

Where we go from here (and why we need to go there together)

By Leigh Harry, President, Joint Meetings Industry Council

The global recession had the effect of forcing every industry to revisit its assumptions about the future. The meetings industry was no exception.

We found that while there is comfort to be had from how well our industry responded, there are still plenty of challenges ahead.

A big positive was the overall resiliency in some important business sectors. For example, while corporate business was hit hard in many areas, associations largely continued to meet and maintain attendance levels. This strength shows the underlying importance people attach to face-to-face interaction.

On the other hand, we saw other groups – most notably governments – questioning the value of meetings and targeting them as examples of wasteful spending.

Our industry has always been at the mercy of outside influences, in particular government policy. Governments are big generators of meetings activities and also influence how the private sector sees meetings and conventions through things like tax policy.

They are also the largest single investor in meetings infrastructure.

How government sees our industry matters. Finance and priorities for investment also matter. To have governments invest in us, they need to appreciate what we contribute to the overall economy.

This raises the question of how to approach the development of the industry, and in particular how to address the decision makers.

The industry has traditionally had a low profile – to the extent that many in both government and the business community question whether we are in fact a distinct industry sector at all. Where we are acknowledged, it is usually only as a vehicle to generate incremental visitors. This isn't good enough when cash-strapped governments are assessing investments as a stimulus to economic recovery.

At the heart of the issue is the need to change the image of the industry. It should be seen as a fundamental driver of economic development through its role in creating innovation, knowledge

transfer, professional development and investment. The challenge is to address this in a consistent, co-ordinated and effective way.

First, we need to be able to set aside individual priorities to show we can behave like an integrated industry.

Secondly, we need to maintain consistency in what we say – how we characterise ourselves and the measures we produce to support claims for the value we generate.

We need to ensure we shape our arguments so they resonate with the people we're addressing – those outside the industry.

Finally, we need to ensure our arguments have relevance at a local level. As impressive as the "big" numbers are, they have little meaning at community level.

These are the directions the Joint Meetings Industry is pursuing in the hope there will be support not only from industry associations but everyone with a stake in the future of the industry. We must set aside the differences between the various sectors and focus on what we have in common.



Preparation is key to successful exhibiting

Exhibitions can be one of the most effective methods of marketing. No other medium brings prospects directly to you or provides a chance to target all five of their senses while creating a brand personality for a product.

Here are a few tips on how to gain as much as possible from exhibiting:

- Set specific and measurable goals. This provides a benchmark for measuring success. They can be as wide and varied as "make 10 new appointments", "meet 50 new prospects", "hand out 200 samples/flyers" or "network with 13 top buyers and dealers".
- Keep in mind your objectives when choosing the location, design and activities of your stand. Think of different ways to tailor it to attract your target audience. For example, to attract top-level decision makers, have a few of your own managers on the stand.
- Email prospects and customers before the show to say you'll be there. Most customers will not actively seek this information. Research shows that 83 per cent of successful companies at exhibitions emailed potential visitors before the show.
- Organise PR and advertising in the lead-up to the show. Spread the word as much as possible. Advertising need not be costly – research opportunities in newspapers and magazines and on radio.
- Ensure your staff is informed and enthusiastic. Reiterate your company's objectives. Remember, it is the people who make the stand.



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US associations setting the agenda

I'm just back from one of the most stimulating association meetings I have ever attended, the ASAE International Conference in Washington DC where 130 senior US association executives gave up nearly three days to discuss international issues.

Unlike other US conferences I've attended over the past 12 months, not a moment was spent whinging about the global recession. On the menu instead was a tasty intellectual stir-fry that should provide food for thought for every international association.

These American associations are definitely on the march: building membership; forming global chapters; setting up for-profit offshoots or hiring association management companies to sell their products and services; setting strategies to ensure accreditation and certification programs have global reach; creating models to expand

aggressively into China, India, Brazil and the Middle East; and talking about dealing with competition from European and international associations, from newly emerging Asia-Pacific associations, and even the private sector.

They are finding ways to persuade their US-dominated boards of directors to embrace dramatic change and go global, or even changing their governance to transform into genuinely entities. They are considering the intellectual challenges of providing meaningful leadership in this flat world environment. They are totally aware of the massive opportunities for delivering products and services. Without exception, this crowd is ambitious, assertive, and knowledgeable about global issues.

And, of course, they are planning meetings, lots of meetings, events that will be in direct competition



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with existing international association programs, offering great speakers and incorporating social media components and business opportunities.

The increasing challenge of obtaining visas to attend US events has been one of the biggest stimulators of this fast-growing change in perceptions and action plans.

Are international associations ready for the challenge? Are they even aware of the changes ahead? One thing is certain: our already competitive world is about to get even tougher. 🇺🇸