



LEFT: Rotorua's Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland.
BELOW: Megan O'Brien.



She said while it's always been a factor, creativity in a conference is becoming a lot more sought after than before.

"They want to know 'how can we do it differently?' How can we get people more involved?' It's exciting for us."

Another important factor is technology.

"Having good technology – they want to know that there are good systems in place."

This includes having online technology as a way of sharing information and keeping people informed.

"That sharing of information, and having your client have easy access, is important."

Conference Innovators managing director Megan O'Brien says the next 12 months is going to be huge for her company based in Christchurch.

"2006 is already our biggest year by far in 11 years in business. We're in a position next year where we've had to put some stop-sell on a few months because we just can't take anymore bookings."

Predominantly handling Association business, Conference Innovators mostly organises events within New Zealand. Mrs O'Brien said while the Association business runs in cycles it just so happens that a large proportion of it is set to conference at SKYCITY Convention Centre in Auckland.

"I'm not sure if that's indicative of SKYCITY's fabulous facilities or whether it's because it's 'Auckland's turn'."

The company organises large-scale conferences with one for 2000 people and another for 1000 coming up next year. It also handles international conventions. She said the two cities in New Zealand most easily able to cope with these numbers are Auckland and Christchurch because their facilities allow for the crucial trade and industry component of an Association conference.

However Mrs O'Brien said other popular destinations within New Zealand are Queenstown, and also Napier.

"Napier city is groovy. It's vibrant and interesting. It's got that great wine region and the airport has just been upgraded."

Mrs O'Brien said her clients also use Rotorua while the Gold Coast is popular with New Zealand delegates. Meanwhile Australia picked up in popularity almost overnight following the

Bali bombings in early October.

"As an incentive destination our clients are certainly not looking at these countries where there's a danger factor so it makes Australia look great."

Business has been a little slow for **Brenda Pearman of Pearman & Associates in Auckland** however, the incentive and conference specialists have a number of bookings lined-up for 2006.

"We've got a lot of business on the board but nothing contracted yet," Mrs Pearman said.

One of the destination's the company's clients were keen on was Bali, until it was bombed again last month.

"We took a group to Bali in August and it was fantastic. We had three (groups) on the books for Bali but now they've pulled out." Instead, clients are heading to Australia, more specifically to the Gold Coast where there are no security concerns. And, Mrs Pearman said not only is Bali suffering from the terrorist strikes, but other Asian destinations too.

"Prior to the Bali bombing Asia was very hot. We had a lot of groups wanting to go to Thailand. But since the Bali thing Australia is it now. We had an incentive group who wanted to go to Hong Kong and we pitched Bali as well. They were sold on it but now they've changed to the Gold Coast."

Other destinations being looked at by the company on behalf of clients are Las Vegas and South Africa, but both places are expensive to visit. Mrs Pearman said affordability and top-notch facilities and service had made Asia an attractive option in the past.

"We're also trying to get groups to places like Dubai, Chili and Cancun but getting the budgets and the buy-in for places like that can be hard."

The company is also organising an incentive group to the Rugby World Cup in 2007 being held in Belfast, Northern Ireland, around France and with the finals in Paris. Within New Zealand Mrs Pearman said Queenstown is always a favourite destination.

"It just delivers. It really has very good infrastructure in place."