

Where do we all go from here?

As we enter the New Year, President of the Joint Meetings Industry Council, **Leigh Harry**, says industry unity around strong messages of meetings' value is essential for a healthy future.

The recent global recession had the effect of forcing every industry to revisit its assumptions about the future, and to decide if those assumptions remain relevant going forward. The meetings industry was no exception, and what we found is that while there was also a lot of comfort to be had from how our industry responded to what was one of the biggest financial shake-ups any of us are likely to see, there are still a lot of challenges to be addressed in the years ahead.

One of the biggest positives was the overall resilience we saw in some of our most important business sectors. For example, while corporate business was in many areas hit hard and fast, associations largely continued to meet and maintain attendance at levels that seemed incredible given the extent of financial impacts in the economy. This strength, and the fact that meetings were obviously

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maintaining their relevance to these important groups in the face of huge challenges, demonstrated the underlying importance people attached to face-to-face interactions, and supported the notion that this value wasn't about to be dismissed any time soon.

On the other hand, we saw other groups, including most notably governments in various parts of the world, actively questioning the value of meetings. In extreme cases they were even targeting them as examples of wasteful spending in a time of economic concern. Many corporations were quick to take their cue from this, and looked upon meetings as expendable activities in a time when cost containment was a number one priority.

All of this is made more important by the fact that, whether or not we like to see ourselves in this way, ours is an industry that has always been at the mercy of outside influences, in particular



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government policy. Governments are big generators of meetings activities. They are also a huge influence on how the private sector sees meetings and conventions, through levers like tax policy and the signals these send to corporations. Their immigration and transportation policies can have major impacts on our competitiveness. And they are also by far the largest single investor in meetings facilities – the convention centres without which a country or city is hard pressed to engage in the industry on any kind of a scale.

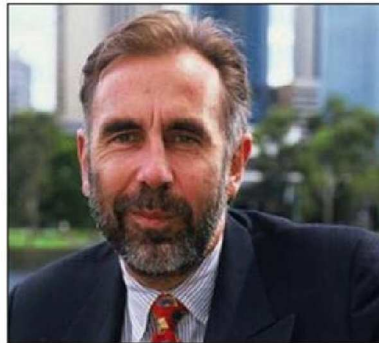
So how governments see us particularly in the context of economic development policy matters a lot. What also matters is the financial position in which they find themselves today, and how they will go about setting priorities for any new investment. And that presents us with a real problem.

Why? Because as an industry that needs ongoing investment and support simply to survive, we are living in a world of heavily indebted governments to whom any kind of investment is going to have to be seen as a matter of absolute necessity. That means that in order to get that investment, we have to be a top priority among a whole host of other competing infrastructure demands, which in turn requires a high level of appreciation for what we contribute to the overall economy. In most parts of the world, that level of appreciation isn't there or is limited to simply the economic impacts arising from delegate spending. The whole idea of a larger contribution by the meetings industry to broader economic development simply doesn't exist among most governments, as was amply demonstrated by their reactions in the midst of the financial crisis.

The industry has traditionally had a very low profile, to the extent that many in both government and the business community would question whether or not we are in fact a distinct industry sector at all. Where we are acknowledged, it is typically within a very narrow definition, typically as a vehicle to generate incremental visitors.

At the heart of the issue is the need to expand the image of the industry from one that exists simply to attract visitors, to one that is seen as a fundamental driver of economic development, and by extension, sustained economic recovery because of the pivotal roles they play in driving innovation, knowledge transfer, professional development and even new investment.

But understanding what those challenges are is only part of what's necessary. The other part is taking action to address them in a consistent, coordinated and effective way – and that's something we haven't historically been very good at as an



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industry. How can we do a better job?

Firstly, we need to be able to set aside our individual priorities and perspectives long enough to demonstrate that we can in fact behave like an industry and react in a coordinated and integrated way when this is called for. The key to doing this is to accept that while we will always have our specific interests and differences of opinion, there is a level at which we can agree on some basic principles about what defines us as an industry and what common beliefs we have on what constitutes our value proposition.

Secondly, we need to recognise and accept the importance of maintaining consistency in what we say; how we characterise ourselves and what measures we produce to support our claims for the value we generate. This is essential to the kind of credibility we need going forward. Nothing undermines that credibility faster than contradictions, and this is always a risk when we have (and will continue to have) so many different organisations taking positions in areas of common concern.

Thirdly, we need to make sure we are shaping our arguments in ways that respond to who's on the receiving end – to make our points in ways that resonate with people outside the industry rather than ourselves. Too often we've carried on a spirited

discussion among ourselves when it is that outside world we need to be addressing and, typically, they speak a very different language. They have a very different set of priorities than we do, such as jobs, community benefits and economic advancement in the broadest possible terms.

And, finally, we have to accept that it is at the local level where the arguments we put forward have to have their greatest relevance – which means we need to make sure we have the figures required to put things into a local rather than global or national context. As impressive as the 'big' numbers are, they have little meaning at the community level which is where the battle for public attention will be won or lost. It also means we need to make it as easy as possible for industry groups to interact at that local level, rather than leaving the job to our national or international organisations.

These are the directions the Joint Meetings Industry Council is pursuing, and it is our hope and expectation that we will be supported in this, not only by our industry associations, but everyone with a stake in the future of the industry. In order to succeed at what is a huge and urgent task, we need to be able to set aside the distinctions we have drawn between different sectors and focus instead on what we have in common, and how we can tell our story most effectively.

It is nothing less than the future of the industry that is at stake, and we will all either succeed or fail based on how effectively we can work together to demonstrate our value.

Leigh Harry is JMIC President.



JOINT MEETINGS INDUSTRY COUNCIL

JMIC members include:

- AIPC** (the International Association of Congress Centres);
- COCAL** (the Latin American Confederation of PCO and Related Companies);
- DMAI** (Destination Marketing Association International);
- ECM** (European Cities Marketing);
- EFAPCO** (the European Federation of Associations of Professional Congress Organisers);
- EVYC** (the European Association of Event Centres);
- IAPCO** (the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers);
- ICCA** (the International Congress and Convention Association);
- MPI** (Meeting Professionals International);
- PCMA** (the Professional Convention Association Management Association);
- SITE** (the Society of Incentive & Travel Executives) and
- UFI** (the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry).