

# More than just money



President of the International Association of Congress Centres, Barbara Maple, this month weighs up some non-financial benefits of meetings and congresses, in the third in a series of bi-monthly columns from the international industry association, AIPC.

Any discussion of the benefits of the meetings industry tends to focus on their economic impact: how much planners and delegates spend, and how that all translates into the community economy.

In fact, considerable time and energy has been devoted in recent years to the process of developing reliable and consistent estimates of these impacts, as centres are increasingly called upon to demonstrate their value and the return they generate on government investment.

But meetings and conventions are about much more than simply generating visitor spending, and we all too often lose sight of the overwhelming importance of the role they play in business, trade, investment and professional development.

In the end, these non-financial benefits often far outweigh the financial side, and need to be factored into any discussion about what makes this industry worthwhile.

Here are some of the benefits that may be a little less obvious:

## Meetings mean tourists

Meetings and conventions attract many visitors that would otherwise never have chosen to come to that particular destination. Having come for the event, they get to see what the destination has to offer, and the destination gets the chance to sell them on an extended stay. Pre- and post-conference tourism is a well-established phenomenon, and accompanies practically every event to some extent or other.

The general rule is that people who travel the furthest are most likely to combine a meeting with some leisure time, and spend even more money doing it. And, having experienced the destination as part of their meeting experience, delegates are much more likely to return as leisure visitors, often with their family in tow.

## Meetings mean business

Conventions also generate business activity, and provide a focus for those who are interested in business development, new investment and product promotion. That means that a community hosting these kinds of events has an edge on business development and an opportunity to benefit from the presence of high level decision-makers and potential investors right on their doorstep.

Convention centres don't just act as meeting places; they can serve as showcases for local products and investment opportunities, even as they host business leaders as part of their ongoing activities. They also help attract audiences that otherwise couldn't be reached.

A single meeting of influential business executives or technology specialists can do more to promote a city's exposure than years of promotion by economic development officials. Delegates can represent any field that a community may wish to attract, and when they're attending an event with their colleagues, they're often in a much better frame of mind to appreciate what a community has to offer.

## Meetings mean professional development

Large events like conventions are designed to bring the best in any given field together in an environment where information can be shared and progress identified. When this happens, it creates a big boost to local knowledge and skills in any imaginable discipline.

Medical conferences are a great example. When the top researchers and practitioners get together, they're looking at the very latest results and procedures in their respective fields.

They're deciding what advances are most important and which areas are the most promising for the future; in short, everything you'd like the local medical community to have access to.

Now multiply that possibility by any number of different professions, trades or business sectors, and you begin to get the idea of what having meetings, conventions and exhibitions can do to promote the professional skills in a community.

## Meetings improve quality of life

Finally, there's the role that convention centres and the kinds of activities they support play in enhancing the overall quality of life in a community.

In order to survive, a community needs some kind of industrial activity, preferably one that brings in money from outside the local economy. A lot of those industries are less than completely benign, particularly from a community or environmental perspective.

The convention business, on the other hand, does more than simply avoid damaging its host community. It actually thrives on the kind of qualities people typically want around them: things like an attractive environment and cultural attributes, and provides a sound economic reason to support and enhance these qualities to everyone's advantage.

So there's a lot more than just money at stake; and these varied benefits need to be remembered when we think about what the congress industry means to our respective communities.

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