

We're all in this together

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

While convention centres and their clients may have occasional differences of opinion, we all share one overriding priority: ensuring the ongoing role of meetings as a primary vehicle for professional and business development.

Without this, clients cannot deliver the level of participation they need to meet their organisational and financial responsibilities. At the same time, suppliers like centres need a thriving industry to fulfil the expectations of their communities, not just in terms of revenue but in community and economic development. It is clear that the business priorities for one group are also likely to be those of the other, and any concerns for the future are largely shared. This means we need to be seeking better ways to address concerns together rather than focusing on our interactions.

AIPC and its members have been identifying future challenges through surveys and workshops, the latest being on the organisation's 50th annual conference in Singapore. Here are five concerns we believe venues and clients share...

1 An uncertain economic outlook. It is axiomatic that the fortunes of the meetings industry tend to track the economy, both directly (as in the corporate area) and indirectly (as in association meetings). Lower attendance and/or cancelled events damage everyone's interests, even beyond the impact of immediate losses in participation and income. For example, replacement activities such as video conferencing may become more established and prove hard to reverse when economic conditions improve.

2 Sustainability, the other edge of the sword. First there was environmental impact, defined largely by pollution and waste management. This expanded into energy management, and sustainability was a broader definition still. At each stage centres responded dutifully, and in most cases effectively – to the point where “green meetings”

are now virtually universally available. But the real question is where this path can lead. After all, the only way to eliminate the environmental impacts of a meeting is to not hold it in the first place. This approach needs to be balanced against the real benefits meetings deliver in terms of economic and social progress.

3 Impacts on travel through concerns about carbon footprints and fuel cost increases. While threatening enough on their own, these concerns escalate when combined with economic uncertainty. Again, there is a need to ensure that sustainability concerns are balanced with an appreciation of the role meetings play in advancing business and professional interests. In this respect, the industry needs to show the economic benefits of meetings.

4 A shrinking work force. Demographics in many countries do not look particularly encouraging for an industry that can be labour intensive. With a dwindling supply of specialised and experienced event staff, more effort is needed in recruitment, training and staff retention.

5 Alternative communication technologies. While “face-to-face” encounters are fundamentally important, the technology for remote meetings is improving. Plus a new generation of delegates has been raised on the internet. The goal should be to use such technology to enhance rather than replace meetings. Any one of these issues could be significant, but it is the combination of them at any one time that could have the greatest impact, and that is the big challenge.

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Be organised

With mammoth amounts of planning and organisation involved, exhibitions are rarely free of stress.

Even experienced organisers can find it a challenge to execute an event without a hitch, so a strategy to circumvent disasters on the exhibition floor is vital.

Pre-show

Because of all the information needed to run an exhibition, important documentation can be misplaced. It is good practice to make back-up copies of all critical papers, schedules, contact numbers and contracts, and carry these at all times. Writing data to a CD can be the best option as it is impossible to accidentally change or erase.

Another issue with huge ramifications is the moving-in of exhibitors. When they bump in on schedule, an orderly flow of equipment to the exhibition floor is assured, but when exhibitors don't show up on time, chaos can ensue.

Precise organisation is the key to dealing with such problems. As soon as an exhibitor misses their allocated slot, an organiser needs to pinpoint their exact location and assess their anticipated arrival time. This is when a comprehensive list of exhibitor contact details are essential.

Post-show

A show last day is renowned for vexing problems. As traffic begins to slow, so too does exhibitor motivation, leading to the assumption that any chance of promising leads has evaporated. But the sight and sound of packing tape can often deter buyers still on the exhibition floor.

To prevent an anti-climax, plainly state the exhibiting terms and trading hours in the exhibition contract. Make it clear that pack-up cannot start until the show floor is closed. Enforcing this rule from the start can boost the likelihood of more leads, ensuring both exhibitors and customers are happy.



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