



Martin Sirk, CEO, ICCA – Briefing Interview October 2008

Briefing: If the meetings industry is to become more successful at increasing its political influence and understanding, what should its priorities be? What needs to change?

Martin: More people inside the industry need to become more aware of the big-picture importance of international meetings: their impact on adult education, on scientific and medical advances, on knowledge transfer to developing economies, on their role in finding solutions to environmental and social problems. These are issues which are much more important to many politicians than the traditional economic impact and job creation side of the

argument, and they elevate the meetings industry so that we will no longer be simply seen as a sub-set of the larger tourism industry. And along with greater awareness, we all need to improve how we shape and communicate the messages that spell out these tremendous benefits to society.

Briefing: What do you see as the biggest political hurdles - those issues that will affect and shape the industry most?

Martin: The issues of skill shortages, migration and environmental impact are all going to be on the political agenda around the world for the foreseeable future. The meetings industry is, of course, going to be influenced by - and will have to react to - a tough economic environment, with growing competition as well as challenges to attract the best staff, but these issues are not specific to us. Our biggest challenge is to gain recognition through both the politicians who determine policy, and also the young people entering the workforce. Then we will be seen as a valuable industry that has far greater significance than a first glance might indicate.

Briefing: How is the world of the international meeting planner going to change over the next 5 – 10 years?

Martin: Delegates are going to get more demanding; meetings are going to get more complex with multiple concurrent objectives being addressed, ever-increasing interactivity, and multicultural audiences; there will be more technological tools for planners to use or mis-use (!); planners will need to learn much more about disciplines such as psychology and marketing, as well as being masters of logistics. Many organisations are only just starting to realise quite how much they can achieve through their meetings, and I expect to see some extremely innovative and exiting new initiatives that create real communities amongst suppliers, clients, agents, partners, in all regions of the world. I also think that corporate and association meetings are going to cross-fertilise one another, which will provide some



great challenges and opportunities for planners who will have to cope with new ways of thinking.

Briefing: What part does ICCA expect to play in shaping that future? The number of members attending the Conference seems to increase year on year. Can that sort of growth continue?

Martin: ICCA had grown over the last four and a half decades in parallel with the development of the international meetings industry, and we see no slowdown on the horizon. Our membership now covers over 850 companies and organisations in more than 80 countries, and new members are coming from both established markets and from newly emerging destinations. The fact that we cover so much of the world and all of the industry supplier segments means that we can deliver a truly unique global network of industry leaders. I think we have also benefitted from being unashamedly focused on our core business: the international association meetings sector - we are the acknowledged world experts in this field, and our database on rotating congresses is seen by most of our members as a simply invaluable sales and marketing tool. Ultimately associations like ICCA have to deliver straightforward, bottom-line value to their members: we even see our advocacy role as linked to creating an environment where our members can gain real competitive advantage. Our members are our leaders, and are closest to the market, so our role is make sure their voices and opinions can be heard in the corridors of power.



Michael Hirst, Chairman of the Business Tourism Partnership – Briefing Interview October 2008

Briefing: What do you think have been the biggest political triumphs for the business tourism industry over the past decade and what are the biggest challenges to come?

Michael: The most significant has been increased awareness of the economic and social benefits that business events produce. There is now a much better understanding of their value in terms of regeneration, employment, cultural understanding, education, information exchange and economic activity. This message must be continuously emphasised. It's essential that each newly elected national, regional and municipal representative hears this success story over and over again.

As to the future, environmental issues will dominate, especially those related to travel which could impact delegate attendance and mean that more meetings are held closer to home. Equally the industry will have to continually deliver higher quality and better value for money as companies and associations seek to justify costs.

Briefing: You were quoted earlier this summer as saying "Quite a lot of what the Government does hinders or interferes with what we are trying to achieve". Can you elaborate on that?

Michael: I was referring to the implementation of policies by government departments not necessarily directly connected with the meetings and events sector. For example, the introduction of restrictive border controls and visas, or the increase in airline passenger taxes and, for that matter, other business taxes. Left to their own devices, meetings organisers can produce world class events. What they need is government support and incentives, not fiscal or regulatory burden.

Briefing: You received your OBE in 2004 for services to the tourism industry. What does the industry still have to learn?

Michael: I believe my recognition was as much to do with the industry being recognised. I merely head up an organisation that brings together all the UK industry's representative bodies. But we still need to work more closely together. There are many organisations and it is sometimes difficult for government to discern which voice to listen to. Through the Business Visits & Events Partnership we present a cohesive front on key issues including raising the sector's profile.



Briefing: Given your experience of lobbying Government for change, what would your advice be to other organisations pushing for change or support in other parts of the world, especially in emerging markets?

Michael: Persistence and tenacity are key. Get politicians involved in the industry. Invite them to participate in winning business for their countries by being part of the bidding process for events, welcoming delegations and taking part in opening ceremonies. Provide robust data to prove the industry's worth. Encourage civic pride in local politicians when their destinations are chosen for major national or international events. Relate industry benefits directly to each politician's key priorities. And also remember that scientific, health and educational conferences can play right to the heart of a political agenda. There's no doubt that events will shape the destiny of destinations in the 21st century.