

Toronto Meeting Professionals and Associates Share the Path to Prosperity

Participants attending National Meetings Industry Day April 15 in Toronto identified a tremendous opportunity to make the federal government and large corporations understand the importance of Canada's meetings industry. To carry the message forward, meeting professionals and their partners need to work together and speak with one voice, letting the government know of their importance to the business community and to Canada's economy as a whole.

Meeting Professionals International (MPI) Toronto Chapter President **Bob Giorgini** welcomed a sell-out crowd of 370 that gathered at the Allstream Centre at Toronto's Exhibition Place. "These events would not come together without partnerships," said Giorgini, extending his heartfelt thanks to all contributors to the meeting.

In the past five years, Giorgini said, the MPI Toronto Chapter has contributed more than \$75,000 to the MPI Foundation of Canada, which has funded important work such as the Canadian Economic Impact Study. This study was the first to measure the contribution of meetings activity to the Canadian economy.

Giorgini read a proclamation from Toronto Mayor David Miller stating that April 15 will henceforth be known as "Meetings Industry Day" in the city.

"It makes sense to have one voice to represent us to industry, government, the media, and the public, and other parts of our business, said **Ruth Abrahamson**, Executive Director of the Business Events Industry Coalition of Canada. "We're building methodically, and we aim to be a part of future government budget development infrastructure consultations."

Introducing the theme of the event, "Path to Prosperity," emcee **Doug Bolger**, Chief L(earn)ing Officer at L(earn)², defined prosperity as "a consciousness" and "a way of thinking." He thanked the association partners for getting together last year to create a new level of prosperity for the future of the industry. It was not easy, and people had to put their differences aside to come together as a coalition, he said. "Now, we can move forward as an industry. Prosperity is a way of looking and acting together."

There is no doubt that the meetings industry and its partners have suffered in the latest economic recession. The good news is that things appear to be turning around, said the three business leaders on the Toronto discussion panel, moderated by **Wendy Mesley**, co-host of CBC's *Marketplace*. The panelists shared their approaches to prosperity during a particularly tough economy.

At Helms Briscoe, the world's largest site selection and media planning company, the first quarter of 2010 was up 38% compared with the same quarter last year, and the company is now hearing from clients it has not heard from in the past two years. With 1,100 sales associates operating as independent contractors in 37 countries, strong international communications are important. Helms Briscoe places high value on an internal pipeline that makes people feel connected in a virtual workspace. But one-on-one relationships are the ultimate key to the company's prosperity, noted **Peter Shelly**, Executive Vice President of Helms Briscoe.

“Technology has allowed us to be more efficient, but nothing has changed in 30 years in regard to the relationship. We develop loyalists who will rebuild the demand when the next downturn comes our way.”

At Experiential Events, a “creator of unique experiences,” sales this year have already increased by 40% compared with last year. The key was in the company’s commitment to do things differently and in its perseverance, according to President and Creative Director **Kenneth Kristoffersen**. “I’d say to clients, ‘You don’t want to hire us if you want us to do the same old thing as before.’” Soon, clients were seeing the company as a vehicle to reinforce their branding and their corporate culture. Kristoffersen compared coming out of the economic recession to the aftermath of a forest fire: when a forest burns down, what regrows is better and stronger than what was there before.

For Porter Airlines, a dynamic company that has grown to be Canada’s third-largest airline since its start-up in the fall of 2006, success came from offering the convenience of flying from Toronto’s downtown location (where the company recently financed a new terminal) and from providing superior customer service. “Our approach was not to hoard what we had. We were strategic and bold. We’ve prospered when many airlines have cut capacity and limited expansion plans,” said **Andrew Wilson**, Vice President of Sales and Distribution for Porter Aviation Holdings Inc.

Shelly said the fiscal value of the meetings industry is being recognized by governments in the United Kingdom, Germany, India, and Australia. Kristoffersen said that in those countries, governments work side-by-side with the events industry, and the goal is to make that happen in Canada. Canada and the United States “don’t get it yet,” but there is great opportunity for that to change, Shelly added.

A strategic communication plan is essential, Wilson noted. For example, Porter stands for three things: speed, convenience, and service. “Define your three points and don’t waver.” Come together with a common voice, define what you stand for, and find good people to deliver the message to your target audience, he advised.

Wilson and Shelly agreed that producing short sound bites for the media is a good way to raise awareness of the meetings industry, while ensuring that the right image gets across.

To change the perspective that the meetings industry is “fluff” or discretionary, everyone must be more vocal, Shelly said. “Get the word out to industry and government that ‘meetings mean business.’” Get out and talk to customers as well, face-to-face, he advised.

Kristoffersen suggested talking to clients on a boardroom level about returns on investment, corporate responsibility, and financial responsibility. “Feed into what they’re planning,” he advised.

An audience member commented that prior to the economic recession, the meetings business was service-driven, but now it is price-driven. Wilson replied that if it is just about pricing, and if the budget is too small, the meetings professional cannot make the client look good. “I say,

‘Your name is on this project. How do you want it to look?’” Kristoffersen agreed: it is important to distinguish between price and value. The onus is on meetings professionals to teach clients, preferably one-on-one, and that value diminishes as well when timeframes are shortened.

Asked how Ontario’s forthcoming Harmonized Sales Tax (HST) will affect the meetings industry, Wilson replied that the jury is out on whether the new tax will prevent people from booking conferences. Shelly predicted a definite adverse effect.

The National Meetings Industry Day Influence Award was presented to Maritz Canada in recognition of its efforts as a partner and supporter of MPI. The MPI Foundation of Canada enlisted the help of Maritz to develop the methodology for the Canadian Economic Impact Study and to conduct both the original study in 2008 and the update released in late 2009.