

An interview with Leigh Harry, President of the Joint Meetings Industry Council



Leigh Harry, President of JMIC, Chief Executive, Melbourne Exhibition & Convention Centre and President of ICCA

Briefing: You spoke at this year's IMEX Opening Ceremony about the need for the meetings industry to be 'better prepared' should there be another PR crisis in the future. What did you mean?

The most recent "image crisis" was a direct result of our industry being seen by many as more closely related to leisure than economic and professional development. This is a real problem if we want to be taken seriously and seen as a priority for future government planning. But because the impact varied considerably in different parts of the world, there are many who don't see it as an issue. The point is that if it happened in some areas, it could just as easily happen anywhere under similar conditions.

As an industry we simply weren't prepared to deal with criticism and that made us unnecessarily vulnerable. But it's not just that we need to be better at defending ourselves – it's that we're missing a huge opportunity to be seen as an important part of the overall economic development process – in being taken seriously by the key decision makers. We've undersold our role as economic generators.

To address this, we need three things. First to shape our arguments about why the industry has value and what it accomplishes in terms of the larger economy. Second, we need better data to back up those assertions. Finally, we need to establish better, ongoing communications with our respective communities and governments so we have a better base of understanding.

Briefing: What are the biggest challenges we face in doing this?

Well, they are largely of our own making. We operate with many different organisations and sectors, each competing to some extent, and have few vehicles for reaching consensus. This weakens overall impact and our ability to speak with one voice when required.

Also, we have a tendency to want to deal with issues at a high level when most of the real action takes place at a regional or community level. We need to concentrate efforts on creating tools that will help individual industry members tell their story more effectively in their own countries and communities.

Finally, we are challenged by the fact that our greatest value is difficult to measure – and that few in the industry even try to calculate. That is, what meetings actually accomplish such as professional and technical advancement, new investment, innovation and knowledge transfer. These are the real reasons meetings and conventions take place, and should be the cornerstone of our arguments.

Briefing: Australian venues and suppliers always put on a very strong showing in the IMEX Awards. Knowing what you do about the Australian meetings industry, what makes the country such a strong contender?

Australians have always had a good sense of what it takes to engage with the rest of the world and a willingness to do what it takes to work together in order to achieve this. At the same time, we have often created our own institutions rather than just

"engage in the rest of the world"

adopting those that exist in other parts of the world. Together, these generate a lot of innovation. For us, it's doing what's needed to be competitive, but if it attracts attention and recognition, that's not such a bad thing either!

Briefing: Can you tell us a little about JMIC's plans for the coming year?

JMIC's initial priority was to create a consistent and independent Council management process as a basis for representing industry interests in an even-handed way. With this defined we now have a series of programme elements, each of which will be developed as resources allow.

First, we want to facilitate interactions amongst industry organisations. The JMIC web site will be a primary vehicle for this second information exchange.

Second, we will also continue to build industry profile by developing messaging, materials and strategies for local advocacy and making these widely available to support local action. We have now published a comprehensive guide to community and government relations plus other materials which will again be available via the website.

Third, we are working to create a united "voice" for the industry, initially through work with the trade media. We are also starting to advance industry measurement tools with initial emphasis on helping individual destinations and regions to calculate their own impacts, and we are looking to develop a value measurement for meetings outcomes. Both will be tough, but are essential for our industry's story to be told in a credible way.

Finally, we will convene industry-wide meetings to develop some consensus around key issues and refine the messages we need to communicate. Our objective here is to achieve agreement at a high level. This kind of forum has not existed before but is essential in building our credibility.

"do what it takes to work together"

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