

INTERVIEW

JAN TONKIN

PIONEERING INDUSTRY EDUCATION

Founder and managing director of Auckland-based The Conference Company, Jan Tonkin has taken on a two-year term as president of the professional conference organisers' association, IAPCO. She explains here what makes IAPCO stand out as an organisation but also all about her love of New Zealand as a meeting destination. *Interview Rémi Dévé*





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You've been recently elected IAPCO President. What are your ambitions for your term?

It's not so much about my ambitions. I believe a President's role is to ensure the vision for the organisation reflects the interests of its members, is crystal clear and to then guide the Council as it works, on behalf of the members, to realise that vision which is underpinned by the concept of 'driving excellence'. That takes many forms – members sharing best practice with one another, promoting best practice, encouraging members to adhere to the association's quality standards, developing education programmes which are highly relevant not just for PCOs but also for the wider meetings industry and drive business excellence.

With that in mind we have established a number of Council portfolios – designed to ensure we are not only active as an organisation but we have a sound foundation in place to grow membership and generate the financial resources to support our activities. We're privileged to be working with industry partners who are always looking at innovative ways of engaging with us.

Having members in 41 countries I am always very mindful of the need to think globally but I do have a special place in my heart for my own region – Asia Pacific. It is an incredibly diverse region where the meetings industry continues to grow in strength rapidly. I am very keen to profile that strength and highlight the great work being done in the region, while also looking to encourage those delivering conference management services to consider IAPCO membership.

IAPCO has always focused on education and you've launched new seminars like the EDGE seminar. How successful have they been so far? What are IAPCO's achievements in the education area?

IAPCO is a pioneer in industry education delivering its week-long, residential training course in the Wolfsberg Centre in Switzerland for 37 consecutive years. Many of today's seniors in the industry credit their career start to participation in this seminar and have fond memories of the camaraderie which led to ongoing friendships as their career paths criss-crossed.

After a good deal of thought and debate IAPCO decided to move away from one fixed location for education and create programmes which were both accessible and affordable world-wide. That meant not just face-to-face education but also online.

IAPCO now has three educational offerings – EDGE (Experts in Dynamic Global Education) seminars, Web-EDGE and Bespoke seminars. Faculty comprises senior PCO practitioners who are immersed in the

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HOW OLD IAPCO
WILL BE IN 2018

business, curious about new technologies and committed to best practice. Content is designed not just for PCOs but for the wider industry, in particular CVBs, venues and convention centres.

The first EDGE seminar was held in Auckland in August last year to wonderful accolades. 80% of the participants completed the evaluation and every one of them said that their expectations had been met. 97% of them gave the seminar a score of 8 or more out of 10. Similarly successful seminars have been held in Copenhagen in January and Whistler this May. Plans are already underway for seminars in Seoul in November, Athens in January and Kuala Lumpur next September; a number of expressions of interest have been received from other destinations. The challenge will be fulfilling demand!

Web-EDGE brings a new dimension to IAPCO's commitment to quality education. It's online and, as is the case with the EDGE seminars, enables participants to accrue CMP credits. Currently a "Starter Pack" (web-EDGE Level 1) is available via IAPCO's website and, over time, the library will be expanded to deliver online learning at three levels.

It's an exciting departure for IAPCO and one that seems to be meeting market needs. André Vietor, who



chairs the Training Academy, and his fellow faculty members tell me that they are both challenged and really energised by the change in direction.

As it has done in the past, IAPCO continues to deliver Bespoke seminars for groups or organisations. These programmes are always tailored to suit the host's needs and are typically very interactive.

IAPCO will celebrate its 50th anniversary within your presidency. How do members look back?

IAPCO's ability to retain members speaks volumes about its ongoing relevance as it continues to adapt its activities in a volatile meetings world. The Association was founded on camaraderie and principles of sharing and collaborating. Those principles have never changed and I see at our annual conference they are more important than ever. I am always both astonished and gratified by the willingness members, who compete with one another, show to discuss issues frankly and share their know-how to help each other deliver a better service.

While planning for the anniversary is in its very early stages, I know that all those attributes of IAPCO's ongoing success will come to the fore. Also, as PCOs, we know a good deal about celebration events so I'm sure February 2018 will be a special time on our calendar.

As a PCO based in New Zealand, can you explain how different the work culture is in the East and in the West?

I don't think it's a comparison that can be easily made in today's world. We are such a mix of cultures now and my city, Auckland, is no exception. That diversity is definitely reflected in our work culture in the form of openness to various views and the ability to be flexible and accommodating. That approach serves us well in the meetings industry in New Zealand as delegates attending international conferences in our country tend to come from all over the globe.

Can you share what you like about New Zealand as an association destination?

Time and time again international associations tell us how much their delegates enjoyed the warmth and hospitality when they hold their conference in New Zealand. That, combined with opportunities to enjoy amazing holidays pre- or post-conference the length and breadth of the country, mean that delegate numbers are always gratifyingly high.

Professor Bryan Storey of the University of Canterbury in New Zealand who convened the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research's Open Science Conference summed it up perfectly when he said: "Tourism New Zealand's Business Events team

assured me that delegates always like coming to New Zealand because it is a safe destination, it is accessible, it is a beautiful country and it has the reputation for welcoming people. They were correct; our delegate numbers exceeded expectations and the conference was voted the best ever."

We genuinely enjoy showcasing our country to visitors and making them feel welcome. We like to impart the spirit of manaakitanga which, in the language of the Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, refers to hospitality, kindness, generosity, showing respect, caring for others.

Our food and wines are of the highest quality, the proximity of memorable landscapes and activities to key conference destinations mean inspirational experiences can be easily accessed and the range of meeting venues and accommodation offerings is wide.

With a small population it is easy to make things happen and establish connections. We can readily create introductions to professionals and academics who can contribute to conference programmes and share their expertise during technical tours.

Those of us in the meetings industry know one another well and work as a team on international conferences, complementing one another's roles, making decisions quickly and always staying focused on making visitors' time in our country special.