



# JOINT MEETINGS INDUSTRY COUNCIL

October 2008

## Profile and Power – Are We Getting There?

After many years of acting primarily as a vehicle for facilitating information exchange amongst the various associations active in the meetings and conventions area, the members of JMIC – the Joint Meetings Industry Council - came to the conclusion that it was time for them to take a more active role in industry affairs. The objective that was identified early in this discussion related to the need for the industry to have a greater influence over decisions affecting the future of the industry – in other words, more engagement with government and community decision makers.

At the same time, the primary problem was also identified – and that was the fact that few people outside of the industry itself even saw it as a distinct sector, or had any real idea what it did, let alone how it contributed to the overall economic picture.

For this reason, the initial objective for JMIC's new initiative quickly became to raise the profile of the industry along with a greater appreciation for its value, including the role it plays in supporting global professional, business and overall economic development. It was a pretty ambitious goal – particularly in the absence of any real structure or funding. However, the strategy that developed – to support the efforts of local industry organizations and communities address their own, immediate opportunities while creating an overall industry “umbrella” to link these efforts together was seen as both effective and achievable.

The basic idea was that JMIC would commission the development of communications materials such as a list of key messages, a “how-to” guidebook to community and government relations and template resources such as advertisements, articles and presentations that could be adapted to meet local needs. Member associations would then undertake to distribute these, as well as to encourage their use through conference sessions and their own internal communications. At the overall industry level, an effort would be made to generate awareness and recognition for individual efforts as a means to encourage others to get involved.



## JOINT MEETINGS INDUSTRY COUNCIL

One of the advantages seen to this approach – apart from the obvious fact that it could be developed without any ongoing support from a central organization – was that the primary activities would be supported and controlled by those who stood to benefit the most from their success. As most of the issues, opportunities and challenges associated with the industry are local ones, it follows that local industry members are not only those in the best possible position to access community decision makers but will also be the primary beneficiaries of a successful program.

So how has it all gone? Like any program that relies on a decentralized, “grassroots” delivery model, the problem is that you never know the exact extent of your effects. However, the evidence like regular announcements of new industry profile events, the translation of program materials into different languages and the frequency with which this topic has been appearing in association meeting agendas demonstrates that things are indeed happening and that if anything, momentum is growing.

So what kinds of actions are resulting? It’s a long list, and one that illustrates the diversity of activities that can all play a role in achieving the desired end of a better understood, better appreciated and, ultimately, better supported industry.

By definition, the first, and most obvious results are those associated with industry profile, the most evident examples of this being events like the “Industry Weeks” that have proliferated in recent years. These kinds of events are all about combining a series of profile and educational activities into a single period in order for them to have as much impact on community awareness as possible.

One of the oldest and best developed examples of such an event is the UK version, which began in 19XX and now has significant profile in that country. However, more such events are appearing regularly in places ranging from Belgium to Sweden, and from Denmark to Canada. Programs typically include a number of measures to reach out to local audiences, explain what the industry is and does, and reinforce the many ways in which the community benefits. However, they also serve as opportunities to not only engage the broad community but also to target government decision makers who are made more responsive by the higher level of public interest generated by other activities.

But these are only the most visible components. Equally important are those that work behind the scenes to create the resources needed to make the industry story more effective. A good example in this regard is the major effort that has been made on a number of fronts recently to develop solid, defensible and comprehensive estimates of the economic benefits generated by the meetings, conventions and exhibitions that make up the bulk of industry activity.



## JOINT MEETINGS INDUSTRY COUNCIL

It goes without saying that you can only create a good sense of value if you have a way to measure that value. But for many years, no such measures existed, and those that did were often buried in other data, such as that associated with leisure tourism. To clarify the contributions of the meetings sector meant having good models that could draw out the specific benefits associated with this sector and make them available for comparison with other business areas, and this is now happening on many fronts, from individual facilities and communities through broader international frameworks that can help make information more comparable.

Another area where the benefits are showing up is in the development of new relationships within the industry itself. At a local level, events like the meetings weeks typically precipitate a working group that brings together various industry representatives in ways that might otherwise not happen.

In crafting the events, as well as the messaging that accompanies them, everyone involved is forced to come to a better understanding of each others concerns and priorities, as well as a better sense of what it will take to effect better long term cooperation. In the absence of the kind of overall industry organization that many other industries have, this is often as close as it gets to having these different component groups actually sounding and behaving like an industry.

Another accomplishment has been the advancement of new relationships in the broader community. By targeting business and academic groups with messages designed to communicate how meetings and conventions can support their professional and business objectives, local groups have been able to forge new alliances that can not only help get new meetings business for their community but at the same time recruit supporters that they can call upon the next time

Finally there have been increasing examples of what is really the ultimate success measure – the development of new structures that actually reflects a recognition that the meetings industry is a distinct area of enterprise which needs to be taken into consideration as such by those who set government policy. While a lot fewer in number, these kinds of examples are the ultimate encouragement that all the profile building can actually lead to structural changes that will secure the future of the industry and those working within it.

On a national or regional scale, developments like the Conventions Australia and Conventions British Columbia have provided evidence that the industry can come to be seen and addressed on its own terms. But similar changes are happening at a local level as well as individual communities come to understand what the industry represents and what is required to ensure its success in an increasingly competitive market.



## JOINT MEETINGS INDUSTRY COUNCIL

In order to capitalize on all these activities, JMIC also needed to be able to put them to work in broader industry forums so that they could serve as examples for others to follow. At the same time, there was a need and a desire to recognize the achievements of those whose work had advanced the profile of the industry in order to provide encouragement to the achievers and inspiration to others. There are two good examples of how this is happening today;

The first is the “Profile and Power Award” which was created to annually recognize an individual or organization that had made an exemplary contribution in this regard, and the various nominees and winners for this award since its inception in 2005 illustrate the full spectrum of the activities described above. The inaugural award was made to Martin Lewis of CAT Publications for their pioneering work in the UK Meetings Week, and this was followed the next year by the organizers of a similar program in Belgium. However, the third award was made to Conventions British Columbia, which reflected the role that a different kind of industry structure could play in advancing the same overall goals of better industry recognition and awareness.

The second example of where individual efforts were given international prominence was the Politician’s Forum held annually at IMEX. In this case, a vehicle was created for individual local politicians with an interest or investment in the industry to come together with both industry representatives and each other to discuss issues of common interest or concern. There was an obvious benefit to such an event in the way that it enabled increased interaction amongst the two groups. However, by elevating local issues to an international forum, it also served to demonstrate the global significance and interrelatedness of the industry in a much more effective way that would otherwise be possible, and to reinforce the kinds of discussions taking place at a local level.

The job JMIC started with the “Profile and Power” program has only begun, and there is a long way to go before our industry can start to lay claim to the kind of awareness and understanding that many other sectors take for granted. But considering it has to date been a product of nothing more than broad industry encouragement, with the real work being done by local community groups, the successes to date have at a minimum demonstrated the importance of such efforts and the potential for a more concerted effort in the future.



## JOINT MEETINGS INDUSTRY COUNCIL

Increasingly, global issues are demanding a coordinated response, and any industry that cannot define itself and state its position is simply going to be left out of the process. As an industry that straddles borders and links continents, ours is one that cannot afford to let that happen. The fact that JMIC has grown in membership to the extent that it now includes most major industry associations is testament to a broad recognition of this reality. The challenge now will be to put all the lessons learned in these early stages of growing industry profile to work in ensuring that we achieve the required degree of control over our future.