

IMEX POLITICIANS FORUM 2009

THE POWER OF MEETINGS TO STIMULATE ECONOMIC GROWTH

With financial constraints on the minds of meetings industry pundits and politicians alike, the burning topic at the seventh Politicians Forum was the role meetings play in stimulating economic recovery. But the meetings professionals also understood they could do better to improve public perception of their activities.

The seventh IMEX Politicians Forum, held during the IMEX exhibition on May 26, 2009, was attended by 25 politicians and civic leaders from 11 European countries and over 50 worldwide meetings industry representatives. Michael Hirst, OBE, Chairman UK Business Visits & Events Partnership, presided over two sessions, one at Messe Frankfurt exhibition centre, where the guests also visited their destination stands at IMEX, and one at the Intercontinental Hotel.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

“Greater effort into identifying and communicating the value of meetings and events is required”

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Looking back at the Forum Michael Hirst explains, “Both events vividly demonstrated why the Forum is – and has been for the last six years - so important, and why we must all continue to communicate loudly, clearly and consistently about the true value and importance of the meetings industry.” He says, “There should be no gap between perception and reality. This industry is a proven vehicle for economic recovery and growth as well as a long-term, viable platform for job and skills creation – that was the nub of our discussion on the day, and the reason why so many political representatives were keen to

learn more about this somewhat ‘hidden’ industry. In fact, we all agreed that the combined economic and media storms actually represented a great opportunity for the industry to be heard and understood at the very highest levels and gave us a consumer-facing public platform for the very first time.”

The main objective of the Forum each year is to impress upon politicians the true economic, educational and cultural value of meetings and events hosted in their communities and countries and to inform them about the trends and conditions shaping the future of meetings. This year, however, the meetings industry had to acknowledge its activities had been put at risk during the downturn, but only through lack of good communication.

Rod Cameron, Criterion Communications Inc, Vancouver, Canada, and director of international development for AIPC (The International Association of Congress Centres) provided a background for the rest of the day’s discussion by explaining the unique characteristics of international convention business and how it differs from leisure tourism. “It’s attractive”, he said, “because it’s valuable. One sale can bring thousands of visitors, i.e. conference delegates, and once they are there delegates spend three or four times more than leisure visitors.” At the same time, these wider benefits are very important to government policy objectives.

Cameron concluded by listing some of the factors driving change in the meetings industry. “Intensifying competition worldwide is one, with many destinations wanting to get into the business or get more of it.” Conventions generate revenue but can also help drive your economic agenda, your professional development objectives, your education objectives and a whole bunch of other things. Only governments can take the long-term investment perspective and only they can recapture a portion of their investment through tax revenues.”

The rapidly changing global economy combined with a misinformed backlash against the meetings and incentive travel industry in the US were two issues that dominated the debate at the seventh IMEX Politicians’ Forum, a follow-up report shows.

The report shows that Brenda Anderson, CEO of Site (Society of Incentive and Travel Executives) shared some salutary lessons from her recent experience in the media spotlight in the USA as a result of what became known there as the ‘AIG effect’. “We were caught off guard by not being able to articulate our economic spend and impact,” she told the Forum audience. She went on to praise IMEX for “being ahead of the curve” in founding the Politicians’ Forum and recognising the importance of encouraging mutual understanding between government representatives and the meetings and events industry.

Community and environmental targets

Attending politicians were invited to ask questions of the panel in advance. These included from...

How can we galvanise public opinion to support and understand what the industry contributes at a local level?

How can we develop our arguments to secure long-term funding for conventions centres?

How can the industry contribute positively to local environmental and community relations targets?

How can we attract greater numbers of events and business visitors to our destinations?

How can we offset misconceptions about the industry?

How can we ensure that, once aligned, public and political opinion remains consistently well-informed about the true economic impact of the meetings industry and its potential for further progress and development?

★★★★★★★★★★

“There is still a long way to go to convince governments of the role meetings and events have in generating economic activity”

On this year's speakers' panel were: John Greenway, MP, UK; Katarzyna Sobierajska, Under Secretary of State, Ministry of Sport and Tourism, Warsaw, Poland; Helena Nyhus, Deputy Mayor Göteborg, Sweden and Geoffrey Lipman, Deputy Secretary General, WTO.

Politicians voice their support and concerns

As well as listening to the meetings professionals, it was important for the politicians invited to give their own points of view, state their aspirations for their communities and discuss the implications of hosting conferences and other events in their cities. Many of them did just that, covering a number of different topics.

★★★★★★★★★★

In the opinion of **John Greenway, UK Member of Parliament**, the agendas of the meetings industry and government actually do coincide, meetings bring many benefits to countries and communities and it is important to make the relationship more harmonious and effective.

Katarzyna Sobierajska, Undersecretary of State, Minister of Sport & Tourism, Poland, was proud that, unlike some of the more developed countries, her government has already identified meetings as one of the priorities of its new strategy for tourism development to 2015.

Helena Nyhus, Deputy Mayor, Gothenberg, Sweden, also understood the good sense of collaboration with the events industry and its huge importance for future generations, but said her problem was convincing the politicians in the parliament in Stockholm of the need for ongoing involvement and investment.

For **David Smith, cabinet member, culture, recreation & sport, Brighton & Hove City Council, UK** the problem was public perception. “Most of the population don't go away on conferences and think everyone who does is on a jolly. How do we overcome this and also convince our fellow councillors and MPs?”

Annette Stavenow of the City Council and Tourism Board of Uppsala, Sweden, described the immense fear of negative public opinion that exists among politicians when their cities want to start new projects.

Ulrik Nilsson, chairman of Boras City Council, Sweden, said the most important message to convey to politicians was that conferences would attract people to their city, “not to tell us we can earn money”.

Conny Brannberg, regional councillor, West Sweden, and president of the Municipal Council of Skövde, was concerned about the environment. “For Swedish politicians, sustainable development is a high priority as far as tourism is concerned. How can we get this meetings industry to do things in a green way?”

Philip Heylen, deputy mayor of Antwerp, Belgium, spoke for everyone in the room: “It is very important that the unity expressed at this Forum should continue, but make it easy for us. Some of the politicians here have been talking about public opinion and this is really important because politicians are only doing the job for a certain time. So it's very important that if you do something you do it in dialogue with public opinion.”

Six city case studies

Apart from the panel discussion, politicians were each presented with six different city case studies designed to bring the issues of developing a city as a viable international meetings industry destination to life. These explained in detail how Göteborg, Málaga, Montreux, Sydney, Vienna and Warsaw had each overcome unique local challenges to establish themselves as competitive and highly successful suppliers to the meetings and events industry.

Pride and passion

It was widely agreed by the politicians present that hosting events attracts visitors and instils pride in their city among local residents. As for politicians not at the Forum and not yet convinced of the value of meetings, industry professionals were advised that inviting them to events and involving them in conferences in their city would give them a better understanding of what they do and the passion to support them.

Drivers of the 21st century economy

To conclude, moderator Michael Hirst said he believed the annual Forums were leaving a legacy of ongoing communication and cooperation between politicians and the meetings industry. "I return to my theme that meetings and events are an integral part of a destination and its destiny. They are the 21st century drivers of the visitor economy and provide an iconic focus for leading the revival of destination economies."

While there was general consensus that meetings and conventions play a key role in economic recovery, politicians and industry leaders alike acknowledged the need to put greater effort into identifying and communicating their value.

A full copy of the Politicians' Form Report plus a shorter summary are available online together with the 2009 programme, the day's presentations and the six case studies at <http://www.imex-frankfurt.com/politforum.html>.

Never waste a good crisis! Now is the time to invite your local politician to IMEX and show them, first hand, the value of the meetings industry in creating a successful destination and the competition you are faced with from those who have achieved it! IMEX chairman Ray Bloom and his team look forward to inviting meetings industry representatives from destinations around the world and their local governmental officials to the next IMEX Politicians Forum on May 25, 2010, Frankfurt, Germany. Please contact debbiewoodbridge@imex-frankfurt.com if you wish to invite a politician.

An IMEX New Vision Project, the Politicians Forum is held under the auspices of the Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC) whose membership comprises international meetings industry associations. The Forum is organised by IMEX in collaboration with European Cities Marketing (ECM), a network of leading tourist offices and convention bureaux from 134 destinations across Europe, and the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC).