Industry challenges are shared by all

Director of Programming and International Development for AIPC, Rod Cameron, makes a call for suppliers and organisers to unite against threats to the industry and 'get in front' of the debate.

Rod Cameron, getting in front of the debate

While convention centres and their corporate and association clients may have their differences of opinion from time to time, we both share one overriding priority, and that is 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 successful industry in order to fulfil the expectations of their respective communities, not just in terms of event revenues, but for the role they play in community and economic development.

So in looking to the future, it's clear that what are the most important business priorities for one group are also likely to be those of the other, and any concerns for the future are largely shared concerns. This means we need to be looking for better ways to address them together, instead of focusing the majority of our energies on the interactions we have with each other.

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As the pre-eminent organisation representing convention and congress centres world wide, AIPC and its members have been identifying future challenges for the industry through a series of surveys and workshops, including at last year's 50th Annual Conference in Singapore. While this is essentially a convention centre perspective, it is clear that the highest priorities are those issues that will impact both centres and clients alike, and can best be addressed with a combined effort. Here are some of the concerns we believe we share:

- **An uncertain economic outlook:** It's axiomatic that the fortunes of the meetings industry tend to track the economy, both directly (as in the corporate meetings area) and indirectly (as in the case of association meetings which, while booked well in advance, can still suffer from lower attendance and spending during an economic downturn). Lower attendance and/or cancelled events result in damage to everyone's interests, including both the centres and →

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destinations that host events and the organisers who have to deal with the impacts of reduced participation and revenues.

Such an effect may have an even greater impact than simply the immediate reductions in participation and income. If meetings are reduced, even temporarily, their role can be eroded in ways that have lingering effects. For example, replacement activities like remote meetings may become more established and prove difficult to reverse even when economic conditions improve.

• **Sustainability: the other edge of the sword:** First it was environmental impact, defined largely on the basis of pollution and waste management. Then this expanded into energy management. Sustainability was a broader definition still, incorporating many other aspects of the impacts a meeting or exhibition might have. At each stage, centres responded dutifully and, in the vast majority of cases, effectively, to the point where 'green meetings' packages are now virtually universally available, even if not consistently used by clients.

But there's a real question of where this path can lead if taken to an extreme. The fact is that the only way to completely eliminate the environmental impacts of a meeting is to not hold it in the first place. So this kind of consideration needs to be balanced against the very real benefits a meeting or convention delivers in terms of economic and social progress. The problem is that this kind of balance often gets lost in a situation where the pendulum swings as far as it has in the sustainability debate, and there is a very real responsibility for those of us in the industry to address that balance issue as regularly as possible.

• **Impacts on travel arising from increasing concerns about the carbon footprint of delegates combined with fuel cost increases associated with the spike in oil prices:** These impacts are threatening enough on their own, but when combined with economic uncertainty they become even more of a concern. Such factors as the 'carbon footprint' can be cited as a way of rationalising travel restrictions that are really more about cost saving measures, just as security concerns served as a proxy for cost saving measures resulting from a soft economy earlier this decade.

Again, there is a need to make sure that sustainability concerns are balanced with an appreciation of the important role meetings play in advancing business and professional interests or all our 'greening' initiatives may become counter productive. One issue that we may have to deal with in this respect is the near-total absence of economic measures that can calculate the economic benefits associated with the kind of professional and business advancement a meeting creates. Without this we are reduced to having to use vague, qualitative measures of value to argue against the hard measures available to other sectors and that are increasingly being developed for the sustainability debate.

• **A shrinking work force:** Demographics don't look particularly encouraging in many parts of the world for an industry that can be very labour intensive. The dwindling supply of specialised and experienced event staff means an expanded effort is needed to recruit, train and retain good people at a much higher rate.

This is a concern shared again by both centres and clients alike; when client organisations such as associations have reduced resources, they often need to look for higher levels of support from a centre, and this may be coming at precisely the same time that centres themselves are struggling to maintain qualified staffing levels. In the end, it's in everyone's interests to deliver the best possible event experience in order to encourage attendance, and to the extent that this requires capable, qualified human resources, we should all be looking more intensely at what it takes to develop such skills and how we can compete more effectively with other sectors looking to attract the same people.

• **Alternative communications technologies:** Although we've been denying this one for years, we can't and shouldn't count it out yet. While most agree on the fundamental importance of face to face encounters, the technology for remote meetings is improving significantly at a time when the challenges to travel are increasing as outlined above. Combine this with a new generation of delegates raised on the Internet and teleconferencing of the future may become an irresistible option, at least for some types of meetings.

Most in the industry would agree that the goal should be to work at how such technology can be used most effectively to enhance meetings rather than replace them. But this has definitely taken a back seat in terms or priorities relative to more attention to traditional meetings activities and formats. It's likely time to make this a real focus and make sure we are utilising the full potential the technologies offer to enhance the value associated with face to face events.

Any one of these issues could have a significant impact. However, it is the combination of them occurring at the same time that could have the greatest impact – the combined effects of economic conditions, sustainability concerns and new technology, for example. We need to be looking at the long term of our industry with the same kind of intensity applied by other sectors, and we need to be doing it together.

As much as we've advanced in both our thinking and the available technical resources in recent years, the fact remains that the basic format of meetings and conventions has evolved very little for a long time. If anyone should have the capability to 'get in front' of how this area evolves it should be those most experienced and directly involved – in other words, those of us in the industry.

All these factors are areas that should be of concern not just to suppliers but to organisers as well. They all have the potential to reduce event participation, which does not serve the interests of either group. As a result, they are areas we should be addressing collectively, particularly in terms of reinforcing the fundamental importance of the meeting experience in promoting business, cultural and professional advancement to those whose decisions will affect the future of our industry.

AIPC is an international association of over 160 of the world's leading convention and exhibition centres.

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