

# Time to tell the important story

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 another sector that has something to gain by association.**

Typically this has been the tourism industry, but the only common ground is a need for accommodation and other visitor services, which is not too different from any other business activity. But there is another, far more critical factor that is ironically overlooked just when the industry needs all the recognition and support it can get – the key role that meetings, conventions and exhibitions play in economic development.

Conventions and exhibitions are, in fact, all about economic development. Only incidentally are they about tourism. Their purpose is to promote professional and business development, academic and research exchange, technical and medical advancement and cultural evolution – not to simply fill hotel rooms. Yet we continue to gauge our success – and the value of the industry – on measures that trivialise the real economic benefits generated by a convention centre for the community.

With the tourism industry generally perpetuating this notion, and with the two industries being lumped together administratively for the sake of convenience, it is little wonder there is a misunderstanding. This compromises the ability of convention centres to deliver on one of the most important benefits that meetings and conventions generate – the ability to shape and advance a region's economic development strategies.

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

- Attracting international events that relate directly to government economic priorities
- Creating forums between global investors and local businesses

- Drawing business and professional visitors, exposing the destination to a more mobile, affluent and decision-making group that might not otherwise visit
- Attracting top professionals in various fields, delivering global expertise into the host community to enhance local professional development and expertise
- Creating opportunities to expose local business, investment, research and cultural products to a global audience
- Advancing international co-operation and understanding, and helping build relationships

This is not to negate the value a centre has in generating benefits for the tourism sector, but the discussion shouldn't end there. If it does, the result will be a lack of appreciation of the broader objectives. Like any area of government investment, convention centres need to be assessed on the basis of what they return to the taxpayer/investor, and this can hardly be done effectively if a major area of significance is left out of the equation.

So why has this broader role been ignored? There has been a tendency to gauge benefits on the basis of immediate economic impact (from delegate and exhibitor spending) simply because this is easy. But the most valuable component – the role that meetings, conventions and exhibitions play in promoting other areas of the economy – almost certainly outweighs the more tangible spending benefits.

This is a problem, firstly because it undermines the potential of a convention centre. A centre and the events it hosts can and should be a primary instrument of economic development for the government owner. With the proper encouragement, events can be pursued that correspond to the owner's policy objectives.

Secondly, there is the question as to how a centre should be marketed,

and who should be doing it. The most successful marketing of a centre (and thus the greatest overall return) will be achieved with full recognition of the demands of the market as well as the broader opportunities associated with economic and business development.

Decisions and business processes are all fundamentally different in the meetings market from those of the leisure travel sector. Conventions and exhibitions are a business-to-business sell. It is not a mass market like the leisure side. Centres seldom, if ever, deal directly with the end user (the delegates), and their marketing must be based on what appeals to a meeting organiser.

This means that the job of selling a centre needs a specialised approach based on an appreciation of the full range of objectives to be served. In most cases, the economic development role will be one of the biggest priorities in the mix. This is not to deny that there is a major destination component in the convention sell, but the point is that it doesn't end there.

We need every economic justification possible to meet the challenges of the future, which means seizing every opportunity to expand the perception of the importance centres have in addressing economic and community interests. Ongoing investment is vital if centres are to stay competitive and continue benefiting the tourism sector by filling hotels and restaurants, as well as supporting hotel development and creating more awareness of a destination.

Like it or not, most governments place a far higher priority on economic development than on tourism, so as an industry it is time we took better advantage of the important story we have to tell in this regard..

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## Dream themes

No matter how big or small, a show needs a consistent theme. While business meetings and conferences often use themes that convey strong messages, exhibitions (particularly for consumers) will always benefit from more imaginative theming. Only when a theme pervades every aspect is an event more likely to succeed.

As simultaneous events vie for visitors, organisers often face the challenge of making the latest show better than ever. Choosing a compelling theme is one way to stand out from the crowd.

1. Choose your brand. It is easy to get carried away with imaginative themes, but it is important the theme be relevant to the business culture and brand. Firstly, the brand image must be clear, and if the show needs to convey a specific message, then the theme should strongly support it.
2. Brainstorm ideas. Think outside the square. A new theme can rejuvenate an event and make visitors more receptive. While the range of choice can be distracting, it is possible to be creative while staying relevant to your brand.
3. Apply the theme. Once a theme has been decided on, it needs to be applied across all areas of event organisation and preparation. Ensure the theme is suitably incorporated into the promotional, decorative, catering, entertainment and promotional aspects of the show, and is used consistently.

Theming can be a savvy marketing tool, offering the chance to do something new. Through careful planning and following these simple steps, an event can be turned into one visitors will never forget, prompting them to return year after year.



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