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## *Dedication*

*Dedicated to  
Miles Clarke  
a gentleman and a scholar.*



Meetings are the midwives to wisdom. When people gather to improve the human condition all of society benefits. Over the past 40 years a large and vibrant industry has grown to offer customised services to clients who choose to congregate for a variety of reasons. Health professionals share their research findings in the hope that cures for degenerative diseases will be found sooner rather than later. Scientists driven by curiosity about the world at large, convene to marvel at their peers' latest discoveries. In a period of relatively low unemployment, business owners spend far more time and money on harnessing the enormous creativity of their staff in order to ensure future success and improved productivity. Stakeholders in

## *Introduction*

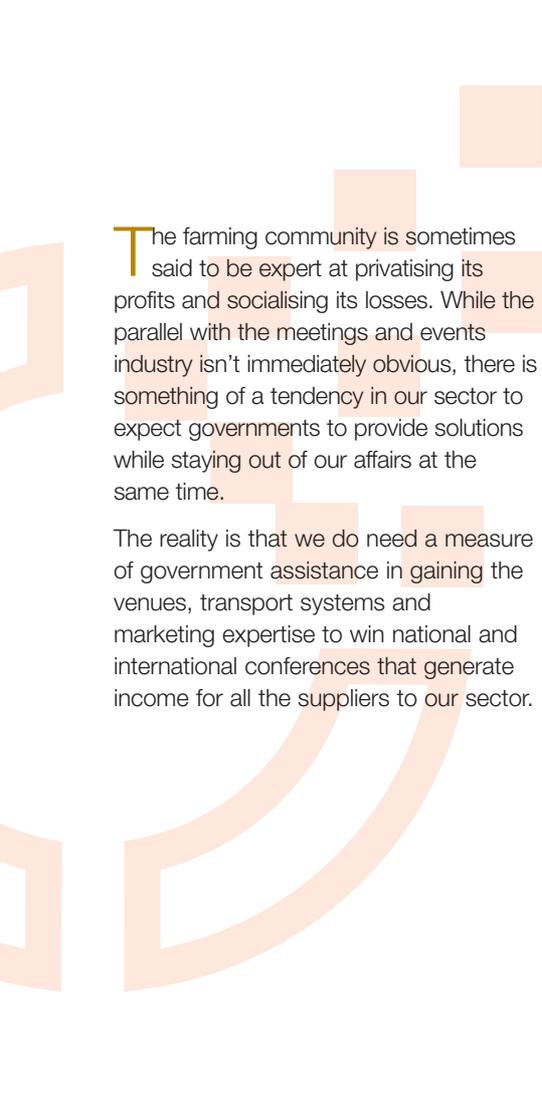
democracy assemble to inspire, inform and motivate their members. Leaders, from all walks of life, transmit their vision via the spoken word at meetings large and small.

The articles reprinted in this booklet were first published in the industry magazine Mice.net and reflect on current issues facing this important sector of the world of work. Although reference is made to contemporary activities, a strong attempt has been made to make the text universal and relevant over a longer period of time. The views expressed in the articles are personal and I'd welcome any comment on their contents.

*Bryan Holliday  
Managing Director*



## *Striving for Balance*



The farming community is sometimes said to be expert at privatising its profits and socialising its losses. While the parallel with the meetings and events industry isn't immediately obvious, there is something of a tendency in our sector to expect governments to provide solutions while staying out of our affairs at the same time.

The reality is that we do need a measure of government assistance in gaining the venues, transport systems and marketing expertise to win national and international conferences that generate income for all the suppliers to our sector.

The level of assistance can be a fine balance, as the more the flow of government money into our coffers, the less control we have over our destinies. This will inevitably lead to a lessening of talent coming into the industry. One needs only to look at the state of affairs in some of our northern neighbours who have been heavily bankrolled by their governments for the past few decades.

They may have superior facilities but the lack of flair and intellectual capital is evident when faced with the challenge of delivering world class events. There are no dress rehearsals in our business and suppliers need to work harmoniously long before the moment the wheels of the delegates' aircraft touch down. The professionalism required to deliver (and prosper) is not easily achieved when government is calling the shots.

The latest international delegate survey by the Sydney Convention & Visitors' Bureau is due for release but preliminary results show again the great value that business events deliver to a city.

It provides the New South Wales government with proof aplenty that decisions need to be made sooner rather than later whether or not to extend the existing convention and exhibition centre or build a new one on a magnificent harbourfront location on the northern point of east Darling Harbour. It's mooted in some quarters that this could – and should – be another iconic landmark like the Sydney Opera House.

The military has traditionally had the best vantage points on Sydney Harbour, so an impressive edifice devoted to the dissemination of ideas on a waterfront location would be proof positive that the nation's taken a very big step forward.



# *Everything Old is New Again*

Some years ago a newly opened deluxe hotel in Sydney drew howls of derision across the community when in order to create an “English club” atmosphere, the management turned up the air-conditioning and had a log fire going in the lounge, even on the hottest days.

In the live events business we’re forever looking at fresh ways of delivering conferences and corporate events that are creative and, in the case of international meetings, leave delegates with a lasting positive impression of Australia.

Even for delegates who might have attended dozens, if not hundreds, of meetings away from their home base, an element of the event should reflect the essence and integrity of the host destination.

For example, Melbourne has become famous for its laneway cafes and specialty shops. Putting in place a dine-around for delegates to do in their own time could make a pleasant break from the rigours of a busy conference. This would also appeal to the delegates at a national conference.

As good and efficient as our purpose built convention centres and conference hotels are, they inevitably act as a barrier between the destination and the delegate, even if various local acts are brought into the venue. Canny conference committees and conference organisers will ensure the delegates leave with a good sense of the destination which goes much further than a clip-on koala.

One person who has the ability to influence the perception of delegates of the destination more than anyone else is the coach driver and how many of us

take the trouble to brief the coach company and its drivers about who the delegates are and what the event is about? In the main, our coach drivers do an excellent job but we need to ensure that they are in lockstep with the larger event.

Street theatre characters can help share the story of a city, though it’s important that they be fresh and innovative, especially if it’s a national audience. The line between humour and cliché is a narrow one indeed.

It’s no secret that Australia is not performing to its full capacity with regards to attracting international meetings. To win back market share, we have to deliver conferences and corporate events with Australian values that cannot be ignored.



# *The Ethical Approach to Business*

I've attended Meetings & Events Australia's conferences for two decades and always manage to find enough from the business and social programs to make the trip worthwhile.

This year in Hobart was no exception and I found my "nugget" from a presentation that had little directly to do with our industry, but on reflection spoke to the heart of everything we do in our business lives.

The speaker was Andrew Wilkie, the former soldier working in the Office of National Assessment which provides intelligence to the Prime Minister's office. Wilkie resigned his position shortly before Australia went to war in Iraq, saying there was no firm evidence to support the contention that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

Wilkie calmly outlined the cost of his ethical dilemma and the impact it had on his life – the loss of all his friends from the intelligence community and ultimately the

unravelling of his marriage. His choice was between loyalty to the people of Australia or loyalty to the Australian government. His decision ultimately cost him his career.

Happily few of us have to make such choices and one of the aspects of living in a free society is that nobody can legislate for good behaviour. The best contract anyone should have is a handshake and it's saddening to see to what extent people in our industry have to "cover" themselves in their business dealings with costly contracts.

Another speaker who made great sense was Leo Schofield, the journalist and arts "czar" who has run a number of successful arts festivals and has entrepeneured many other artistic events.

His message was about being bold and running with big ideas. His contention is that there's nothing wrong with conceiving a good idea for an event and selling it

well. This is certainly something association meeting organisers should consider when faced with a marketing challenge to build delegate numbers. People are bombarded with messages day and night and event promoters have only a couple of seconds to attract attention.

Schofield's opinion that the amount one achieves is in inverse proportion to the size of the committee organising it has a ring of truth, but there is nothing that can't be overcome with good, honest communication.

Educating your audience is essential as one can't assume that people will come to a product launch or attend a conference on the basis of a website saying it's a good idea. Building interest is a process that should happen over months. It's a question of establishing a relationship and communicating effectively before you start your "sell".

Truth and honour should never be strangers in our working lives.



# *Relationships, Relationships, Relationships*

Relationships are to the meetings and events sector what location is to the business of real estate.

It takes no more than a glance through the MEA's "Who's Who in Meetings & Events" to see there are some 60 different categories of suppliers and an event of some significance may require the smooth co-ordination of at least half of these.

They typically include meet-and-greet, transport, accommodation, signage, special events management, insurance, photographers, interpreting services, attraction and cruise operators.

Recently the technical team at one of this country's leading convention centres went beyond and above the call of duty to assist our staff when setting up for a conference which had the tightest of budgets. It left a lasting impression and

I've little doubt our people will positively respond in kind if and when the occasion arises.

Meeting and event organisers are the midwives of the communications process and events are running at their best when we're almost invisible. This is mostly achieved through the development and implementation of a plan which seamlessly brings together all the suppliers.

There's seldom time for rehearsal, so it always pays to engage the support of suppliers with a good track record and who are able to see the "bigger picture". For example, a printer with a 9-5 mentality may do a perfect job, but the lack of flexibility could result in a delivery delay of just one hour. That could be a crucial hour which could result in the organisers being on the back foot for the rest of the day, imperiling the perception that the event is being efficiently managed.

In other instances, the flow-on effect can impact on to other suppliers. A fault with a cherry picker lift might result in the lighting rig for the gala dinner being delayed. This might mean the setting of tables and theming is impacted and the band doesn't have time for sound checks. The list goes on and if the event manager lacks good relations with the suppliers, the wheels are more than likely to fall off.

The organiser's client doesn't need to be given a blow by blow account of the challenges being encountered during the delivery of the event, but it is essential they be apprised in a timely manner when it becomes clear there is a significant problem brewing. Dealt with properly and professionally, obstacles can become significant opportunities.

It's all about relationships.



# *When the Wheels Fall Off...*

While their duration may be just hours or days, meetings and events can be months and years in the making.

Despite all precautions and countless testing, equipment failure can easily bedevil proceedings at the most inopportune of moments. In modern, networked convention centres this can easily throw an entire business program out of kilter.

Previously, if there was a technical problem in a presentation it would be limited to a particular room or lecture theatre, whereas today the audiovisual presentations are networked throughout the building from a central communications desk.

When we had an instance of network failure three years ago, we could instantly draw on some 90 years' combined experience from our technical crew to tackle the issue and solve it before presenters and delegates were even aware of the problem.

Never scrimp on getting the very best people to hold key positions within your presentation technology management team – even if they're under-employed most of the time during the event. Just as you will always make wet weather contingency plans for your social program as part of your risk management program, lines of communication and responsibility need to be equally clear to cope with unforeseen challenges.

Risk assessment should include the following steps: identify the risks, rate them, take steps to avoid them and plan how you will manage them. There is no turning back the clock. If your program needs to be modified, do so and ensure everyone is informed. Nothing spreads greater unhappiness than when delegates or visitors are left in the dark in the event of a delay, especially with regards to transportation arrangements.

The same transparency should also extend to the media. Have a designated spokesperson on hand to answer any enquiries. There's certainly no requirement to be proactive when it comes to unfortunate tidings but if questions are asked, front line staff should be able to direct any queries to the spokesperson.

The September 11 attacks in New York in 2001 came five days before the opening ceremony of a major international medical meeting in Sydney. Some 200 speakers were unable to make their flights because of the aviation shut down in the United States. Two days before curtain up Ansett Airlines collapsed.

Delegates drove from Cairns, Adelaide and Melbourne. We worked around the gaps in our scientific program. A sense of community second to none grew from the shared adversity. Despite the disaster, it was a memorable and highly successful meeting.





## *Voices of the Nation*

Any business that has plans to survive and prosper needs a business plan.

A key element of any business plan is a consultative process, be it between the members of a board of directors, business partners or groups of workers.

It's encouraging to see our national government draw in the best and brightest through this month's Australia 2020 Summit to draw up a "business plan" for Australia. This meeting will probably cost us less than the price of a tank, but its symbolic and practical benefit may be felt for decades.

No doubt there'll be the predictable chorus of nay-sayers, but as anyone involved in the business of meetings is aware, much more is generated from most meetings than is reflected in the final plenary presentation or the official communiqués.

As we saw with the Constitutional Convention on the Republic issue a decade ago, outstanding Australians, young and old, had the opportunity to share their wisdom and world view in a forum unfettered by political affiliation and narrow sectional interests.

In a country which is not given to much pomp and ceremony, there's undeniable value in the symbolism as we witnessed with the recent apology to the stolen generations. Whatever one's opinion of the issue, there was no doubt it was deeply felt by those affected and nothing less than the coming together of the elected leadership to acknowledge that pain publicly was going to change that.

I sense the 2020 Summit will prove a forum where fresh talent will surface, alliances made and lifelong friendships forged that will be to the betterment of Australia.

What more can one hope for from any meeting?



# *Make Your Showtime a Winner*

As February swings around, the AIME exhibition for the conference and events industry in Melbourne becomes the great tribal gathering of our industry.

AIME has gathered critical mass in recent years to the extent that many buyers of services in this sector no longer feel they have to migrate to the mega-shows in Europe and the USA.

Last year I participated as a hosted buyer and was pleased to find the show as relevant and stimulating as ever. There is a temptation when one's been to a few of the shows to assume that one's fully up to speed with the industry and there's not a lot to be gained. This couldn't be further from the truth.

I had some 25 scheduled appointments and found it helpful to devote the first couple of minutes providing the supplier

with a concise snapshot of our business and what I was possibly looking for from them. It had the effect that we were both singing from the same song sheet when we came to discuss the service on offer.

Also, what last year's AIME told me was that – to use the unlamented Donald Rumsfeld's logic – there was a lot that I didn't know and it was only revealed by my participation.

Of course, AIME and the other industry events around the country are also a good opportunity to meet up with other buyers, many of whom are friendly competitors. The informal conversations where one can recommend or warn off a supplier are the grist for the mill in our industry. One can also gain some useful market intelligence by attending the various seminars that pepper the program.

Another thing I noticed was how much better the interaction with a supplier is when the chief executive takes the time

to capitalise on his or her investment by being available throughout the show and not leave the fielding of visitors to junior staffers. I'd also suggest that exhibitors put their mobile phones on mute or just switch them off.

AIME is by no means the only forum for this interaction. Winston Broadbent at Saxton Speakers has long been proactive in organising regular events where his top speakers have a chance to strut their stuff before a corporate audience.

There is a temptation after a long day of networking to give the official dinner a miss, but there's certainly some value in having at least one of your team attend as there is often new talent being showcased. It's also useful to get a first hand impression of the staging and presentation techniques employed at this event.





*Discover Australia*  
*Discover Yourself*





## *Time to Think Local?*

The current global fuel crisis is forcing everyone to think about how to make the most of changing circumstances.

Coupled with the challenges of climate change, we might be tempted to think the business environment we're familiar and comfortable with is under dire threat.

We shouldn't lose sight that Australia by comparison with just about every other country on the planet is in an extraordinarily good position. We have an abundance of natural resources that other countries want; a well educated workforce by any measure; minimal threats to our national wellbeing and are the possessors of a country that millions wish to visit.

This is not the first time there's been a fuel crisis and it seems that this one may well be the trigger for the development of meaningful alternatives to fossil fuels. We should not lose sight that the cost of travel has plunged in real terms over the

past three decades and what we might be experiencing is simply a right-sizing to some extent.

Travel is intrinsic to the business of meetings and if we're going to see a decline in long haul travel on environmental or cost grounds, we need to put strategies in place to perhaps "mine" the best and brightest in our regional sphere of interest.

Technology is making video conferencing cheaper and more convincing, with holograms and high definition narrow-casting bringing in inspirational and expert opinions to conference halls from around the world. If it's not feasible to bring the world's top five surgeons to Sydney or Melbourne for a conference, beaming them in electronically for two way conversations certainly is.

While nothing will replace face to face communications, there are plenty of avenues to explore to make meetings

more meaningful and a good return on investment. We need now to look to our national and regional meetings for growth and innovation. Most people are happy to come away with one or two fresh insights from a meeting.

As meeting planners, our goal should be to work with our clients in a strategic way to make their events more relevant and inspirational for their audiences. With national meetings, there may be benefits to be had from suggesting the inclusion of regional counterparts into the business program in some way, promoting dialogue beyond our borders.

As the only "western" country in a similar time zone to much of the Asia Pacific, Australia is uniquely placed to benefit from increased dialogue with our immediate neighbours. The current challenges may be a golden opportunity to make that happen.



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## *Downunder No More?*

The mindset that Australia is utterly remote from the world's great cradles of civilisation in Europe and North America has been more than 200 years in the making.

A recent observation by the expatriate Australian and former World Bank President John Wolfensohn is an indication that while the geography might not have changed, perceptions certainly have.

He was commenting that the emerging superpowers of China and India are bringing the world focus to south and east Asia, with significant economic implications for Australia.

This may take half a century to fully eventuate, but Australia is already in a

strong position to make the most of a changing world order. Where strong economic growth occurs, so too does the requirement for professional associations and corporate entities to meet and discuss common issues and challenges.

We're only a relatively short flight and few time zones away from all the major capitals in south and east Asia, which makes commuting so much more viable. The next generation of wide-body aircraft has the potential to even further slash the time and cost of travel. Anyone with a bit of savvy can easily spend less on international than local calls using phone cards and voice-over-IP systems such as Skype.

Australia, with its sophisticated meetings industry infrastructure in terms of convention centres and associated service providers, is well placed to help lay the groundwork for the roll out of infrastructure for India and China as well

as other countries in the region. Already there is significant evidence that Australian events industry specialists are setting up shop in centres such as Shanghai and Beijing.

A competitive advantage Australia enjoys is that delegates are drawn to meetings in cities where the locals enjoy a good quality of life and critical issues such as air pollution are addressed. Delegates enjoy experiencing a slice of life as it is experienced by the people who live in the environment. Creative cities attract creative people who leave their marks in innumerable ways.

Immense opportunity awaits the new generation of meeting and event planners. Four or five years with a dynamic company in Australia and you're well set to further your experience with a stint in one of these emerging conference destinations.



# *Ignore Local Knowledge at Your Peril*

I recently attended a conference for meeting managers and venue operators where there was much talk about mainly European professional associations appointing professional conference organisers to manage their events wherever they are in the world.

While there might be some logic in having the core organising activity centralised, this could also have the unintended consequence of homogenising meetings to the extent that the host destination becomes little more than a supplier of beds and transport logistics.

The past two decades has seen an explosion in high tech convention centres worldwide and the development of sophisticated IT that is transforming the way delegates convert information into knowledge and wisdom. With these have come conveniently located hotels and resorts as governments and developers have recognised the significant yield these events provide.

There may be an argument for an external conference planner/manager when it comes to destinations where the infrastructure is lacking, but in a country like Australia it simply makes no sense when there's an army of suppliers who can deliver a meeting as well, if not better, than those of Europe or North America.

If we become no more than stuffers of satchels and co-ordinators of coaches, our relationships will not be of the calibre that has seen this country become one of the world's powerhouses in the international conference world.

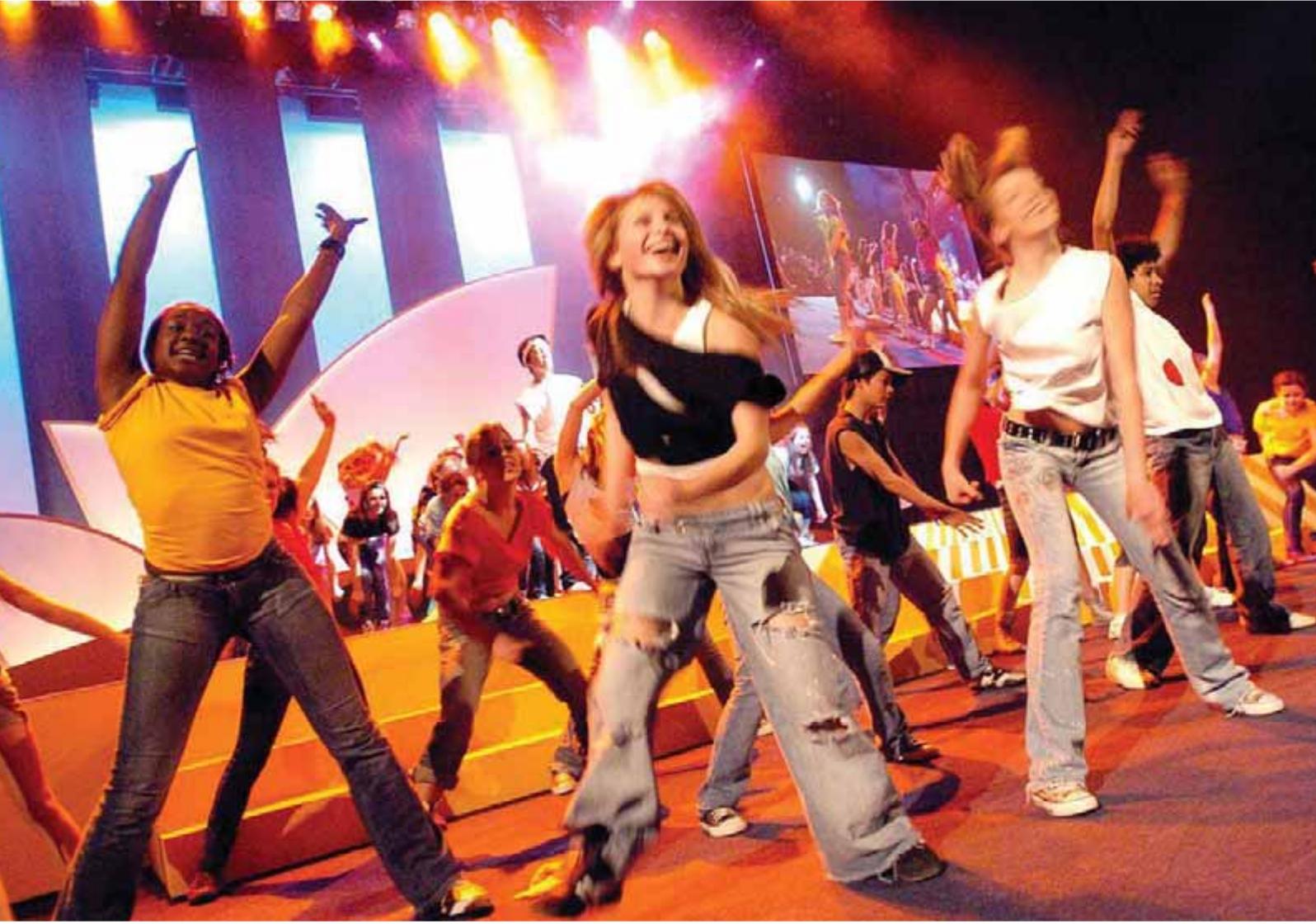
Some of our clients have been with us for upwards of two decades. It has been the recognition that good relationships and communication during the planning and delivery of the events have set these events apart.

Much of this can be ascribed to local knowledge. Even if the host association has a local committee in place, these

are often busy professional people and they simply don't have the expertise of professional conference organisers.

A good PCO will anticipate the needs of their client even before the client is aware of it. If meeting managers are given only a small portion of the business, it's inevitable there will be matters overlooked. I recall a meeting in Sydney some years ago when the event was run in-house by the organising committee and using just one or two suppliers for various services. It was an almighty shambles and an embarrassment for a city with such a strong reputation for quality meetings.

The host organisations – be they international association or corporate meeting – can “disaster-proof” their events by completing due diligence on the companies tendering and then respecting their expertise to deliver the events as agreed.



# *Planning a Healthy Alternative*

The 10th International Congress on Obesity in Sydney provided a near perfect example of a meeting being designed and delivered in a way that reflected the ultimate mission of the organisers and delegates.

Some 2,500 delegates from nearly 100 countries participated in an event where good nutrition was not just discussed, but lived.

The delegates comprised clinicians, dieticians and associated health care workers.

In preparation, the Executive Chef of the Sydney Convention & Exhibition Centre worked closely with the organisers to ensure healthy and nutritious meals and snacks were in line with the objectives of the overall scientific program.

In addition, the Centre service staff received special briefings with regard to the nutritional details of the food items they would be serving so that they could answer any questions the delegates might have.

The ceremonial and social programs were equally tuned to the theme, with the Opening Ceremony featuring a child playing a computer game. A girl enters with a basket ball and starts bouncing it around. Within minutes there are some 60 kids on stage involved in a high energy game, underscoring the message that childhood obesity is avoidable.

With a conference of that size, there are unavoidable queues on registration day. We created an effective and appreciated diversion by having animal keepers circulate with some native animals to the delight of our international visitors.

It was an extremely successful meeting, with some 400 speakers and 1000 posters.

The healthy living message was also incorporated into the suppliers assisting the planning and management of the meeting. If appropriate, they needed to prove their credentials with regard to the products they supplied. The same applied to the 140 exhibitors.

The Congress Party at Wharf 8 was hugely successful, thanks in part to the healthy yet tasty fare our delegates enjoyed. The caterers were also happy to prepare cuisine that was so appreciated.

The attendance of some 71 media representatives ensured the message of the meeting went well beyond the confines of specialist medical journals.



# *The Value in Sticking to Your Knitting*

Meetings come and go and on the surface they seem to change little from one year to the next. Advances in technology enhance the quality of communications but in the main meetings follow many time honoured rituals.

Look below the surface and the situation is very different. The very architecture of meetings and how the various components are delivered is constantly being redefined.

Everyone is trying to do everything and the traditional territory of the professional conference organiser is being invaded by a plethora of suppliers who see themselves as competent to offer a whole range of services other than their core activity.

We find special events companies offering registration services or travel management direct to clients. Convention bureaus are becoming de

facto accommodation agencies and taking commissions as part of their funding process. Catering companies offer full service event management.

Travel companies are supplying conference management services and global conference organising companies have brokered relationships with international associations to the extent that local conference organisers are effectively out of the client relationship loop and are merely service providers for accommodation and logistics.

Just who owns the client relationship has become very murky in some instances and thus the trust, loyalty and respect between the client and the traditional primary contractor, the PCO, can well be at risk.

As international and national meetings continue to grow in size and complexity so too does the degree of financial risk. The PCO with a good track record is

uniquely placed to ensure that critical elements such as sponsorship, marketing and relations with venues and accommodation providers are in synch with the overall vision for the event. An orchestra can manage without a conductor after a fashion but there's a world of difference when the baton is wielded by a true professional.

Australia has among the best collection of purpose-built convention centres in the world and our reputation is such that we win a goodly share of international association meetings. However, the reality is that our market share is slipping, mostly due to factors outside of our control. We have to be alert and we don't want to squander the goodwill we enjoy by trying to capture business that we're not fully equipped to service.

Long after the glow of a low price has faded, the disappointment of a poor job will still burn bright.



# Opportunity Knocks

If ever there was a time for Australia to think big, act bold and embrace vision for the future this is it.

It's time to tap into resources beyond those under the red dirt of Western Australia and build a common-wealth based on skills and human energy rather than look to paper wealth that has all the stability of the next margin call.

Look no further than the latest figures from ICCA, the international conference industry association, which shows that Australia has slipped dramatically in recent times.

The year Sydney hosted the Olympics, the city was the world's leading destination for international conferences. The 2007 figures from ICCA show that Sydney (and Australia) does not even figure in the top 20 cities. Our Asia Pacific region has no fewer than five in the top 20, with Kuala Lumpur sitting proudly in 19th spot, less than three

years after its international convention centre was opened. They've aggressively gone out to win business and it's clearly paid off.

We live in a democracy where the market rather than government dictates what the next priorities for development should be and that is as it should be. Governments do have a responsibility to look at the bigger picture and help put in place the building blocks on which infrastructure development can go forward. We see the bodies such as major events organisations being part of this process to progress our industry.

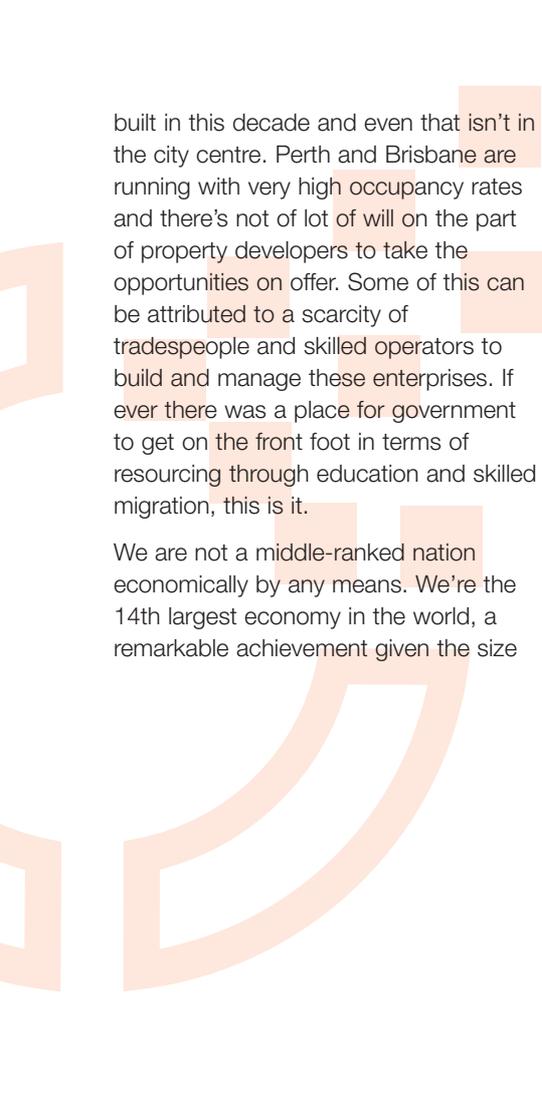
There is just no reason why we should be experiencing the bottlenecks that exist in the conference and events sector right now. When 50 bulk-carriers are hanging around off the coast due to lack of cargo-loading facilities, the lack of infrastructure is obvious to all but when cities are losing conferences because of

a shortage of hotels, meeting rooms and quality exhibition space, it's losses that are less obvious but just as significant to the general economy.

We run the risk of losing our best and brightest to those powerhouse economies overseas if we don't take stock, provide the infrastructure and once again make our cities exciting and stimulating destinations for meetings and events.

We still have a strong point of difference from many of those Asian cities in that our cities are clean, especially when it comes to air quality and in the main we offer a wider range of attractions and cultural activities. In many instances we're now highly competitive from a pricing perspective, so there really is nothing but commitment to stop our leading conference cities from becoming world leaders once again.

Sydney will only have one five star hotel



built in this decade and even that isn't in the city centre. Perth and Brisbane are running with very high occupancy rates and there's not a lot of will on the part of property developers to take the opportunities on offer. Some of this can be attributed to a scarcity of tradespeople and skilled operators to build and manage these enterprises. If ever there was a place for government to get on the front foot in terms of resourcing through education and skilled migration, this is it.

We are not a middle-ranked nation economically by any means. We're the 14th largest economy in the world, a remarkable achievement given the size

of our landmass and the puny population numbers we have to sustain it. We offer a good quality of life for just about everyone who chooses to participate in our economy, even though there are challenges that sometimes seem intractable.

The events and hospitality sector is an industry that facilitates so much more than its own perpetuation. Well designed conferences add much to a country's "social capital", something that goes well beyond the dollars and cents that derive from an influx of foreign exchange.

Bruce MacMillan, the head of MPI, a global association for conference

organisers alluded to this recently while visiting Sydney. He was saying that the cities of Toronto and Vancouver had gained invaluable social capital by hosting the mega World AIDS conferences. The clinicians and health workers in both cities were now regarded as the best in the world for their overall skill at managing the disease, thanks to the expertise they'd learnt from visiting delegates to those conferences.

Perhaps it's time to look beyond the parochialism of state politics and embrace a vision that builds surely on our common wealth.



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