

## Q&A WITH TARA GORDON, VP, BUSINESS EVENTS, TOURISM TORONTO



*Photo: Collision Conference*

Collision is North America's fastest growing technology conference, and it's moving to Toronto in 2019. Collision is the sister event to the popular Web Summit conference in Lisbon and it is expected to bring more than 90,000 attendees to Toronto over the next three years, with a combined economic impact of \$147 million.

The organizers were attracted to Toronto because it's the fastest growing technology market in the world, ranking ahead of Boston, Chicago, and Seattle in terms of tech jobs. The city also has the third largest tech sector in North America with 14,000 companies employing more than 400,000 tech professionals.

According to Tara Gordon, Vice President, Business Events at Tourism Toronto, a conference of this magnitude demonstrates how meetings and events can be a powerful catalyst for economic development in priority sectors, not just in Toronto, but across the country.

SkiftX spoke with Gordon for more insight into the connection between business events and economic development.

**SkiftX:** How are you positioning Toronto to business event organizers in advanced industries today?

**TG:** As a leader in technology, life sciences, and financial services, to name a few, Toronto is a logical destination for groups looking to meet here. This is where innovation in their industry is happening. Groups choosing the city for their meetings are poised to benefit from the conversation that is happening here in their sector, and they can benefit in a number of ways, whether that's increased sponsorship, attendance building, or programming from relevant thought leaders. Connecting with industry thought leaders and academia, conference organizers can conduct content-related site inspections and gain access to subject matter experts to recruit new talent, grow their industry membership, exchange best practices, and meet with real purpose in Toronto.

**Do you have any specific case studies where you've won a bid that tipped in your favor based on the strength of your industry clusters?**



Tara Gordon, Vice President, Business Events Sales & Service, Tourism Toronto

Toronto is a leader in life sciences, and with every medical bid we submit we look to capitalize on the fact that we're a center of medical excellence in Canada. We have a high concentration of teaching hospitals working in close relation to the University of Toronto and its vast research programs.

The 2018 World Conference on Lung Cancer brought leading experts dedicated to research and treatment of lung cancer and thoracic malignancies to Toronto earlier this year. The bid to bring the group to the city was bolstered by the fact that we are a world leader in lung cancer research and treatment. The conference also had a tremendous impact on advancing practice in the field by highlighting the leading work being done in Toronto and in Canada. The efforts resulted in the world's largest meeting of its kind, setting a record of around 7,500 attendees.



## How do you convince local leaders in your advanced and creative industries to collaborate with you to win meetings business? What is the benefit for them?

We're really trying to create a differentiator in the marketplace when we're having conversations with organizers as to why we want the business that we're soliciting to come to our destination. The Leader's Circle is Toronto's official Ambassador Program, which plays an instrumental part in helping to bring international meetings to the city, while also providing opportunities to work with locals to bring meetings here. Top thinkers, innovators, and researchers partner with our team to form a growing network of leaders to host events in Toronto, which ultimately amplifies their life's work and research globally.

We see this truly as a partnership where we are able to work together from the initial stages of identifying the opportunities, to the bid process, and right up to the conference. The benefit for so many of these local leaders is the ability to showcase their products, innovations, and quite frankly themselves to their peers, as well as elevate the work that they are doing in their industry. Often the people we work with are just as proud of showcasing Toronto as a destination for these meetings as we are.

## How will the national strategy developed by Business Events Canada further help you increase meetings business in your city?

We had already begun the sector strategy for Toronto a few years ago. But having Business Events Canada moving along the same lines and focusing on aligning our sector strategy with theirs means we have their support and marketing behind us. It certainly helps keep our team focused.

We started the sector strategy because the city has become so popular that we can't afford to go around and just try getting any kind of business into the city.

We are much more granular and much more surgical in our approach today so that we maximize the experience and opportunity for organizers, the attendees, and our community. When you bring people, who are aligned to our strength, then we can add some value to the organizing committee's content and we can expose our communities to other communities.



## How was Toronto able to successfully secure Collision?

It started with a call from Mayor John Tory who had met with the owners of Collision. He contacted us and said that he wanted to go after this business and see if we could bring it to the city. The mayor has had meetings with the owners through other leaders in the technology sector in Toronto, such as the MaRS technology incubator group.

When we got involved, Toronto Global was also involved, which is a regional economic development agency. They're trying to bring businesses into our region, and we started working with Toronto Regional Board of Trade as well. So we had economic development from the city, Toronto Global, the technology community, and MaRS innovation hub, and we had the Toronto Regional board of trade.

It then expanded to include other Canadian economic development groups. So what we're trying to do is make this more than a Toronto story. We want it to be a Canada story around the world. When we went to Web Summit, recently, and Collision this past year in New Orleans, it was a Canadian contingency representing Collision for Canada. Even though Toronto is hosting it, it is a Canada story that we are trying to broadcast around the world.

## Are you attempting to measure the long-term economic impact of hosting business events in your priority sectors?

That's a hard one, because we don't specifically continue following up as to what the legacy is for our events and international congresses. One thing we've done with our Leaders Circle is that we created a grant program that we have filled with a pool of a million dollars between the convention center and ourselves. We will issue grants up to \$50,000 based on the successful application by ambassadors who were successful in securing a congress for our destination. We know how much work is required for an ambassador to successfully get to the bid and host their peers and community, and they don't get paid for that.

We wanted to entice people to become ambassadors, so we have now given three \$25,000 grants to doctors and professors to further their research programs. They report to us on an interim basis and then one year later on the results of their research. It's not directly related to having hosted the event in the city, but it really is all tied into the program.

