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Canadian convention centres produce big business

By 1987 Canada will enjoy more than a dozen new or expanded convention facilities, built at a cost exceeding half a billion dollars. These huge, world-class centres hope to attract equally huge meetings or trade shows.

Canada's most recent convention centre in Toronto, a \$90-million facility, is the country's largest, catering to groups of up to 12 000. The centre hosted its first convention, the fifth annual Conference of the Canadian Association of Exposition Managers, September 8-9. In stressing the importance of the centre, vice-president of sales for the Metro Toronto Convention and Visitors Association, Gino Giancola, says "we're going to be able to go after pieces of business we couldn't even look at before".

With its new showpiece centres, Canada is poised to win considerably more than its current 2 per cent share of the \$27 billion North American meetings business. Convention centres in the country are aiming for an increase of one percentage point, which would net an estimated \$200 million in incremental meetings revenue.

Advantages in Canada

While Canada will have to work hard at luring business as organizers take advantage of what has become a buyer's market with the addition of major new facilities throughout the United States and overseas, Canada does have some distinct advantages.

Recently, customs regulations were broadened to make it easier for foreign groups to meet in Canada. The new Canadian policies provide free entry for convention and promotional material and give-away souvenirs, and offer temporary duty-free status for audio-visual and office equipment.

Canada Customs officers at all border crossings have also undergone a training program underlining the importance of a warm welcome and hassle-free entry to Canada.

The Canadian dollar *vis-a-vis* its US counterpart has provided added incentive for groups considering an event in Canada, and



The \$90-million convention centre complex in Toronto, with the impressive CN Tower in the background. The centre, which hosted its first convention this summer, can accommodate groups of up to 12 000.

in the fight to attract convention dollars, most facilities are also offering cut-rate bargains. The Hull *Palais des Congrès*, for instance, charges half price for any group booking in the traditionally slower months of April, July and August. In Edmonton, Alberta, convention centre officials play up the generally lower costs for delegates stemming from the province's lack of room and sales taxes, and the city's generally lower hotel rates.

Canadian airlines also offer special packages or reduced rates for convention meetings. Both Air Canada and CP Air offer 20 per cent off regular economy fares for groups travelling within Canada, and 25 per cent off for US groups meeting here.

Others rely heavily on promoting the destination itself. "Our centre is being marketed as an opportunity, a foreign destination without leaving the continent — one with a different culture," says Michael



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