

AIPC Research Creates a Road Map for Industry Advocacy

By Rod Cameron

Anyone today who sees the importance of arguing their case with a public audience dreams of getting their hands on a roadmap – a document that would not only tell them what kind of proposition would be seen as unique and compelling but at the same time identify the type of information that would influence perceptions in a positive direction.

That's certainly the case with the Meetings Industry, where a wide range of interests all share a common objective of building a better appreciation of what we do for our respective communities. And now, courtesy of a recent research study by **AIPC, the International Association of Convention Centres**, we now have exactly that – it only remains to see if we can bring ourselves to use it to advantage.

But first, let's back up to the point of why this matters. We start with the premise that the ongoing goodwill and support of our respective governments and communities are beneficial – if not critical – to the future of our industry. For governments, this means investment in the kinds of facilities and programming required to compete effectively in today's intense market. For communities, think of the required tolerance and welcoming local reception that we are increasingly told makes for a more satisfying and therefore competitive delegate experience.

To do this amongst the competing voices and claims of other sectors that are also seeking this kind of endorsement and investment we need to be able to deliver a unique and compelling proposition – one that will both distinguish us and

capture the imaginations of those who, whether we like it or not, will be making key decisions that will determine our future.

This is of particular importance to address in a time when many communities around the world are expressing their displeasure at one of the key things we do; namely, bring in what are often large numbers of visitors who compete for many of the amenities residents themselves most want. From Barcelona to Amsterdam and from Berlin to any number of other major cities, voices are being raised about how growing influxes of visitors are competing for resources, reshaping the character of their city and generally proving to be an annoying influence, an effect increasingly driven by new disruptors such as AirBNB and its clones that drive such impacts far beyond traditional tourism precincts and into residential neighborhoods where they start to affect everyday life.

But within the visitor category there are distinctions to be made. While there are many who consider the very idea that there are different "grades" of visitor to be inhumane, the fact is that different categories of visitors present very different value propositions. Let's face it; leisure visitors at best bring some local spending, cultural curiosity, and hopefully, a bit of goodwill. Convention and exhibition delegates, on the other hand, while also bringing all of the above (and in the case of spending, on average about 4 times as much) also bring transferrable knowledge, expertise, business opportunities, investment potential, prestige, acquirable talent and access to high-level decision-makers. And if your community can only tolerate so much of an increase in visitor

traffic, why not make a priority out of those that generate the best return and who make the greatest long-term contribution?

If you're in agreement so far, the next question is how to convey the value of that opportunity most effectively. And that takes us back to the AIPC Local Resident's Survey.

Targeting three cities where the growing impacts of visitor traffic are a recognized issue – namely Berlin, Barcelona and Amsterdam, along with a "control" in the form of Sydney, where such issues don't appear to be as strong as yet – residents were asked how they felt about different types of visitors to their cities – and what they got wrong was at least as valuable as where we found agreement.

The highlights of those results were;

> The benefits associated with meetings and convention delegates were distinctly different, with leisure visitors associated almost entirely with spending-based benefits while those participating in meetings and events being seen to contribute to a wide range of other community benefits.

> At the same time, convention / exhibition delegates were significantly less likely to be associated with negative behaviours such as crowding and congestion, theft and vandalism, the environmental burden and disorderly behaviour.

> Respondents were twice as likely to believe that new investment to attract more visitors to their destination should be directed toward the meetings and conventions area rather than leisure tourism.



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That's the good news. But there were also two other findings that clearly demonstrated we have a lot of work to do in order to capitalize on the opportunity for a more positive image;

> The first was that while respondents felt that centers and the events they host created those broader output benefits, very few were clear as to what exactly these were – so there's a lot of work to be done in delivering information that underlines just what events deliver to and leave behind in our communities.

> The second is even more important: with regard to visitor spending, residents of all the surveyed communities had it completely backwards, believing that leisure visitors had higher levels of spending than delegates when in fact most studies have shown that per diem delegate spending is at least 2-300% higher than for other types of visitors.

So now we know what they really think of us – and what kind of information would improve that opinion! What's more, the results were consistent – which in turn means that those in your community likely have the same kinds of predispositions and misconceptions.

That's a huge opportunity to shape a local advocacy program that could really make a difference in how residents – and the governments that represent them – see the work we do on their behalf. In practical terms there are three lessons:

> Do the homework. Make the calculations, document spending, do your economic impact calculation so you have the facts.

> Capture the examples that illustrate the broader benefits; tell the stories that help the community see exactly what an event brings in terms of knowledge, prestige, exposure and, just as important, what it leaves behind.

> Get out there and deliver the message!

If there was ever a question about where the challenges and opportunities lie, this latest research has put that to rest and created a clear roadmap for local advocacy. So what are you waiting for?

Rod Cameron is Executive Director of AIPC and JMIC.

AIPC represents a global network of over 185 leading centres in 59 countries with the active involvement of more than 900 management-level professionals worldwide. It is committed to encouraging and recognizing excellence in convention centre management, based on the diverse experience and expertise of its international representation, and maintains a variety of educational, research, networking and standards programs to achieve this. AIPC also celebrates and promotes the essential role of the international meetings industry in supporting economic, academic and professional development and enhancing global relations amongst highly diverse business and cultural interests.