

Only You Can Protect Meetings

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Like Smokey the Bear imploring each of us to take care of the forests, Roger Rickard recently implored a group of meeting professionals to join the Meetings Mean Business Coalition to protect the future of the meetings industry. An author and founder of Voices in Advocacy who regularly presents on behalf of MMB, Rickard delivered a keynote address to attendees at the [Financial & Insurance Conference Planners Winter Symposium](#) in Boston in January.

Wakeup Call

In case anyone needs reminding, several years ago the industry faced media and government outcries against conferences where spending appeared high and controls lacking. There were cases, [like that of the IRS](#), in which meetings were not being managed appropriately. However, anyone who cared to look beyond most of the other sensational headlines would have found more nuanced stories. Few cared to look.

The situation shook the meetings industry awake. Meetings had a low profile—no profile, really—and if the general public thought of them at all, it was either with aggravation (the boring office meeting that prevents them from getting their work done) or scorn (the executives off on a junket).

Those perceptions are why the [Meetings Mean Business](#) coalition was formed in 2009. Over the years, MMB has worked to get more than 33 meetings and hospitality companies and associations to coalesce around a single mission—raising the profile, and therefore influence, of meetings and the meetings industry.

MMB's goal was, and is, to reach three constituencies:

- elected officials
- business leaders
- media representatives

and send them two messages:

- meetings are critical to business growth
- the meetings industry is critical to the U.S. economy

Doing so, the hope is, will cause the next elected official or headline writer to stop and take a look at the whole story before slamming the [\\$16 muffin](#).

Preaching to the Choir

You'd think that describing all this to a room full of people whose livelihoods depend on meetings would be preaching to the choir. And of course, it is. But this choir has never been given its songs to sing, Rickard explains. The "songs" are available now, however, as [talking points laid out at the MMB Web site](#) and in its Android/iPhone app.

In a nutshell:

1. Meetings Create Personal Connections

The savviest investor in the world, Warren Buffett, knows it to be true: “You will never see eye to eye,” he has said, “if you don’t meet face to face.”

2. Meetings Drive Positive Business Outcomes

Meetings seal deals, win customers, and develop high-performing talent. An Oxford Economics study showed that every \$1 invested in business travel returns \$9.50 in new revenue.

3. Meetings Build Strong Communities

The meetings industry creates hundreds of thousands of jobs, generates billions of dollars of revenue, and supports communities across the country. Every meeting held in the U.S. supports three full-time jobs.

MMB Relaunches and Redoubles

When Rickard tells the MMB story to rooms full of meeting professionals, he invariably finds that half the audience has no idea that MMB exists. Over the past year, MMB has focused on broadening the reach of the coalition, which is now helmed by co-chairs David Peckinpugh, Martiz Travel Co., and Michael Dominguez, MGM Resorts. And future outreach efforts will attempt to bring more related suppliers into the fold, such as restaurants and airlines.

In addition to the work of coalition members and leaders, however, the movement needs grassroots participation. Rickard asks anyone who cares about meetings to sign up at CIC.advocacyhub.info to receive occasional bulletins about the coalition’s work and to be on call to push back when the next scandalous headline hits.

“We need to have the ground troops ready,” he says. “There will be challenges ahead.”

Your Value as a Meeting Planner

So what can individual meeting planners do? “Believe what you do really matters to your organization,” says Rickard. And tell the story. Review the talking points and have them ready when you’re challenged about the value of events.

Internally, be ready when your immediate supervisor or your CEO wants to know your value to the organization. Be prepared to say, “I am responsible for business profitability” and know how to show it. Profitability comes from selling more or spending less. Describe how your meetings do one or both: You are training employees to work more efficiently, so you are saving the company money. You are motivating producers to sell more, so you are increasing revenue.

Confirm for executives that meetings are the best tool for sharing the corporate story with customers, for engaging and training employees, for developing and rewarding exceptional talent, for keeping investors informed. Tell them that you are the only person to manage those programs because you have intimate knowledge of the organizational culture and you’re driving toward the company’s strategic goals.

“Move yourself from the cost column to the necessity column,” Rickard sums up.

North American Meetings Industry Day

The mission of the Meetings Mean Business Coalition will be on full display April 16, the first-ever [North American Meetings Industry Day](#). Meetings industry organizations and chapters from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico will hold events to raise awareness of the value and strength of the global meetings industry.

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