



## *THE BATTLE FOR RECOGNITION*

Why isn't anyone listening to the UK exhibitions industry? Steve Monnington goes in search of some answers on what needs to happen



#WEMAKEEVENTS  
 #PROJECTCONFIDENCE  
 #WEAREVIABLE #PROJECTRECOVERY  
 #SHUTDOWN #FORGOTTEN  
 #WEAREALONE

**A** brief history of social media hashtags over the last few weeks tells the stark story of shifting sentiment from some of the key players in the events sector, as frustration turns to anger at the lack of understanding and support from the UK Government.

Anger was heightened by the withdrawal of the 1 October 'Go Date', which condemned the whole sector to at least six months further lockdown at a time when more and more countries were announcing their own exhibition start dates.

With a second national lockdown underway across England, it's time to reflect on what has gone wrong? How did the hospitality sector get to the front of the queue for the government's attention when we emerged from the original lockdown? How did other countries' event sectors succeed in getting shows open when we failed? And what can we do about it when we re-emerge from lockdown 2 and in the longer term?

#

**THE PERFECT STORM**

Thom Hetherington epitomises the event entrepreneur. His company, Holden Media, organises

Northern Restaurant and Bar (NRB) and the Manchester Art Fair.

NRB's March show was closed-down during build-up and he now finds himself at the centre of a perfect storm – exhibitions, the hospitality industry and the North.

He is immersed in the hospitality sector and has been a major contributor to the efforts to keep it open. "Our focus has always been on the sectors we serve – hospitality and culture – and we have built deep, resilient networks, which means we know the people, the ecologies and the dynamic," he says.

Hetherington has seen firsthand what hospitality has achieved with a targeted approach and, with less of an involvement in the exhibition mainstream, he has watched as the sector has come to a standstill.

"This is now about convincing government that business events are a vital part of rebooting the post-covid economy. We must be there, for the good of UK PLC," Hetherington explains. "The two takeaways from hospitality are that engagement must be with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BIES) and Treasury, not the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS). Also, go with a simple, achievable sharable list

of asks as Hospitality Union did. It will build industry/public pressure and give clarity of voice."

#

**ASSOCIATION LOBBYING**

Chris Skeith, CEO of the Association of Event Organisers (AEO) is convinced that the political lobbying activities, driven by the Events Industry Alliance (EIA) are getting results.

He says: "The EIA approach has been a combination of targeted public affairs work and PR to get through to the heart of government and I have no doubt that we've been seen, heard and understood by the DCMS, which is our "home department". When the 'Go Date' was pulled, we agreed to commit more resources and money. The change in tone and incremental effort is a direct result of the rug being pulled.

"At the moment our message is about survival and therefore treasury support. Longer-term it will be about recovery including Freedom of Information requests for why other sectors are open and we aren't. This will show us the hurdles we have to go through to get a new open date, which will be linked to customer confidence."

An open letter to government from the EIA contained three "asks".

- An adapted wage subsidy scheme with a temporary higher government contribution to event companies' employment costs.
- A regular review process with clear criteria and industry involvement to assess the ability of COVID-secure events to resume at a future date.
- An enhanced grant and loan scheme offered to companies in the sector whilst it remains closed.

Unfortunately, the reply was a classic example of non-commitment and while these measures would be welcomed, a lot of organisers don't want the financial support angle to be pushed in case it gives the wrong

impression to exhibitors that show organisers are in financial trouble.

They simply want to be allowed to run their exhibitions so they are more interested in the measures that will allow them to open, such as government underwritten insurance policies and rapid testing - both of which Skeith says are also being lobbied for.

### # *THE VIEW FROM THE BACK BENCHES*

When I spoke to MPs at the end of September it was depressing to hear that the events sector was considered late to the party and that very little “cut-through” to government had been achieved. Concerted efforts by the EIA and many key figures have now finally started to move the dial.

Robert Largan, Conservative MP for High Peak is one of a handful of MPs who has taken the time to understand the events sector. “It’s been quite noticeable in the last few weeks with half a dozen MPs raising questions in the House about the events sector,” he observes. “However, there is still a lack of awareness from MPs in general about just how central business events and exhibitions are for a lot of businesses as this is where a huge part of their order book gets filled up. For a lot of MPs, their only experience is their own party conference and they don’t understand how big the footprint is. There also needs to be greater awareness that there is a big difference between business events and cultural exhibitions”.

Due to this lack of understanding, Largan believes that two things need to be done better: “You need more advocacy. My constituents are suffering because they can’t exhibit at events but most of these are small companies. You need more companies to weigh in - both Blue Chip and SME’s - so that MPs are more aware of how many businesses rely on the sector. You must also

have a clear message about what is needed. The main reason why hospitality has been more successful is because they have clear messages that have been hammered home.”

### # *THE HOSPITALITY PINCER MOVEMENT*

The hospitality sector, although the victim of the 10pm curfew and the three tier system, was very quick off the blocks and managed to get itself in front of government at the right time. The trade association UK Hospitality represents hotels, bars, pubs, coffee shops, and nightclubs.

CEO Kate Nicholls explains how it managed to get cut through in a way that the events sector hasn’t. “The reality is that it does take persistent, relentless lobbying to find your fair share of voice,” she says. “There isn’t really a quick fix to finding cut-through with Westminster or with the media. You need to apply pressure pretty ruthlessly and

### *“IT FELT LIKE OUR INDUSTRY WAS HOLDING HANDS, SOBBING IN A BASEMENT AND WAITING FOR IT ALL TO BLOW OVER.”*

there can’t be a second where you are not pushing the needs of your members with policy-makers. When things are difficult for the sector you have to ram it down the throat of politicians and make sure they have no excuse for not knowing.”

Nicholls does concede that it’s easier for hospitality to get resonance.

She says: “We are perhaps fortunate in that it is relatively easy for us to communicate the value of hospitality beyond simple economics. If a local pub closes, the economic impact might be relatively minimal,

but that closure resonates with people. That means a vital community, possibly historic community hub has now been taken away from people. It’s much more difficult to make people understand the events industry in that frame of mind.”

Despite UK Hospitality’s position, Jonathan Downey, CEO of London Union and a highly influential voice in hospitality believed that the independent operators wouldn’t be properly represented in the fight that he saw coming.

“At the beginning there was no-one speaking up - it felt like our industry was holding hands, sobbing in a basement and waiting for it all to blow over. You need people to step up and speak out and my job was to be the initial leader in inspiring people to do that”

Downey created Hospitality Union on 16 March, a few hours before Boris asked everyone to “stay away from restaurants and pubs”. What started as a WhatsApp group of 50 contacts became a movement of more than 3,000 hospitality business owners as competitors became collaborators.

“I’d already started work on the six things that the industry was going to need:

- A one-year business rates holiday
- “Time to Pay” for VAT and NIC/PAYE payments plus a VAT holiday
- A lease forfeiture moratorium
- A six-month debt enforcement moratorium
- A £330 billion loan fund

“My credibility as a business operator meant that MPs started picking up on what I was saying. I have a lot of influential members in the group including major press and TV. We knew we needed simple, memorable and impactful soundbites and the list of six was visionary. We got five of the six things we were asking for. The only thing we didn’t get was the debt enforcement moratorium.”

How did Hospitality Union and UK Hospitality avoid

stepping on each other's toes?

"We shared messaging with UK Hospitality but there needs to be a voice from people who actually run their own businesses," Downey explains.

Is this what the UK events sector has been missing – a counterpart to the association lobbying?

Jo Tanner, CEO of political communications firm iNHouse Communications and PR mastermind for Boris Johnson's 2008 Mayoral campaign urges caution.

"There is a natural frustration with how Associations support the wider sector but working remotely means that ministers have limited time to meet different people from the same sector," she says. "Fires are going off everywhere so how do they determine who to meet and who is the voice of the sector? Negotiations may be proceeding with the Association and then the guerrilla movement steps-in with something the government then has to respond to. It can easily derail sensitive negotiations. It can work extremely well in raising awareness but it can also shoot the industries cause in the foot."

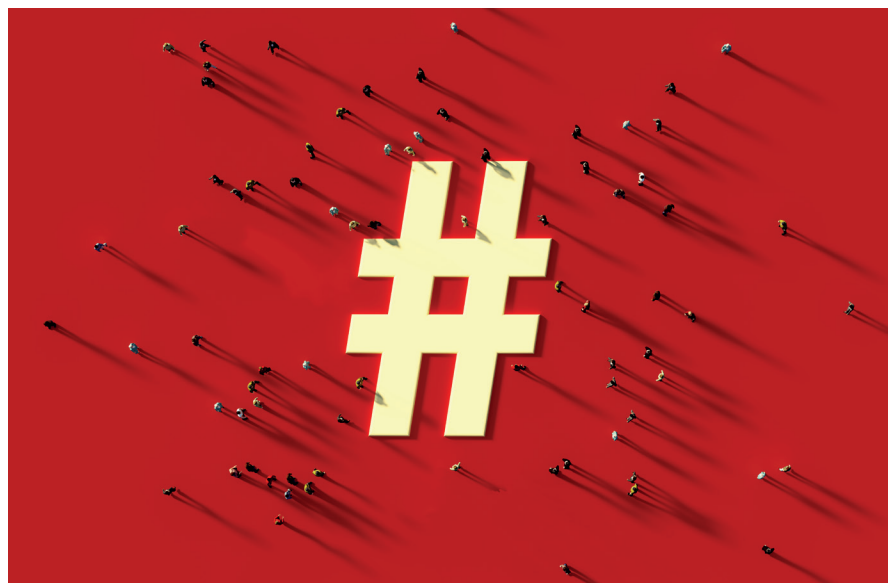
## #

### MEANWHILE IN THE USA

One country that has had to streamline all of the various association and movements into one voice is the USA as Doug Emslie, chair of the Society of Independent Show Organisers (SISO) explains.

"There is a complicated government structure in the U.S as decisions are taken at state and local level. No-one was leading the advocacy effort so "Go Live Together" was set-up by Freeman CEO, Bob Priest-Heck.

"He wanted to bring all the associations together to lobby government to get shows open. SISO was approached as it is commercially focused so can get things done



quickly. We agreed to hire the top lobbying firm in Washington DC and a communications company to work on a programme, which required one-off funding of \$500k."

However, Emslie concedes that, as with the UK, there has been limited success so far.

"Huge effort has gone in but the sector is still not open so there's more to be done and it's become clear that this is not a one-off problem," he continues. "We need something longer-term that advocates for the industry as neither the government nor the individual states understand us.

"We are lobbying at a federal level for loans and insurance but what will get shows open now is testing so we have a task-force working with the experts at Columbia University to put a similar programme together and then work to roll it out worldwide."

## #

### THE TRIPLE WHAMMY

The UK exhibition industry starts with three disadvantages:

There is no government vested interest in our sector. In Germany many of the Messes are owned by the state so they are

more involved at a policy level.

There has also been success in Hong Kong as Stuart Bailey, chairman of the Hong Kong Exhibition & Convention Industry Association explains.

"COVID-19 started in Hong Kong in late January and by February there was a subsidy scheme whereby organisers of international exhibitions and conferences got their venue rental fees back from the government for a period of 12 months from October this year. The reason for the speed was because the Hong Kong Trade Development Council owns half the exhibitions and, as a semi government department, lobbied hard."

The UK government operates at a national rather than regional level. Kai Hattendorf, CEO of global association UFI, is clear about why lobbying has been more successful in the main European countries.

"The key to success in Germany was conversations at regional level, which then came to the federal level. There was competition between the states so when Nordrhein Westfalen said they would open, Bavaria reacted so as not to be left behind. The same happened in Italy where the regions pushed the Italian government for an opening date."

We're in the wrong government department. The reply to the EIA's open letter to Boris and Rishi came from the Undersecretary of State for Sport, Tourism and Heritage and encouraged the EIA to keep sharing information with the DCMS Tourism team. This neatly sums up the problem - the trade exhibition sector belongs in BEIS not DCMS. For 30 years, Phil Soar, Chairman of CloserStill Media has had many roles in the exhibitions sector and says that we have never been understood.

"We don't have a government that is in anyway tuned to the trade show industry and it's very difficult to get them to see things in terms other than "events = Glastonbury". The DCMS is so traumatised over the Cheltenham festival that the idea of opening up any event at all is impossible."

Soar also points to inconsistency of treatment within the DCMS. He says: "The Royal Albert Hall is running 18 events between now and Christmas with 2,500 people at each event. That's 50% capacity. It's very cramped, and access is very tight. Why is this allowed but not 2,500 at the NEC? It's a good example of how nonsensical things are."

### # WHAT'S NEXT?

It's clear that the UK exhibition and events industry has never been understood or appreciated by government but as a phenomenally successful industry, it hasn't mattered to any of our stakeholders until now.

Distilling the many hours of conversations I have had with a whole cross section of people there are several things that can be done in the short-term.

Advocacy. It's not enough for us to explain to the government what we do. We need exhibitors to explain why exhibitions are vital as a sales lead and order generation tool. This is what underpins the message that exhibitions are the kickstart to all sectors of the economy. Organisers are in regular contact with all their exhibitors, so this is achievable. As iNHouse Communications' Jo Tanner puts it: "It's not enough to look at what the event achieved for the people involved in putting it on, you need to be able to demonstrate/quantify what happened as a result of the exhibitors being there. The order being placed that enables the factory to be expanded, which means that more jobs will be created which means a town will be transformed and small suppliers will spring up. Job creation and wealth creation isn't being quantified."

Sharpen the message. Although we are several months behind the hospitality lobby curve, we

*"THE DCMS IS SO TRAUMATISED OVER THE  
CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL THAT THE IDEA OF  
OPENING UP ANY EVENT AT ALL IS IMPOSSIBLE."*

can learn by what hospitality did and sharpen our message of "asks". Many people answered our call to provide the key things we should be asking government.

- A government underwritten Covid insurance scheme
- A clear opening plan we can work to
- Differential between business and general events to take into account COVID secure standards
- Subsidies for organisers to use for hosted buyers and exhibitor grants
- Sector specific furloughing until events can return

There was also a strong view that there needs to be a differentiation in messaging if we are

to push the economic benefits of business exhibitions and it shouldn't be a case of one size fits all across the spectrum of events.

Lock on to the technology. Singapore is piloting pre-event testing from mid-October to December to identify a model that can be widely implemented so that more large-scale events can safely resume. Heathrow is starting to implement rapid testing too.

Longer-term, the consensus is that our job should be to lobby to move our business events home from the DCMS to BEIS. Phil Soar thinks that it's definitely worth a go.

"The likelihood of us achieving anything is small but it's not impossible. I don't think you can do it unless you are perceived to have some serious clout. We have a couple of large quoted companies in Informa and Reed and you can add in the NEC, Olympia and ExCeL as a starting point. You've got to have this level of credibility before

anyone will pay any attention to you."

I asked Soar if this meant more direct involvement. "Yes - people with political power will get a hearing. We claim to be a large important industry and the obvious way we can prove that is with a direct body that represents serious players which speaks for itself rather than through a series of associations and alliances. The major players have got to be a fundamental part of it - they are the ones who will make government, civil servants and press take notice."

If we get this right, the hashtags of the future could be rewritten - #eventsmeanbusiness #openforbusiness #weareunderstood