

Tourism only incidental in convention centre equation

By Rod Cameron, Director of Programming & International Development for AIPC.

For most of its existence, the meetings industry has been something of an orphan, falling between the various sectors that make up more recognised industries and, often as not, adopted by some other sector that has something to gain by association.

Typically it has been regarded as part of the tourism industry, but really it only shares a need for accommodation and other visitor services, which is not far different from any other business activity.

It does, in fact, have another far more critical role – and it is ironic that at a time when the industry needs all the recognition and support it can get, this role has been largely overlooked both by the industry itself as well as by governments, which need to understand the impact of convention centres. Meetings and exhibitions make a key contribution to economic development – something that is routinely ignored with the focus on their far less significant role as a tourism product.

Conventions and exhibitions are all about economic development and only incidentally about tourism. Their *raison d'être* is to promote professional and business development, academic and research exchange, technical and medical advancement and cultural evolution, not simply to fill hotel rooms. Yet we continue to gauge success – and the value of the industry – on measures that trivialise the real economic benefits a convention centre generates.

The tourism industry perpetuates this notion, and it does not help that the two are sometimes lumped together administratively for the sake of convenience.

All this has compromised the ability of the meetings sector to deliver on one of the most important benefits meetings and conventions generate: the ability to shape and advance a region's economic development strategies.

So how do conventions and exhibitions address overall economic development goals? It is a long list, including:

- Attracting international events that are directly related to

government economic priorities

- Creating forums for interaction between global investors and local businesses
- Drawing business and professional visitors, creating destination exposure to mobile, affluent decision-makers who might otherwise not have visited
- Attracting top professionals, delivering global expertise into the host community
- Exposing local businesses and investment, research and cultural products to a global audience
- Advancing international co-operation and understanding through forums and helping build relationships through direct, personal contact.

This is not to negate the value a convention centre has in generating benefits for the tourism sector, but underlines the fact that the discussion should not end there. Like any area of government investment, convention centres need to be assessed on the basis of what they return to the taxpayer investor.

So why has this broader role been ignored? Because it does not lend itself to direct measurement. There has been a tendency to measure benefits on the basis of the immediate economic impacts arising from delegate and exhibitor spending, simply because this is easier to calculate. This means the evaluation focuses on what a centre contributes to the tourism/hospitality sector – specifically the number of hotel room nights generated.

The fact that something is easy to measure does not mean it is the most valuable component, and the role that conventions and exhibitions play in promoting other areas of the economy almost certainly outweighs the more tangible spending benefits.

A convention centre and the events it hosts should be a primary instrument of economic development for the government owner, because it can selectively pursue the kinds of events that best correspond to the owner's policy objectives.

By perpetuating the idea that centres serve only one sector, the tourism industry, their marketing can be left in the hands of bureaux that have other priorities. Decisions about business priorities may be difficult if a convention centre is viewed as existing simply to fill hotel rooms.

Marketing can be successful only with a dedicated effort that fully recognises and prioritises the particular demands of the market, as well as its broader opportunities. A centre should be regarded as an economic driver...

- Conventions and exhibitions are a business-to-business sell
- A "leisure" image is increasingly irrelevant to planners seeking to make a site decision
- Decision makers, decision factors and business processes are all fundamentally different in the meetings market from those of the leisure travel sector
- In a leisure/business mix, the business events side of the equation is seldom a top priority, perhaps because the leisure side has more lobbying capability.

In essence, the job of selling a centre needs a specialised approach based on the objectives to be served.

All this is not to say there is no role for the bureaux. In today's highly competitive market, all elements of the equation need to pull together, and there is no doubt that the destination is still a big part of the sell. But participating in a process is not the same as dominating it.

Of course centres will continue to benefit the tourism sector by filling hotels and restaurants, supporting hotel expansion and creating greater destination exposure, but they can't do this without ongoing investment, usually by government.

Most governments place a higher priority on economic development than on tourism, and it's time our industry took better advantage of the important story we have to tell.

• For further information, contact Marianne de Raay (marianne.de.raay@aipc.org) or visit www.aipc.org.

EYE ON EXHIBITIONS

exhibition & event association of australasia

Etiquette pays

Exhibitor etiquette is the key to success at an exhibition. As important as pre-show planning and stand design may be, the hard work can all be undone if the people on the stand make etiquette mistakes.

These simple guidelines can prevent your company losing time, money and business, and ensure a professional brand image...

Pre-show

Arrive early. A company that is still setting up when attendees arrive will suggest it is disorganised. Be prepared. If staff members have a sound knowledge of the product and business objectives, they will be better equipped to generate lucrative business leads.

Mid-show

Stay on your feet and make eye contact. Sitting down will not entice attendees to your stand. Eating on the stand conveys a similar message and will ward off possible leads.

Be attentive. A customer is unlikely to interrupt two staff members having a chat.

It is common courtesy not to wander on to other exhibitor stands, or in the aisles.

Don't be a bad sport. Knocking your competition in front of customers is both dishonest and unnecessary. Sell your product or service on its own merits.

Be approachable. Having a relaxed stance creates a sense of intimacy and trust. If you smile and make eye contact, you will look professional and ready for business.

Post-show

Keep your display up until the very end of the show. Dismantling early deters late attendees and can be disruptive.

By choosing your staff carefully and preparing them well, you can maximise exhibition results.



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