

MUNICH 2006 GENERAL MEETING REPORT

Lucie, Karina and Craig of ICMA Head Office arrived at the beautiful Dorint Sofitel hotel in Munich a couple of days before the start of the conference to complete their final preparations and meet with the various suppliers. Even though the winter temperatures had just started to make themselves felt, the sun shone at the start of the week as delegates began to arrive and settle in. The hotel was much admired, especially the spa and the beautiful lighting (was I the only one who took about half an hour to work out how to turn off the lights in the room?), and many pronounced it one of the finest that ICMA had ever used for a GM – appropriate for our 20th anniversary and many thanks to Karina for having found it and negotiated such good rates for a 5* hotel.

Much stuffing of conference bags and chasing of presentations later, Lucie retired to the relative calm of the Committee Meeting on Wednesday morning, and Karina and Craig welcomed delegates to the Meet and Greet lunch before ushering them onto the bus for the Bavarian Olympics. This was the second Olympics that ICMA had held – the first was in Barcelona on the beach – and whilst this one resulted in far fewer injuries, it was just as hilarious as delegates were split into teams, dressed in Bavarian clothing, made to milk a wooden cow, and toss pretzels into a basket whilst blindfolded and having the remainder of the team yell instructions in Bavarian. Points must surely be awarded for sheer enthusiasm to the ladies from El Clasificado who whooped and cheered throughout – fantastic participants! Congratulations to the winning “Hirsch” team of Jason Hays (US), Margus Tomberg (Estonia), Bernie Neubauer (Germany), Mike Katajamaki (Finland), Alena Mraz (Czech Republic) and Ugnius Jankauskas (Lithuania) – surely an example of international co-operation at its finest!

After a quick wash and brush-up, everyone re-convened in the foyer for the Welcome Reception, drank plenty of excellent German sekt and quizzed their neighbours about the colours of the Estonian flag and exactly which GM it was when FAPIA voted to change its name to ICMA in order to have a chance of winning the Welcome Quiz. Matthias Popp, MD of our gracious hosts, Quoka Verlag GmbH, welcomed everyone to Munich, and Jill Armer, ICMA Chairperson, greeted all delegates, especially the non-members and first-timers, described the programme for the next few days, and encouraged everyone to make the most of the networking opportunities that lay ahead. A delicious dinner was then served in the Restaurant Schwarz und Weiss, a lot of wine was consumed, and Lucie ended up approving the bill without her glasses on – never a good sign!

Yet, remarkably promptly the next morning, everyone found their way to the plenary sessions on the lower ground floor for Jill’s opening address with a slide-show of photos from the Association’s 10th anniversary party and a presentation to Elena Dudenkova of EUR 500 for her winning design of ICMA’s new logo – many congratulations Elena! The winner of the Welcome Quiz was also drawn, with Ramon van den Ende of Ocasiao being the lucky delegate.

And it was over to one of ICMA's most regular and respected speakers, Peter Rees, formerly of Trader Classified Media and now operating as an independent consultant to the classified industry to give the Keynote Address. Titled 'Hanging Out My Helicopter', Peter interwove his analysis of the challenges facing today's classified media professionals with a series of questions posed to delegates which enabled them to evaluate where they are in their journey, and what they still need to do to ensure continued success in this industry. As usual, Peter was forthright in his views, ruthless in his analysis, and ended his presentation with an appropriate quote (at least this one was better than the one about weasels not getting sucked into jet-engines!).

Peter was followed by Heiner Kroke, Country Manager of Kijiji in Germany. Heiner's brief was to discuss how classified sites could leverage the growing community trend and emphasise their localness. Kijiji is a real hyper-local C2C site with nearly 300 cities and towns covered in Germany, but no ability to search the entire German database (although the very popular message boards are national). The delegates were intrigued by the age-profile of Kijiji users, Nielsen Netratings showed that, unlike the average Internet age-profile, the vast majority of Kijiji users fell between 35-64.

After a brief coffee-break, Felix, Mark and Laszlo treated us to a packed session on mobile classifieds. There was such a wealth of information, particularly from Mark's presentation, that everyone felt that this session could have been twice as long and there would still have been unanswered questions – so we promise to revisit this in Lisbon! Felix Erken, MD of JunkMail Publishing Group Pty in South Africa, opened the panel with an overview of the rapid development of the mobile industry and his personal experiences in South Africa. Mark Challinor, a fellow Liverpool fan, President of the European chapter of INMA and MD of Buzz Mobile Marketing, took up the baton with an extensive presentation on the many applications of the mobile technology and business models that could be applied to classifieds – way too many to go into here but don't forget to check out his presentation for all the details. Another ICMA member, Laszlo Gyenge, Sales Manager at Inform Media Group in Hungary and Romania, shared his company's experiences and successes with mobile services. Mobile has a high degree of penetration in his markets and is widely accepted as a payment method, especially as credit cards are mistrusted.

Returning after lunch in the ICMA lounge for the session on key verticals, Head Office was very relieved that a replacement speaker from Monster, Kai Deininger, Head of European Marketing, had arrived (the scheduled speaker, Steve Pogorzelski, had to pull out at the last minute due to illness). Kai took delegates through an overview of the recruitment market, and argued that despite the trend towards online advertising of vacancies, Monster believed that print would remain a significant player in this sector. Moving onto one of the most valuable verticals for ICMA members, Tim Hilpert, Department Head of New Business for eBay Motors and Mobile.de, ran delegates through an historical overview of eBay's development in this sector and its plans for Motors 2.0. Interestingly, much of eBay Motors' business is from car parts and accessories, and the mix of vehicles is somewhat skewed away from the mass-market

models. Closing this session, we were delighted to welcome Jeroen Wilhelm, Marketing Manager of Funda.nl, the leading Dutch property site. Founded through an alliance between the national real-estate agents association and a publisher of regional newspaper titles, Funda.nl has grown to dominate its sector and is extending its brand into many other areas, including new markets such as Ireland. Check out its adoption of databased technologies such as 360 degree photographs of neighbourhoods taken every 10 metres...

The final session on Thursday was another panel session, this time focusing on the free-distribution model. The panel was chaired by Rob Paterson, MD of Friday-Ad in the UK, one of ICMA's most successful free-distribution publishers with 64 plus editions in the UK, Spain and Gibraltar. He described a flourishing business but did not neglect to mention the challenges that free-distribution publishers faced such as lack of credibility with advertising agencies, the management and cost of distribution, retailers increasingly asking for payment, the time taken to build pick-up and the fact that the police regularly stop Friday-Ad vans so they can get their copies first! Rob was followed by Niko Ruokosuo, a former General Manager of Recycler in Los Angeles and now President of the free papers division of Sanoma in Finland. Whilst Niko's products are editorial rather than purely classified in content, he nevertheless provided a compelling analysis of the advantages of the various types of free-distribution methods such as rack, home, hand or commuter delivered. Karen Wall, Marketing Director of Metro UK, part of Associated Newspapers, rounded up the panel with an overview of the Metro success story and the factors that underpinned it. Unlike the previous panel, we had time for questions and there were plenty, ranging from Den Bla Avis who revealed that they were planning to go completely free distribution as of 4 January 2007 (good luck guys, we look forward to hearing more in Lisbon!), to a question about the exact cost per bus per month in Finland (how's that for detail, I'm still impressed Niko knew the answer!).

After a long day's work, Head Office rounded up all the delegates and marched them, crocodile-style, to one of Munich's most traditional bierkellers, the AugustinerKeller. We don't think we lost anyone en route, although apparently it was a lot harder getting people to leave! The evening took place in the underground cellars with non-stop food and beer in constant supply, there was plenty of mingling and networking and we reckon the Portuguese (plus a couple of Dutch, Brits, Spaniards and South Africans) were definitely the noisiest and most international table – you know who you are!

We were very impressed at the turnout on Friday morning for the opening supplier-case-studies... June Griffin, Sales Development and Training Director of Canadian auction specialists CityXpress kicked off with a case-study of how the continuous auction model – Bid4It! – had delivered for Northcliffe Newspapers in the UK. She was followed by Kate Bowler, Director of Business Development at Platefood, who presented an example of how search-engine optimization solutions helped power www.suche.de. Closing off the case-studies came Matthieu Laverne, Director of Calligram, who talked delegates through the results of implementing Calligram pagination at France Antilles Comareg.

The final presentation before the coffee-break was from Miklos Gaspar, VP Europe at Pressflex in Hungary. Miklos has worked extensively on research with the World Association of Newspapers, studying the business models that are developing as classifieds move from print to online, and he made a thoughtful presentation which nevertheless highlighted the very real issues (and revenue gaps) that publishers must address.

We were on the home strait of the formal presentations at this stage, with only three more speakers between us and lunch. This final session was designed to look at how different neighbouring sectors such as directories, newspapers and local search were affecting classifieds. First up was two for the price of one with Esther Fraile, Directories Product Manager, and Guzman Garmendia, Internet Research, Alliances and Development Manager, both of TPI in Spain, who described the internal thinking of directory company and how it felt it could apply its skill-set to classifieds. Esther and Guzman were followed by Klaus Abele, MD of Markt.de in Germany (thank you to Helmar for helping us secure Klaus as a speaker!). Markt.de is a joint venture between several large German newspaper groups which have decided to create a single platform to combat the various competitors in the German market and secure their classified franchise. According to Klaus, Markt.de currently carries over one and half million ads, more than 3 times its nearest competitor. The speaker with the unenviable task of wrapping up the morning session was Neal Polachek, VP Business Development of the Kelsey Group in the US. The Kelsey Group is a leading analyst in the field of Yellow Pages, directories and local search and Neal took us through a closely-argued concept on concentric circles starting at directories, then classifieds, moving through local search to the holy grail of marketplaces – a very cogent piece of reasoning!

After lunch, delegates had the opportunity to attend four of the six rotating workshops throughout the afternoon. All were very well-attended and resulted in plenty of discussion and debate, our thanks to all the facilitators, Peter Rees, Nick Sertis, Mike Katajamaki, Juilan Carter (on his first GM too!), Dan Rindos and Peter Lamb – your time and efforts were very much appreciated!

Friday evening was left free for delegates to make their own arrangements and as we didn't see anyone looking left out and lonely in the hotel, it seemed that you all went out to sample the delights of Munich without any help from us ;-)

Saturday morning saw the start of four single-discipline workshops – the Publishers' Meeting, the Sales Managers' Workshop, the IT Managers' Workshop and the PHOENIX Workshop – once again we were most impressed at the prompt turnout! Lucie will be writing up the Publishers' Meeting minutes in a separate document with the help of Sally's beautifully scribed flipchart sheets, but it's safe to say, even before the evaluation forms are processed, that Sally ran one of the best Publishers' Meetings in recent years – congratulations and thanks once again!

Jaco van As of CapeAds (JunkMail Publishing Group Pty) had to contend with one of the largest ever turnouts for the Sales Managers' Workshop, but the feedback that came through was that ideas were flowing just as thick and fast as ever.

The IT managers were uncharacteristically quiet (I'm convinced that they just slipped off to the bar early), but Craig's PHOENIX Workshop actually overran, there were so many good ideas coming from the group.

At lunch, a presentation was made to Matthias Popp, MD of Quoka, to thank him for his and his team's superb hosting of the event. We always think that it can't get any better but somehow each host manages to raise the bar just that little bit higher each time. With that in mind, it was over to Helmut Pollinger, General Manager of Ocasiao Lda in Portugal to introduce Lisbon, the destination for the next GM on 3-5 May 2007. The hotel that Helmut and Karina have chosen is the Hotel Mirage in Cascais, a beautiful seaside town just outside Lisbon which is brand new and where every room has a terrace and a sea-view. Put the dates in your diary now...

The Business Meeting was a short and sweet affair. Lucie presented ICMA Projects, a round-up of everything that Head Office had been doing for members over the past 6 months, and then presented the proposed 2007 budget which was approved by members unanimously. Formal minutes will be written up very shortly.

A quick shower, fixing of make-up and donning of party-dresses and stilettos, and all the delegates arrived downstairs in good time to catch the coaches to the Gala Party which took place at the Bavaria Filmstudios. It was a spectacular event, marked by the most delicious food, the biggest cake that anyone has ever seen, some very glitzy awards (Martha de la Torre was awarded best-dressed delegate, Ramon van den Ende most often seen at the bar – pipping the out and out favourite Peter Rees by a short head, and Ashley Rindos was the clear winner of the friendliest delegate award), and the most frenetic dancing ever seen at an ICMA GM (note to self: never jive with a German without appropriate body armour!).

Blearily, 30 of us dragged ourselves onto the coach for the Sunday cultural excursion to the castle of Neuschwanstein and a visit to the Wieskirche. Our tour guide was ruthlessly organized but at that stage we weren't putting up much resistance to be honest. Appalling weather but some really lovely sights...

We hope you all enjoyed it as much as we did! Thanks again to all the speakers, facilitators, panelists, chairpeople, Matthias and his fabulous team at our hosts Quoka Verlag GmbH (and Josef for helping foot the bill!), the Committee for all their hard work and support, our suppliers and exhibitors and Head Office for making it happen. But most of all, thank you to you, all the delegates, without whom ICMA GM's really wouldn't be the same...

See you in Lisbon!