



News & Analysis > Associations

ACOM Turns 20!

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When industry veteran Bill Just founded the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM), he was well aware that most convention services managers (CSMs) received their training mostly through in-house programs. If they were lucky, they were “allowed” to attend a Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) meeting or Meeting Professionals International (MPI) annual meeting – but these were rare situations.

“Working with convention services professionals was a joy back then, as it is today. They were all very skilled, but I would think – isn’t it a shame that they don’t have their own association?” said Just.

Before ACOM, most CSMs were working 10 to 14 hour days, many for two to three weeks straight, with breaks only as client schedules allowed, leaving no time for continuing education. “I used to worship these CSMs for all that they accomplished while totally lacking the appropriate forum to exchange ideas,” said Just. “Now, having the ability to network has made a big difference in the industry. I think any meeting planner would say the same.”

Just, now retired, has had a tremendous impact on the industry through leadership roles with PCMA and the creation of the Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) certification program. Just successfully launched ACOM in 1988 with the help of several key industry leaders, including Keith Sexton-Patrick, currently the Director of Convention Services for Mohegan Sun. Together they formed the Core Leadership Group with more than 30 convention service professionals from the U.S. and Canada – the model for what ACOM would become.

“We began to see the potential for membership in ACOM. We all realized that because CSM was such a new profession back then, it just wasn’t officially recognized,” said Sexton-Patrick.

Today, with 460 members, ACOM is dedicated to advancing convention services management in the meetings industry and to preparing convention services professionals for their critical role in the success of their organizations. ACOM members hold many positions in convention and visitor bureaus (CVBs), convention centers, conference centers, hotels and resorts and include housing managers, operations managers, catering and facility managers who may work with entertainment facilities, audiovisual or decorator management companies.

“Over the last 20 years, we have added many educational benefits for members,” said Janice Telstar, past president and assistant director of convention services at the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau. “We’re now providing webinars, Idea Network conference call discussions and monthly newsletters. Also, we used to rely heavily on our own members for education but recently have brought in professional speakers for our conferences – that has made a big difference.”

Perhaps one of ACOM's biggest accomplishments came when the association became one of 32 member organizations of the Convention Industry Council, helping to facilitate the exchange of information and developing programs to promote professionalism that have also raised awareness about CMP certification.

Also, a mutually beneficial relationship with PCMA has resulted in the decision to co-locate their respective annual meetings. Roy Evans, executive director of PCMA at the time of ACOM's launch, agreed with Just that offering ACOM members a share in PCMA's educational sessions with executive management, sales and marketing executives, and convention service personnel all in one place at one time would significantly streamline education and communications within the industry.

"ACOM members value the level of education that we provide and benefit from building relationships," said Sexton-Patrick. "Both lead to increased professionalism and feeling valued."

One of the constant challenges of keeping ACOM on the upswing, according to Telstar, is to retain current members and continue to rise to the occasion to offer exceptional opportunities. Members have increasingly been providing sponsorship from within the association, applying their own skills to create bigger and better conferences every year. "The beauty of ACOM is that we continue to have fun and keep the association feeling like a second family – a professional family."