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Handan Boyce, general manager of the Istanbul Lütfi Kırdar International Convention and Exhibition Center, offers her insights into the Turkish congress sector, underlining the industry's strong suits and highlighting the ICEC's role in hosting world-class healthcare and life sciences events.

You have been working as a manager in the congress sector for over 15 years. Given your vast experience, what gives Istanbul a comparative advantage in hosting conventions and events compared to other global cities?

Every city has its own allure and identity for sure but Istanbul, this beautiful city has so much to offer, to tell and to give to its visitors. Being home to many World Heritage sites, having been named European Capital of Culture, given the "Design City" status by UNESCO to name but a few titles it has received throughout its long history, Istanbul has always had a competitive advantage of being a city of trade, arts and a rich cuisine, connecting continents and people for centuries.

The city's beauty and dynamism, its wealth of history and culture make it an attractive destination for tourists as much as for professionals, event delegates, researchers, academicians and business people who want to meet, experience and discover.

Given the modern transportation, convention and exhibition venues and variety of accommodation facilities, İstanbul has the entire infrastructure to cater to all needs of meetings and events of all sizes. But the city's real strength lies in the experience of the industry stakeholders in organizing a different range of events for years as well as public and private cooperation.

Recently opened the new airport Istanbul Airport will offer flights to more than 350 destinations with an annual passenger capacity of up to 200 million once fully completed. To be the world's largest airport, it will make Istanbul not only a transportation hub but also a primary destination accessible from all around the world.

From our industry point of view, Istanbul is an ideal location for events and meetings due to its transportation infrastructure (including the new Istanbul Airport), its accessibility and its proximity to so many countries. our state-of-the-art infrastructure combined with the city's allure makes Istanbul a destination that keeps delegations coming back year after year for events and congresses. In fact, it is statistically proven that if a congress comes to Istanbul, attendance will be higher than previous events. Corporate tourists want to come to Istanbul and feel the soul of the city, rather than to simply attend an event in a nice venue.

I should add that our congress sector is gifted with an incredible level of human capital – professionals in our industry are experienced, flexible and willing to cater to our guests' needs; it is our people that make our guests' stay in Istanbul unforgettable.

Lastly, Istanbul is ideal from the standpoint of the planning organization. The city is profitable, responsive to the organizations' objectives, and practical for nearly every sector insofar as business expansion is concerned – as Istanbul plays host to top companies from *every* business sector and over 60 universities, visitors are ensured to learn something strategic about their professions if they engage with local stakeholders.

While you mention that nearly all sectors stand to benefit from hosting events in Istanbul, which sectors, in particular, have been attracted to the city?

Istanbul has been very popular for the medical sector, especially the international rotating congresses. The IT, telecommunications and FinTech sectors have also had a strong presence in our city of late.

However, while those four industries have a particular affinity for Istanbul, I would not say that they have an overwhelming presence here compared to any other sector. Istanbul truly attracts all types

of corporations and organizations from each and every sector.

Could you introduce the ICEC to our international readers?

The ICEC is the keystone of the convention and meeting industry in Istanbul. Prior to the city's rapid demographic and economic growth, the ICEC was really the only congress centre in Istanbul. It hosted all European and international important events. Currently, it enjoys a wonderful location in the heart of Istanbul's "Congress Valley," as we call it. The ICEC is surrounded by five-star, four-star, and three-star hotels, as well as by other convention centres with which we can partner for especially large events that exceed 20,000 attendees.

I am very proud of the ICEC on behalf of Istanbul; all congress venues in Istanbul have a responsibility not just to their guests and their staff, but also to the city and its citizens at large. The historied ICEC belongs to Istanbul, and it is a humbling privilege to serve as its General Manager.

To what extent must "Congress Valley" work together in bringing corporate tourists to Istanbul?

It is imperative that the Istanbul meeting industry works together. I believe that this sentiment is shared by my neighbouring venues. The industry is, without a doubt, stronger together—we frequently collaborate in hosting events and marketing our city. As a united front, the event venues in Istanbul are working to represent Istanbul and correct misconceptions of our city on the international stage. The country at large dealt with security concerns a few years ago that got overstated by the media, which significantly affected our business. Delegates came in fewer numbers due to travel warnings. Nonetheless, in Istanbul and in Turkey, at large, we are stable and safe – and it is the job of our industry partners, government, and business sector to work together and inform the world that such is the case and that Istanbul has it all as a leading meeting destination.

Has the government been supportive of your efforts to promote the congress sector in Istanbul?

Absolutely. The government understands the value-added that our sector offers to the economy, on the whole; we are not merely the venue for events. We help associations and companies maximize their potential. We help lobby for specific needs, we work to ensure that key stakeholders are active, and we leverage our experience to help the event organizers achieve exactly what they wish to achieve.

Especially the local governments now appreciate the impact of conventions and meetings for the cities and therefore they offer coordination and cooperation to event owners. Governments and policymakers are more than ever aware of the industry's contribution in not only the economic but social and cultural life and in the development of different sectors by hosting worldwide knowledge, academia, trade and business world to their destinations. We at ICEC recently hosted UNWTO Conference organized and invited by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. It was a very successful organization and a tourism industry gathering with the participation of ministers from over 40 countries and high-level international organizations here in Istanbul.

What is the ICEC's comparative advantage over the other congress venues in Istanbul?

The ICEC has a great central location in the heart of the city, easily accessible by all transportation means, with multi-functional capacity. I would be happy to add that ICEC has an unrivalled brand and team behind it. Like I said before, a key pillar to a successful congress centre is the human element. Our team at the ICEC is experienced, adaptive, team-oriented. In this industry, you cannot succeed if you are not flexible and mindful of your clients' needs.

What unique benefits does the ICEC offer the pharmaceutical industry when it comes to events and conventions?

The pharmaceutical industry is a massive, important sector with which our staff is very familiar. If we know ahead of time exactly what our partners and clients hope to achieve from a given event, we are guaranteed to make it happen. They can have perfect events here, thanks to our team, experience and attitude. Pharmaceutical companies can come to the ICEC for a comprehensive partnership – not just a venue. We can help engage stakeholders and maximize the scope of their convention. At the ICEC, we are foremost concerned about an event's success, and not price.

As you are relatively new in your position at the ICEC, what are your achievements thus far and priorities moving forward?

The past two months have consisted of a smooth and transparent transition into a new management style and a new leadership. The ICEC is truly making progress in attracting new business and will be operating with better financial savvy.

Moving forward, I am looking to attract new partners and clients and to market our brand in the international arena.

What is your final message to our readership of 160,000 executives?

Any business that wants to expand should highlight Turkey and Istanbul, in particular, on the map. We believe very strongly that Turkey is the future, and it is an excellent investment for any industry. When planning your next convention or exhibition, make sure that Istanbul is at the top of your list of prospective locations.

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