

WORKING TOGETHER

Convention centres and their corporate and association clients need to work together now more than ever to overcome the current challenges faced by the meetings industry. Rod Cameron, director of programming and international development for AIPC, looks at areas where a combined effort is needed most



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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 fulfill the expectations of their respective communities, not just in terms of event revenues, but for the role they play in community and economic development.

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. Here are some of the concerns 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). 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: 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, and 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.

Measuring a carbon footprint: 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 are threatening enough on their own, but when combined with economic uncertainty they become even more of a concern.

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.

A shrinking work force: 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 come 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. We should all be looking more

intensely at what it takes to develop 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. 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. It's 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. ●

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A blue rectangular box containing the AIPC logo on the left and descriptive text on the right. The logo consists of the letters 'AIPC' in a stylized, bold, white font. The text to the right of the logo reads: 'AIPC is an international association of 160 of the world's leading convention and exhibition centres around the world. Its mission is to support, encourage and recognise excellence in convention centre operation and management and it supports this mission with activities designed to assist members in improving their level of management expertise in such areas as operations, finance, technology, staff development, marketing, client relations and environment. It is based in Brussels, Belgium.'