



JOINT MEETINGS INDUSTRY COUNCIL

The Power of Stories!

By Rod Cameron, Executive Director, JMIC

In the process of an intensive review of industry research, data and strategic communications issues taking place at the JMIC conference on the Value of Meetings in Paris this past May, 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 from participants and host destinations to society as a whole!

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 – they provide the solid rationale for what are often big investment decisions that have to show measureable returns. 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 that are hot topics today.

This realization has big implications for how we handle the value conversation from here on, as reflected in the overall recommendations arising from the conference. There was unanimous agreement on 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.



JOINT MEETINGS INDUSTRY COUNCIL

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. So both groups are more likely to react positively to the industry story when it is put in terms of what meetings, conventions and exhibitions accomplish in growing community and economic value than if they are just presented with the hard numbers.

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.

Finally, it's clear that this is where all parts of the meetings equation need to work together to achieve the desired result. The distinctions between organizer and supplier are far less important than the overall goal of documenting and delivering the kind of value proposition that will ensure the ongoing relevance of meetings as a key element in driving global progress on many different fronts.

So let's start working together to become better storytellers – and we'll all benefit from the results!



JOINT MEETINGS INDUSTRY COUNCIL

The active member associations who comprise JMIC today are:

AACVB, the Asian Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus
AIPC, the International Association of Convention Centres
ASAE, the American Society of Association Executives
Cocal, the Latin American Confederation of PCO and Related Companies
DMAI, Destination Marketing Association International
ECM, European Cities Marketing
EFAPCO, the European Federation of Associations of Professional Congress Organisers
EVVC, European Association of Event Centres
IAPCO, the International Association of Professional Congress Organizers
ICCA, the International Congress and Convention Association
ICESAP, the Incentive, Conference & Event Society Asia Pacific
IFES, the International Federation of Exhibition and Event Services
MPI, Meeting Professionals International
PCMA, the Professional Convention Management Association
SITE, the Society of Incentive & Travel Excellence
UFI, the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry
UIA, Union of International Associations

JMIC is supported by IMEX and ibtm world