Mathias Posch
President & Partner / IAPCO President
International Conference Services, Vancouver, Canada

I would start with the benefit for associations of receiving the collective knowledge and experience from running several meetings in various fields and being able to learn from best practices and easily benchmark your conference against another one. Additionally, associations – naturally – have a much different focus than the logistics and strategies around a conference. Therefore by hiring a PCO, they will benefit from the network and collective industry knowledge of a company that focuses 100% of their time on these things.

A stronger focus on year round learning would be one of the greatest trends. We are not just planning a conference as a singular event anymore but as part of a greater learning and education strategy. With the decline of sponsor-paid participation, we can also see a stronger focus on value proposition, sometimes declining registration fees as well as a development to more “regional” rather than international conferences in many fields. But to add a personal opinion and prediction to this: the need for international exchange remains strong and we see new and emerging ‘powerhouses’ for some industries and scientific fields popping up around the globe. I therefore believe in the power of international meetings and their ongoing endurance.

In addition, I think we are finally in a creative era where more and more associations are questioning their conference models and willing to try out new things. There is a strong focus on catering to new delegate needs and that is really affecting conference programmes.

The IAPCO Certification is a very important part of our maturing process as an industry. As a profession without a specific “academic path” or defined industry code, some PCOs felt there was a vacuum that had to be filled. IAPCO’s certification was started to set criteria for a quality PCO that allows clients and industry partners to easily identify those who run meetings at a certain standard/quality level. In addition, it allows PCOs to benchmark themselves against these criteria, work towards them or work to maintain their qualification. It is still the only industry standard for companies in our field and it is constantly being updated to comply with changes.

The Annual Meeting of the International Association of Professional Congress Organizers in Tokyo last February was the occasion for Boardroom to gain deeper insights into what PCOs in general could offer associations. In order for you to understand in turn, we asked four of them, all located in four different corners of the world, the following questions:

1) What is, according to you, the added value for an association to work with a PCO?
2) What are the latest trends you have experienced regarding association conferences/meetings?
3) What does it mean to you and to your clients to be IAPCO certified?

Here are their answers.

THE VOICE OF IAPCO

The Added Values of PCOs

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THE VOICE OF IAPCO

The Added Values of PCOs
A congress is a very complex event. Lots of our clients have of course participated to congresses, but being a participant or an organiser are two different things. You usually has an excellent knowledge of the business tourism market and its actors, and can provide several services, from advice, management and co-ordination of administrative and operational aspects of the event, budgetary monitoring, etc., while bringing its knowledge of new trends. In addition, it can provide relevant and updated information on rules and regulations impacting the sector an association is working in and that the association itself wouldn’t have necessarily easy access to.

1. Simply put, a PCO can be more of a partner of an association, and not just a mere supplier, offering expertise and know-how for the organisation of a conference. It usually has an excellent knowledge of the business tourism market and its actors, and can provide several services, from advice, management and co-ordination of administrative and operational aspects of the event, budgetary monitoring, etc., while bringing its knowledge of new trends. In addition, it can provide relevant and updated information on rules and regulations impacting the sector an association is working in and that the association itself wouldn’t have necessarily easy access to.

2. Nowadays, delegates tend to register to conferences quite late, which means less room to maneuver in terms of budget, services bookings, etc. and requires much more negotiating skills with suppliers. Compliance rules are also becoming quite complex, and, as a consequence, we are required to be very knowledgeable regarding all things contractual and legal, which we are increasingly recognised for. Online efforts, through all channels available, are also highly valued, especially when it comes to engaging a specific audience: communication before, during and after a conference is key, with all stakeholders. It’s actually not just about the conference itself, but the commitment is more on year-round learning, and, as PCOs, we are gradually including in the process. Last but not least, conference sessions must be inclusive of everyone, highly comprehensive, with a strong focus on visuals and interaction.

3. To sum it up, it means that associations have some guidance in a field with thousands of players – many of them actually not qualified to run meetings. The IAPCO certification is, in this respect, an important qualifier and guidance for the industry.