

6TH POLITICIANS FORUM – INTERACTIVE SESSION

The right approach

Opening general discussion on an eclectic range of topics, moderator Michael Hirst expressed a concern fundamental to the spirit of the Politicians Forum. Picking up on an earlier comment by Minister Jane Lomax-Smith, he asked her if she felt that meetings industry representatives at the Forum were not actually talking the politicians' agenda.

She said that showing any sign of irritation with politicians would not help the industry's cause and, anyway, at this event, they were preaching to the converted. "If I were a lobbyist, and I'm not, I'd be more politic in the way you approach politicians and more capable of massaging their egos. Also, maybe, suggest that it's other politicians who don't understand..."

Hirst asked Mayor Alan Lowe how material the social, environmental and community benefits of meetings and convention were to politicians, or was it all about economics.

Lowe admitted that, when asked to invest in a new development or expansion, the bottom line for politicians is what they will get out of it - "They need support from business and tax payers." But, he said, social and green issues are high on council agendas these days and the industry needs to somehow market the other aspects to them. He said taking politicians to a conference would help open their eyes. "Show them what you guys can do! It's the cheapest investment you can make."

Local versus national government

Scott Taylor, chief executive of Glasgow City Marketing Bureau, asked, "When you have the authority, accountability and responsibility for your city's economic performance, how do you square it with national government that can take actions that prevent or inhibit your approach?"

Lomax-Smith said that politicians mostly do foolish things because they haven't thought through or understood the implications. But the problem is that tourism ministers often don't have a seat in the inner cabinet; therefore don't have sufficient clout in federal government. "In a local context, we all have to make sure tourism has a big enough voice."

John Greenway confirmed that in the UK tourism is not seen as a priority and, in fact, last year the government cut the tourism budget. But, he said, it was important for the meetings industry to continue to explain the distinction between their business and tourism per se and explain the many potential additional benefits.

Ivor Blumenthal said in South Africa there is a huge diffusion of responsibility between local, provincial and national government and it depends on which party is in office. The political framework should be enabling enough to facilitate the industry to do what it needs to do to advocate and articulate its message globally. "There's a lack of consistency and therefore sustainability of that message because of policy conflict, so that really needs to be the question."

Lomax-Smith talked about the benefits of having a mix of portfolios, in her case, tourism and education. Education is the more powerful but helps her understanding of the skills, training and accreditation needed for development in the meetings industry. "You might equally have arts and tourism or sport and tourism. One portfolio will help the other."

Support for bids

Mayor Lowe said he actively supports the city's and convention centre's bids for international conventions but doesn't have the money to offer subvention packages. Greenway said it was encouraging when the UK Minister of Tourism recently wrote to all her colleagues in government asking them to support bids for international conference business but he wasn't sure how effective

it will be. He said that the meetings industry needs to be at the table of organisations that advocate industry and commerce in general and have more powerful voices within government.

International conventions and the green agenda

Lomax-Smith said that in general a credible system of authenticating emissions and a carbon footprint is still a long way off. For instance, even food that's travelled a long way may be better to eat if it's had few chemicals on it or has used less water or less energy. In Adelaide, they try hard to reduce emissions and have low chemical use. But she said that potential participants have the choice whether they attend an overseas convention or not.

Blumenthal believes the environment is an opportunistic rather than a moral issue: no matter how good your policy structure is, it's how you use it in your international marketing activity that's going to count more than anything else. As for training employees to understand good environmental practice, he said it is already in the standards of the countries he is working with and he hoped it would be in the European Qualification Framework when it is launched in 2010.

Rashid Toefy, who is overseeing the proposed expansion of Cape Town International Convention Centre, was concerned about persuading the treasury to pay the equivalent of an extra 25 million euros, 25 per cent of the whole cost, to ensure it is a six-star green building.

Lomax-Smith said the payback makes it justifiable. In Australia, legislation has just been enacted that requires government offices to be in six-star green buildings. Greenway said the climate change question is on the political agenda and the meetings industry has to adapt to that in what it does. Once again, Blumenthal advocated a global compact on the subject as the way forward.

Training and qualifications

Hirst wanted to know if enough was being invested in training and qualifications in the meetings sector. Blumenthal said it was up to the industry to determine its needs and percentage of investment. If there is a skills shortage, as in South Africa, then there was not enough investment but in a balanced economy, where the skills pool has been financed partially by legislation and partially on a voluntary basis, the answer should be yes.

Lomax-Smith could foresee shortage of staff being a future problem. "It's quite apparent if you look at the exponential growth in convention centres around the world and at the massive growth in size of the ones that exist, that we're looking at a globally mobile workforce. There's going to be an advantage in poaching staff with better skills and many of us will be serious losers if those skills are going to new emerging markets. We all have to look to our own skills development agenda."

Alan Lowe said that Victoria has the lowest unemployment rate in Canada and it's always difficult to find skilled labour. Canada is currently bringing people over from the Philippines and training them to work in the hotel industry.

"We have to enthuse and encourage young people to see a career in hospitality and event management as something worthwhile," Greenway added. "Otherwise we won't deliver the quality we want to deliver in order to grow and sustain all the opportunities that we foresee."

Migrant workers

Greenway said that in the UK there is too much focus on bringing in people such as doctors or scientists with top skills rather than people with service skills, particularly in the hospitality sector. "We need to manage the whole thing better and I shudder to think how we'll deal with the 2012 Olympics unless the government faces up to the fact that we need migrant labour."

Javier Oyarzabal, general coordinator of economy and employment for Madrid City Council, said there are many immigrants in Madrid and, because they don't know the traditions or history of the

city, communication is changing. He wondered what other cities who have already developed a multi-cultural environment would recommend, in other words, is it a plus or a minus?

Greenway said he thought Spain has a very enlightened approach because it has regularised the entry of the many hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans who were arriving without visas and Russia is also regularising migrants as both countries need the workforce. He believes that for a multinational industry such as meetings, a multinational approach is needed.

“The way to woo us!” Top tips from the politicians

Alan Lowe: Spend more time creating and striking up relationships with the elected officials you need to fund your facility and you will see a great change in their mindset.

Ivor Blumenthal: You need global, political compacts giving rise to conventions which governments can then ratify. You can then use them as bargaining power.

John Greenway: You need to position yourselves within the mainstream business industry and commercial world, not as part of tourism, albeit we understand the connection. See the meetings industry as just like any other business in the mainstream of commerce and also of education, training and academic achievement. But the worry is that you will get more meetings because there are more, and you won't have the staff to service the people who come!

Jane Lomax-Smith: You don't know who to talk to. Politicians are transient and you probably have to cultivate friendships with lots of them to get the return on investment of having one minister for tourism in your circle. And remember to invite them to functions or ask them to open an event, particularly if they know something about the topic in question. Politicians love meeting powerful politicians from other places so make sure they're on the meet and greet list. Find ways to make them feel part of the industry instead of just being victims of lobbying and nagging for money. Let them feel the excitement, the buzz, the enthusiasm. Let them feel what a really extraordinary, vibrant, sexy industry it is and then you'll have a better chance of swaying them.