

MPI Atlantic Chapter: Knowledge the Strongest Asset to Unlocking New Meetings Potential

A meetings industry battered by global recession is poised to make a strong comeback if meeting planners can exceed new demands for data and details, said keynote speaker **Michael Hughes** at the 2010 National Meetings Industry Day in Halifax on April 15. Those demands can be partly met by bricks and mortar, but only if human imagination and energy are attuned to a clientele that has become more discerning and cautious in the wake of the recent financial crisis and rebirth.

Hughes, vice-president of research and consulting for *Tradeshaw Week* magazine and a 15-year veteran of the meetings industry, set the stage for “Bigger, Brighter, Bolder,” a morning hosted by Meeting Professionals International’s (MPI) Atlantic Canada Chapter in Halifax’s current conference venue, the World Trade and Convention Centre. A proposed new convention centre was the topic; a strategy plan for industry growth was the goal; and by the end of the morning, the 80 participants had focused their planning skills on the client of the day—MPI Atlantic Chapter—and empowered their association to move forward as a voice for their industry and region.

The meetings and events industry is worth \$500 billion globally, generating \$71 billion annually in Canada and \$77 million per year in the Halifax region. To tap into this lucrative market, a new convention centre has long been a priority of meeting and event planners in the Halifax region; a petition in support of the project on MPI Atlantic Canada Chapter’s website had garnered 1,333 names as of National Meetings Industry Day’s opening session.

Yet even before submission of a formal proposal, the idea of a new convention centre has drawn sharp criticism from taxpayers unwilling to support the multi-million-dollar investment.

2009 was the worst year for meetings and events since tracking began in 1972, Hughes said, but 2010 is looking brighter: exhibitor spending that declined by 20% last year is expected to grow by 2% this year, and 60% of North American companies surveyed this year expect their travel budgets to rebound. But while spending is expected to recover, clients now hold dual power: cash and information, the latter growing exponentially as access to the Internet allows them to research their own venues, accommodations, and rates. Attracting these increasingly powerful clients requires offering events that answer their two burning questions: “What is going on in my industry today? What will give me the edge as my industry recovers?”

The good news is that 88% of attendees believe that meetings and events will be critical for product sourcing and buying over the next five years, said Hughes. This reveals a market ripe with opportunity for planners willing and able to enhance their offerings with more vibrant events, customized offerings, and value-added services. “Attendees indicate that they need to show return on investment (ROI), but only 20% have true ROI tracking,” he said. “Meeting planners can help with this.”

A venue of proper size and location could enhance the Halifax’s existing qualities as a destination. “We have a downtown precinct on the ocean that works beautifully for events; we

have connections internationally; and everyone who comes here loves to interact on the street,” said **Scott Ferguson**, president and CEO of Trade Centre Limited, whose management team received the 2010 National Meetings Industry Day Influence Award from MPI Atlantic Canada Chapter. “Bringing people from all around the world into Halifax goes back hundreds of years; it’s the simplest form of economic development there is.”

Hughes said a new convention centre with a large exhibition space could enhance efforts to grow the meetings industry and the economy, if other issues are also examined, including the overall impact of tourism on the Nova Scotia and Halifax economies, the impact of business-generated tourism, and the ability of stakeholders such as the hotel industry, governments, and tourism officials to work together.

His Tradeshow Impact Ecosystem showed the related financial impacts of meetings and events: for example, 17% of delegates bring along a spouse or friend, 45% of delegates go shopping, and 92% dine out, contributing to an average \$3.6 million in local wages, employment, and tax revenues.

Participant insights were harvested in a World Café hosted by **Ravi Tangri** of Chrysalis Strategies Inc. and graphically facilitated by **Janet Rhymes** and **Corrie Melanson** of SeeWhatYouMean. Tangri, once a nuclear physicist, now uses his scientific training to simplify complex issues at the human interaction level.

He set the Café tone with a simple request: identify all red items in the room. “Now, close your eyes and think of something that was blue,” he said. Focusing on a specific thing leaves many things unobserved, whereas examining all verbal and visual perspectives can yield collective solutions. Four-person round tables were given 20 minutes to discuss each of three questions, leading from what Halifax is doing right to what it needs to do better.

The first question—share an example of a successful event or meeting in Halifax—drew a range of examples, including concerts by the Rolling Stones and Paul McCartney, the G7 Summit, Tall Ships, annual busker and comedy festivals, World Hockey Championships, and weddings on Citadel Hill. The response to September 11, 2001 was suggested, as the Halifax International Airport and surrounding venues became a haven for grounded and diverted travellers. Also, a recent conference of 1,400 delegates tailored its program to fit smaller venues so it could be held in Halifax.

Next, groups considered the factors or conditions that enabled the success of those events and meetings. Participants said Halifax as a host city, and the service providers in it, are seen as innovative, supportive, creative, genuine, and flexible. “We do combination venues of outdoors and indoors; we work with a variety of restaurants and entertainment; we have lots of services to draw upon; and we’re not afraid to think outside the box,” one participant said.

From the final question—What will it take to grow our industry and make each event bigger, brighter, and better?—five themes emerged: advocacy, attitude, innovation, co-operation, and the need to do the homework to seek out and focus upon the best meetings opportunities for the region.

In the World Café spirit of “dotmocracy,” participants were given sticker dots to vote for their top three issues. Advocacy emerged as a clear leader, including a new convention centre and other infrastructure necessary to attract, transport, and serve clientele. Also under advocacy were marketing, media awareness, and educating the government and the general public about the benefits of the meetings industry. “We do a great job of telling the public what the potential benefits are, but we’re not strong on follow-up, to say what the actual benefits *were*,” said one participant, who suggested an industry-mandated post-event review to track and share data.

Adopting and fostering a progressive attitude was also voted a key action item. “We need to open our minds, out-speak the naysayers, and move forward,” a participant said. “Some fear this new convention centre will turn us into Toronto, but that will not happen.” Another participant said the benefits associated with meetings and events must be promoted. “After every event, all the world is doing is looking at the red, whether it is there or not. . . . Providing information can help with their decision making.”

Other high scorers included the need for innovative ideas, co-operation among those within the meetings industry and other industries, and a willingness to take risks. “Each of us needs to take responsibility for our growth and development,” a participant said. “If we continue to think separately, we can never come together and be effective.”

Hughes said the meetings industry is all about transformation. “We aim not just to educate and inform people, not just to give them a memorable experience, but to transform them into better employees, better people,” he said. **Kim George**, president of MPI Atlantic Canada Chapter, said the morning’s findings will be used to develop an action plan in which the chapter transforms into a voice of the industry.