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## THE VOICE OF IAPCO

# The Added Values of PCOs

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.

*Verbatim Rémi Dévé*

### Mathias Posch

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

**1-** 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.

**2-** 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.

**3-** 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.

## Marta Cabré

Team Leader Atlanta, Barcelona, Spain

**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 manoeuvre 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.

## Bertrand Joehr

Managing Director  
Symporg SA, Geneva, Switzerland

**1** – 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 don't look at the same details when you are on one side or the other. PCOs are specialists, we know what details to focus on, which ideas work and which don't, what technical aspects are crucial, how much the participants drink, eat, the time needed to fill-in a 1,500-seat plenary room, etc. Our clients know what topics they have to deal with, which keynote speakers have to be invited... we take care of the rest.

**2** – We not only know how to organise a congress in a flawless manner, but also that our clients' time is precious and that our role is to reduce their workload to a

minimum. Our job is to coordinate as many aspects as possible and let the clients focus on the scientific part of the congress.

The last five years we have seen an increase in the use of mobile applications and other technologies, especially in the audiovisual field, with livestreaming, VOD, and virtual reality, though the latter is still in its infancy. This has helped reduce the environmental impact of conferences, it's improved the participants' experience with easy access to the programme and all relevant documents, while the networking experience has been enhanced, as delegates can now connect before, during and after the event.

It is not always easy to change the habits of participants who attended many congresses in the past, and the implementation of these new technologies can be pretty slow in the congress industry compared to other sectors. But I have also noticed that we don't have to convince our

clients to integrate digital solutions into their congress anymore, they now ask for it!

**3** – It is very important to me for two reasons. First, it is an acknowledgement from peers that we are doing a good job and that the clients can trust us not only because we tell them so, but because we have been assessed and that other professionals can confirm that we are doing a good job.

Secondly, IAPCO members are part of a great network that we can use if we need to operate abroad. It's a great support system that allows us to state with confidence that we are able to operate all over the world.

We have been IAPCO members for a few months only and I don't have yet received any feedback from our current clients or potential clients about it. But I am pretty sure that it is an added value that will comfort them, should they choose to work with us.

## Kayo Nomura

Chief International Relations Executive Congress Corporation, Tokyo, Japan

**1** – Should they choose to work with a PCO, associations will be able to concentrate on their core businesses, ie the overall management of their organisation, while the PCO will take care of the logistical aspects of their conferences/meetings. Associations will also benefit from some valuable input from PCOs, such as how to use new and affordable technology or what the latest trends in

conference organisation are. Additionally, in Japan specifically where cultural differences and business practices can be so great, PCOs can act as facilitators/coordinators between international and domestic/national associations. In many cases, Japanese medical associations have a large number of domestic/national association members, and international associations organising a conference in Japan can expect a larger attendance than usual.

**2** – They are threefold: association conferences make sure they have sections/specific presentations open to the

general public; there are more interdisciplinary meetings, especially in the medical and engineering fields; there is a strong emphasis on sustainability in general.

**3** – Being IAPCO certified is sometimes a prerequisite to responding to an RFP. A lot of associations see, and rightly so, this certification as a proof of quality. In many cases, this has even become one of the chief factors for us to win bids. Associations choosing a IAPCO certified PCO are sure to get the same level of service and excellence, no matter where they organise their events.