The following is an excerpt of questions and answers from the January 2010 CAEM panel discussion with Robert George’s responses.

**Question:** What strategies do you recommend to meet the changes and challenges in 2010?
Predicting the economic future and its attendant strategies is nearly impossible even for economists …. you know the ones who always have the answers to last year’s questions. I think the changes and challenges we face can be as an industry can be distilled into two simple statements.

**First as to** change “The high growth rates shows have experienced over the last 25 years is over” We need to accept that reality. We are becoming a mature industry… although you would never know that given the carrying on at the annual conference.

**Second as to** challenges we need to develop a plan as to “How can we re-engage our exhibitors and attendees and re-energize our properties”

In 1982 I spoke at a CAEM Conference and the key point I made then is one I will repeat today because nothing has really changed in those intervening 28 years and that is… “Whatever got you where you are today will not keep you there tomorrow. Today’s sustainability issues are complex and need a new perspective and innovative solutions. We cannot simply stay in the middle of the road or we will get run over. Our trade show world is a rapidly changing world and clinging to the past can and will be fatal.

I find there is a lot of concern about the future and format of trade shows. Clients frequently ask “Are trade shows declining and even dying? “Are trade shows even relevant anymore given the explosion of the internet? Is there a future for trade shows and if so what does that future look like?”

Well in my opinion, and lord knows I always have one, is that anyone who organizes or provides services trade shows should know that change is coming and it is coming very fast. I have been talking about change for thirty years and the one thing I have learned that if you want to make waves try to change something. So I continue to forge ahead because I believe when we all think alike, no one thinks very much. The big question is …”What will those changes be and how do we adapt our business model to take advantage of them”

I believe there is a future for some trade shows but unfortunately there will be others that will probably require life support. Those are the ones that adhere to tradition and refuse to change with the times. I think tradition is what get when you do not invest in the resources to do it right.
A recent US study asked a variety of companies “will you continue to attend trade shows as often as in the past?” 1/3 of them said NO. They also asked “Will you have a greater presence as an exhibitor at trade shows in the next 5 years?” and more than half of them said NO. So I take that as a message that a change in how we conduct our business is long overdue…But I think change is just what this industry needs. We need to reposition our products, provide better attendee and exhibitor value and earn that exhibitor and attendee dollar.

**For starters I for one recommend** that facilities, decorators, show managers and all those who have a vested interest in this industry need to get together as a group and create and design the next generation of meetings and trade shows. We seem to all be headed in different directions without any kind of unified objectives. The recession combined with the explosion of internet economics I think will be the catalyst for significant change whether we like it or not. I am convinced that many trade shows and meetings will become smaller and move toward niche conferences with a more focussed vertical audience where the experience will be more intimate and the results can be easier quantified. In other words shows will develop a more focussed brand. If new products and technologies appear that may mitigate this trend.

Many exhibitors complain to me that they just do not get enough face time especially at major shows. Everyone is just too busy with all the various show activities. There are too many product announcements and their message just gets lost in the noise. **Just look at what Apple and Google did recently.** The two biggest product announcements of the year were done prior to CES and Macworld. **They are managing their message in a way that allows them to be one voice instead of one of many.** This was a very clever deliberate strategy and not merely a coincidence. This probably means the end of Macworld since all the other Macworld shows died when Apple pulled out. This kind of exhibitor behaviour represents a clear and present danger to organizers especially to those producing shows where technology announcements cannot wait for the next show. So if I am a producer of one of these types of events I need to wake up and face the facts and develop a strategy to contain this behaviour. You know facts do not cease to exist just because we ignore them.

Also another exhibitor complaint is the returns for many exhibitors in many shows are just not there. Exhibitors are discovering that they can host private shows for a fraction of the cost especially where large heavy equipment is
the product. They have also discovered they can have virtual exhibits on their web sites. We of course can argue the trade show provides a more personal experience but from a financial standpoint the ROI of on-line marketing wins hands down. Consequently I suspect we will see a migration of exhibit dollars from trade shows to digital media. More exhibitors will shift more of their marketing budget to existing and developing on-line activities. So as show organizers we will have to provide better education, more interactive and integrated meetings. The key is we will have to develop a new strategy and produce events that the on-line experience is unable to duplicate.

I might seem a little crazy but I suggest we should focus more on customer profitability rather than fixating on our own profitability (within reason of course) because if we provide it to attendees and exhibitors ours will automatically follow. This approach will be more of a challenge for public companies than the private ones but adaptation is vital. You may say well our show has a great current sales and great profits …..but it is possible that the future prospects for that event may be poor. Remember just because the sun is shining doesn’t mean bad weather is not on the horizon.

I think the younger generation of show managers will be more tech savvy and more customer centric and will focus more on acquiring attendees who will have more input about how the meeting is constructed via such things as needs analysis surveys and advisory councils. This will provide the foundation for a more collaborative process and give organizers better information as what programs attendees really want. The various social media formats such as blogs, discussion forums and twitter and face book will become important information contributors as to what attendees and exhibitors are talking about.

What I am suggesting is to not push products at attendees and exhibitors but to serve and cultivate them as customers. The future will be to find out what the customer wants and fulfill that need.

I think there will be a return to the original reason marketing was invented. That was to develop relationships with people relevant to our enterprise. I see slowly but surely a move away from traditional broadcast “push” type marketing to more of a conversational one. I think those companies structured to market products rather than cultivate customers will fall behind.
I believe there will be more focus on attendee buying power than just **gross attendance numbers** since the overall attendance at shows has been declining for a while now and will probably continue into the foreseeable future.

The good news is I don’t think that internet conferences, webinars, private shows and virtual conferences will supplant trade shows. On the contrary I believe they will just be another form of adjacent marketing. Remember the radio was supposed to replace newspapers and television was supposed to replace radio and film but they coexist.

**So I think we can all co-exist but in a somewhat different form than at present.** As marketers we need to exploit all these different mediums to our advantage. By way of example email has become an important part of everyone’s marketing arsenal. It has become a tool not a threat. We all need to think in terms of “**Unified Marketing Communications**” whereas we integrate all the things we see as threats and turn them into allies. The best way to evolve and prosper is to incorporate these new ideas and technologies into our business. If we stick to our old ways of business as usual the downside is we will likely miss new opportunities and competitor threats and misread the needs of our customers.

**Question: What are you doing now that is different than this time last year?**

**It is a combination of new strategies and increasing the voltage on existing strategies.**

I start with the premise that not only has the economy changed, our customers have changed, our prospects have changed, the way people buy has changed. Everything has changed so it is time to stop worrying about when the recession will end but how to start the recovery at least in our little universe and choose marketing that that we can measure.

I explore with corporate clients what economic advantages can be gained by realigning the strategies and structures of their exhibit program. I recommend reviewing strategic goals and discontinuing participation in those events that do not
contribute to the growth and well being of their enterprise. The focus is on the shows that have proven measurable results.

**I encourage clients to study the trends to see where the culture, technology and products are going. Start a facebook page and update it regularly. Build a twitter presence (50 million users at last count) and tweet regularly about the show. Twitter is an excellent tool for networking because you can reach huge audiences and target specific niches. Answer questions on linkedin and collaborate on line with Google Wave. In other words increase your exposure through social media. I subscribe to the notion that if we continue selling the same products and services and selling them in the same way we were a few years ago then we are behind the curve.**

Learn how to use Bing Webmaster and Google Webmaster Central tools to improve the e-commerce website’s appearance information architecture and functionality. Make sure your website looks and works great on mobile devices

**Create video clips or slide shows and feature them on the website and upload to things like Youtube.**

Write a Wikipedia entry about your event. Millions of people use Wikipedia as a reference and the entries rank high in search engines

Update your Website. Look at your or Blog as free low cost advertising. Use the Blog to tell them the latest conference and show news.
Take advantage of Mobile Marketing. Globally twice as many people use text messaging than email.

Focus on ideal profitable customers who are happy with your product. Keep a detailed profile of them.

I encourage clients to build flexibility into the business model. Keep fixed costs to a minimum, control our web site and related digital media and travel and entertainment expenses, reorganizing human resources and concentrating on the profitable core businesses and recommending clients do not sign long term contracts without cancellation and performance clauses.

**Question: what attendance strategies are you doing employing for 2010?**

I try to develop and implement attendee engagement strategies. Try to provide value beyond what they paid for. I am encouraging clients to focus on attendee profitability rather than focussing on our own (within reason of course) because if we can provide attendee profitability they will come and if they come so will the exhibitors.

Make a continuous year round effort at promotion as opposed to just a few months before the show.
I encourage the use of an integrated calendar whereas each promotion activity is scheduled so as not to hit them with multiple communications at one time. I am trying to serve and cultivate them as customers and communicate value in attending events.

Sending communications to attendees as to how to visit show and showing them how to set goals and pre-plan their visit.

I am encouraging attendee collaboration by using needs analysis surveys and advisory councils to find out what programs attendees really want.

Focussing on that 20% of the universe that will generate 80% of the qualified attendees. Vertical marketing promotion pieces are developed for different groups. An educational development piece for one and a product promotion for another.

Making use of the social media as a promotion strategy including twitter, facebook and the like because different attendees respond to different messaging formats.
Reviewing the timing of promotions: Those most likely to attend get the first mailings and emails and rented lists get contacted after registration is live. Attendance promotion is timed differently for different parts of the country because of the need for travel plans.

**Question: How are you working with exhibitors?**

As a show contractor we offer bundled services to high value clients. In almost all the shows where I am the general contractor and or the exhibit designer builder I provide almost all the services such as electrical, material handling, transportation, janitorial, labour, exhibit rental and even fulfilment services.

As a consultant I encourage exhibitors to maintain their show participation. Marketing should continue to expand. I advise them not to abandon their marketing strategies but adapt them to the new realities of the marketplace. I caution them that if they remove themselves from the show they risk removing themselves from customer decisions.

I help them identify what non core functions in their show budget would be eligible for outsourcing.

I help them identify what shows they should participate in based on promotional material supplied by promoters.
I help them identify what products can be aligned with conference topics and encourage them to offer those products to the presenters for their sessions.

I help them identify the audience profile and show them how to calculate the potential audience and consequently how much space they need in order to reach that target audience.

Track how customers differ in their characteristics and purchasing behaviour for the company’s products

Educate them as to how to set show objectives and design their exhibit to have form follow function

Provide seminars on good boothmanship

**Attempting to identify disruptive technologies and how we can make them our own and turn them into allies.**

Example offset printing vs digital printing  
Brick & motor retailing vs online

Measure return on investment

How to build more booth traffic