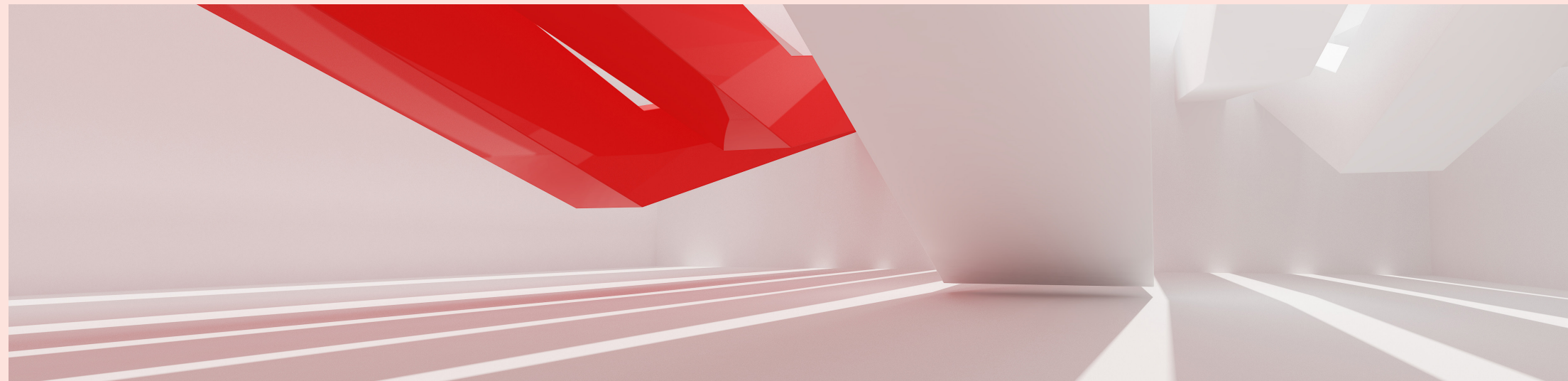


Adjusting to the New Normal

For IAPCO, **Ajay Bhojwani**, Managing Director, MCI Middle East, argues that only organizations that are able to adapt to the new world's order and fast-changing environments will survive.



Since the lockdowns were introduced a year back, irrespective of the city or country in which one lived, much has changed and evolved. New formats of work - from home, flexible hours, and much more - are now the reality and organizations are adapting them to not just deal with the pandemic but also for the long term. It is crucial for associations to be adaptable and have an agile strategy to survive the economic downturn in order to go back to their original growth plans. This has become extremely important as we grapple with the new reality where there are far more "unknown-unknowns" than "known-knowns".

As with many other organizations across all industries, what worked in the past, for a lot of associations, may not work in the future. Those who can successfully adapt to each new "normal" will dominate, while those that fail to do so will disappear.

Here are some stories from the Middle East as to how some associations have dealt with the situation and are still thriving and serving their members.

THE EMIRATES DIABETES SOCIETY (EDS)

In the past, the Emirates Diabetes Society (EDS), a national medical association in the UAE, had driven all its revenues through its annual congress, an event which normally attracts over 4,000+ attendees primarily from the region. As the pandemic hit, the EDS board quickly realized the need to keep their members engaged and connected, and to serve their mission of bringing the best science to this part of the world. By June 2020, three months into the pandemic, they had already launched a series of digital learning programmes, held on a bi-monthly basis, bringing the best speakers and delivering the best content from around the world. This didn't only increase their reach from the usual 4,000 attending the congress but extended to over 8,500 delegates.

The programmes were so well received that the board took a further bold strategic step to move the bi-monthly digital learnings to monthly for 2021. This came in addition to their annual

congress which they decided to organize as a fully virtual event in March this year. The congress brought together over 6,000 participants, on top of which their monthly programmes are building on a 15% to 20% increased attendance every month.

For 2022 the current vision is to hold the physical congress, and to continue the digital learning programmes to strengthen their offering. The Society is closely keeping its ties with the industry and the other stakeholders to make this possible, in addition to which it is also now moving to a whole new set of research and education support programmes for their members.

THE ARAB ASSOCIATION OF UROLOGY (AAU)

A second and slightly different approach comes from the Arab Association of Urology (AAU), a regional association which operates like a federation in the region with national societies as their members. In the face of the pandemic, they too decided to build on digital learning programmes to drive more revenue for

themselves and to serve their extended community of urologists in the region.

They took, however, a different route to that of the Emirates Diabetes Society. They spent four months building a learning platform which was eventually launched in August 2020, through which all the digital learning is offered. Members create an account and then have access to all content live and on-demand.

For their annual congress, they again took a bold step and decided to hold a hybrid meeting in November 2020 in conjunction with the national society of UAE - the Emirates Urology Society. From a combined expected attendance of 800-1000 participants, they ended up with over 1,500 attendees. It didn't only drive more revenue, it also strengthened their partnership with the national society and helped them to extend their offering.

Today, they have established the Arab School of Urology and all the digital learnings and the platform are run under that banner. Their programmes are monthly based and have already reached over 10,000+ participants in the past eight months. This resulted from a much more long-term thinking with an approach to build revenue as well as providing a whole new offering and brand that will develop a life of its own even after the pandemic is behind us.

THE WAY FORWARD

Both examples clearly demonstrate that agile and adaptable organizations will always find a way to succeed but that paths can differ based on the history of each organization and their modus operandi. One common feature lies at a leadership level, where individuals are bold enough to launch new programmes, embrace change and communicate it internally and externally. There were of course challenges and hiccups to surmount, but the journey went on quite successfully.

There obviously is not one single strategy or one single solution that will work, but the quicker you understand the needs of your organization, the easier it will be to bring in the necessary tools and talent to move forward towards success and growth.

This article was provided by the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers, author Ajay Bhojwani, Managing Director, MCI Middle East. IAPCO represents today 139 companies comprised of over 9,900 professional congress organisers, meeting planners and managers of international and national congresses, conventions and special events from 40 countries. / www.iapco.org