



**Australian
Business
Events
Association**

**ABEA Leaders Forum
19 February 2024, AIME
Summary**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australian Business Events Association (ABEA) hosted its inaugural Leaders Forum in Melbourne at AIME 2024.

The purpose of the Forum was to help shape the Business Events Proposition, aimed at cultivating talent, advocating for government support, promoting sustainability and more within the business events industry.

The forum focused on four areas:

1. An update from **Tourism Australia** outlining the context of business events nationally and internationally
2. To discuss the challenges and opportunities for **attracting and retaining talent**
3. To discuss and understand how the industry's **advocacy** can be shaped and managed
4. To discuss how the business events industry can embed **sustainability** principles

This is a top-level summary of the session. For a full transcription, please contact ABEA.

1. TOURISM AUSTRALIA UPDATE

Pip Harrison, Managing Director, Tourism Australia provided a current snapshot of the business events industry, its challenges, and opportunities. Pip also congratulated ABEA for bringing together the industry under one umbrella.

Key points:

1. **Phases of Growth:** There are two phases projected for the future - accelerated growth from 2024 to 2028, followed by normalised growth after 2028. The focus initially is on rebuilding quickly and capturing lost growth.
2. **Business Events Sector:** Despite a 67% recovery in visitation, the spend is at 91%, indicating increased costs. Business events delegates are spending 74% more than leisure visitors, plus they have positive legacies for industry and community.
3. **Government Support:** The global competition is strong. The Bid Fund has been key, supporting 125 events which injected \$991M into the economy.
4. **Tourism Australia Events:** Dreamtime – now called Australia Next, held in Adelaide – was successful. Another is planned for Cairns this year. It will then revert to bi-annual.

5. **Sustainability:** Sustainability is a growing concern, with more than 50% of customers prioritising it when choosing a destination. Tourism Australia is involved in education, advocacy, and storytelling around sustainability efforts.
6. **Future:** There is optimism for the sector, with good event confirmations for Australia, particularly from India. Challenges include aviation pricing and the need to offer meaningful connections and experiences for business travellers. Besides sustainability, factors such as CSR, diversity, inclusion, and Australia's indigenous offerings are important for attracting visitors. There's also interest in how AI is shaping the industry.

2. ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TALENT

One of the biggest challenges facing the industry is attracting and retaining talent. ABEA and ICCA ran a competition for young people to devise a proposition for the industry regarding new talent. Sharna Greig from Business Events Adelaide was the winner. Sharna presented her thoughts.

Key points:

1. **Lack of Awareness in Young People:** When Sharna transitioned to the industry from real estate, she discovered it online, not whilst doing a tourism and events degree. She said we must do more to raise awareness of the industry's career opportunities.
2. **Raising Awareness:** This could be done by having industry leaders present their experiences, opportunities, and career paths to students at schools and universities. Also, by recognising and utilising the influence of social media, particularly platforms like TikTok, industry experiences could be showcased to attract emerging leaders.
3. **Generational Differences:** Efforts need to be made to acknowledge the varying preferences of different generations and create initiatives for more inclusive work environments that cater to them. Sharna said Gen Z values work / life balance, and that people should be evaluated on output rather than time spent at work.
4. **Promoting Diversity and Growth:** The industry can do better to present itself as a dynamic and inclusive industry by showcasing career pathways and opportunities for professional growth.

The group discussion centred on:

1. Individual pathways to the industry, which are all different.
2. The industry as a terrific proposition for value and purpose-conscious generations.
3. The university and educational institutions don't understand / teach / know about business events – we need to choose an educational partner and develop an educational pathway.
4. We need to focus on the industry being a place for more than event managers.

3. ADVOCACY

A core and central challenge for the business events industry is advocacy of the sector to government. Priya Brown, Director, GRA Partners, a lobbyist and professional advocacy advisor shared how advocacy works, and what the industry's approach could be. She stressed the need to approach advocacy strategically, with stories, considered timing, alignment with government priorities, audience targeting, data utilisation and budget contexts.

Key points:

1. **Advocacy as Storytelling:** Advocacy, at its core, is about storytelling. We need an articulated story to tell governments about our impact, worth and contribution.
2. **Timeliness in Advocacy:** Timing is crucial when advocating for government funding, considering budget cycles, grant submissions, and political election cycles. These are different for each state and territory.
3. **Aligning with Government Priorities:** The advocacy efforts should articulate how the industry's issues align with government priorities, considering benefits to government and how to frame requests effectively.
4. **Understanding Target Audience:** Advocacy submissions should cater to the knowledge level of the audience, using simple language and targeting the interests of decision-makers. Often, a young policy officer unfamiliar with an industry is the one feeding information to the minister's office.
5. **Utilising Data:** Data is essential in supporting advocacy arguments and educating government officials; it needs to be used to emphasise both the factual and political aspects of your story. Our value proposition needs evidence and data for advocacy.
6. **Contextualising Budget Requests:** Advocacy needs to consider the budgetary context when asking for funding. We must consider the financial position of different states and territories and the federal government, as well as the duration of funding required. We should also consider the decision-makers involved, build a coalition of support, and engage people both formally and informally at every opportunity.
7. **Learning from Successful Advocacy:** Examples of successful advocacy, such as the property sectors response during COVID-19, can provide valuable insights into effective storytelling and coalition-building strategies.

The group discussion centred on:

1. The need to emphasise the broader impacts of the business events industry beyond tourism, including its contributions to various sectors of the economy. However, funding often focuses on immediate tourism benefits rather than long-term impacts.

2. Advocacy efforts should not solely rely on government or tourism bodies but should involve various stakeholders within the industry, including event planners, convention centres, and venues.
3. The industry needs to change its messaging to highlight its value proposition beyond monetary gains. This includes showcasing the industry's contributions to economic development, job creation, and knowledge sharing.
4. Advocacy efforts need be backed by data to substantiate the industry's claims and demonstrate its long-term impacts. This requires identifying and measuring key metrics that reflect the industry's contributions over time.
5. Acknowledging that many impacts of business events are longitudinal and may not be immediately evident, we must consider how to convey these impacts within the shorter timelines of political cycles. This requires strategic communication and engagement with policymakers and government departments.

4. SUSTAINABILITY

Overall, the audience is encouraged to collaborate, share best practices, collect data, and tell the industry's collective story to advance sustainability and inclusivity efforts within the Australian business events sector. Samantha Glass, Chair of the ABEA Sustainability Council, and Director of Corporate Affairs, Communication and Sustainability for the ICC Sydney, spoke about regenerative sustainability and the broad spectrum of the topic beyond environment.

Key Points

1. **Urgency of Sustainability:** There's an urgent need to accelerate efforts towards sustainability due to rising carbon emissions, warming oceans, and increasing extreme weather events. 2023 was the hottest year on record, and 2024 will be hotter.
2. **Shift in Sustainability Focus:** There's a transition from a traditional net-zero focus to a positive impact focus, emphasising the importance of considering nature, diversity, and future generations in sustainability efforts.
3. **Learning from First Nations Communities:** First Nations communities offer valuable lessons in regenerative sustainability, emphasising the interconnectedness of the environment and human health over generations.
4. **Sharing Best Practices:** A call on the industry to share sustainability initiative best practices and success stories to highlight positive social impact projects and environmental efforts – showing it can be done, and how it is done.
5. **Data Collection and Advocacy:** Collating data and creating national scorecards can help outline the industry's approach to sustainability, support advocacy efforts, and attract and retain talent.

6. **Addressing Social Issues:** Business events play a crucial role in combating loneliness and fostering connections within communities, aligning with societal desires for sustainability, inclusivity, innovation, and accessibility.

The group discussion centred on:

1. UFI has spearheaded the [Net Zero Carbon Events Pledge](#), 650 companies have signed up globally.
2. To be part of the solution, not the problem – we need to stay ahead of legislation, as we will then be able to inform the legislation.
3. Sustainable aviation fuel is a major issue for long-haul events – 90% of our jet fuel comes from the US. 80% of the carbon generated by international events come from the flights.
4. Event managers look for impact alignment with clients.
5. Sustainability for corporates is directed by procurement. We want events to be renowned for their sustainability leadership.
6. Metrics are important and we need to be measuring against the same set of metrics, so that it is valuable data.
7. The cost of doing nothing is high for Australia.
8. For long-haul destinations, we are saying once you're here, the experience of sustainability will be much better than staying close to home.
9. The different stakeholders involved here – small businesses, associations, governments, and large corporations – all have different needs and capabilities in this space.

OPEN MIC TIME

AI

- How can it help us?
- How can it hinder us?
- What are we as an industry doing about it?
- Are we all in?
- Are we ignoring it?
- Are we testing and learning?

CLOSING STATEMENTS

Peter King, the Chair of the ABEA Board closed out the Leaders Forum with the below sentiments.

- Business events is a very collaborative industry
- The industry is innovative, exciting, mature
- There is a need to invest and nurture talent
- We need to demonstrate that we are a professional and sophisticated industry to governments
- ABEA are the conduit to moving ahead

ABEA 2026 BUSINESS STRATEGY

The ABEA Board held its strategy day on 30 January. The strategy was being finalised during the timing of the Leaders Forum. The results and discussions from this session have been considered and helped to inform the Board's decisions and key strategic directions.