make a habit every year of attending the Chinese, European, American, and Australian conferences, whether or not I am speaking. The one thing that this absolutely brings home is the global nature of our business. These are not just national conferences focusing on local issues, they are the ones where the long-term future of the industry is discussed. All of these conferences have visiting international delegates, at some that could be as high as 50 percent, at others only 5 percent, mainly driven by the age of the market. They attend because they are eager either to learn from an established market or to find the opportunities in a growing one.

That may over-simplify the point since I have yet to find a conference, wherever it is, where I do not learn something new, despite having been in the industry for over 35 years. I do not necessarily learn just from presentations and speeches, as one of the most important reasons for attending is the networking benefits and market intelligence shared amongst industry colleagues. Where else can you find so many influential players together at one time?

People are not only reviewing the year that has just flown by faster than we can remember, but are also focusing on the next, and the budget season is at the front of many minds, either having just finished or being in the midst of preparation. In the current environment, it is essential to at least try to keep pace with what is happening in the industry, and a key aspect of this is establishing and maintaining contacts. Apart from the important commercial reasons, let's be frank and recognise that with everything moving so fast no-one knows if, or when, they will be the next to be looking for a new role.

Geographically, the boundaries of leasing are being redrawn. No longer is the focus primarily on Europe and the US, but it has widened to include China in particular, which has the greatest potential to grow, and will become a leading force on the global leasing stage. Despite the recent easing of the steep upward growth curve, remarkable progress is being achieved.

Closer to home, it would be remiss to overlook the Middle East and North Africa, as it was recently forecast that within just five years, this region will control a tenth of the international leasing market. Yet, just like markets everywhere, at present, this part of the world is not immune from the credit crunch.

As banks and lessors are bailed out, we may see more and more of the money to do that coming from regions to the east, including smaller markets such as Hong Kong, even Singapore, and with it ownership and, hence, influence will shift.

Set against the background of global financial market and economic turmoil and the changing leasing landscape in terms of geography and evolution, the conference season presents numerous opportunities. It is an opportunity to see, and be seen. It is an opportunity to meet up with colleagues in the established markets as well as to develop new contacts in the emerging markets that will become dominant or important forces.

As well as commercial, learning, networking, and any other personal objectives, there is another important reason for attending leasing conferences – they offer the opportunity to advance our industry. Leasing is still very much a relationship business and we need to find time to meet people face to face and participate in collective debate, sharing knowledge and experience.

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