

Report on 2003 APACA Conference

by APACA Vice President **Suzette Watkins**

From any point of view, the 2003 APACA Conference *The Way Forward* was a great success. We had 101 delegates, which included 73 members. Several members took advantage of reduced rates for additional delegates and brought other staff members along. This broadens the perspective of the conference and often introduces new ideas and ways of thinking.

In a significant departure, there were also 11 people who came along just for one day or one session. I think this reflects the quality of the speakers and sessions at this conference.

The Way Forward conference was make or break time. This was the time to show our colleagues what APACA does, and can do for our members. The conference had to be relevant, compelling and above all **useful** for our members and 'owners'. It also had to be fun. We want people to come back next year, knowing that it will be one of the highlights of the year.

This conference was also the first that I can recall that didn't make a loss. The Executive had budgeted for a small deficit, in line with previous years, but with the brilliant management of Christine Dunstan Productions (a huge thank you to Christine and Cherrie this provision was not needed).

We had all been hoping that Minister Kemp would announce the results of Playing Australia during his speech – particularly given that Long Paddock was to take place immediately following the Conference – but this was not to happen.

Some highlights from my point of view:

Philip Adams:

I could not stop mulling over what he said about Australians losing their voice; about globalisation and its effect on our cultural identity.

I was particularly struck by his comment about the fact that Australia produced around 500 feature films before talkies, then the Brits and the Americans moved in, bought the cinema chains and the Australian movie industry died, until its revitalisation in the 60's and 70's. "We were robbed of our voice" is how he put it.

I feel we are once again in danger of being 'robbed of our voice' if the Free Trade Agreement with the USA does not exclude cultural products. After all, if there's no film industry, most Australian actors will not be able to get work in this country and live theatre will also go down the gurgler.

Adams reiterated the words he's used on the then Prime Minister John Gorton when the idea of a film development unit was first proposed. "It's time to see our own landscape, to hear our own voices and dream our own dreams."

Powerful stuff.

Equally powerful were his closing remarks. He was quoting Pablo Casals, the great Spanish cellist, who stopped playing during Franco's regime. Adams was applying this to both the dire funding environments most of us operate under, and the danger of Australian voices being swamped once again under the weight of imported cultural items. "The situation is hopeless. It is time to take the next step".

Rick Farley:

Rick was a most dynamic and relevant speaker. I note that APACA took his approach on board very quickly once we had to do a massive lobbying job on the Playing Australia funding results. And I have to say, it worked.

In some ways, what he said was obvious, but I think we all learned something. I sure as hell did!

He asked us to consider our lobbying efforts in light of the political realities that politicians look at every day. For example: 85% of the population live within 50km of the coast on 1% of the land mass. So you have to convince people living on the coastal fringe that your issue is important.

He also suggested that we look for windows of opportunity. When are elections happening and where? Sound policy making is done more than six months away from an election. Give sound policy basis for the propositions you're putting forward.

In developing policy positions and lobbying, you need effective research and numbers to be able to able to communicate effectively with those you need to influence.

Get the same message coming from as many directions as possible

- Backbenchers are looking for something to do.
- Parliamentary committees (eg Senate Estimates) are very effective vehicles for getting your message across.
- Ministerial officers control access, diaries etc, so get them on your side.
- State branches of parties (they make recommendations from their state and national conferences).
- The media can be a very effective lobbying tool.
- Make sure there's always a filmic backdrop – not just a talking head.
- Know their deadlines. Schedule media calls appropriately, but make sure they don't have time to get a comment from somewhere else. 1 – 1.5 hrs before deadline is good.
- Use a current affairs show to break a story eg Channel 9 Sunday program – set the agenda for the day.
- Provide a backgrounder to go with the media release - "feed the chooks" as Joh Bjelke Petersen used to say.
- Send a media release to regional media with regional contacts. They'll use the story if there's some local flavour.

Try to develop strategic alliances. Find out where you can all agree and work with that. Enlightened self-interest has the best chance of winning. Create the widest possible base of public support.

Final keynote speaker Dr Roberto Villano:

The trouble was, he was so damned plausible! I was also taken in at the start, but woke up well before the end. Round about the 'strategic serendipity' part. He had all the patter down....., well....., pat! The sight of the entire room up and dancing Zorba the Greek was definitely one of the sights of the conference. I do hope it was captured somehow on film. There were some people who left the session early who never cottoned on. Love it!

Risk management, Lyndall Milenkovic:

This one was a little heavy to digest first up, but it was vital information for any venue operator. In fact there was so much 'meat' in her presentation that is essential for us all to consider.

A couple of things stuck with me. One was to ensure that you witness the tests that are supposed to be carried out in your venue, such as the pressure drop in fire systems, blowing a puff of smoke into the fire detection system etc. Don't just rely on someone telling you it was done. OK, this sounds like overkill – why do I have managers of these areas if I go round after them and check? Because **you** are ultimately responsible. That's a good enough reason for me.

“In an emergency, people will always try to get out the way they came in”. This is despite the fact that there may be an obstruction or danger there. And despite the fact that there are several other clearly marked exits. Therefore we have to educate our patrons as to where the other exits are. How do we do this without distracting from the performance that we are about to see? That’s another question entirely.

“If it’s not in the code, do I really have to do it?” How often have we weighed this one up ourselves? Remember that in the recent fire in the NY nightclub, everything was ‘to code’ – and people died.

Consider what other people introduce into your site. Every lead you have may be tagged and tested. Every piece of set and equipment may be made of non-flammable materials, but what do other people bring in? Especially those who come from different jurisdictions, where other codes may not be as strict.

Risk management: what begins as a defence mechanism, becomes an embedded strength.

Hypothetical with Simon Longstaff:

This was a great addition to the program. It dealt with issues that we all have to think about every day – although not hopefully all at once! The panel were all willing to enter into the fray with the scenarios given. He’d obviously been particularly well briefed, as he managed to get some surprising points of view from some surprising people. Getting panel members to argue from a point of view not traditionally their own is a brilliant way of getting a unique twist on hypothetical events. There should be more of this!

The touring forum also had the panel working from the normally opposite point of view. This also produced some interesting comments! Overall, perhaps not so much of a ‘result’ as an opening of minds, perhaps.

Other highlights:

Bus tour: Great to see so many people taking advantage of the opportunity to visit other venues. Each venue showed a different aspect of this industry, which was really interesting.

Cocktails with Mary Delahunty – Victoria Minister for the Arts was a great way to start off the conference. A great time for meeting up with people and developing new alliances.

Dinner: I reckon this was the best dinner we’ve had. No ‘dirty dancing’ this time from Mr Rae and Mr Harris, or a display of the *Macarena* from Ms Beck, but a great time was had by all. Hell, I was up dancing, and that takes some doing! I **loved** the waiters and Paul Capsis was his usual brilliant self. The surroundings were absolutely inspired – The Famous Spiegeltent is a total icon and sooooo elegant. It’s going to be hard to top this one next year, I can tell you.

Huge thanks to our brilliant Conference Organisers, Christine and Cherrie. You have set a very high bar for next year. Can we persuade you to do it for us again in the future? I know it wasn’t easy at times, dealing with health and personal issues before and during the conference, but it was a ripper! Here’s to the next one.

Suzette Watkins

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