



IMEX 2011 Politicians Forum Summary

IMEX Politicians Forum: A landmark year as the meetings industry presents further proof of economic value

This year's Politicians Forum delivered a stronger message than ever about the positive impact of meetings and events which extend way beyond the economic benefits they bring to a destination.

The topics presented marked a turning point in the way the meetings industry should be perceived by outside agencies and particularly by politicians, especially following the adverse publicity it has suffered in places in recent years.

Who attended?

The ninth Forum was attended by 26 politicians and civic leaders from 16 countries and 63 meetings industry association leaders and destination and venue representatives from around the world.

A brief overview of the key issues covered:

- Day one was opened by Rohit Talwar, CEO, Fast Future Research, executive director of the Future Convention Cities Initiative (FCCI) and project director of the Convention 2020 research study. Talwar introduced the FCCI as a research initiative, not a marketing alliance, and explained: "It's all about strategic research that drives the member cities forward and provides benefits to other meetings industry players".
- The legacy of hosting key events was an important theme, particularly for Seoul Convention Bureau, Korea. It was explained that hosting the Olympics in 1998 enabled Seoul to show the world what it had to offer. In 2010, Seoul hosted the G20 event and Maureen O'Crowley of the Seoul Convention Bureau said that this accolade "proved we were capable of putting on an incredible, large-scale event and this gave us increased motivation."
- With London ramping up its Olympics preparations for 2012, the topic was prevalent in the presentation delivered by Tracey Halliwell, director, business tourism & major events, London Partners UK. Halliwell highlighted the contrasting challenges London faces compared to Seoul due to it being a more mature market. After analysing areas of success and weakness in other host cities, it was revealed that London has compiled its own programme, with the aim of bidding for further future major events. "The current 16 billion pound capital investment will leave us with some great spaces to shout about", explained Halliwell.
- Describing the UAE capital as "a 21st century city with the mystique and spice of an Arabian adventure", Gillian Taylor, business tourism manager at Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority, United Arab Emirates, discussed how it sits on top of 10 per cent of the world's oil reserves and four per cent of the world's gas in her speech giving it economic value and attraction that can be leveraged across the meetings industry.
- The need for constant evolution was a focus for James Seymour, CEO, Durban KwaZulu-Natal Convention Bureau, South Africa. Seymour discussed that despite winning numerous awards for a whole range of achievements, Durban recognised the requirement to evolve and latch on to important opportunities, such as the 2010 FIFA World Cup, to upgrade its tourism-related infrastructure in order to remain competitive.
- The fundamental relationship between the meetings industry and government was key for Rod Cameron, Criterion Communication Inc, Vancouver, Canada, and director of international development for AIPC. Cameron highlighted that 75 per cent of convention centres worldwide are owned by some kind of local government. He listed the four things he sees the convention industry requiring from politicians:

1. **Recognition** that it is a factor in economic development strategy and not just in tourism or hospitality
2. **An opportunity** to participate in the economic development process
3. **Consideration** in policy decisions that impact the collective success of business events
4. **Better understanding** of policy priorities and how the industry can help government to achieve them.

Summarising his thoughts, he revealed: "We have a lot of tools available to us to help you advance but we can't do so unless we have a really clear understanding about what you want to accomplish."

- The importance of strategy and forward-planning was the focus for Rohit Talwar as he explained that when you hope that a centre will last for 15-20 years, the challenge is to design for a future we can barely even imagine. "Look back five years and see how technology has evolved. Looking forward 10 years is almost impossible," Talwar said.
- The benefits of strategy was touched on again, as Michael Hirst OBE, chairman, UK Business Visits & Events Partnership, director of The Tourism Alliance, member of VisitBritain's British Tourism Industry Group, explained that "business events do play a refreshing role in the visitor economy, attracting high-spending delegates to conventions, exhibitions and trade fairs. Strategically- managed, a programme can easily complement a nation's, region's or local destination's economic or social agenda."
- In a talk on "How industry research can influence political opinion" Karen Kotowski, CEO, Convention Industry Council (CIC) presented the findings of the first ever definitive quantitative piece of research on the economic significance of meetings to the United States economy. The research, she revealed, was undertaken to demonstrate that the industry is an economic engine and to justify investment by destinations within the industry. Kotowski also discussed how the industry was brought to its knees by the widespread misconception that all meetings were 'boondoggles' (i.e. activities that waste time and money).

Commenting on indirect economic contribution, Kotowski highlighted that in 2009, the total industry output was one of the worst years for the meetings industry in the US at \$907 billion and that the country employed - or caused to be employed 6.3 million - Americans across every state in the nation. As a relatable comparison, this meant that for every proposed meeting cancelled that year, three jobs would have been lost.

- Bruce MacMillan, president and CEO, Meeting Professionals International (MPI) offered his thoughts on the above study and explained its value. Macmillan stressed the benefits of this study for this trillion dollar industry, in which every meeting that happens represents three jobs in the community for the economy. Macmillan said: "Right now, governments are charged with making some very difficult decisions regarding investment in infrastructure, tax policy, etc. We can now talk about the effects of those decisions. As the US heads into an election cycle, the attitude in Washington is they need to find more ways to tax and to cut expenditure. Now we have a tool to say, 'OK, you want to do that? Well, here's the impact it will have on jobs.' Unfortunately, I didn't have those talking points a few years ago when I ended up in an elevator with President George Bush and he asked me how business was!"
- Mexico's goal to be listed as a top five destination in the next decade was a focus in the talk 'Down Mexico way' presented by Rodolfo Lopez Negrete Coppel, chief operating officer, Mexico Tourism Board. With tourism representing nine per cent of Mexico's GDP and the third largest contributor to the revenues of the country, Mexico is commissioning a survey similar to the US's to ascertain what percentage of the meetings industry represents that nine per cent. Negrete Coppel explained the benefits of hosting conventions as "helping level out the peaks and troughs leisure travel creates. Statistics have shown that conference delegates spend from 1.5 to four times more than the average leisure traveller."
- Finally, Jon Hutchison, CEO, Business Events Sydney (BESydney) delivered a talk entitled 'Measuring the real value of business events'. As a background to the research study Sydney conducted recently, Hutchison cited inadequate government interest and funding as the reason why organisations charged by cities to bring in business events had suffered. "We have failed miserably over the years to prove our true value beyond this tourist value but on my visit here I feel we are on the cusp of resolving that issue and we shall see a huge difference in government reaction throughout the world to this sector", explained Hutchinson.
- Rod Cameron completed the session with a summary of all that had been discussed during the day. He concluded by telling the guest politicians, "This has been a good story but we are only on the first page. You can expect a lot more from the industry representatives in this room as they build this story into a very compelling argument to help you make the case for supporting this sector. Because, in so doing, you are supporting so many of the vital activities in which your nations and your communities are engaged."

An IMEX New Vision Project, the Politicians Forum is held under the auspices of the Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC) whose membership comprises the leading international meetings industry associations. The Forum is also organised by IMEX in Frankfurt in collaboration with European Cities Marketing (ECM), a pan-European network of tourist offices and convention bureaux, and the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC).