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ROD CAMERON

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All visitors aren't equal!

AIPC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **ROD CAMERON** UNDERLINES THE VALUE OF MEETINGS GROUPS



Rod Cameron

AIPC represents a global network of over 185 leading centres in 60 countries with the active involvement of more than 900 management-level professionals worldwide

With many destinations feeling increasing pressures and even community backlash from growing numbers of visitors, particularly as these are driven further into traditional residential areas courtesy of accommodation sharing vehicles like Airbnb, it's time to take a step back and critically re-assess the kinds of returns generated by various visitors that would justify these impacts.

Pious pronouncements aside, all visitors are not equal – and the sooner we come to grips with that reality the easier it becomes to make intelligent decisions about which groups are most worth accepting and pursuing. And by almost all measures, the benefits and legacies derived from participants in meetings, conventions and exhibitions far outweigh those of the average leisure visitor, for a number of easily demonstrated reasons.

The first arises from the very purpose of the visit, which in the case of the latter group is invariably related to professional, academic or economic advancement, some of which always rubs off on the host community. A major medical event leaves behind a legacy of awareness, new techniques and specialised knowledge accessible to local practitioners; a business event offers an opportunity for profiling the destination and its investment opportunities and attracting new talent, while an academic event creates important opportunities for knowledge transfer, new networks and exposure for local research. In every case there is a residual benefit to the host that goes far

beyond what might be expected from someone just there to take in the sights.

Second, even the most basic measure – the spending-based economic impact derived from a visitor – weighs heavily in favour of the delegate, for two reasons.

The average daily spend by an event participant generally far exceeds that of a leisure visitor, and not just because of the demographics: such a visitor is far more likely to be financially supported to attend and thus able to afford higher level accommodation as well as devote more to personal spending. But it doesn't end there. Each delegate also creates an additional requirement for organisers and an attraction for related groups like exhibitors, sponsors and supporters, all of whom bring incremental spending that is a direct consequence of that delegate attending in the first place.

Third, it is important to realise that in many cases a delegate represents an entirely new market opportunity – the primary purpose of their visit is to attend their event, which means they would otherwise not necessarily have come to that destination at all. Having come for the meeting, many subsequently return for a repeat visit, perhaps with family in tow.

Engagers

Finally, in a time when the “creep” of tourists from established visitor precincts into residential areas can be a source of local friction, delegates are far more likely to stay in areas associated with commercial accommodation than to avail themselves of shared alternatives. Again, this is partly a

result of the fact that these are people more likely to be supported in their expenses and less likely to need to search for less expensive alternatives. But it is also a result of their need to be close to the facilities where events are taking place – like a convention centre or hotel venue – which are most likely to be in commercial or visitor precincts designed to manage such groups with a minimum of disruption.

This is not to say that these incremental benefits come at the expense of more typical visitor spending – event participants are every bit as likely to engage in other leisure activities like restaurant dining, shopping and visiting attractions as are their leisure counterparts. In fact, they are in many respects even more likely to do so as a result of activities organised in association with the event that expose the destination in addition to the less structured time they have available to explore on their own.

These are all factors we need to be thinking about as elements of the discussions we have with our communities and governments. At a time when many interests are competing for attention and resources from both, and when decision-makers are having to make tough choices, they are powerful arguments as to why what we do serves the broadest range of community interests – and why our audiences should be seen as the highest priorities for visitor-related investment. ■

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