

# Industry challenges are shared by all

by Rod Cameron

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

It is therefore 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.

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.

As the preeminent organisation representing convention and congress centres worldwide, the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC) and its members have been identifying future challenges for the industry through a series of surveys and workshops, the

most recent being at the association's 50<sup>th</sup> annual conference in Singapore.

While this is essentially a convention centre perspective, it is clear that the highest priorities are those issues that will affect centres and clients alike, and can best be addressed with a combined effort.

## Here are some of the concerns it is believed are shared

1. An uncertain economic outlook: It is 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 can damage everyone's interests, affecting both the centres and 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. For example, replacement activities like remote meetings may become more established and prove difficult to reverse, even when economic conditions improve.

2. Sustainability (the other edge of the sword): First there was the concept of environmental impact, defined largely on the basis of pollution and waste management. This then 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 is the significant question of where this path can lead to if taken to an extreme. The fact is that the only



### About the author

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3. Effects on travel arising from increasing concerns about carbon footprints, 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. Factors such as way to eliminate the environmental impacts of a meeting is not to hold it in the first place, and this kind of consideration needs to be balanced against the very real benefits a meeting or convention deliver in terms of economic and social progress.
4. A shrinking workforce: Demographics do not 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 again a concern shared by centres and clients alike: when client organisations such as associations have reduced resources,

the carbon footprint can be cited as a means 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 ensure 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 counterproductive. 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.

5. Alternative communications technologies: Although the benefits of this idea have been denied for years, we cannot and should not count it out yet. While most agree on the fundamental importance of face-to-face encounters,

they often need to look for higher levels of support from centres, and this may be happening at precisely the same time that centres themselves are struggling to maintain qualified staffing levels. In the end, it is in everyone's interests to deliver the best possible event experience to encourage attendance, and to the extent that this requires capable, qualified human resources, we should all be looking more intensely at

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what it takes to develop such skills and how we can compete more effectively with other sectors looking to attract the same people.

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the technology for remote meetings is improving significantly at a time when the challenges to travel are increasing, as outlined above. This, combined with a new generation of delegates raised on the Internet, means that the 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.

Any one of these issues could have a significant impact. It is the combination of them occurring at the same time that could have the greatest impact – the effects of economic conditions. All of these factors are areas that should be of concern not only to suppliers but also to organisers. 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. **35**



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