



Congress: boring or spectacular?

More experience and renewal, more attention to innovation, an inspiring day for the visitors. You would think that these are the maxims all congress organisers use. But do they really?

Text Erik Werners

With most of the congress requests we receive, the conversation usually starts with: "We are looking for an inspiring venue and an innovative programme." We want something new and different. The very moment we go deeper into the objec-

tives, the available budget and the basic programming, these elements suddenly are a lot less important. Many associations remain very 'conservative' and find it hard to abandon the fixed structure of the annual congress. They are mainly afraid they will put off the participants which will automatically result in less registrations. Step by step we try to help the management to consider what is feasible within the target group. Even with small changes, original surprises and optimisation of the programme, in keeping with the objectives, you can already make a difference.



PROFESSIONALISATION

AD 2017 a presentation with an overhead projector by one of the professors should really be ancient history. The stuffiness and dullness during an association congress has long ago been dusted off already. These days the catering is almost always in good order, at most of the venues the technical facilities in the function room are up to par and the networking moments are used in an optimal manner. But sometimes you see exactly the opposite. Too often, the management underestimates the programming of an association congress. Too often, we see the obligatory talk by the chairman, the General Meeting combined with the congress and the limited preparation time allotted by the management for the congress. Is this a bad thing? Not necessarily

if it is in keeping with the objectives and the participants expect it. If, however, the aim is to really innovate, the standard structure will have to be abandoned. Many associations are struggling with this but fortunately, you see more and more professionalisation within this target group. Here lie the opportunities for professionals to support the associations in this transformation.

NEW LOCATION

First and foremost: start selecting a different congress location. Break away from tradition of traveling to the same location year after year. Of course, the new location has to be compatible with your target group. If a large part of the guests travel by public transport, you should not organise the event in a picturesque small village, but opt for a city that has excellent accessibility. There are quite enough innovating venues and if you invite several tenders you will surely remain within budget. Your negotiation position with a new location is often stronger than with a location you have been visiting for years – until the moment you tell them you want to go somewhere else. Then, a lot more can suddenly be discussed. That is a missed opportunity for the location because they should have entered negotiations concerning innovations much sooner. The extra portion of the budget should have been used to implement new items in the programme. A new location offers new dynamics and automatically leads to new ideas and solutions. This is a first, easy step to gradually implement renewals.

RENEWING

And this spectacle, is that really necessary? Yes, it certainly is! A congress that keeps on renewing and is talked about ensures that it remains profitable and that there is always a quest for more

Erik Werners is manager/owner of De Vergaderstoel. Under the label Congres-Service.nl De Vergaderstoel organises various congresses for, among other clients, several associations. Werners can be contacted via erik@devergaderstoel.nl

innovative elements. Fortunately, there are enough examples of (association) congresses which act in such a professional manner that their congress is always a guaranteed success. The risk, however, is that the content becomes less important than the spectacle because every edition, the bar is raised even further and expectations are higher as the last edition must be outdone.

AMBASSADORS

Organising an excellent congress can only be successful if the congress is a fixed item on the organisation's agenda. If time, means, know-how and budget is made available by the organisation. What is good and what is wrong? Nothing is all good or all bad. The contents and the set-up of the congress should fit the organisation from an organisational, financial and intrinsic viewpoint. But always keep in mind that renewal can also be done in small details. Engage, for instance, another supplier for new ideas, reevaluate the programme once more in a critical manner and talk with your participants. They are your ambassadors!