

06 August 2019



From conference concept to design to delivery – PCOs do it all

Jan Tonkin is the Managing Director of The Conference Company. She will be speaking on the topic of PCOs at the upcoming [UIA Associations Round Table Asia-Pacific](#) in Pattaya, Thailand taking place 19 & 20 September 2019.

When asked about the work my company (The Conference Company) does as a professional conference organiser (PCO), I'm always reminded of a conversation I had with Rose, an Association Executive Officer who I've known for many years. She said "I love the way an experienced PCO brings order to the organisation of our conference. A good PCO has our best interests at heart, keeps us up to date with progress and, most importantly, reduces our risk. It's a

relief to be able to rely on their experience and know that the myriad of tasks associated with organising our conference will be attended to professionally and without fuss."

Since that conversation, my company has managed many association conferences in many parts of world and Rose's insights have remained front of mind.

As an association professional you will already know that the demands on Rose's work day are huge as she juggles the needs of members who are all at different stages of their careers and /or businesses and all looking for appropriate education, certification, advocacy and connections with peers.

Her association is in good heart thanks to her efforts and those of a committed but over-burdened Board working alongside her. They are all very aware of just how vital their annual conference is to ensure the association not only retains, but also grows, its standing as the peak body in its professional community. They are also mindful of the consequences of failure: the impact on reputation, finances and future membership.

It is that anxiety and often a sense of being overwhelmed with organising the annual conference on top of business as usual that a PCO can alleviate. By questioning and listening carefully a PCO can turn an association's conference committee thinking and ideas into a vision that then becomes central to planning the conference. A PCO will ask hard questions on why exactly is the association hosting a conference, who needs to be represented to ensure those aims are met, what will grab people's attention to attend your conference or will they cast the promotional material to one side or delete the email announcing the conference as it didn't quite hit the mark? A PCO will also ensure those questions are answered fully, well before planning of the conference begins.

Armed with a well-documented vision, a PCO can confidently craft a project plan that takes the conference from concept to design, through to 'on the day' delivery and full reconciliation at the end.

Increasingly, people like Rose and other association executives are looking at how their conferences fit into their organisations' overall strategy. A conference is a major piece of expenditure for any association and it is no longer just a social, networking opportunity. It needs to deliver key strategic outcomes for the association and also fulfil the needs and expectations of the attendees.

PCOs have also changed, moving from being more than just expert logistics and event delivery technicians to the full-service professionals we see around the globe today. Many PCOs employ specialists in financial management, sponsorship, IT, marketing and meeting design who work alongside the project managers, registration teams and programme managers. Team members who are adaptable, creative, tech-savvy, enthusiastic, great communicators, culturally sensitive and eternally curious about the world around them, are keenly sought after by forward-thinking PCOs.

This is all great news for associations as PCOs deliver more and more value to them. This is particularly the case when a PCO is engaged on a long-term contract which means institutional knowledge of the conference accumulates year on year with each year building on the success of the year before.

If this article has piqued your interest around PCOs but you have questions such as 'how do I get that best value?' and 'how do I engage a PCO?', helpful publications are provided by IAPCO (International Association of Professional Congress Organisers) on its [website](#).

I'll also be exploring these issues, along with many others, when I join speakers and participants at UIA's Round Table Asia-Pacific. I look forward to seeing you there