

The Kursaal, a journey from negative emotions to positive emotions

"A journey from negative emotions to positive emotions" is the leitmotiv of the Kursaal (1999-2003) launching strategy awarded a prize in Busan (Korea) on 28 October last at the annual ICCA General Assembly.

The award was collected by José Miguel Ayerza, Director of the Kursaal, and Angel Alvarez, Director of the San Sebastian Convention Bureau, who also explained and defended the strategy during the plenary session held before the 500 participants who voted by large majority for the management strategy used to launch the Kursaal.

Having been initially short-listed among the best three and later having won this competition is an enormous bonus thanks to which the San Sebastian Conference Centre is already achieving international visibility and fame. In fact, Ayerza and Alvarez were effusively congratulated by participants at the ICCA general assembly and were in constant demand by the international media for upcoming articles in newspapers and sector magazines. As Ayerza and Alvarez stated in Korea, "The echo has been enormous, unthinkable otherwise. Even our greatest expectations with respect to repercussion in the media have been surpassed".

The importance of receiving an award from the same sector

The ICCA Best Marketing Awards represents the best of international competition and the association, which was founded in 1963, is one of the most prominent organisations in the world of international meetings, events and conferences. ICCA represents specialists in planning, accommodating and operating international events, in 80 countries around the world, and the rigorous entrance and qualification regulations for the competition reflects the high calibre of the entrants.

"This is a key award. We have received, among other acknowledgements, two prestigious international awards. One for the building, the Mies van der Rohe Award for Best European Architecture in 2001, and now this one for our marketing strategy, moreover granted by our own sector, hence doubling its value", in the words of José Miguel Ayerza, Managing Director of the Kursaal, who shares his opinion with the Director of the San Sebastian Convention Bureau, that this prize, the ICCA Best Marketing Award 2003, may well mark a before and after in the international growth of the Conference Centre. Until now no Spanish entity in the world of meeting and conference tourism had won or been short-listed for this award.

The campaign presented to the ICCA jury is based on the fact that most of the locals were against the Kursaal project, ever since 1995, when construction work was started on the building. The criticism mainly focused on three questions: the chosen architectural design - avant-garde in style - the economic feasibility of the conference centre - given its presumed loss-making activity which would require institutional contributions - and a potential elitist use of the building. The controversy grew to such an extent that an anti-Kursaal Citizens' Platform was set up.

San Sebastian, a European tourist destination

To understand the situation we have to pinpoint San Sebastian on the map and know something about its idiosyncrasy. The city, with approximately 200,000 inhabitants, is strategically located in the North of Spain, 20 kilometres from Biarritz (France), on the shores of the Cantabrian Sea and set around an unmistakable bay. Its tourist tradition stretches back for decades to the early 20th century, when it was considered to be the most aristocratic spa centre in Europe. With a small old quarter and modernist new town consisting of noble constructions, integration of the state-of-the-art Kursaal into this emblematic setting - facing the sea right in the centre of the city - caused opposition in the most conservative sectors who succeeded in infecting a large number of neighbours.

But it is precisely this location with which the prestigious architect Rafael Moneo - Pritzker Architecture Award - "fell in love" - designing two translucent glass cubes portraying "two rocks washed up on the shore" in an endeavour to "perpetuate the geography and underline the harmony between the natural and the artificial", given the building's privileged setting at the river mouth and on the sea front. The Kursaal is the result of an ambitious project to endow San Sebastian with a modern, groundbreaking infrastructure, internationally recognized in the world of architecture and design.

From negative to positive emotions

Hence, "A journey from negative emotions to positive emotions", the argument appraised and rewarded by the 500 "judges" - the ICCA general assembly - with the Best Marketing Award 2003, explains the transformation of an initially controversial situation of opposition to the Kursaal project into a favourable citizen attitude towards the Kursaal "reality" and into outstanding recognition of the building at both local and state levels.

The marketing strategy centres on a principal objective: to covert public opinion in San Sebastian from negative to positive. Emphasis is therefore placed on various key aspects: the management - business - model; consolidation of the Kursaal "brand name"; the product, for which we have created the idea of a "square" as a versatile meeting place open to a wide range of activities: congresses, conferences, shows, cultural activities or social events.

An external communication plan aimed at the citizens channelled through the press, radio, television and the Internet; advertising campaigns in different formats (buses, informative marquees, presentations at sector shows and fairs, the web, etc.); a varied cultural programme for the entire public at affordable prices and specific marketing campaigns targeting the citizens, companies and other market segments make up the general outline of the Kursaal launching strategy.

The challenge of transforming the initial negative emotions into positive emotions was boosted not only by the international architectural recognition of the building, but also by applying a series of rigorous management criteria, such as promotion of the above-mentioned idea of a "square", constitution of the Kursaal Foundation - which organizes some thirty cultural events a year with an occupation of 95% - and at the end of the day by influencing the emotions of the clients who attend the events, i.e., the general public, with respect to whom the intention is to make the Kursaal a memorable experience.

A cultural and economic reference in the Basque Country

Today, four years after its doors were opened, the Kursaal has become not only an emblematic architectural complex in San Sebastian, but a multi-purpose space, a venue for all sorts of events aimed at all publics and a cultural and economic reference in the Basque Country.

This "journey" of emotions, embarked upon hand in hand by the Kursaal and the Donostia-San Sebastian Convention Bureau, was described last October 27 in Busan with an audiovisual presentation including a video showing images of the Kursaal, its activity and summing up "Five years of memorable experiences".

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