



**COMMENTARY** March 30<sup>th</sup> 2020

## In The Thick of It: Preparing for Recovery

Rod Cameron | Executive Director, Joint Meetings Industry Council

The problem with writing anything about the global COVID-19 pandemic at the moment is that by the time you're finished it's likely to already be at least partly out of date. But that doesn't mean there are not things we can still be doing, or that we can't continue to plan and to prepare for the eventual recovery to follow.

At the time of writing this, international travel has all but shut down (along with whole cities and regions) and the entire focus world-wide is on containing, reducing and mitigating the impacts of the outbreak. This is as it should be, and we must be as supportive of that objective as we possibly can, regardless of the economic impacts that we know will inevitably result.

Right now it's all about health and safety – of our staff, our clients, our suppliers and our guests. The time will come when we need to start focusing again on relocating and pursuing new business, but that comes later – it's only after job number one has produced the necessary results that we can move on to encourage re-engagement. To do anything else is the height of irresponsibility, and would be seen that way.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be looking ahead. The crisis will pass, however long that takes, and as always, our industry will be a critical element in responding to the economic dislocations that will have taken place in the interim. That means we should now be thinking about what comes after.

Here are some thoughts in that regard;

First, we will need more than ever before to be able to demonstrate safe environments for participants. However complete the eventual containment will be, there will still be residual concerns as people will have become sensitized in this respect as never before. That means that all of the practices and protocols put in place during the pandemic should be considered for longer-term application – imbedded in visible, ongoing policies and practices in ways that demonstrate we've learned from the experience and are even better prepared should something similar happen again.

Secondly, we need to be fully aware of government policies and programs not just around pandemic management but about things like the financial support measures being put in place to help mitigate the huge impacts that can be expected in the global economy. Many of those impacts will be felt amongst our own membership – this is, after all, an industry of many independent (and hence vulnerable) companies often operating with slim margins and high overhead – and it is absolutely certain that at least some and perhaps many will be impacted. By playing a role in understanding and communicating some of the available support options we will be providing a much needed service – but in fact, helping ourselves as well since these companies are often key elements in our product.

Third, we need to be anticipating and preparing for supporting events with their own issues. This is particularly true of the industry supply chain where – as mentioned above – many of the support services and resources we have come to take for granted will themselves be challenged. But it's also true of event owners and organizers; with virtually all major events having been cancelled or at the least severely dislocated, many will have lost the revenues on which they depend for their survival and others will have incurred non-recoverable expenses. Add to that the uncertainties associated with how long it will take for participation to return and it is easy to imagine why they will be looking for help through the recovery process.

Finally – and getting back to our own future challenges – we need to do an even better job of emphasizing our critical role as a vehicle for economic recovery and restoration. We all know what meetings, conventions and exhibitions mean in terms of driving business and professional advancements – but this often tends to get buried in the flurry of other actions that will be taken for the same purpose. The events we develop and host as an industry are essential to the interactions that will get the economy back on track – and should be a priority for government policy and support. But as always, that will only happen if we make that point ourselves, repeatedly and effectively, in every forum that arises as governments struggle with the challenge of putting things back together and re-creating confidence in systems that will have been badly shaken.

Working together and communicating freely is our best chance for weathering both the current crisis and the challenges to follow. Let's ensure that is the top priority for all of us.