

IBP National Journalism Awards 2019: Event of the Year

Bisnow's Women Leading Real Estate event 2019

Date: 6 February 2019

Location: The Grand Hotel, London

Budget: £24,424



The statistics are stark: just 14% of professionals in commercial property are female, according to the RICS and EY. Bisnow wants to play its part in changing this awful situation, and so decided to hold an event dedicated to the amazing and talented women in the sector.

The event was the second in what is now an annual series, trying to encourage greater diversity in commercial property.

It was not solely marketed to women, but generated an enormous amount of interest among female property professionals: more than 600 people attended the event, around 80% of them female. That is an increase from 450 in the first year. In that sense, it is by far and away the largest gathering of women in UK commercial property. As one attendee commented: "I didn't know there were this many women in commercial property, never mind getting them all in the same room!"

The event served two functions: giving female professionals an opportunity to network in a female-friendly environment, and providing content to discuss issues surrounding diversity.

On the first point, we altered the format from the first year, changing from a morning event to an afternoon event with evening cocktails, to allow for networking time both before and after the event. Also, moving it from a morning event meant that people who need to do the morning school run could attend without taking too much time out of the working day.

In terms of content, the aim was to be enlightening but also provocative. A roster of senior industry figures including Greystar's Michela Hancock, Real Estate Balance's Kaela Fenn-Smith, Tristan Capital's Ric Lewis and Nuveen's Mike Sales debated a series of topics that relate to diversity. Note that the panels were not entirely female - it will need both men and women to engage with this issue to foster diversity.

The content was risky, and aimed avoid simply paying lip service to the matter of diversity. In that sense a debate on work-life balance looked at the real practicalities that are involved in making sure women have the option to continue in a company after having children, and indeed for men to achieve a better life balance as well. Panellists gave emotional responses and didn't shy away from the difficulty in achieving this aim. Read more here:

<https://www.bisnow.com/london/news/women/the-difficult-honest-truth-about-being-a-working-parent-in-property-97433>

Fenn-Smith and Lewis also raised difficult questions about the pace of change in terms of making property companies more diverse, and whether companies are genuinely committed to this aim.

<https://www.bisnow.com/london/news/women/economics-and-accountability-will-be-the-big-factors-pushing-forward-diversity-in-real-estate-97435>

The event itself



The event had a single aim: get as many people in a room as possible to discuss and debate the issue of diversity in commercial real estate. This aim was achieved through a traditional e-mail marketing campaign, promoting it to Bisnow's UK subscriber base. The fact that it is a success is inarguable: it was the best attended event Bisnow ran in the UK, and the third highest globally, beaten only by events in New York and Washington, markets where the company has operated for a decade, compared to three years in London. With 600 attendees, there are very few larger events in UK property generally.

As well as the email marketing campaign, Bisnow's editorial team produced a list of incredible entrepreneurs and rising stars operating in the field of UK property, highlighting the amazing success of women across the industry and promoting the event. This was a major driver of ticket sales. This was a major editorial project in and of itself, and was a hugely well-read article across the world.

<https://www.bisnow.com/london/news/women/46-women-who-own-the-future-of-uk-real-estate-96064>

The number of attendees presented its own challenge: finding a venue suitable to host both content and networking. And more importantly: processing that many people arriving simultaneously. There's no real way of doing that other than making sure you have enough staff, they are well briefed, and you have planned in advance how to move people from check in, to network, to the auditorium where the content will be happening. People were queuing round the block to get in, but crucially, feedback from attendees did not dwell on this, because people were not queuing for more than 10 minutes, and were kept informed of what was happening.

All this was achieved by a full-time Bisnow events team of just two people.

A small point that sums up the ethos of the event. Four toilets were available in the area where the event was held. Three were male, one female. Given the demographic of the event, we made sure ahead of time that this ratio was reversed and the signage changed to make more loos available for the majority-female audience. And all the songs that accompanies panellists walking on stage were by female artists.

Meeting objectives



Meeting the objective in terms of attendance has already been demonstrated. And the feedback from the event was positive too.

“Great organisation and a very impressive turn-out,” Real Estate Balance’s Fenn-Smith said. “So many women stayed to network and there was a definite feeling of positivity in the room. Exciting times!”

“I thought the gathering was fantastic and it sure feels like it is something special and that it has momentum,” Tristan’s Ric Lewis said. “I appreciate very much being included in the dialogue.”

Attendees said they appreciated the deep dive into how to achieve a good work-life balance, the kind of topic that is not usually covered at a business event. People said they wanted to hear more from high-flying women about how they made it, in terms of both starting new companies and working within larger organisations. The event can always be improved, so this is already being incorporated for the 2020 event.

Big corporates have also been in contact to sponsor and participate in the event in 2020, which is a great sign that the event is resonating with the large companies that will play a big part in driving this agenda.