

A Better Image Equals a Better Future

By Rod Cameron

AIPC recently distributed to its members copies of a new publication developed in cooperation with the Joint Meetings Industry Council entitled “**Speak Up**”. As the title suggests it was prepared to encourage members of the industry to take the initiative to communicate the value of our industry more aggressively, whether to local governments and communities or simply colleagues and business associates.

Nowhere is this message more appropriate than to convention centres, which have a huge stake in the economic life of their respective communities and are in many cases owned or heavily invested in by local government. For that reason, we also distributed copies of a companion piece “**A Meetings Industry Guide to Community and Government Relations**” which gets into the specifics of the kinds of actions that can be taken and how best to go about this.

To the obvious question: *why now?* there is an equally obvious answer: **because ongoing global economic concerns have created an atmosphere where there is not just an opportunity but an obligation to tell our economic story more effectively.** Our communities are most often the primary investors in centres around the world, and they need to know that their investment is producing a good return. From a convention centre perspective, it is also a good strategy to better communicate their broader values to the community in order to ensure ongoing support and investment for the future, particularly in

a time when conventional revenues may be harder to achieve.

Usually the biggest challenge to a more aggressive communications initiative is just getting going – it’s another task in the middle of what is already usually a heavy workload. But it doesn’t have to happen all at once.

Here are ten project ideas that you could carry out in the coming months as a way of starting a more effective communications initiative in your own city;

1 | Carry out an economic impact assessment:

We all know that the economic legacy is the greatest value of an event – but do you have the figures to show it? An economic impact assessment can add an “edge” to your estimates and make them more credible and even newsworthy.

2 | Define your “value proposition” as a centre in terms of your unique community values:

The value of events goes beyond just their economic impact and include everything from new knowledge and insights to specific professional development opportunities. However, these have the greatest impact when they can be seen to relate directly to local issues. By relating selected events taking place in your centre to priority local concerns (jobs, health, education) you can make a compelling story as to how the centre is advancing community interests.

3 | Prepare a briefing for local government on how your centre is supporting their economic and community development policies:

Government may be your primary investor – but whether or not this is the case, their primary interest is how well they are delivering on the policies that got them elected. By providing specific examples of how certain events are advancing their stated policy priorities you can win friends in high places!

4 | Reach out to a business, academic or professional organization:

Allies are everything – and when your allies are recognized and respected members of the community, your own status increases. Communicating the values in 2 and 3 above to local organizations you can create the basis for a mutually beneficial relationship that will pay dividends when you need supporters.

5 | Review your upcoming events for linkages to government policy priorities:

Governments have their own urgencies – so they may not make the connection between the activities of the centre and their own priorities unless it’s pointed out to them. Choose events that demonstrate this relationship and bring them to the attention of relevant officials – maybe even arranging access – and don’t limit your actions to the most obvious groups like economic development and tourism when you can readily relate to others such as health, education, technology and investment.

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6 | Encourage an incoming client to leave a community legacy:

You can make an event and its legacies more obvious by encouraging clients to reach out to the community – and this may fit well with their own agendas. Even something as simple as a public presentation related to the conference topic will attract local media coverage and demonstrate those greater values to a community that may otherwise not even be aware an event is taking place.

7 | Send local media a bulletin highlighting the benefits to be generated by an upcoming event:

Like government officials, local media have their own priorities, and may not have the time or inclination to dig into an incoming event in order to discover its broader implications. If you take the initiative – and maybe even arrange access to key participants – you'll not only increase the chances of better coverage but establish an ongoing relationship for the future.

8 | Feature a local "ambassador" in a thank you ad:

Sometimes it's hard to speak publicly about the value of an event without looking like you're "self-promoting" – but there's no such problem when you're recognizing the achievements of a local

individual who has helped secure or organize a national or international event. The message is the same – but much more acceptable, and may even lead to others coming forward to support similar initiatives.

9 | Make a presentation on the role of the centre to a local community organization:

Every destination has numerous organizations concerned in various ways about the welfare of the community and many may have no idea of the role a centre and the events they host play in supporting these. It's only an hour out of your life to attend and present – but the repercussions may be significant, particularly when you have no idea of who the people in the room may be and what connections they may have,

10 | Challenge centre staff to come up with community relations ideas:

Everyone has a potential role to play and their own unique set of connections and working relationships in the community. Take advantage of your relations with colleagues and local industry organizations by looking for ways to join forces in developing ideas on how to spread the message more effectively.

It's worth taking a moment to think about what you as either a centre or an individual can do with even one or two of these ideas – because everyone has an opportunity to communicate even if it's simply amongst neighbours and colleagues. In the end, the way that our industry and you as a professional working in it are regarded will be a product of how your community regards its importance – and that's a matter of how well and how consistently we advance our image and our value.