

The Weaponization of Travel

MEETING & EVENT PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTIONS
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT – JUNE 2018



THE WEAPONIZATION OF TRAVEL

Contents

Research Background	3
Executive Summary	4
Detailed Findings	5
Key Destination Considerations.....	5
Issue Familiarity	5
Issue Impact	6
Messaging	8
Alternatives.....	10
Trusted Partners & Information Sources.....	10
Next Steps	11

Research Background

As travel continues to be weaponized, the Destinations International Foundation and Meetings Mean Business Coalition are working to support their members, as well as the meeting and events industry more broadly, with issue management strategies and communications best practices.

An important industry stakeholder, meetings and event professionals (MEPs) are recommending, selecting and vetting destinations as part of their common job responsibilities. Today, they are navigating a new landscape where there is an established risk of a travel ban, boycott or advisory being declared against their next destination. Destinations International Foundation and Meetings Mean Business recognize the importance of supporting MEPs in this issue landscape, helping them make the best decisions for their various stakeholders.

To that end, Destinations International Foundation and Meetings Mean Business commissioned APCO Insight to conduct a comprehensive research study among meeting and event professionals. Findings from the study will be used to develop tailored communications materials for MEPs.

The initial qualitative phase of this study included a 90-minute online focus group among 32 MEPs on June 13, 2018. To qualify, participants must have influence or decision-making power in selecting meeting destinations. The group included MEPs from across the U.S. and represented a mix of industries such as third-party planners, association or professional society in-house planners and corporate planners.

As part of this preliminary phase, APCO Insight also conducted nine in-depth interviews among MEPs between June 11 and June 25, 2018. In addition to the qualifications listed above, these professionals also planned a meeting or event in a destination targeted by boycotters in the past three years.

The findings from the qualitative research are the focus of this report. Please note that, by nature, qualitative research does not allow for statistical analysis and interpretation. All findings included in this report are meant to provide insight and direction into decision-making and should not be regarded as ultimate truths.

Qualitative findings will be used to inform the development of the subsequent quantitative phase of research which will statistically test the attitudes and perceptions expressed here.

Executive Summary

Unaided, **travel boycotts are not a top-of-mind consideration** when deciding where a meeting or event should take place. Instead, the biggest drivers of an event location are cost, accessibility and safety.

Most MEPs are familiar with travel boycotts, commonly naming LGBT issues, bathrooms bills, NAACP advisories, California government travel bans and union issues as examples of boycotts.

For most, **travel boycotts are something to consider but do not have a large role in decision-making**. Moreover, **few support boycotts** (just four of the 32 participants) as MEPs **want to stay apolitical** and the **unpredictability of boycotts** makes it difficult for planners to incorporate the issue into their decision-making especially for their biggest and most important events. These often require long lead times and significant resource expenditure.

For those who ultimately decided to keep their meeting in a boycotted area, consistent themes emerge:

- **Boycotts start in a window too close to the event.**
- **Attendees were not the subject of the boycott.**
- **CVBs and hotels were vigilant about public outreach** and committed to not enforcing discriminatory policies.
- There was **a lack of pressure from leadership or clients to move the meeting.**

Unaided, most were either **unable to cite a compelling argument in favor of travel boycotts, or restated they are a neutral party in boycotts**. Those who could cite arguments were careful to create space between themselves and the argument, prefacing arguments with statements like “some people think” or “they believe.” The most commonly cited argument was that **boycotts bring attention** to an important issue.

MEPs readily cite arguments later tested in messaging unaided. Once exposed to messaging, there is **strong agreement travel boycotts hurt innocent bystanders like small businesses and local residents**. Audience specific messaging that **“meetings and events are a way to bring people together”** also tested **well**, likely as it appealed to a love of the industry.

Messaging that speaks to **“hurting politicians”** or **“boycotts being ineffective”** does not play as well. On the former, the negative tone feels divisive and there is not agreement that hurting politicians is the goal. The latter is less compelling without facts and figures and some point to cities like Indianapolis as examples to the contrary.

To improve messaging, APCO recommends **incorporating** the reasons MEPs share for opposition to boycotts – **being neutral parties and the unpredictable nature of boycotts** – and **softening divisive, political statements**.

In addition to the core messaging, **MEPs are looking for more information on alternatives**. Almost all agree having all options on the table is beneficial and strongly desired. Overall, if clients or attendees voice a desire to boycott a location, MEPs seem quick to engage with little objection, due in part to a lack of understanding for alternatives. Without this knowledge, MEPs do not feel empowered to advocate for visiting boycotted locations.

Detailed Findings

Key Destination Considerations

To better understand how the weaponization of travel has impacted the daily responsibilities of meeting and event professionals, participants were asked to explain their decision-making process for selecting a destination. For many MEPs, the selection process is fairly autonomous. Only about a third of participants report having set policies or guardrails on where to hold their meetings, most of which include avoiding going outside of the U.S. or their operational region as well as visiting unsafe destinations. Of course, final approval is often needed from executive leadership or, in the case of third party planners, the meeting owner/client.

Given the limited guardrails, there is a vast list of factors MEPs consider when selecting a destination. Travel bans, boycotts or advisories are not a top-of-mind factor, though, and were not mentioned outright. However, the issue may be implied in reports of looking at “local or state politics.”

The word cloud at right is a visual representation of the list of factors MEPs consider when selecting a location. The larger the word, the more frequently it was mentioned.

As one can see, the most top-of-mind consideration, by far, is cost. Accessibility, weather and safety are also commonly mentioned.

- **Cost** is two-fold – it is a given that a city must have venue options that fit into the hosting organization’s budget, but out-of-pocket costs, like hotel rooms, must be affordable for attendees. This is especially true for organizations whose attendees personally pay out-of-pocket to attend events.
- **Accessibility** means not only does the location have a conveniently located airport, but also that a majority of attendees can access the city with as few flight connections as possible, otherwise known as airlift.
- **Safety** is critical. If a destination is seen as a safety risk, it is an automatic deal breaker.



Issue Familiarity

The vast majority of participants say they are familiar (a third say they are very familiar) with the issue of travel boycotts, which was defined to MEPs as follows:

Over the last decade, various organizations and people, including activist groups, municipalities, businesses and celebrities, have announced they will no longer travel to a

specific location in response to a new policy proposed or enacted by the local government. For the purposes of our session today, we are describing this action as a "travel boycott."

As industry insiders, they have heard of the issue from industry trade groups, their CVB partners and their own customers/clients as well as from the main stream media.

As the word cloud visualizes, MEPs most closely associate travel boycotts with anti-LGBT policies and bathrooms bills as well as states like North Carolina, California, Las Vegas and even Tennessee.



MEPs most regularly cite LGBT Groups, political organizations (many specifically cite the NRA), and religious groups as organizations calling for travel boycotts. They report hearing industry trade groups and CVBs most vocally opposing the issue.

Issue Impact

For most, travel boycotts are something to consider but do not appear to have a large role in decision-making. Indeed, only one in five say travel boycotts are a very important consideration. In total, fewer than half say it is important.

Moreover, very few even support boycotts. Just four of the 32 participants support boycotts and only one participant *strongly* supports them. MEPs cite several reasons for their lack of support:

- Many MEPs want to stay apolitical, avoiding actively engaging or counteracting boycotts. Most participants are not from political organizations and are sensitive to inserting both the organization as well as themselves personally into what is perceived as a political fight.
 - *I think [moving the meeting] would have put us at risk of appearing that the association is taking a political stance or a social stance on what really in the scheme of things is a state issue. –IDI Participant*
 - *I cannot let my personal beliefs affect my client's decision on where to host their meeting. – Focus Group Participant*
- Long planning periods (up to five years in some cases) means moving an event would result in significant losses (both money and time) and additional expenditures in rescheduling a new destination. For the biggest events, rescheduling in a reasonable timeframe may even be impossible, as the largest venues are limited and booked well in advance.
 - *Generally, we are booked a year in advance and very rarely will shift locations unless immediate danger or hazards become prominent. – Focus Group Participant*
 - *People are entitled to their opinion but I am not going to see hundreds of hours go to waste because some group isn't happy with a particular region. – Focus Group Participant*

- Some MEPs judiciously note moving meetings as a result of a boycott sets a blurry precedent. As one MEP explains, engaging in boycotts would make his job almost impossible, given the chaotic and unpredictable variables of who is engaging, where they happen and for how long they will last. This is especially true for events with long planning periods (often the most important and biggest events planned).
 - *There's such craziness going on at the state level now with all these legislatures that it would be very problematic for us to say, "Well, we just aren't going to any state that has a bathroom bill." – IDI Participant*
- Others note it is hard to please everyone. Inevitably, whether a meeting is moved or not, some attendees are upset either way. Thus, the easiest path for MEPs may very well be to not move a meeting.
 - *We were hearing from our Hispanic members that they would feel uncomfortable going to Phoenix. We were new at the game of how to deal with [travel boycotts]. We hadn't signed a contract and didn't want the blowback. We were trying to respect that issue. But then we heard from people who accused us of being anti-conservative, and not seeing the harm that immigration's doing. – IDI Participant*

A small minority of MEPs have personal experience with boycotts. Recruitment incidence shows a quarter had a meeting or event scheduled in a location that came under boycott pressure. In total, APCO interviewed eight participants who kept their meeting in a boycotted area. Consistent themes emerged from those discussions:

- Most commonly, boycotts start in a window too close to the event. Onset of boycotts are sudden, and, as previously mentioned, canceling would have had a significant financial impact on the organization hosting the meeting.
 - *The cancellation fees were too large. It was a large event... at least 2,000 people. It was so short-term in cancellation, they had to go ahead and move forward with it. – IDI Participant*
- Attendees were not the subject of the boycotts. In the event of a boycott, safety of attendees is a major concern for planners. Unless a substantial number of meeting attendees are the target of legislation being boycotted (and thus safety or discrimination concerns) it is hard to justify a threat to members.
- CVBs and hotels were vigilant about public outreach to ensure the venue would not enforce or conduct itself in a discriminatory manner and that the destination supported inclusive policies after news of the boycott broke. The importance of this should not be understated. The fact that the location was committed to ensuring an inclusive environment was a major MEP argument for why they chose to continue with the event.
- There was no pressure from leadership or clients to move the meeting. As previously noted, most MEPs don't support boycotts, want to remain neutral, and do not want to upend all the time and money spent to date. Once alerted to a boycott, many did work to have costs and back-up locations available if asked to explore the implications of what moving an event would mean, but most MEPs were not proactively bringing the issue to their

clients (internal or external). Ultimately, many MEPs were not feeling pressure to move their meeting and therefore stayed with the status quo.

Messaging

Before introducing MEPs to APCO's drafted messaging, participants were first asked to share compelling arguments they have heard from those supporting and opposing boycotts.

Unaided, most were either unable to cite a compelling argument in support of boycotts or restated they are a neutral party on boycotts. Those who could cite arguments were careful to create space between themselves and the argument, prefacing statements like "some people think" or "they believe." As one MEP articulated, messages in support of boycotts tend to be highly emotional and, in his opinion, divisive, as they try to paint opponents as morally inept. Still, others do not believe there are any compelling arguments.

- *They believe financial impact is the only way to make change. – Focus Group Participant*
- *I'm sure there is a belief they are creating change or shedding light on some issue. – Focus Group Participant*
- *I haven't heard any compelling arguments...just lip service about personal opinions. – Focus Group Participant*

When asked to name compelling arguments made by those who oppose travel boycotts, MEPs readily cite arguments later tested in messaging. The most pervasive arguments are that travel boycotts hurt innocent bystanders and, on a higher level, the local economy.

- *They're hurting the city's livelihood and putting people out of work. – Focus Group Participant*
- *The person who gets affected the most is that housekeeper who's cleaning rooms because now they're not getting shifts. – IDI Participant*

Most MEPs were hesitant to say definitively that boycotts are effective (or ineffective). While a few pointed to examples like North Carolina and Indianapolis as times when travel boycotts were effective, others report a lack of data and consistency on either side. There is agreement boycotts can bring attention to a discriminatory policy, but bringing awareness to a policy is as far as most participants go to say boycotts help.

- *Boycotts are effective in getting a point across to the rest of the nation. – Focus Group Participant*
- *I'm not sure I've ever seen the positive effect of travel boycotts except for maybe the five minutes of fame for those proposing the boycott. – Focus Group Participant*
- *May bring temporary attention, but rarely affect real change for the maligned group – Focus Group*

After an open-ended discussion on messaging, MEPs were presented with a statement against the weaponization of travel. Below is a "heat map" of that statement which represents the words and phrases MEPs found compelling, unconvincing and polarizing. Words in green are seen as compelling, those in red unconvincing, and polarization is reflected in yellow. Font size reflects intensity.

Travel boycotts hurt small businesses and local residents who rely on the meetings and events industry. **They are much less likely to hurt politicians who actually have the power to change the policies that have incited the boycott.**

Moreover, **many travel boycotts** have proven to be ineffective in affecting policy. There are better ways to influence politicians that are less harmful and just as, if not more, effective.

As meeting and event professionals, we should not be engaging in a tactic that hurts our own industry.

Meetings and events are a way to bring people together, not divide, and we should be participating in ways to further that mission.

As noted by the amount of green text above, most participants found the tested message compelling. Given that participants voiced unaided boycotts hurt innocent bystanders, it is fitting that messaging like “travel boycotts hurt small businesses and local residents” performs well.

- *We should not hurt our neighbor by taking the food out of their hands. I would sign my name to that document. It was exactly spot on. – IDI Participant*
- *In the beginning of the statement, it really touched home to me that it affects the frontline people and not the politicians. – IDI Participant*

MEP-specific messaging that “meetings and events are a way to bring people together” also tested well, appealing to what some describe as a love for their industry. Bringing people together is what many MEPs love about their job and boycotts go against that mission.

- *[I find this compelling because] the mission of events is overriding the negative factor; bringing people together and providing income for many, many people in the community. – Focus Group Participant*
- *This appeals to my love of my profession & industry. – Focus Group Participant*

Messaging that speaks to “hurting politicians” or “boycotts being ineffective” did not play as well. On the former, the negative tone feels divisive and is perhaps an overreach, as not all agree the goal of boycotts is to harm elected officials. On the latter, speaking to the ineffectiveness of boycotts is less compelling without facts and figures, and, again some point to cities like Indianapolis as examples to the contrary.

- *I don't think the goal of boycotts is to HURT politicians, but rather to highlight a moral issue. – Focus Group Participant*
- *If this line is to be used, it is ineffective because it must have research to back it up. The media does not share the effects and they may be hard to pin down. – Focus Group Participant*

When asked what should be changed or added to this statement, MEPs resoundingly ask for facts and figures, or “hard information, not blanket statements.” Many also want politics taken out altogether, as one MEP articulated, “avoid all mentions of politicians, this is not the business we're getting into.”

Most did not initially support boycotts and after discussion and review of the messaging, most say that has not changed. A few MEPs report they are less likely to participate, citing the harm caused by boycotts as the reason their opposition strengthened. Just two participants said they were more likely to participate in a travel boycott. Open ends reveal these MEPs feel a strong sense of civic duty to boycott and are likely non-persuadable.

- *I was unlikely to participate before and remain that way. Have not seen a compelling counterargument. – Focus Group Participant*
- *I am less likely to support boycotts because after realizing and discussing the hurt it puts the location, it would be difficult to support. – Focus Group Participant*
- *How else does change happen unless you fight the injustice? What better way do you suggest? – Focus Group Participant*

Alternatives

Overall, if clients or attendees voice a desire to boycott a location, MEPs seem quick to engage with little objection. The research reveals this may be due in part to a lack of understanding for alternatives. Without this knowledge, MEPs do not feel empowered to advocate for visiting boycotted locations. For some, advocacy might still be too strong of a sentiment, but almost all agree having all options on the table is beneficial and strongly desired.

Indeed, MEPs have a hard time articulating alternatives they as MEPs can present to their clients. Rather, many fall back to traditional civic actions such as voting, demonstrations, petitions and media coverage (either traditional or social) and few are unable to name a “best” alternative.

When provided with examples, some react positively to the idea of using the meeting to organize attendees, whether by developing sessions during the event to discuss the issue, organizing a volunteer event or civic activity or engaging with local media. For others though, taking an active stance is just too political.

By their nature, MEPs believe the meetings they host are inclusive. Recall the sentiment from the messaging exercise where MEPs found “meetings and events are a way to bring people together” compelling, partly because it appealed to their love of industry. Overall, MEPs want their events to be inclusive and, while not a direct analogy to boycotts, many say they have policies in place to ensure attendees feel welcome. Some of these policies are subtler, following the mantra of “be neutral and respectful to all” and generally ensuring the meeting reflects the values of the organization’s mission. Some MEPs do push further though – listing inclusive networking events, ensuring facilities so that all feel comfortable (e.g. pumping rooms, gender neutral bathrooms, ADA approved venues, etc.), having industry events to share best practices on holding inclusive events and partnering with local businesses to show their support for inclusivity (e.g., something as simple as having a sticker or decal in the window).

- *Again, it’s knowing your attendee base, but trying to educate yourself like crazy. I’m constantly reading newsletters, participating in webinars, and doing everything you can for having the gender-neutral restrooms, having everything be as inclusive as possible based on your attendee base. –IDI Participant*

Trusted Partners & Information Sources

When it comes to trusted voices on the issue of boycotts, MEPs' primarily rely on CVBs and their local venues for information. Indeed, CVBs are clearly a trusted partner and are heavily involved in the destination selection and vetting process. They are also viewed as good champions for promoting inclusive policies and discouraging participation in travel boycotts. Secondly, MEPs also turn to industry organizations like MMB, MPI and PCMA.



When asked about specific tools or support materials in case MEPs schedule or keep an event in a boycotted area, respondents request as much information as possible. It is important for MEPs to be armed with data on effectiveness/ineffectiveness of travel boycotts, safety of the area and broadly with information on the issue at hand. MEPs also want support from internal stakeholders (attendees, clients, and leadership) as well as from the local CVB or another external organization that would have insight into the area being boycotted.

- *I think doing some research and having some good strong numbers on how it would adversely affect the local community dollar wise, meals on their table, number of bodies out of work, and show it on a very human level. – IDI Participant*
- *A resource guide that outlines what to do and where to get help when you are faced with this issue. – Focus Group Participant*
- *Knowing what the issue at hand it, what the boycott group(s) are actually doing in the city, the safety plans at the hotel and in the city. – Focus Group Participant*

Next Steps

As a next step, the Destinations International Foundation, Meetings Mean Business and APCO will use the findings detailed in this report to develop a survey questionnaire for MEPs. Specifically, we will fine tune messaging and flesh out alternatives for testing. Destinations International Foundation is currently working to secure support from MPI for access to its members for the survey.

We look forward to your feedback and remain available for any questions.