

# PCOS MUST BE AN EXTENSION OF THE ASSOCIATION

**Patrizia Semprebene Buongiorno**, vice president AIM Group International, explains why commoditisation will sound the death knell for professional congress organisers...



**P**rofessional congress organisers (PCOs) must recognise the value they offer clients and avoid competing on price

– a tactic that will undermine the objectives of the congress itself. But how can we raise the PCO-client relationship to one based on long-term competitive value sharing?

If PCOs want to stand out in this highly competitive market, they must raise the level of conversation and find new ways to add value. Otherwise they will be compared only on price – and lose clients and business opportunities to ‘cheaper’ rivals.

The challenge they face is to increase the value of the services they offer to avoid being perceived as simply a ‘commodity’. When PCOs complain of being treated as a commodity they must ask themselves this one question: is commoditisation killing PCOs or are PCOs guilty of sitting on their laurels and failing to refresh the products and services to better meet their clients’ needs?

Fundamental to adding value is a deep understanding of those needs.

First and foremost a PCO has to identify its strengths and the areas where, for each particular client, it is able to deliver outstanding value. Then, and this is of the utmost importance, listen carefully to the client’s needs, history, problems, business model and expectations (even those initially not clearly declared by the client). And, finally, they must be totally customer-oriented.

How is it possible? PCOs must get inside their clients’ heads and ask themselves what associations expect and want to obtain from congress organisation: they want to

strengthen their relations and network, become more renowned and influential for the scientific community, gain trust and establish new partnerships with relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, associations are looking for financial and economic guarantees and support. Budgets are tighter nowadays, so they demand attentive monitoring and control of any additional service required.

Each PCO has to find the way to offer for each specific client both the expected quantitative benefits – turnover increasing, costs and financial risks reduction, economic growth – and qualitative results, such as easier organisation, building relationships, expanding the network.

PCOs have to demonstrate the competitive advantage offered to clients on a long-term basis and how they share a common strategic approach. They must propose innovative solutions, in terms of event format, fundraising, delegate engagement, technology etc – without forgetting younger members – and provide accurate information and effective communications to attract delegates. At the same time, they must learn to improve upselling, offering more high-value items that generate relevant benefits for clients. They must be responsive and proactive and act not as a partner, even less a provider, but as an extension of the association itself.

PCOs must convince clients that it’s not how little you pay, it’s how much you get. ■

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