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How the event industry in China is embracing the new normal

Pandemic restrictions have been lifted in China and events and economic activities are recovering. East Star, INCON's partner in China, has been at the eye of the storm. In this article, Lisa Xu shares her perspectives about experiencing **the first green shoots for her business and the return to organizing meetings and events in her country.**

Without a doubt, it is a time of uncertainty and nobody can tell how **the demand, the industry and the practice** will change after COVID-19. First of all, we must be honest with ourselves, though painful, the market will shake and shrink in the short-term. However we are not facing this crisis in a vacuum. There are both internal and external factors that are critical to recovery and to re-build confidence:

1. Government intervention
2. Local infrastructure
3. Flexible business strategy

A prominent influencer on the future of our business is **government intervention**, on the one side there are the regulations on how people gather in public, and on the other, there are the subsidies and supports to meeting and exhibition companies. Not actively engaging with governments at this time will be at the industry's peril. At the recently concluded National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), our industry was very effective in advocating for support. The government agreed to help companies by accelerating the allocation of **subsidies, increasing grant assistance for venues, and carving out special funding for event publicity and promotion.**

State-owned companies play an important role in China's economy. The recent local government subsidies, as well as government-led exhibition projects, has helped to create opportunities for companies in the industry thereby restoring much needed confidence. The largest EXPO of the year, the China International Import Expo (CIIE) is a case in point. This B2B trade exhibition focuses on international procurement, investment promotion and people-to-people exchanges. The fact that the government agreed to this event has given a massive confidence boost not only to our industry but to the wider economy. It provides the market with a crucial sense of certainty, **boosting confidence in capital investment as well as potential customers.**

The second key influencer to our recovery is the quality of the **local infrastructure** such as transport, accommodation, venues, etc. The quality of local infrastructure will influence the quality of the service that can be provided. As one old saying goes: "No one can cook without rice." *The cities traditionally famous for tourism may have an advantage in the recovery of our meetings industry, simply because they are better equipped.* For instance, after the disruption of global travel, we found that cities like Macau and Singapore, which have developed tourism industries and global travel networks, have been quick to recover. These cities are more likely to have strong venues as well as reliable, professional local suppliers. Therefore, it should not be surprising that those cities with good infrastructures can function as the starting point of our recovery, especially when it comes to the organisation of international conferences.

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The differences in local infrastructure leads to the third point, the importance of having **flexible business strategies**. Going **virtual and downscaling to C-level** are two strategies that MICE organizations and DMCs have to consider. While COVID-19 was unexpected, it is also a rare opportunity for us to pivot and polish our products and resources. Our group, Donghao Lansheng is working with the Shanghai Commission of Commerce to create a vintage, nocturnal, fashion fair in the well-known Old Town of Shanghai, every weekend from May 22 to June 21. This is a newly created festival and includes live entertainment with a fusion of traditional and modern art; local brands are also exhibiting with newly created artisan products.



East Star has also taken the brave step of **launching seven new B2C services**. One example of our new business offering is a City Walking Tour which embraces knowledge sharing as well as parent-child interaction. By flexibility of strategies, we don't need to re-invent the wheel but we need to have our finger on the pulse of our nation and local communities. We need to find new opportunities whilst at the same time respecting the health of all participants.

Last but not least, a more flexible approach should be adopted to embrace all sorts of online activities. The functioning of societies during the lockdown period has proven the **potential of remote cooperation and online meetings**. With large tech companies investing hugely in online meeting software, we can have full confidence that online meetings will prosper and provide more opportunities for our industry. However we need to stay ahead of the curve and make sure that the hungry tech companies do not wipe out our share of this market. Our relevance and years of experience bringing people together and creating meaningful connections is an essential ingredient to creating memorable and impactful online meetings.

For live or off-line events, we all know the format will be different versus events organised before March 2020. Event organisers and venues are adapting to new hygiene requirements to ensure the safety and health of everyone. We need to continue to take a flexible approach and adopt different strategies according to the local situation as well as the different government policies. You will find some more practical tips to keeping events safe in our article on **Best Practice Health Screening Measures**.

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