

Meetings make-over

Rod Cameron, director of programming and international development for AIPC says it's time for the meetings industry to polish its image

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. 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 demonstrated clearly 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, but at the same time cancelled their own meetings and related travel as cost-saving measures.

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. 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. Further rationalisation followed.

Now is the time to recognise we need an active and ongoing programme to promote a better understanding of the meetings industry and the value meetings deliver.

First, we need to emphasise the role that meetings play in economic, professional and educational development and downplay the leisure aspect.

Second, we need to enhance both the content and perceived value of meetings in order to give planners and delegates the arguments they need to justify their investment of time and resources.

Third, we have to create new arguments to balance concerns around sustainability. The fact is that while we may have made huge advancements in green meetings and facilities, the only entirely sustainable meetings are those that don't actually happen.

Finally, we need to make the effort to deliver these messages at a local level where they have a greater impact and reality. That means 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.



At the same time, it means 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 in order 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 meetings in the eyes of those who need to see them as engines for business and professional progress.

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.

AIPC is an international association of convention centres, with a mission of encouraging, supporting and recognising excellence in centre management. Its programmes are directed toward enhancing the profile and performance of its members, who are purpose-built facilities whose primary purpose is to accommodate and service meetings, conventions, congresses and exhibitions. AIPC is a global network of over 160 leading centres in 53 countries, with the active involvement of more than 650 centre management professionals. For further information please contact marianne.de.raay@aipc.org or visit www.aipc.org

Now is the time to recognise we need an active and ongoing programme to promote a better understanding of the meetings industry and the value meetings deliver