



Why one should not be seduced into organising a conference

BY VALERIE LUND

Having enjoyed yourself at so many meetings, it may strike you or be suggested to you by 'friends', that it would be a good idea to organise an international conference. Think of the kudos, the fame, the financial gain for the local society! But it is a siren call to engage in something that can all too easily unravel. In the past, you might have found yourself in a bidding war where somewhat questionable incentives were being offered by some applicants to voters, or you might even be expected to lavishly entertain the committee members of the overarching organisation. Fortunately, these practices have been stopped and now, apart from some low-key lobbying, only a short presentation on the charms of the venue and locality are required.

I do remember being in the unhappy position once of trying to persuade voters for one world congress that Birmingham was a close suburb of London. We didn't win.

Once you have secured the meeting, it is impossible to predict what might derail your best intentions. A volcano in Iceland, a terrorist attack on the other

side of the world, an outbreak of disease. With the average ENT conference costing several million £/\$/€, this is a serious business that cannot be undertaken lightly. In most cases, limited companies are formed, and insurance policies are negotiated to mitigate the risk of failure for the organisations involved. Gone are the days when a group of enthusiasts put together a programme, invited their friends and hoped for the best. Now it involves a PCO (professional conference organiser) supported by a host of helpers to smooth the way. However, even this is far from straightforward and comes at a cost. A European organisation with which I have been closely associated decided to choose a PCO. They did a shortlist, held interviews and selected one, though it was a close-run thing between them and another company. Shortly afterwards, this second company went bankrupt, losing hundreds of thousands of euros belonging to several medical societies. Caveat emptor!

You may still part company with your chosen PCO due to 'irreconcilable differences'. Whilst the PCO is simply doing their day job, we are trying to fit this

work in with a host of other commitments – not least looking after patients – so things can become quite tense, especially if the PCO employees are less obsessive than we are, which will likely be the case. Even if you try to run the show in-house, then likely as not, the key office person will up stumps and leave with all their experience before the next meeting takes place. So, running a big conference requires nerves of steel or a massive society underwritten by large financial reserves.

First, the choice of venue – somewhere not too far from the city centre, not too large, not too small with its own organisation for signage, security, sustenance etc. The provision of helpers is also important. I well remember a meeting in Paris at the Palais de Congres where the impeccably dressed but disdainful conference assistants spoke nothing but French and totally ignored participants or simply shrugged. Of course, in an increasingly do-it-yourself age, they are now superfluous, as badges, bags and other conference ephemera are delivered from a machine, so one wonders where

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all these delightful hosts and hostesses have gone.

Is there a conference hotel within spitting distance of the conference centre that won't break the bank? On one occasion, the supposed 'conference' hotel in Rome could only be accessed from the conference centre by crossing a motorway which drivers had mistaken for the Monza circuit, so it was quicker and safer to get there by underground via the centre of the Eternal City, to which I relocated into a very nice and much cheaper pensione. Interestingly, the extraordinary decoration and mirrors on the ceiling suggested an hourly rate was usually paid in this establishment.

One option used to be to choose somewhere combining entertainment and conference facilities such as Disney, Futuroscope near Poitiers, or the casinos of Las Vegas and Macau. These juxtapositions are now generally frowned upon and restrictions have been imposed on the commercial sponsors, seriously limiting where meetings can be held.

It is a given that whatever food you provide at a conference in a bid to keep attendees in the building, it will be regarded as 'poor' in the unavoidable post-conference questionnaire. I think even a three-star Michelin meal would go down badly in these circumstances. But needs must, otherwise the audience seeps away, never to return. It is also axiomatic that refreshments must be served within the commercial exhibit, something which still seems to elude some meeting organisers. Without this contact, the incentive for continued financial support of meetings by the commercial sector is doomed, as this has to be a symbiotic relationship, albeit politically correct.

At a microbiology conference in Sicily many years ago, whilst the commercial exhibit and conference centre were close together as the crow flies, they were unhelpfully divided by a wall necessitating a moderately long walk between the two venues. This sufficiently enraged the commercial exhibitors that, on the second day, the wall was simply blown up, after which participants picked their way between the rubble. It was unknown which godfather had provided the gelignite.

The main conference social event can also be an organisational minefield. Now rebadged as a 'networking' event, it needs to provide affordable fun, though nothing can compare to Brazilian meetings which continue to have conference parties of epic proportions, often replete with carnival samba schools, amazing Latin-American bands, well-known chanteuses and an extravagant amount of caipirinha. On several occasions, I have been able to head directly from the party to the airport the next morning for my flight home.

Some countries in the Far East, such as the Philippines, favour do-it-yourself entertainment in the form of karaoke, much to the excruciating embarrassment of British speakers. Alternatively, it is not infrequent for local medics to provide the musical entertainment. Such talent is often found amongst the medical fraternity, so jazz and rock bands and impersonations of national icons are not unusual. The Swedes put on a very passable impersonation of Abba at one European rhinology meeting, whilst the Brits relied on a 007 spoof in return. The French, by contrast, may be entertained by an excellent rhinological magician, whilst in Romania, the faculty had to don fancy dress in Dracula's medieval castle. On one occasion in Norway, I was suddenly asked to lead a pavane before the banquet which, as far as I knew, was a slow processional dance that, for good reason, came and went from Europe during the Renaissance.

However, amateur musical talent can sometimes test one's politeness. In one exclusive ENT society, we were annually treated to an operatic performance from several members which we had all come to dread but were too 'nice' to demur. Sometimes at a conference social event, the child prodigy of one of the organisers exposes us to their instrumental prowess, replete with encores due to the encouragement of adoring relatives. On at least two occasions, I have crept out of the room when no end was in sight. I well remember a senior American rhinologist and I crawling on our hands and knees as unobtrusively as possible towards the exit at an American Rhinologic Society dinner when an elderly 'Victor Borg' impersonator overstayed his welcome.

It will be interesting to see what happens in the future. The conference

circuit has surged back to life as if Covid never happened which, in terms of ecology and time management, is a pity. Although we may all be heartily sick of Zoom, Teams, Webex and their ilk, they have shown that it is not an absolute necessity for speakers to be flown around the world for a 30-minute lecture. I have flown to Canada to give a 20-minute talk and returned on the same plane a day later, on first name terms with the cabin staff. Or, madder still, I have travelled to the Philippines and back over a weekend, the only consolation being that one never changes one's biologic clock. Surely this is not sustainable, and not even that enjoyable. A possible compromise can be the hybrid meeting, which is attended by the locals whilst the international guest speakers deliver online, which works up to a point. It may not seem super attractive, as we all love the buzz of the performance, the face-to-face interaction and general jollification but think of the money saved, the teeny carbon footprint of lecturing from your kitchen, and the greater time spent at the day job. But I wouldn't think about it for too long!

This series of stories is dedicated to those of you with whom some of these moments were shared (or endured) and, above all, to my amazing and long-suffering husband, David Howard. Most of you know him as an exceptional head and neck surgeon but, since Covid, he has been involved in a large multi-speciality international charitable project reintroducing negative pressure non-invasive breathing support which could transform the management of respiratory disease all round the world. If you are interested, please visit www.exovent.org (or scan the QR code) for further information and, if you enjoy the stories, please consider donating to the charity through the Exovent website (Click DONATE on the home page drop down menu).



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