Interview: Marcel Schonenberg & Michiel Lindenbergh – Managing Director & Commercial Director – Beurs Van Berlage, The Netherlands



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Beurs Van Berlage is an historic conference center in Amsterdam, hosting thousands of participants each year, many of them physicians, scientists, and professionals attending seminars, conferences, and meetings related to groundbreaking developments in medicine. The institution's managing and commercial director discuss their organization's suitability for hosting life science conferences.

Could you tell our readers what some of your most recent accomplishments/milestones have been since we met in 2011?

Marcel Schonenberg (MS): In 2011, we were in the process of converting our center into a location where companies and associations could meet for their conferences and business events. We are very proud of the accomplishments that we have made so far. We have succeeded in growing our business both as an international convention centre and in terms of growing the range of services that we provide. Last year we operated at a profit for the first time in the 112 year history of Beurs Van Berlage. We have maximized our space by using every square inch of the building to better adhere to the needs of our clients including reworking the entire basement space of the convention center. As the building was not originally built as a convention center, we have significantly refinished the appearance and logistical aspect of the building to better fit the needs

of our clients as well as creating a more open and inviting space for the overall appearance of the building. As such, the visibility and accessibility of the center have both been substantially improved. Since Beurs Van Berlage has been so successful in the event and convention business, we also created two new exhibition spaces in the building to better supply spaces for our clients.

Michiel Lindenbergh (ML): We are creating a new Beurs Van Berlage with a new image and facilities that are better suited for conferences and events, which constitute the bulk of our business. Our new “Meet Berlage” platform allows our clients to better share their experiences. The essence of the formula we have created is not only to provide our clients with a wonderful conference space but to have a platform where our customers can build and grow together as individuals. The central location of Beurs Van Berlage means that we are able to host a lot of wonderful conferences for larger groups, but we also wanted to create a space in the city where we could offer meeting spaces for smaller groups, which was the logic behind creating our “Meet Berlage” program for meetings of up to 50 individuals.

In 2011, when we first met, you mentioned that you and your team had been able to reposition the image of Beurs successfully – with a strategic direction as one entity and organization that was better geared toward the market, with better facilities and technology. How have you improved your direction and competitive strategies since that time? What is different?

ML: In 2010, we had just started expanding into the conference business but now we have expanded significantly into the event business. Last year alone, we hosted 27 international conferences with more than 45,000 participants. This was really an amazing accomplishment for such a new conference center. We are now extending our vision for both the public and private markets.

MS: In this respect, we have significantly expanded our reach as well as broadened our offer and space. In 2011, we spoke about how the company had begun to work with some of the local hotels in Amsterdam to better accommodate our clients. Today we have created a “one stop shop” concept for our customers. Not only do we offer conference services, catering, planning services, but we also offer hotel services to our customers to make their visit a more valuable experience. We offer an easy package to alleviate all possible concerns for our clients. Quality is a key aspect of our strategy, as we make sure that our customers are highly cared for and provided for. We strive very hard to pinpoint the exact needs of our clients and offer them the highest care possible. The best and most successful events happen when the guests of the events themselves are happy, so we not only strive to comprehend individual expectations and adhere to the needs of our clients

but as well to the needs of the guests that will be attending the conferences.

The last time we met you also mentioned how you have further focused your time on the healthcare industry and in 2011 alone had around 15 events. What steps have you taken to increase your exposure in the pharma industry?

ML: We are now members of ICCA, the International Conference Association, which provides us with an international database worldwide for rotating conferences including healthcare related events. We also look for counterparts in the city and in the country such as scientists and leading researchers at local universities and medical centers and inform them of the opportunity they have to work with Beurs Van Berlage for events to highlight their findings and research. We are moving internationally to meet many healthcare related professionals and have gone to places such as Las Vegas, Barcelona, Frankfurt, and many other destinations to present Beurs Van Berlage.

MS: We have been very successful in those two fields and will continue to grow and expand our image internationally into other markets. About 40 percent of our international business comes from the healthcare industry.

What are some of the different events, services and facilities that you offer to your clients, specifically in healthcare and medical related conferences?

ML: We have increased the capacity of our facilities significantly and made huge changes. We have tripled our capacity in terms of number of attendees, this number has increased from 700 to 1000 delegates, which is a very important aspect to have for the healthcare industry since most of these conferences require a large amount of attendees.

MS: We offer a full range of services that includes AV services, exhibitions booths, catering, hotel services, event service, registration etc. etc. We are a full service company to help our clients and make their lives easy.

How have you differentiated yourself in comparison to some of your competitors in the healthcare industry?

ML: Catering and hospitality are the main differences that you see at Beurs Van Berlage. We are very organized and provide quality services to our customers. We emphasize the exclusivity aspect of our conferences. If we have a conference or event going on, we like to focus all of our attention on that specific event, we emphasize all of our attention on that one event to make sure our clients are highly satisfied. Our catering services are all fully managed in-house, we have a specialized staff and provide a variety of different items on the menu each day, while our menu also includes a

variety of Dutch delicacies and cuisine. We provide authenticity and prestige to our clients as well as an international base for conferences and events worldwide.

How much potential is there for the Netherlands to attract more events in the healthcare and medical industry?

ML: The Netherlands is a very stable economy and has a lot of potential. It is a very pleasant environment where many people enjoy having conferences and events. Our safe atmosphere provides the perfect location for conferences, while the rich culture and history of Amsterdam also attracts a lot of events, not to mention the growing healthcare industry. We have the privilege of being centrally located in the city with a very rich prestigious history and are able to host many important events. We have managed the market very well and have created a very good atmosphere for events in Amsterdam.

MS: Amsterdam has now become a central hub for meetings in the business world, with a significant increase in recent years. We also expect business and events to increase significantly in the next 10 to 20 years. Accessibility is also a wonderful aspect of Amsterdam that makes it very easy for meetings and conferences. We collaborate with other venues, specifically with venues in Amsterdam, a development that has created better partnerships between venues and event centres in the area. With this association “Unique Venues of Amsterdam”, we provide multiple locations for conferences. Conferences generally last for more than two or three days. As such, we provide options for several different venue locations for our clients as an option as well. Nowadays, we see that conferences provide a real time option for their participants. Many of our events include personalities that are located all over the world via real time conferencing and imaging. Many of the health related conferences now include real time surgeries in their program. We provide high speed fiber optic connections to connect the world to our conference centre.

With the significant advancements that you have made in the last five years and since the last time we met, where would you like to see the company in the next six years?

MS: We intend to grow with all the strategic choices we have made these past years and improve our focus on quality further. The next step for Beurs Van Berlage is start producing some of our own events in the industry. We would like to produce business to consumer events as well as business to business events in the upcoming years.

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