



Microsoft Australia general manager Pip Marlow is speaking at the Creative Innovation conference in Melbourne in November. micenet AUSTRALIA spoke to her about creativity and meetings.

Microsoft innovation

Q: Why have you agreed to do a presentation at the Ci2011 conference and what will your presentation focus on?

A: Our world is faced with a myriad of challenges and choices and networked technology has the potential to improve many areas of human endeavour. This year's theme, "The challenges and opportunities of a super-connected world" is one that as a business leader in a global technology company, I've given a lot of thought to. I am speaking on 'Technology in learning environments – will it deliver on its promise?' and will be investigating how the education sector will continue its digital 'coming of age', laying the foundation for a generation of Australian children to be innovators of the future. Ci 2011 has an amazing line-up of speakers, such as Edward de Bono, Raymond Kurzweil and Stephen Heppell and I'm looking forward to exploring these topics with such prolific thought leaders.

Q: The theme of this conference is "the challenges and opportunities of a super-connected world". What challenges and opportunities does Microsoft Australia have today?

A: The breadth of our offering is what makes Microsoft both interesting and challenging as we have so many consumer and commercial products all under one roof. On the one hand, we've got products like Windows Phone 7 and Bing, which are clearly challenger brands and then we have our established flagship brands like Windows and Office. Windows is used by about a billion people on our planet and those billion customers have very diverse opinions and needs. In fact if you look at Microsoft all-up, everyone from Excel business users to families to hardcore Xbox gamers use Microsoft products and our brand means many different things to different people. Another challenge would be one that's facing the industry as a whole and is both an opportunity and a challenge – and that's the transition to cloud. As Microsoft moves to the cloud, it's important that we support our customers in their shift to 'IT as a service' and help them focus on business vs. infrastructure. We are also working with our partners, helping them take best advantage of, as well as create, new services and opportunities to be offered in the cloud.

Q: How does Microsoft Australia regard creativity and innovation within your business?

A: It's a core essential. Microsoft exists because of innovation and we firmly believe that continued innovation will drive our growth into the future. We have more than 800 computer scientists, sociologists, psychologists, mathematicians, physicists and engineers across the globe working on creative technology developments. This year, Microsoft has increased our global investment in R&D by more than \$1 billion to \$9.6 billion a year... more than any technology company in the world. Through our commitment to innovation through research and development, we are ensuring that we'll continue to meet the evolving needs of consumers and businesses.

Q: How do you nurture creative talent?

A: Microsoft operates a philosophy and approach of 'what works for you, works for us' inviting employees to construct and agree [on] work arrangements around their individual needs and requirements. Microsoft believes that work is something that you do, not a place that you have to go to and as such it works hard to foster a positive place to work and create an environment where people can be the best that they can be. We understand that you'll enjoy work more and do a better job if you also have a full, rewarding life. Microsoft has always been about recognising the value that different life experiences and viewpoints bring to our business. We seek out people from diverse backgrounds and encourage them to take risks and approach challenges unconventionally. By respecting and embracing everyone's unique skills and perspectives, we can create an environment that encourages remarkable innovation. What's more, this way of doing business helps our employees—as well as our customers and communities across the globe—unleash their potential and lead better lives.

Q: In terms of the meetings industry, what tools does Microsoft offer that can enhance meetings?

A: What great meeting or event was ever achieved by one person alone? Collaboration is

◀ the key to any great meeting and it's with this in mind that many of Microsoft's products have been developed.

For example, conference planning is a frequent business necessity that requires significant time, effort and coordination from team members. Tools such as SharePoint include templates that can help teams organise events, for example, allowing attendees to register online for sessions, extract event schedules and facilitate online communication and interaction. In addition, role based dashboards can be set up in SharePoint to provide applicable information for individual event members, such as speakers, guests, staff, vendors, and delegates.

In the near future, combining a world-class brand such as Skype with Microsoft's rich and growing unified communications properties will help us advance the state of real time communications around the world. We believe this combination will increase the accessibility and ubiquity of real-time video and voice communications, bringing benefits to both consumers and enterprise users and generating significant new business and revenue opportunities.

Q: What is just around the corner in terms of new products that may have an impact on the meetings sector?

A: We currently use keyboards, mice and clickers to interact with most PCs but we're already starting to see a shift towards more natural and human-like interaction using touch, gestures, handwriting and speech recognition. This shift toward Natural User Interface (NUI) represents a significant transformation in computing and will impact all aspects of our lives in the years to come in the home, workplace, entertainment, healthcare, etc.

Microsoft Kinect is a great example of NUI in the gaming space. With Kinect you don't need a game controller, it senses your body's motion and you control the game by moving your hands, feet, legs and body using gestures recognised by the software. In the near future, Australians will also be able to control Kinect with spoken commands when voice control launches.

We recently released a Kinect software development kit (SDK) and hope to see many non-gaming innovations come to light as a result of this. Perhaps instead of using a clicker on stage speakers might be able to embrace the technology and simply wave their hand or say "next slide".

Looking to the future, virtual meetings will become more common and Microsoft is developing technology to make them feel more real. Using the Kinect technology, your own avatar can be built, which represents a digital "cartoon" of yourself, which can join multi-party tele-present meetings where everyone's avatars will meet in cyberspace. You'll be able to see through the eyes of your avatar, hear through its ears and your voice will be projected and transferred to the other people in the tele-present meeting.

These avatar meetings in cyberspace will help make virtual meetings easier and more fun – it will also help the elderly or disabled to socialise and interact with the community.

Creative Innovation 2011 is being held from November 16 to 18 at the Sofitel Melbourne on Collins. Visit www.creativeinnovationglobal.com.au to learn more.

slowly slowly for U.S. associations

THE RETURN OF association events in America to pre-GFC numbers was an intriguing topic at a mid-July industry lunch at Wolfies, Sydney organised by the Associations Forum.

STORY BY **EDWINA STORIE**

The industry event hosted local and international associations managers including special guest Christie Tarantino, CEO of the Association Forum of Chicagoland. The Association Forum of Chicagoland is the second largest group in America focusing on advancing the practice of association management. Ms Tarantino was the guest speaker at the Associations Forum National Conference held at the Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre on July 27 and 28.

The mood of the day was that things were slowly beginning to pick up since the economic downturn, although the American associations market is realistic and not expecting a full recovery in the near future.

"It has been a very difficult two-and-a-half years in the associations community, and meetings and events were tremendously impacted," Ms Tarantino said.

"We're starting to see minor increases in attendance at events but it's certainly not pre-recession levels."

And the recovery rate differs dramatically across each industry.

"Certain segments of the association industry are doing very well, such as health care. But a lot of associations are still recovering or not recovering from our economic downturn."

Ms Tarantino said they weren't expecting an instant recovery and that the bounce back was heavily dependant on the housing market which is still on the decline. It won't be until major sectors such as these recovered that the associations industry would be back on track.

"We believe it's going to take years. Our industry lags the rest of the economy so we're a long way from economic recovery in the United States."

Sponsorship challenges

Ms Tarantino also said the economic downturn has changed the nature of event sponsorship. Supporting an event is no longer valued solely as a branding exercise which is pushing organisations to be more creative with how they can guarantee a return on sponsorship, while also having their own requirements fulfilled.

That said, delegate numbers are increasing in some American industries.