

## *Miles Clarke Business Events Communication Award 2009*

### *Highly Commended Entry*

#### **A CHANGE OF TACK**

##### **....add a dose of CSR to keep business events ‘stimulated’**

*Written by Vanessa Cali\**

Well it's been doom and gloom for the start of 2009 and everywhere you turn there have been cut backs, salary caps, layoffs and something really new, talk of stimulating packages.

Not surprisingly one of the first things to be placed on the chopping block is the business event - particularly the event in a disused warehouse transformed into Brazilian samba party; or the team building experience banging drums in unison together; not to mention the annual conference in a well known wine region and the employee incentive trip on a tropical island.

Whether this is right or wrong does not matter - this is the current state of play. Main stream media outlets are baying for corporate blood so they can feed them to their hungry readers who are fed up with multimillion dollar pay packages and perceived perks, whilst 'Main Street' struggles with mortgages and the rising cost of breathing.

Look at the headlines generated over a certain corporate 'extravagant' Christmas Party on Cockatoo Island. When the finances markets were starting to melt there was a photo of "The Millionaire Factory's' employees with ties loosened, bathed in a sea of red light, arms waving in the air to the sound of doof, doof on news.com.au. The caption accompanying the display was "Booze bash ... despite the downturn, X Bank has spent more than \$500,000 on its staff Christmas party". The week after the so called 'booze bash', 1,000 employees were laid off.

In the US the scrutiny is worse. The Chairman of the troubled US insurance giant, was forced to write an open letter of apology to congress, after it was reported in the media the company spent nearly half a million dollars at a luxury resort in California for an executive retreat for its top business partners, and this just after accepting a US\$85 million from the US Treasury Department as part of its bailout packages.

Not much was reported on this in Australia but if part of your business is assisting corporations reward their staff with incentive trips to Australia then this statement in the Chairman's letter would send chills into next year's budget. I have **bolded** the important parts for that extra shiver.

*“While **this sort of gathering has been standard practice in our industry for many years and was planned many months before the Federal Reserve's loan to AIG, we understand that our company is now facing very different challenges – and that we owe our employees and the American public new standards and approaches. Let me assure you that we are re-evaluating the costs of all aspects of our operations in light of the new circumstances in which we are all operating**”.*

So what does the business events industry do? We could be more discreet, certainly but with the advent of mobile phone cameras and every media agency advertising the 'text your photos to 0400' it only takes one disgruntled employee, or guest for that matter, to release lions into the stadium, or the hotel ballroom as is mostly the case.

But what if we as an industry could change perception? Take the focus away from the five star to a rewarding philanthropic experience.

Incorporating an aspect of corporate social responsibility or 'CSR' for those down with the lingo, into your client's next event, conference or incentive could help change the headlines from 'Executive retreat' to 'Executives regenerate'...

Imagine.....employees spend half a day restoring the foreshores of Sydney Harbour before heading back to a sales meeting at the InterContinental, or spend a day clearing debris off a remote beach for turtle breeding in Darwin before that convention or spend 3 days weighing echidnas and goannas on Kangaroo Island before sipping on a South Australian red! Makes great sense, and the results are an immediate return on investment.

There are schools out there that need a good dose of paint, crisis accommodation shelters that need some tender loving care and kids that need some mentoring.

In house PR managers will fall over themselves to write press releases for the next share holder report.

Rewarding events and experiences do not have to be all about the 'ME, ME and ME TOO'. There is nothing wrong with 'a bit of me' and a glass of Margaret River chardonnay, but how about sharing the journey, and feeling good at the end of the day for having made a worthwhile contribution, before heading back to the spa?

The business events industry today has an opportunity to regenerate and reinvigorate itself. Surviving this downturn is achievable, and finding ways to improve everyone's environment for the future has got to be the way to go. We need to educate our clients in how to justify why meeting, conferencing and incentivising not only rewards their staff and guests but is helping out others in the community and at the same time providing a return on their investment.

Peace, Love and Mungbeans.

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*\* Vanessa Cali is a member of the team at Encore Business Tourism Pty Ltd, an event management company. She is based in the Sydney office.*