

Connecting with the community



In this fourth in a series of bi-monthly columns, AIPC's Barbara Maple asks, 'Who cares about congress centres?'

Convention centres and destinations competing in today's market have one very big challenge these days, namely that increasing numbers of cities and countries are recognising the benefits conventions and exhibitions bring to a destination and deciding to get involved in the industry. The result is a more intense level of competition than we've ever seen before.

Being competitive is about having the right facilities and services, but it is also about having a receptive, welcoming destination that makes delegates enjoy the experience and want to attend an event in that location. In both cases, this has a lot to do with how well the community understands the benefits and issues associated with the meetings business, and whether or not it is prepared to turn that understanding into support.

In fact, community support is critical for at least three good reasons.

First, success in this business demands ongoing investment in facilities and

marketing, usually by government, and this, in turn, requires that political leaders see there is support for this investment coming from the community.

Second, the community is part of the product; planners these days are looking for a 'total experience' for their delegates, and this includes the atmosphere they enjoy when they're spending free time in the location where their event is being held. Third, there is a need to remember that events can and do have local impacts, everything from traffic congestion to street closures for special events, and, when this happens, organisers will need a community who understand the greater benefits that are being generated, rather than just focusing on any disruptions.

But while everyone agrees that community support is important, few actually invest a lot of time or money in developing it. The fact is, this is just one more demand to be addressed in the already busy lives of congress centre staff, and often it is the one that falls off the priority list.

The problem with good community relations is that by the time you realise you need them, it's usually already too late. Goodwill needs to be built up ahead of time, like a 'rainy day' fund. The time to begin is long before you have an issue, when people in the community are more receptive to the messages you want to deliver.

Most congress centre managers know what the most compelling messages are: things like money, jobs, professional development opportunities and an enhanced profile for the destination. The question is, how are they best delivered? There are several ways to approach this question.

First, there is a need to have good, solid data to support any claims for such things as economic benefits, jobs or tax revenues.

Too many interest groups throw around big economic numbers and people are less willing to accept these without the appropriate back up information. To maintain credibility, centres and their owners must be able to document their claims and, preferably, have these verified by independent authorities.

Second, centres need to find ways to share the experience with people in the community, many of whom would never otherwise attend a convention or understand what they're all about. By definition, most delegates are from outside of the community, so unless centres make a conscious effort to enable locals to share in what goes on in their facilities, there will be little community awareness. Something as simple as an open house or a special annual event for the community can go a long way in this regard.

We need to remember that people tend to filter information based on their own immediate priorities and concerns. This means that in order to

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connect with a community audience, there must be a real effort to translate the convention message into things that are meaningful to the community. Fortunately, this is something that our industry really lends itself to, as we can easily make an argument that everything from economic and professional development to health care and technology benefit from the presence of conventions and exhibitions in that community.

Community relations, like any other management responsibility, can be a lot of work. But unless managers find a way to invest in building community support, the time will inevitably come when they need that support and it's simply not there. In the end, it's the community that either makes or influences the big government decisions, and we need them on our side.

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