

Time to polish our image

by Rod Cameron



As we look back over a challenging year, many in the meetings industry are sifting through the ashes for lessons that can be profitably applied to a future that will inevitably include similar downturns. One of the most important of those lessons was the impact we saw on our image – an unprecedented questioning of the value that meetings

and conventions deliver in the face of economic turmoil. By early 2009, things had reached the point where surveys were showing high levels of concern about industry image, not only among planners but also the corporations that made up much of the meetings business base.

And while these impacts were certainly most intense in the US – where audiences were being treated to nightly exposés of TV camera crews scouring resort properties in an effort to track down corporations who were daring to hold meetings – they clearly demonstrated a vulnerability that could appear anywhere in the world given similar conditions.

Governments were not our friends in this process. Not only did many question legitimate meetings and incentive-related business activity, particularly where public money was involved, but at the same time cancelled their own meetings and related travel as cost-saving measures, which only served to reinforce that they placed little value on these kinds of activities.

The biggest eye-opener for most of us was the discovery that governments really had no idea what meetings do in terms of driving economic and professional development – and as a result, couldn't see what kind of a role they could and should be playing in their own number one priority, which was economic recovery. At a time when we should have been recognised as a key element in stimulating the economy, we were instead being seen in many quarters as a part of the problem – at best, a dispensable expense and at worst, an example of the kind of corporate excess that created the economic problems in the first place.

What happened and what should we be doing about it?

For a very long time, we took it for granted that everyone saw meetings and conventions as good things. They

brought people together. They advanced business and research. They generated revenue. They were green, compared with many other industry activities. How could anyone argue with this? However, because of this complacency, we neglected to prepare the arguments and develop the data that could respond to even the most superficial challenge. As a result, when the challenge came, we simply weren't prepared to respond in any effective way. We didn't have the messages; we didn't have the data to back them up and we didn't have the vehicles in place to deliver them effectively, so we were essentially sitting ducks for what followed.

And it's not as though the signs weren't there. The introduction of new codes governing investment by pharmaceuticals in medical meetings signalled the beginning of a more serious approach to rationalising what meetings were all about.

Government bailouts of corporations only increased the scrutiny applied to this question, and there was even an element of sustainability mixed in, with questions raised around the carbon footprint associated with business-related travel. Yet at the same time, many of us were still relying on leisure messaging to sell our products, reinforcing the notion that they were primarily about having a good time.

Where do we go from here?

Do we just hope that things will return to 'normal' when the economy recovers or is it time to recognise that we need an active and ongoing programme to promote a better understanding of the meetings industry and the value meetings deliver?

If it's the latter, there are a number of things that need to be addressed:

1. We need to emphasise the role that meetings play in economic, professional and educational development and downplay the leisure aspect. There has never been a greater opportunity for

the industry as the world continues to look at the course recovery will take, and to search for any activities that can promise support in this regard. However, to achieve this we need to be taken more seriously.

2. We need to enhance both the content and perceived value of meetings to give planners and delegates the arguments they need to justify their investment of time and resources. In particular, we need to put more emphasis on the ability to demonstrate measurable outcomes that will resonate with increasing corporate concerns around ROI.
3. We have to create new arguments to balance concerns around sustainability. The fact is that while we may have made huge advances in green meetings and facilities, the only entirely 'sustainable' meetings are those that don't actually happen. There needs to be a greater cost/benefit argument introduced to the discussion to show how the benefits outweigh the inevitable impacts. If we don't do this, it's hard to imagine who will.

4. We need to make the effort to deliver these messages at a local level where they have a greater impact and reality. That means that we all have a role to play in delivering the message and can't rely on that being done on a national or international stage by somebody else.

meetings in the eyes of those who need to see them as engines for business and professional progress. If this past year has demonstrated anything, it is how resilient our industry is in a time of economic chaos. Now it's time to get that message – along with a broader appreciation of

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It also means we need to create better measurement tools that actually work at that local level rather than simply focusing on 'the big number'.

At the same time, it means that we need to move beyond hospitality metrics and start figuring out how to attach demonstrable value to meetings outcomes. The fact is, nobody holds a meeting to fill hotel rooms – that's simply a by-product – and yet most of our current industry measures relate to what delegates spend, not what they actually accomplish. This trivialises

their value – out to the communities and governments whose support we need to survive and grow over the long term.

At the same time, we need to recognise that as an industry, we're all in this together and have a shared responsibility to address if we are going to get any serious results.

It won't be easy, and it won't be quick. But if we don't make a start now, we'll be in the same position when we hit the next recession, and the same kinds of questions are raised again. **35**



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