

Can CSR Clear Up the Industry's Image Problem?

By William Keenan Jr.

Incentive programs and corporate meetings involve motivation, communication, training, recognition, leadership and other essential components of engagement. But the last couple of years have been rough on what's commonly known as the MICE industry – Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions – with cancellations, cutbacks and conservatism becoming the order of the day.

Caught up in the backlash against the major corporations whose questionable business practices helped precipitate the current economic crisis, the image of meetings and incentive trips in the general media has largely been one of excess and irresponsibility – right up there with exorbitant bonuses, private jets and company limos on the list of things people think of when they hear the words “corporate greed.”

In some cases those stereotypes and accusations are well-founded. But those in the motivation and meetings industries know this isn't a fair assessment of most programs. Still, the impression most people have of corporate meetings and incentives is that they're just an excuse for a bunch of fat cats to jet off to glamorous resort destinations for a week of golf, spa treatments, gourmet cuisine and a few richly-catered cocktail parties, all on the company tab.

So how does the industry fight that perception? Many ideas have been proposed, but one seems to offer more promise than the others – find ways to “humanize” meetings and incentives, make them less about money and excess and more about people and service. The recent rise of Corporate Social Responsibility offers that opportunity.

A BROADER, ORGANIZED EFFORT

Many in the industry already incorporate a CSR component in the events they plan. But to reverse the damage that's been done to the reputation of corporate meetings and incentives, a broader, organized effort is needed. And most importantly, it needs to be publicized at every possible turn.

InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) recently made a five-year investment in the MPI Foundation that will fund thought leadership studies, research and standards development in the area of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Worth \$500,000, the investment will allow MPI to develop a sustainable meeting and event training program, build a recognized CSR measurement platform for the meetings industry, and launch a CSR research agenda supporting the creation of new educational content for meeting and event professionals.

In light of these and other recent developments in the area of CSR, there are some who believe this could be the so-called “silver bullet” that will stop the negative press and transform the industry's image. One of the Roundtables at the recent IRF Invitational in Colorado Springs focused on this very topic, and ESM asked some of the attendees at that session to take part in a more in-depth discussion about how this idea might be implemented and promoted.

Participants in the discussion include:

- Ira Almeas, President of Impact 4 Good
- Sandi Daniel, President of FIRE Light Group
- Melissa Van Dyke, President of the Incentive Research Foundation
- John Washko, VP Sales & Marketing at The Broadmoor Resort

Organizations need to look at things like employee retention. By adding a CSR program as a part of their culture or event, have they been able to increase employee retention or morale?

– John Washko

Four industry practitioners discuss how incorporating a Corporate Social Responsibility component into meetings and incentives may finally turn the tide and help the public understand why such programs are good for business, employees and the economy in general

ESM: WHAT TYPES OF CSR PROGRAMS OR COMPONENTS MAKE MOST SENSE TO ADD TO MEETING AND TRAVEL EVENTS?

DANIEL: The first step is to make it really easy and simple for program participants to contribute, by having everyone bring a few books or toys in their suitcase for needy children of a local charity in the area, for instance. This takes almost no effort, and even the busiest executives can handle this simple task.

WASHKO: You have to find things that are aligned with your corporate culture. Most corporations out there have some sort of an ongoing CSR program in place. For example, our mainstay here at The Broadmoor is the United Way. But it could be literacy for children, or it could be focused on families of the military. What works best is something that's congruent with causes you're already committed to.

VAN DYKE: CSR program components that leave lasting memories for the participants and have strong ties to the community where the program is taking place – or, as John says, programs that have a strong tie to a corporate charity that employees already support. In the past, the logistics of matching up something meaningful to a particular employee population to the needs of a particular community while still ensuring it didn't disrupt the flow of the program was burdensome and sometimes impossible for an organization's meeting planners. But now there's a whole group of socially conscious corporate teambuilding companies that do an amazing job of bringing these activities to your location or finding something that fits within the program schedule.

ALMEAS: It depends on a company's core objectives. For example, most corporate meetings would like to reach certain objectives for their employees gathering together – better communications, trust, time management skills. All of these can be achieved utilizing a teambuilding activity. However, agendas are packed, and budgets might be limited. That's why all of our activities can be managed within 90-minutes, and we bring the community service to the ballroom. So the group gets an effective teambuilding activity that includes a meaningful CSR component.

ESM: TELL US HOW YOU'RE USING CSR COMPONENTS IN MEETING AND INCENTIVE PROGRAMS.

VAN DYKE: At our recent IRF Invitational in Colorado Springs we had a CSR project with the Children's Literacy Center, a nonprofit organization that encourages increased literacy in school-aged children. Attendees were asked to bring books to donate, and while there helped build bookshelves and craft special bookmarks. Children from the community were also on site to pick out a bookmark and meet our attendees. Since many of the children in the program have one or both parents serving in the military overseas, a number of our people commented on how great it was to support not only Colorado Springs, but our military personnel as well.

DANIEL: We're just beginning to introduce CSR options to our clients, and they all seem to love the concept. First of all it's something new. CSR is a hands-on thing that people can walk away with, even if they didn't get what they wanted out of the meeting. So we now include a CSR component in every proposal we put together.

WASHKO: The number one industry in Colorado Springs is the military. So we've done programs in conjunction with military families and for military personnel who are deployed overseas. For instance, some of our programs put together care baskets to be sent to those soldiers – that's a great one that we can recommend to clients. As to what we've been doing internally, a few years ago we would give an annual thank-

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– Sandi Daniel

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your holiday gift to our best customers. But we recently decided – with the economic downturn and a lot of people needing things – that it would make a lot more sense if we were to give a gift in those customers' name instead. That's when we activated our Build-a-Bike program, where we build bikes for underprivileged children for an organization called Christmas Unlimited.

ALMEAS: Here's a recent example: A financial leasing company planned a sales incentive program to Jamaica. The company's key cause is to support small businesses. It was important that attendees were rewarded with the daily activities and excursions that are expected on an incentive trip, so we sourced a bee farmer's cooperative near the resort that was in need of equipment. We created a tented pavilion near the sea for two days and invited attendees and their guests to stop by after their daily activities, lend a hand and support the local community in Jamaica. The attendees assembled beehives, and local bee farmers were onsite to interact with the corporate guests and share their real-life stories. The interaction with the local farmers was priceless, the attendees went home knowing they'd supported local farmers that very much needed this equipment to survive. Participants also received some of the honey and hand-written notes from the local farmers as a room gift and acknowledgement of their support and friendship.

ESM: WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO USING CSR COMPONENTS IN MORE MEETINGS AND TRAVEL EVENTS? WHAT KINDS OF OBJECTIONS ARE VOICED BY CLIENTS?

ALMEAS: The most common obstacle is a lack of understanding how to effectively create and manage a meaningful CSR event. Specifically, I would say that the key objections are time and cost.

WASHKO: We don't ever try to push the CSR idea [to clients]. We let them know that there are options for CSR programs, and it is usually part of their culture or not. One obstacle is certainly time – especially as we start to see five-day programs become four days, and more programs that maybe had more leisure time built in are now more business-oriented.

DANIEL: I agree. Making time in the agenda is the number one objection. With meeting budgets tight, the time to do anything for a few hours or a half-day is hard to fit in.

VAN DYKE: The obstacles are similar to any team-building activity at a meeting or event – cost justification and logistics. That's why it's important to engage an outside entity that can help ensure you've selected the right activity for your people and situation.

ESM: DO YOU THINK A MORE PROMINENT CSR COMPONENT COULD HELP REVERSE THE NEGATIVE PERCEPTION THAT MANY PEOPLE HAVE OF CORPORATE MEETING AND TRAVEL EVENTS?

WASHKO: A well-done CSR component does help in terms of both external and internal perceptions about an event. Even internally you sometimes have people saying, "OK, we realize the need for us to get together, but do we have to do it at such a nice place?" A CSR component can help to develop goodwill within the team. Research shows that having an active CSR piece to your business in general does that.

DANIEL: Once it's seen that people who go to meetings and incentives are all about giving back rather than just enjoying the "spoils" of their awards or achievements, a whole new perception can be created for the industry.

VAN DYKE: I just wrote an article in one of our industry publications entitled, "If you think incentive trips are all boondoggle, then you don't know Jack.....or Fran...or Larry." These were just a few of the people who donated hundreds of books and built bookshelves to support the Children's Literacy Center at the IRF Invitational. We know from our Pulse Surveys that sensitivity to extravagance in programs hasn't leveled off – in fact it's continuing to increase in the United States. Every day, at programs all over the country and all over the world, participants in CSR programs related to incentives or meetings are coming together, not only to better themselves and their organization, but the community in which they're staying. It really begs the question: If the general media had arrived at AIG's "boondoggle" only to find those individuals making prosthetic hands for mine victims or building bicycles for children in the community, how different would their story have been?

ALMEAS: There are a number of surveys that support the inclusion of CSR in corporate meetings and incentive travel programs, and including a CSR event within an agenda can certainly "soften" shareholders' and the media's perceptions when it comes to corporate spending on meetings and incentive travel programs. It's really the responsibility of the meeting planner and C-suite execs to support the importance of their meetings, as well as the benefits of a well designed incentive travel program, to those challenging corporate spending on these activities.

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**It really begs the question: If the general media had arrived at AIG's "boondoggle" only to find those individuals making prosthetic hands for mine victims or building bicycles for children in the community, how different would their story have been?
– Melissa Van Dyke**

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ESM: WHAT CAN CLIENTS DO – AND WHAT CAN WE DO – TO HELP PUBLICIZE CSR PROGRAMS AND THEIR IMPACT?

ALMEAS: At Impact 4 Good, we provide corporations with a press release at the conclusion of each CSR event. We include testimonials and photos. All participants receive a thank-you letter from the beneficiary as a follow-up. The letter confirms the impact the contribution had on the community. And many times the local press is invited to observe and write a story of the community service event.

VAN DYKE: The media in most communities are often looking for a positive human interest story. Working through your organization's PR team in advance and with a CSR company can help you get the right coverage.

WASHKO: I've written some articles myself in an industry publication that I contribute to about some of the events we've done at The Broadmoor. I feel CSR is an important thing to talk about. So I think we just have to make the information readily available; we have to make it easy.

DANIEL: Contact local media when you're coming in to do a CSR event. It's also something that can become a part of the company's own internal marketing to their team. Most employees feel good when they're a part of team that responds and helps in the community.

ESM: HAVE YOU DEVELOPED ANY WAYS TO MEASURE THE POSITIVE ROI ON CSR PROGRAMS? ANY SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO SPREAD THE NEWS MORE EFFECTIVELY?

WASHKO: Organizations need to look at things like employee retention. By adding a CSR program as a part of their culture or event, have they been able to increase employee retention or morale? Some companies also do surveys of employees after they conduct an event. How do those scores rank when there's a CSR component, versus when they go without one?

DANIEL: We look at ROI pretty much only anecdotally. There are some things that are just really hard to measure. That's why companies often have a "corporate goodwill" line on the balance sheet.

VAN DYKE: I would look more to identifying a "return on objective." If your objective for the program is to create lasting memories for participants, promote an emotional connection between employees and your organization, and achieve corporate-wide CSR goals, then I'd agree with Ira and use the research that supports the effectiveness of these programs.

ALMEAS: Post-event surveys also support the positive results that a CSR activity has had with participants. And it's important to reconfirm that key objectives – such as the effectiveness of the teambuilding element of the event – were met. Impact 4 Good's facilitators can include an on-site assessment that provides useful feedback. In addition, the beneficiary of the CSR activity often completes a post-event survey that provides useful data supporting the donation and the impact on the local community.

ESM: WHAT'S NEXT? WHAT NEXT STEPS CAN THE INDUSTRY TAKE TO ENSURE THAT MORE MEETINGS AND TRAVEL EVENTS INCLUDE A CSR COMPONENT?

VAN DYKE: Incorporating CSR programs as a standard practice for all meetings and events would be great start. We need to organize a bit more strongly around this topic so that we craft a better database and message on how to effectively execute these program elements and what the benefits are.

ALMEAS: It's important that meeting planners, third-party planners, DMCs, production companies and hoteliers understand the importance of CSR events at meetings and incentive travel programs. Being a good corporate citizen should be a goal, just as increasing sales or increasing market share is a goal. The first step is understanding the causes that a corporation or association supports and then creating a CSR event that supports a similar cause that benefits the community at your meeting destination.

WASHKO: I think we all need to get on board. We need to communicate about CSR and make CSR options readily available. We need to be advocates. We would all like to say, "Hey, not only is what we're doing keeping people employed here, but look at what we're doing to impact the community." I think we all want to leave this world a better place.

DANIEL: I just hope the press keeps covering CSR efforts every chance they get! **ESM**

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– Ira Almeas