

Getting sustainability into perspective

by Rod Cameron



As with the old pendulum example, issues have a way of running to excess before they come back to something that represents a logical balance between the idealistic and the realistic. For some years, the green movement has been on an upswing and while most people have now adopted a reasonable level of expectation about environmental responsibility, there are always those who, for various reasons, want to push the agenda as far as it will go.

In the case of the meetings arena, the odd thing is that there are many of us who are devoting more energy to the green issue than we are to making the arguments about the value of meetings themselves – which is ironic given that this may well result in a drastic effect on our collective future.

Many within our industry have become almost obsessive in their promotion of the green agenda, even to the point where there is now a significant gap between what kinds of facilities and programming can be delivered as well as what most client groups are demanding (or, in an even better test of sincerity, are willing to pay for). To a certain extent, this is a good thing as it demonstrates that we are getting our house in order on an issue where there is a lot of public concern.

The problem is that in many cases, this has been at the expense of advancing our own arguments as to why face-to-face meetings remain an important element in global economic, professional and cultural development – a factor that needs to be balanced against the inevitable effects associated with the travel required to attend those meetings.

About the author

Rod Cameron is the director of programming and international development for AIPC. AIPC is the pre-eminent international association of convention centres, with a mission of encouraging, supporting and recognising excellence in centre management. For more information, please contact marianne.de.raay@aipc.org or visit www.aipc.org.

That travel factor is never going to go away however green we make our events and facilities. So maybe it's time for us to recognise that the only meeting that has no environmental impact at all is the one that doesn't take place – not exactly a great business development strategy. Instead, concentrate a bit more on balancing the discussion about why a certain amount of impact is a small price to pay for what meetings accomplish and the advances they bring about for the global community.

This doesn't mean abandoning our support for sustainability. That's pretty much built into everyone's programme these days and will remain a key element for the foreseeable future. But if anyone should be promoting the idea of getting the green issue into some kind of perspective, it should be us.

There are and will continue to be lots of people (and self-interests) promoting the green agenda. So shouldn't we be devoting a bit more time to promoting our own?

The fact is, there are a whole host of reasons why conventions, and convention centres in particular, will always be driven to higher standards of sustainability, and these are only partly related to the market. Centres are overwhelmingly government owned and community sensitive, which means that they are likely to be among the first to adopt sustainability measures regardless of what the market demands. Increasingly, they are also adopting standards that demonstrate their environmental qualities as part of building codes, community standards and a host of emerging formal certifications.

The bottom line is that even the most zealous among us need not worry that our sector is going to become environmentally regressive any time soon since we have, as both a society and an industry, already gone way beyond that, and will inevitably continue to improve in the years ahead. Something better to worry about is the fact that as the green arguments reach fever pitch in some quarters, it is our industry that will suffer. In fact, there is now a growing list of powerful organisations calling for significant,

defined reductions in business travel and meetings participation – music to the ears of those engaged in providing technological alternatives and bound to resonate as well with governments and corporations eager for an excuse to reduce travel-related spending. What is fascinating is that we may have brought this on, at least in part, by our own actions, focusing on the green agenda to the near-exclusion of pretty much everything else. We might instead be arguing about the value and importance of the events that make up our industry.

And it's not as though there aren't some pretty good arguments. Meetings and conventions are typically where the most significant global exchanges take place, leading to everything from medical and technical advancements to cultural enhancement and the creation of a better understanding and interaction among different groups worldwide. Does anyone really think that the world will become a better place if we all stay at home and communicate via the Internet? Are we really prepared to continue our push for even more aggressive environmental measures when the inevitable result is that fewer people will be able, or even want, to travel to engage with their colleagues around the world?

Environmental standards are not going to move backwards. The point has been made, and we are all beyond waving placards and into the stage where responsibility and sustainability are simply expectations that must and will be satisfied.

So, let's start applying ourselves more effectively to the other side of the argument, that the green agenda needs to be tempered by the realisation that life can't simply come to a halt because that's the most 'sustainable' thing to do, and that we need to accept the fact that there are intelligent trade-offs to be made if we are going to continue our use of face-to-face encounters to progress as a society. Because if we, as an industry, don't make that argument, it's hard to imagine who else will. **35**