



LOOKING FORWARD

Leigh Harry, president of the Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC), considers the global recession and asks 'Where do we go from here and why we need to go there together?'



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 we found that while there was comfort from how our industry responded to what was one of the biggest financial shake-ups any of us is likely to see, there are still a lot of challenges to be addressed in the years ahead.

One of the biggest positive outcomes was the overall resilience we saw in some of our most important business sectors. For example, while corporate business was hit hard and fast in many areas, associations largely continued to meet and maintain attendance at levels that seemed incredible given the extent of financial impact in the surrounding economy.

This strength – and the fact that meetings were obviously maintaining their relevance to these important groups in the face of huge challenges – demonstrated the underlying importance people attach to face-to-face interactions, and supported the notion that this value wasn't about to be dismissed anytime soon.

On the other hand, we saw some groups – including most notably

governments in various parts of the world – actively questioning the value of meetings and, in extreme cases, even targeting them as examples of wasteful spending in a time of economic concern. Many corporations were quick to pick up their cue from this, and look to 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 government policy. Governments are big generators of meeting activities. They are also a huge influence on how the private sector sees meetings and conventions, through things 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 single largest investor in meetings facilities through 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 amongst 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. The whole idea of a larger contribution by the meetings industry to broader economic development simply doesn't exist amongst most governments.

Which brings us back to the question of how we approach the future development of the industry – and in particular, how we need to address those whose decisions will have a huge impact on our ability to compete and grow as a part of the global economy.

In this respect, we have a real problem. 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 – and this is simply not good enough when cash-strapped governments everywhere are carefully weighing every investment against the role it can play in stimulating overall economic recovery. As many economists believe that current financial constraints are likely to be around for a decade or even more, we clearly need to make some progress on our image as part of how we move the industry forward.

The process of raising profile and building a better and broader appreciation of what any industry does is not a quick or an easy one. But the one thing we can guarantee is that unless we make a

start and build a sustained effort to achieve this we can have little reason to think we're going to effect any change. 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 it plays 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 actions to address them in a consistent, coordinated and effective way – and that's something we haven't historically been very good at as an industry.

So how can we do a better job in the future?

First, 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.

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 has never been easy in an industry made up of so many different sectors – but is essential to the kind of credibility we need going forward.

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 amongst ourselves when it is that outside world we need to be addressing – and typically, they speak a very different language and have their own 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 national or global 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 JMIC 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.

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