

# NO TIME FOR APATHY

Even with the global economy picking up, Joint Meetings Industry Council president Leigh Harry says now is not the time for professionals to sit back and relax.

With some improvement evident in the global economy, the meetings industry is again demonstrating its resiliency and adaptability with corresponding signs of recovery on many fronts. But that may just make this the most dangerous of times for industry advocacy, which is still a desperate need in many parts of the world. There is a natural tendency to respond to the first bit of positive news with a sigh of relief and focus on the business at hand while abandoning the serious efforts needed to enhance industry profile and appreciation. Given what has happened to us in the past few years that would be a mistake.

The fact that meetings and conventions came into disrepute so quickly in the face of recession in many parts of the world clearly demonstrated that we have an image problem – and that it is one that could easily recur under similar circumstances in the future.

In fact, there are strong signs that the kinds of pressures meetings and conventions came under during the recession are still playing out on several fronts. Many governments, most notably those in the US and the UK, have recently announced major cuts in their meeting activities and accompanying restrictions in business travel. Meanwhile, there are ongoing calls for reduction in meeting activities in the name of sustainability, and these calls are regularly joined by governments and NGOs.

And let's not forget the growing role of alternatives driven by improvements in communications technology. The use of web-based activities, such as webinars, webcasting and other forms of remote meetings, have gained a lot of traction, and while they may have helped enhance many meetings, they may in time provide more competition to face-to-face events.

Taken together, these factors can have a dangerous synergy. Governments and corporations looking for cost savings can reduce meetings-related travel in the name of sustainability — and the technology to help them do so is improving every day. In the absence of strong arguments about the value of meetings, there is little to stop such a trend.



All these are ongoing demonstrations of the fact that there is still a lack of appreciation for the fundamental role that meetings, conventions, exhibitions and all other related activities that make up our industry play in overall economic growth and development. They suggest that many groups still see us as a diversion or a form of entertainment rather than a key element in economic recovery, and that we have a long way to go in changing that impression.

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**GROUPS STILL SEE US  
AS A DIVERSION RATHER  
THAN A KEY ELEMENT IN  
ECONOMIC RECOVERY**

On the positive side, a time of recovery is the best possible time to tell our story because we have a much more powerful story to tell. When we can point to business growth and expansion instead of declines we are much better placed to show why our sector has value – and why it generates value for other parts of the economy. However, this is precisely the time when we are least likely to devote time to communications, simply because it feels like the pressure has subsided.

Fortunately, efforts are being made by industry organisations which will help keep the momentum going, such as the 'Face Time' campaign mounted by industry players in the US and a strong government relations initiative now unfolding in the UK. There are also new research and evaluation programmes underway in an effort to provide a unified approach to measuring both the economic and outcome values of the industry. These were a result of the concerns we all felt when prospects were at their worst, and will hopefully carry on into the future.

But like all communications activities, the best results are achieved on a local basis where what we as an industry accomplish is felt most directly. Measures of jobs, spending, social benefits and professional advancement are at their strongest when people see that they are being delivered right in their own backyards, and that is why we all have a role to play in the overall communications effort.

JMIC — the Joint Meetings Industry Council — is continuing to support such an initiative by developing materials, messages and strategies that can be applied at the local level. It is also working to pull together industry-wide research in a form that is more directly usable by anyone who has an argument to make with their own communities and governments. And it is working to encourage a greater exchange among the wide variety of organisations and interests that make up our very diverse industry.

Now is the time to make this kind of effort because unless we do, we won't be any better prepared that we were the last time to address industry criticism.