



BY JASON HENSEL

CITIES, EXPERIENCES AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

Elena Rodríguez Blanco wants to show MPI European Meetings & Events Conference attendees how local experiences can help make the world a better place.

Elena Rodríguez Blanco gives you a challenge and asks you to go out and solve it. That process, she says, is the best way to develop a critical mindset, which is an important skill for the 21st century.

"We're not setting people up to ask the right questions," Rodríguez Blanco says. "It's because the traditional format of learning is, for example, me telling you something. That's why I think travel is very interesting, because it gets you out of your comfort zone and gives you the possibility of exploring unexpected things."

Travel, Rodríguez Blanco feels, is a great teacher through experiences.

"The experiential part of learning has made some strides in the last year, but it can go further and eliminate the professor," she says. "People tend to get a question and go straight to an answer because we're taught that being efficient is solving something as quickly as possible even if it doesn't answer the right question. Many times, it's about asking more questions to find out what it is you need answered. I think travel and experiences make you generate those questions."

The same holds true for the meeting and event industry.

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amount of time,” she says. “Instead of me spending time—one person sharing the knowledge—we use the collective intelligence of all the knowledge in the room.”

And that’s what Rodríguez Blanco plans to do during her session at MPI’s 2017 European Meetings & Events Conference (EMEC) in Granada, Spain, March 5-7. Her session, “Cities, Experiences and Social Innovation,” will offer personal accounts of people making a difference for citizens and tourists alike.

“It’s going to be a lot about what we’re doing, but then opening the space for people to ask questions,” Rodríguez Blanco says. “I want to give people the space to think about how they can do things differently.”

Relationships Matter

Rodríguez Blanco is the co-founder of Authenticitys, a company that connects travelers with local experiences and businesses. It promotes responsible tourism and offers ways people can take in a city’s culture while also adding social value. It is a “B Corporation,” a for-profit designation for companies that promote positive impacts on communities and the environment.

Its roots are in education, and one example of the type of experience Authenticitys provides is alternative tours in European cities given by formerly homeless or migrant citizens.

“This is not about exoticizing hardship or ‘poverty tourism.’ Rather, it’s about offering tourists and curious visitors a rare opportunity to hear the stories and real-life experiences of people who know a side of the urban landscape that doesn’t often get seen,” Rodríguez Blanco writes on the organization’s blog. “We believe storytelling is one of the most powerful change agents there is, and these kinds of tours not only spark a change in the visitors who go on them, but also in the tour guides who serve them.”

And for Rodríguez Blanco, the changes she sees in tourists and guides—and the connections made—drives her to keep working every day.

“Three things have changed me,” she says. “One of them is to not feel like the company is yours, but an idea that has come through you, and there’s a whole world there to help you and work with it. Another one is not to attach to the concept of it. It’s not like a child, but instead a partnership in terms of how I view it. In a partnership, you try to build each other up. The third one is the importance of building relationships. We do not view people as providers. It’s a community where we see each other as partners.”

The biggest challenge, though, is education.

“We’re not only selling a new product but we’re educating our customers on the new product,” she says. “As a small company, that can be very resource intensive. Basically, every time I go sell to a hotel or the event industry, I will have to define what social entrepreneurship is and how sustainability can happen in a fun experience. It’s a bit of a challenge because you’re not selling something people know. You have to spend time teaching and sharing and inviting people to be part of it.”

Sometimes, Rodríguez Blanco says, it takes a long time, because people don’t relate to it.

“When you say ‘responsible travel’ or ‘sustainable experiences,’ it sounds boring,” she says. “It sounds like something you don’t want to do on a holiday. I spend a lot of time doing PR and talks. It’s exciting, though, because you see people’s eyes shine whenever they see the possibilities.”

Rodríguez Blanco hopes EMEC delegates leave with new ideas they can offer their own meeting and event attendees on how to leave locations better than when they arrived and more educated. And there is only one good way to do that, which inspires her daily: “My main drive is relationships with people.”

Seems like that should be a good goal for everyone, meeting planner or not. ■



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