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THE VOICE OF JMIC

The Power of Stories

In the process of an intensive review of industry research, data and strategic communications issues taking place at the JMIC conference in Paris, an interesting consensus emerged. The conclusion: that the most powerful way to communicate the real impact of meetings, conventions and exhibitions may in fact be to simply provide good, compelling stories about how these kinds of events drive outcomes that benefit everyone.

Words Rod Cameron, Executive Director, JMIC

This is more of a departure than it may seem. For many years we've played the numbers game, using a range of measurements from delegate spending and economic impacts to hotel room nights and incremental tax revenues. But in a world where pretty much everyone is constantly bombarded with big figures, it is the individual examples of how a specific gathering brought about professional advancements and positive change that seem to best capture people's imaginations and demonstrate the real value of these events.

There's no question the numbers are important. But when it comes to illustrating what these events actually do in terms of delivering broadly desirable outcomes – everything from advancing organizational and societal objectives, driving economic and academic progress and even profiling a destination in the way locals most want it to be seen – it is the specific examples that really seem to deliver the goods.

On reflection, it's not hard to see why. All those numbers have little emotional quality, and as emotional creatures, we respond best to messages we can relate to terms of our own concerns and interests. At the same time, there is a lot more flexibility to be had from being able to identify and document a wider range of beneficial outcomes than simply the financial ones, particularly when the latter include everything from innovation and knowledge transfer to new investment and academic advancements.

This realization has big implications for how we handle the value conversation from here on. There is today a need to focus on well-documented and creatively delivered case studies that can not only express the value of specific event achievements but at the same time imply what benefits are likely to be achieved by similar events in other subject areas.

This is particularly important when we realize that two of our most important audiences are communities and elected officials. As mentioned, the former typically most want to relate things in terms of their own interests – so things like improved medical practices, inward investment, new job opportunities and overall economic prospects really resonate.

Politicians, on the other hand, can best relate to the ways in which events support their policy agendas, raise profile and generate non-resident tax revenues that help take the pressure off of locals. At the same time, they know only too well the power of storytelling, as it is an important element of their own strategies – a way of demonstrating understanding and personal affinity with the electorate.

But that doesn't mean there isn't some discipline required. In order to be credible, event accomplishments must be well researched and documented rather than just trotted out as anecdotes. And that's where there's a lot more work to be done.

Many suppliers and organizers aren't even clear on what specific outcomes they expect from the events they support, let alone how to measure the extent to which those are actually delivered. But in a world where accountability is increasingly required in return for the investment of time and resources that successful events demand, the ability to measure these kinds of factors more precisely is now more of an expectation than an option.

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