

Local Government and Community Advocacy: Some Basics

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Local Government and Community Advocacy: Some Basics

A Message From the President

As per one of JMIC's primary roles as a creator of global industry resources, we are pleased to introduce our latest COVID-19 resource – a guide to Local Government and Community Advocacy. We hope you will find it of use in creating and managing your own strategies.

This guide is not intended to be a comprehensive review of what is a very complex subject. It is rather a collection of industry-specific tips for assembling a professional and compelling strategy to promote the role and importance of the meetings industry and achieve required decisions under today's challenging conditions. Having said that, the principles set out here are just as relevant over the longer term, as the job of local industry advocacy will not end with the pandemic. Local communications is an ongoing requirement to get the support and "license" we need to carry out our activities in ways that benefit the community as a whole, and that pays big dividends at all levels.

The guide has another purpose as well. It provides a framework for using the JMIC Global Manifesto and other industry resources created over the past year to most effective use in helping pave the way for event re-opening and a more prominent role in the process of economic renewal that will follow. Together, these key resource components provide a large part of what is needed by industry members to make their case at a local and regional level, and to do so in a way that is consistent with what colleagues in other parts of the world are doing.

We hope it will be of use to you.

Kai Hattendorf President, Joint Meetings Industry Council

Why Now? Why You?

Advocacy – the process of making arguments to support particular decisions in favor of a group of stakeholders, in this case the meetings industry, is not something many in the industry have necessarily considered to be part of their responsibility. COVID-19 has changed all that.

The impact of the pandemic on our activities and prospects has been profound and the road to recovery will be a challenging one.



– we have a powerful story to tell, both in terms of our capabilities in managing group gatherings under optimal conditions and of the key role we play – and will continue to play – in the economic recovery and renewal process.

At the same time, we have a powerful story to tell, both in terms of our capabilities in managing group gatherings under optimal conditions and of the key role we play – and will continue to play – in the economic recovery and renewal process that has become a primary global concern.

In order for the industry to deliver its capabilities for driving the knowledge transfer, collective problem solving and networking that are required for economic and community restoration, business events must not simply be allowed – they must be encouraged, and receive priority and support from governments as part of the recovery process.

Increasingly those are decisions being made at a local and regional level, even if they are under the guidance of broader national and international protocols. That means to be effective, advocacy must happen at a local level but local industry representatives with the insights, relationships and credibility to have the necessary influence.

Communications vs. Advocacy

The processes of communications and advocacy may be seen as much the same thing, and in fact they share many elements and often complement one another. But the important difference is that advocacy is by definition **targeted to address a specific issue and to achieve a particular outcome**. That means a strategy for advocacy must be very rigorously and efficiently focused on that outcome rather than simply delivering general information or encouraging greater understanding and appreciation.

A Two-Part Equation

Today the critical decisions are about the safe re-opening of events. There are two components to this;

- 1 | Demonstrating the capability to deliver interactions **that comply with all relevant health and safety requirements** in place at this time, and
- 2 | A rationale as to why business events are a **priority in the process of driving economic and community recovery**.

Many national and international industry organizations have created relevant resources and guidance in both areas (see references) – but advancing these in a local context needs the leadership of the local industry.

As an example, a number of **industry-specific health and safety guides** are now available on the JMIC website www.themeetingsindustry.org as well as through JMIC members AIPC, ICCA and UFI whose collaborative efforts created these guides. Similar guidance is also available through many other organizations, including global bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and their principles are widely recognized and readily applicable to the needs of our industry both in practical terms and the ability to demonstrate compliance.

What's the JMJC Global Manifesto?

The JMJC Global Manifesto is a **comprehensive and illustrated overview of key arguments for the role of the Meetings Industry in driving economic and community recovery.** It has been produced in a number of practical formats, including a projectable presentation and as an infographic, that have been designed to be either used directly or adapted to incorporate local information and context to the global messaging.

The Manifesto is largely focused on the role of business events in key areas such as:

- Innovation and Reinvention
- Multi-sector Impacts
- Relationships and Trust
- Diversification and Self-Sufficiency
- Transition and Renewal
- Talent and Investment
- Path to Sustainable Development
- Controlled Environment
- Community Legacies
- Funding in Place
- Digitization
- Laboratories for Public Policy
- Support for the Visitor Economy
- Image and Reputation
- Measureable ROI



It also addressed some of the health and safety issues that must be argued – such as **Controlled Environment** and **Laboratories for Public Policy** that address the differences between business events as highly controlled events with excellent contact-tracing capabilities relative to other types of public gatherings such as entertainment and sporting events, as well as the potential they offer for testing new protocols before they are applied more generally in the community. These latter points have been critical to arguing for priority in re-opening in many different countries around the world.

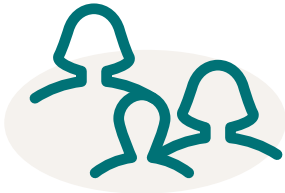
Some of these various arguments will work more effectively in your community than others – that's your decision to make. However, they provide a good and comprehensive place to start thinking about your messaging.



Taking Action

There are many steps in creating and delivering a strong advocacy effort and each must be developed in the context of local needs and priorities with which you are most likely to be aware. However, here are some overall principles you should consider as you assemble your initiative;

STEP 1 | Organization



Align the Local Industry

A lot depends on who you are being seen to represent. Even if you are a major player in your community, your voice alone will not be as powerful as being able to confirm you are **representing the collective interests of the entire sector**. Governments are most likely to act if they believe there are no dissenting groups with conflicting perspectives.

Sometimes such an entity already exists in the form of a local industry association or alliance. If not, job number one is to create such an entity and secure the participation of as many industry representatives as possible. This will not only enhance your credibility, it will also bolster your resources. At the same time, it will also ensure there is a vehicle for resolving any differences of opinion that exist or may arise, ensuring you can demonstrate a united front.



Connect With Local Users and Beneficiaries

Your messages will always be more powerful if they are re-enforced by others in the community that are seen to endorse what it is you are saying. Often these will be the organizers and beneficiaries of business events and professional association engagements, i.e., the professionals, business leaders and academics you may be interacting with on a regular basis. They are also likely to have different networks in the community, which means they can help access decision makers and other supporters less accessible to you and your immediate colleagues.

If they can participate in your advocacy activities directly, this is great. If not, even being able to include a quote from them in your presentation or materials will help illustrate the breadth of your impacts in the larger community – and that support for your work will be seen and appreciated by a much wider audience.



Leverage Off Existing Programs

It's always an easier “sell” if what you are proposing can connect to or leverage off of an existing program or funding mechanism. In such a case, most of the required thinking and decision making has already taken place and it is thus easier for authorities to accept what is simply an extension of an existing policy or program rather than something entirely new.

In a similar way, if what you are seeking can be presented as an enhancement of an existing program that will make that program even more widely impactful, this will likely get a better reception than if it is seen as being something required because of a gap in government policy.

STEP 2 | Creating Content



Define the Key Messages

In terms of messaging, clarity and consistency are everything – without these you will immediately lose your credibility. Precision is also key: **you must be clear as to exactly what you're asking for; what it will accomplish and how it will complement overall government priorities** (which may be very different from yours). There are many voices competing for attention these days and an absolutely clear message will help you stand out in the crowd more effectively.

Your messages should be articulated in detail and committed to a document, not only to make sure there is no ambiguity but to enable them to be communicated to others for their own use without risking inconsistencies.

There is no need (or typically the time) to start from zero. Sample messaging around the Meetings Industry is readily available online and from industry associations – the JMIC Global Manifesto is a good example – and can be adopted as a starting point instead of needing to re-invent these entirely.



Adapt Your Messaging for Local Relevance

Having said that, high-level messaging around the industry as a whole will not be enough in itself – to be effective, such **messaging needs to be adapted to more directly address local issues, priorities and opportunities**. Things to consider:

- **What** are the biggest local challenges governments want to be seen to address, and how can the messages respond to these?
- **What** are the (often stated) economic priorities for your area / region? How can you relate your messaging to support for these?

- **What** specific community benefits (education, health care, employment) can you link to?
- **What** is the current political agenda and timing, and are there potential announcements or profile opportunities you can tie to your messaging?

Always remember to focus your messaging not on your own interests but rather on those of your target audiences, including the political aspirations and priorities of the governments you are approaching. The effectiveness of the message is always based more on how relevant it is to the recipient than to who is delivering it!



Clarify the “Ask”: What Exactly Are You Looking For?

As strange as it may seem, this is one of the biggest flaws in many approaches to local authorities – the **need to be absolutely clear what you are asking for and how it can best be achieved**. It isn’t enough to promote your benefits and leave it to your audience to figure out how they can support you – it needs to be spelled out in detail including both what is needed and how it can best be delivered, based on your in-depth understanding of the industry and how it works.

This may require more research – how funding programs work, what regulations may apply to a proposed solution, what any formal government positions may have been taken with similar sectors – but is far more likely to produce a positive and timely outcome.

Again, the key here is to **not simply identify problems but put forward actionable solutions**. There is no reason to think decision-makers will have the time or inclination to develop responses to the issues you raise, and even if they did, you might not be happy with what they came up with! By far the better approach is to create those solutions yourself and then have the rationale to defend them as part of your overall messaging.

Back Up Your Arguments



It’s not enough to simply make assertions about the value of the industry to the local community – these must be supported by actual evidence. The good news is that this evidence does not necessarily have to be purely financial: well documented examples and case studies are often equally or even more effective if they demonstrate the points you are trying to make.

Quantitative measures might include:

- The results of economic impact studies demonstrating the breadth of benefits arising from events. If this isn’t available for your area, extrapolations can often be made from other destinations.
- Incremental numbers of visitors and spending data that illustrates how business event participants enhance local spending and tax revenues.
- “Hard” numbers such as hotel room nights, meals consumed, spending by organizers and exhibitors and similar data.

Qualitative or “case study” information could include:

- Illustrations of how local knowledge / practices (i.e., medical expertise and advancements) have been enhanced through hosting professional events.
- “Legacies” left behind in the community by specific events, such as new exposure for local industry or network enhancement.
- Examples of innovation, medical, scientific and trade breakthroughs from other parts of the world with applicability to your own community.

The Iceberg | Legacies of Business Events www.the-iceberg.org is a global repository for such information and can provide many relevant examples for your use.



Emphasize Renewal

For obvious reasons, there is a lot of attention today on economic recovery and addressing the generally massive debts that governments have incurred world-wide in addressing both the demands of the pandemic itself and the economic dislocations that have resulted from containment measures. The role of the industry in facilitating recovery therefore can and should be directly addressed.

However, many jurisdictions are also looking at the recovery as **an opportunity to not simply restore economic activity but renew it in a form more suitable to the longer term**. Given the general consensus that no economy ever

returns from a disruption in the same form, this is a reasonable strategy, and again one where the Meetings Industry has a clear and understandable role in making this happen – so this should be featured as a part of your argument.

Given the importance now being placed on sustainable development – embodied in the UN Sustainable Development Goals given global prominence in recent years – as a strategy for economic growth, resources like the JMIC UNSDG Case studies and resources available on our web site can again provide a good and industry-specific source of information and examples that will add an extra and positive dimension to your arguments.

Identify Key Decision-Makers and Influencers

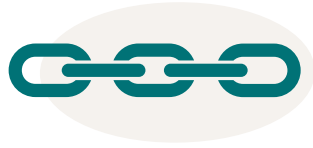


Once again, a distinction in advocacy is the **need to precisely define who will be making key decisions** and target these groups and individuals as a priority. At the same time, it is also important to determine those who may influence such decision makers, either formally (i.e., advisory bodies, health authorities) or informally (advisors, lobbyists, associates) and consider what role they might play.

Sometimes such influencers may be part of those you would consider to be industry supporters, in which case such individuals can be of even greater value. In any event, such an analysis will reduce any wasted efforts and ensure activities are focused where they will do the most good.

Knowing clearly who are the target audiences is also the key to fine-tuning your messages; when you know who you are targeting, it is much easier to determine how best to shape your arguments to address their interests and priorities.

STEP 3 | Delivery



Maintain Consistency

Once you've decided on your messages – recommendations, for example, or the strategies you are proposing for solutions to key issues, it is absolutely **essential to make sure those messages are consistent across all communications**.

This is certainly the case with a particular audience – local government, for example – but it is equally important in communications **between various levels of government**. These typically communicate with one another – often formally, via task forces and special committees established around a key policy area – and if inconsistencies are noted,

it will seriously damage everyone's credibility. At the very least, it will lead to confusion – and confusion to delay, which is the last thing we need when events are unfolding so quickly.

This is another good reason for the requirement for the industry alignment as noted above – part of any alliance must be an agreement to stick to messaging once this has been agreed upon. If there are differences of opinion, make sure these are addressed in advance – so that when the messages roll out, they are seen to be solid and unanimously adopted.



Create Context

One of the first things your key audiences are likely to ask is how what you are proposing compares with **what's going on in similar jurisdictions** under the same kind of circumstances. This is what will help give them the confidence they need to see how what you are proposing is in fact also understood and being acted upon elsewhere in the world.

Your interactions with colleagues, industry media and industry associations should help you prepare for this, but so too are resources like the JMIC Global webinar which brought together more than 30 industry leaders in a collective discussion of industry potential for driving economic recovery, supported by global expertise from outside the industry itself.

The key here is to anticipate the question and to be prepared to respond as a part of your initiative.



Access (or create!) Platforms For Delivery

The full range of vehicles for accessing government and community audiences is beyond the scope of this guide, but includes both direct approaches – audiences with and presentations to key political and community decision makers – as well as background communications via business and social media. Again, the key is to ensure that messaging is consistent across all such approaches to ensure reinforcement and avoid any potential contradictions that could weaken your case. In this regard, assigning one individual to manage such consistency is a good investment.

However, **the industry also has unique access and communications advantages than can and should be exploited.** Major events that are organized or supported by the industry are generally high-profile and often attract government officials and political leaders in ways that can facilitate access to them for a private audience. Where such events do not exist, they can often be created, either in-person where and when this is allowed, or online when it is not. Such an environment is highly appropriate for advancing industry arguments as it is in effect demonstrating the importance of face to face interactions by example.



Consider Related Communications Activities to Support Advocacy Initiatives

While efficiency demands a targeted effort, positive “background noise” in the community can reinforce key points and generate both an impression and the reality of broader support. Stories about the role business events play in economic and social recovery (and the challenges coming out of a lack of them) are newsworthy and media may be encouraged to look at how that plays out in the community. Encouraging allies to emphasize how events help them realize their own community-related objectives – even via paid media – can help stir greater attention.

Remember that **most government agencies and certainly politicians follow media closely to help them with decision-making** – so having your story coming from several different directions is an effective way to support any direct initiatives you may be taking. As an example, a timely “media blitz” with positive and easily understood examples of what past events have done to advance key economic and social sectors would create valuable reinforcement for any more formal approaches to government.

STEP 4 | Follow Up



Document the Results

It goes without saying that the results of any discussions should be well documented to ensure there are no misconceptions about what was communicated and what was agreed. Bear in mind that depending on timing, whoever initiated contact and delivered the initial information may not be the one to follow up so this kind of documentation is also an important part of maintaining consistency over what may be an extended period with different players.



Deliver Promptly On Any Promises Made

If you agreed to supply further detail or backup information make sure you do so quickly and efficiently while the initial presentation is still in the minds of decision-makers. Updating such information as new details become available is also a good way to maintain contact and act as a reminder to your key audiences that the process is ongoing.



Provide Feedback to Stakeholders

Communicate with both your immediate industry group and any supporters to again ensure consistency and at the same time provide encouragement and motivation. This is also the time to resolve any issues that may have become apparent in discussions and to make any adjustments that may be necessary.



Develop a Schedule For Follow-Up

There is a tendency to let things drift once the initial presentation is made and this can undermine whatever may have been achieved. It is thus worthwhile creating a formal schedule for ongoing action and ensuring all the required elements are dealt with in a regular and timely manner. This should include all updates and new information as well as tracking of subsequent actions that must be taken to maintain awareness and momentum.

An Ongoing Process

Once again, keep in mind that while everything you do at this particular point is likely to be primarily aimed at achieving permissions and support for re-opening, the communications and advocacy process is a long-term investment and should not be abandoned if and when pandemic-related conditions improve.

“ — **the communications and advocacy process is a long-term investment and should not be abandoned if and when pandemic-related conditions improve.**

The overall goal of enhancing the appreciation by governments and communities for what we do and bring as an industry will be undiminished once the current crisis has eased or passed – in fact, it may be more important than ever as indebted governments begin the formidable task of ramping up their economies. It should therefore instead be seen as an ongoing effort that will render you better prepared for whatever happens in the recovery process and beyond.

Ongoing communications is a necessary investment and not one to be ignored until there is a sudden need – in fact, **if you wait until there is a crisis to start your communications it's likely already too late!**

Governments change, issues and priorities change and contacts change – it's only by considering communications and advocacy as a core part of your ongoing operations that you can maintain a state of readiness for whatever challenges (and opportunities!) the future may bring.

SOME RESOURCES

The JMIC Global Manifesto

The Iceberg

JMIC COVID-19 Resources

The Iceberg / JMIC Global Webinar

The JMIC Guide to Local Government and Community Advocacy

TEXT AND CONTENT

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