

FEATURE ARTICLE

Maximising congress attendance: an increasing challenge for associations

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When working with international associations on their meetings these days, one of the most common statements that I hear is: “We are planning to cut costs in our congress budget since we don’t know what will happen in 2 years’ time!” It is a fact that

uncertainty continues to grow regarding both industry support and delegate attendance, particularly in the healthcare sector. The concern, which has been with us for many years, is that attracting delegates to a conference or scientific meeting has become more and more of a challenge and a headache for associations.

This is due to a variety of reasons. It is not only because of a steadily increasing number of competing conferences, but also due to the fact that professionals are entitled to take fewer days off for continuing education. On top of that, corporate compliance policies and new industry regulations are affecting the ability of companies to invite delegates.

There is also another fear factor – how will on-line access to digital educational content and e-learning platforms impact the attendance at face-to-face meetings? An increasing number of associations are making all congress content available through a dedicated e-library at their websites, either for a limited period of time or all year round. Nevertheless, several case studies actually show that access to digital content does not prevent people from signing up for the next conference – and in fact motivates non-attendees to go, and not to miss out on the face-to-face experience. That sounds

promising ... However, it is important to get the basics right, including a cutting-edge scientific programme, an attractive programme design and format allowing for delegate engagement and providing good networking opportunities, as well as the best return on investment (ROI) or on objectives (ROO)!

Let us return to our initial challenge ... One of the major concerns of associations today, very often due to a lack of expertise, is how to reach out to their potential target groups and to design a strategy and communication plan that will enable them to maximise delegate attendance for their face-to-face meetings. There are two key questions to be answered. How do potential participants find out about the conference and its value? How do we effectively communicate in order to reach 100% of our target group and to achieve the desired impact, taking into account the generational differences?

A 360-degree marketing and communication strategy is needed that encompasses the three main areas of marketing:

1. Digital marketing – embracing brand creation, congress promotion via an official congress website, video, webinars, on-line ‘teaser’ sessions, a congress app, electronic marketing such as email blasts, and social media and e-newsletter campaigns.
2. Traditional marketing methods – including printed promotional activities, advertising and PR.
3. Face-to-face marketing – consisting of promotional campaigns in collaboration with industry and sponsors, promotion through an ambassador programme acting as an extended sales force, as well as promotional campaigns at other industry events and the preceding conference.

Social media campaigns are relatively new to many of our clients but are more commonly integrated in the promotion plan since they help to reach out to those potential conference delegates not covered in any existing database or mailing list. However, it requires some expertise to use the right media and channels, depending on whom we are targeting and for what purpose. This is where PCOs may add tremendous value.

It is interesting to see that some cities and Convention Bureaux have also seen a unique selling point in assisting association clients in ‘delegate boosting’. This is done by providing services and tools such as use of in-house media and PR channels, specially designed apps, on-line tools and widgets promoting corporate social responsibility programmes, exclusive packages or special discounts to conference delegates for local transportation, cultural activities, and restaurants, and even healthcare insurance to enhance the visitor experience – to name only a few.

PCOs are increasingly asked by association clients to take an active role and become a central part in the promotion strategy, as well as the execution, of the overall communication plan. It requires quite a deal of expertise to choose the right channels, and PCOs are of utmost value due to their experience gathered from working with so many different communities and delegate profiles.