

Fred De Deken – President BHA (Brussels Hotel Association)

The Brussels Hotels Association (B.H.A.) is the hotel industry's professional organisation, its members represent 12 000 jobs and 14 500 hotel rooms in the Brussels region and its economic hinterland. Hotels are part and parcel of the package on offer to international meetings attendees and therefore are important 'players' on the scene of promoting our destination worldwide.

Most of the hotels represented in our capital spend sizeable budgets on promoting Belgium and Brussels. They will not be pleased by this decision which in fact means the abolition of the umbrella brand 'Belgium' which they have been promoting through their own marketing & sales departments.

It is now time for our Government to enforce the regionalisation of the tourism industry as organised per the last State's reform to ensure Toerisme Vlaanderen focus on promoting Flanders, WBT on Wallonia and VisitBrussels on Brussels.

BUT this is an absolute necessity to achieve a smooth collaboration between the three organizations and to project a single image of our country under the Belgian banner on the international scene!

Recent studies have shown and proven that within a country, city marketing, city branding and now place branding are the driving forces in attracting visitors.

In Belgium, the target clients are indeed quite different from regional entities considering either a short city trip or a longer stay at the Belgian Coast or in our green and hilly Ardennes.

Tourism professionals, involved in either leisure or corporate meetings, have different interests when promoting our three Regions hence the clear necessity to implement a strong Region's branding based on their own specific strengths. This will strongly reinforce the branding of Belgium as a leading place to visit and at the same time promote in harmony the specifics of each Region.

I cannot stress enough the importance of portraying ourselves as Brussels, a brand that has taken a long time to develop and which has finally managed to get decent recognition worldwide. We have the 'chance' that, thanks to the European Union, Brussels has become a household name worldwide, let's make the best possible use of this.

We also have to ask ourselves if we have the right infrastructures to try and compete with top destinations such as Barcelona. For the time being, there is an absolute need to improve our structural infrastructure. I dream of a centre of town, top of the range convention centre, capable of handling large numbers. But, I would be a happy man if

and when the NEO project on the Heysel plateau comes about. Then, and only then, can we compete with the big boys.

Here in Brussels we do have top accommodation available, but we may have to be more proactive and attract more business by offering a total services package, including convention centres, restaurants, hotels and transportation.

Belgium is a destination with great attraction points for both the business traveller and the tourist. Let's not confuse meeting planners by implicating them in our political maze which is of no interest whatsoever to them and totally irrelevant to their choice of destination... on the contrary, a notion of political strife and instability will only frighten them away and then what...?