

Captivating conferences

Dan Collins shares some of the tricks of organising a successful conference

Like me, I'm sure you've sat in what started out as a well-upholstered conference chair, finding your mind drifting from the speaker's words to thoughts of deep vein thrombosis and aching buttocks!

Even the greatest speakers struggle to keep an audience attentive in a warm, dark room following a heavy lunch. It's no wonder – our bodies are hard-wired to divert blood from the brain to the digestive system the moment we finish eating. If, during that time, we keep very still, allowing the large leg muscles that normally help the heart pump blood around our bodies to relax, the critical organ at

the top of our bodies – our brain – is slowly starved of oxygenated blood, resulting in drowsiness and loss of concentration.

This is all basic biology, I know, so it amazes me that, while every workplace has more than its fair share of first aiders, it's rare that anyone suggests a conference agenda that overcomes the 'graveyard shift' that immediately follows lunch.

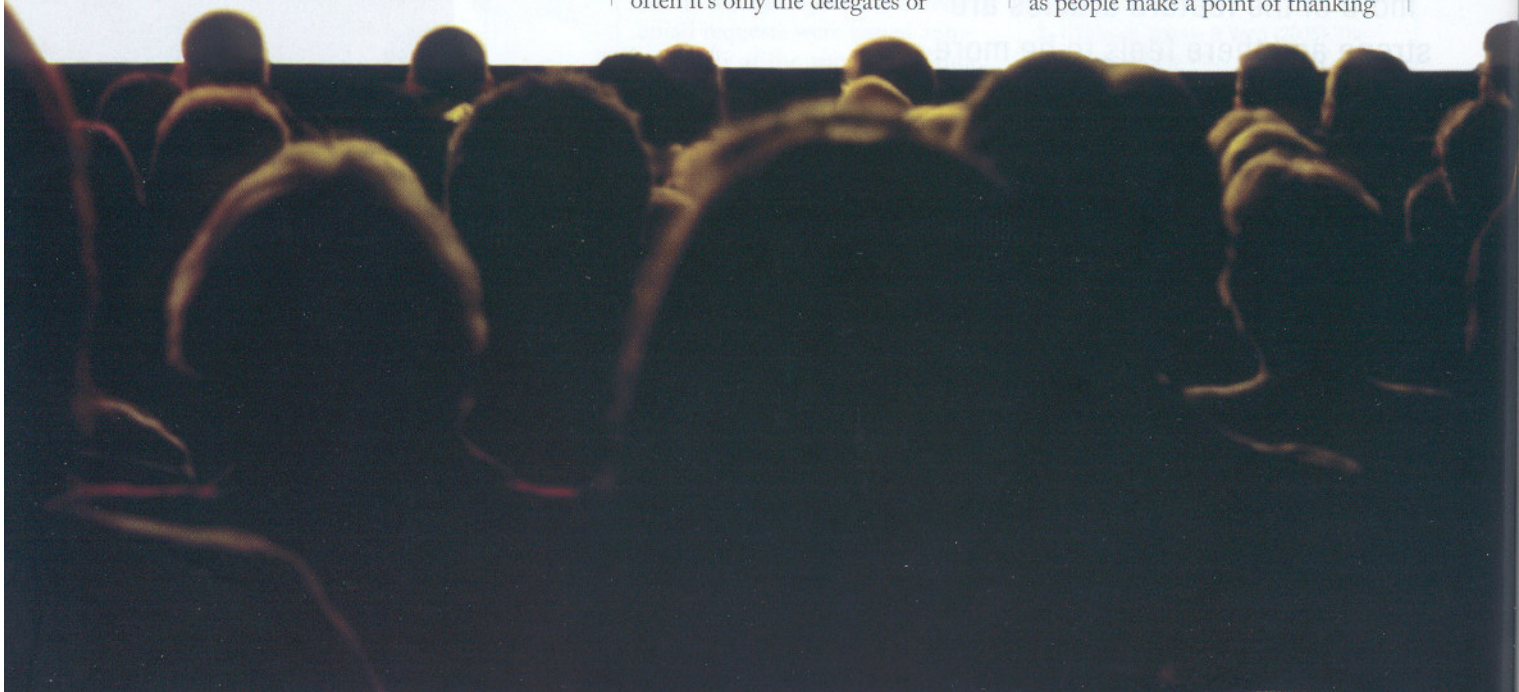
And it's not just the early afternoon slot that could benefit from a makeover – from the choice of venue months beforehand, through to the follow-up process after the event, there's much we can do to squeeze more value from the dreaded corporate conference.

Much like a bad party, all too often it's only the delegates or

guests that really know it was a disaster. The host or conference organiser is often so busy throughout the event that he or she is unable to see the boredom sweeping like a cloud over the assembled crowd.

It's therefore vital that the organiser's first priority is to delegate everything, leaving himself free to monitor the programme and adapt it to accommodate the myriad unforeseen events that are bound to arise.

Having been nominated for this task, take a moment to visualise how you would like to feel the moment the conference closes – you should be hearing enthusiastic applause, fending off rigorous hand shakes and pats on the back, as people make a point of thanking



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you personally for a great day before they head home.

If this is going to happen, and believe me it can, you are going to need some expert help. You shouldn't even be the one dimming the lights when the first slide show begins – and you certainly shouldn't have to shift furniture or serve refreshments.

Good planning will ensure the load is evenly spread across a group of skilled professionals, for whom preparing lunch for 400 or changing a slide presentation with just two minutes' warning is a daily occurrence, not cause for a coronary attack.

The first task is to decide when the conference will take place; without this information it's impossible to check the availability of any of the services you will need to call upon – the most important of which is the venue. Don't be fooled into thinking that only the larger seaside towns used by political parties can accommodate your conference, or even that you have to choose a respected hotel.

There really are no rules. I've run conferences in aircraft hangers, sports stadiums and even in ancient woodlands – not that the venue should be gimmicky for the sake of it, but it should help to reinforce your message.

Surprisingly, most large hotels and conference centres fail to do this; it's worth remembering that a hotel is little different from any other landlord selling square feet to the highest bidder. One day they could be accommodating a wedding, the next an exhibition and the next a dinner dance. Sadly, this often results in rooms designed to serve all comers that don't provide the learning-friendly environment demanded by a conference.

Look for a venue with good natural daylight, controllable air conditioning and, most importantly of all, staff who are determined to make your event a success. It's hard to check this on a formal show-round, so I always turn up early and

take a peek at the bedrooms while the chambermaid is turning them round, visit the public toilets to check their cleanliness and order a club sandwich in the bar. This simple, three-part test has never failed to give me the true picture of a venue's real capability, and it's been fascinating to discover the range of interpretations of a club sandwich!

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Equally varied from place to place are the numbers applied to conference room capacities. One well-known hotel group clearly regards its guests as sardines to be crammed into meeting rooms, as its stated capacities are well in excess of what is comfortable. Wherever possible, avoid theatre-style seating – it stifles interaction between delegates and hastens the road to drowsiness. A far better option is cabaret-style seating with groups of six spread around a round table, with a clear view of the stage. Refreshments and paperwork can be put on the table and it's ideal for syndicate work. With wide aisles between tables and a few mixing activities, the conference will take on a far more lively and interactive feel. Support this with some well-chosen music, leading into and out of breaks, and you will see a transformation in the attitude of the attendees.

The days of an overhead projector, with some muddled handwritten acetates, being the main focus of a presentation are thankfully behind us. PowerPoint and LCD projectors are fast becoming standard issue in the better conference centres and, with presenters increasingly incorporating sound and video clips in their presentations, good quality and user-friendly audio visual equipment is essential. That's not to say

that you should automatically set aside £30,000 for an AV company to build a branded stage set. Get the basics right first – sounds people can hear, which might require a hearing loop and images people can see which will demand some guidelines on font size and slide layout for those creating presentations. It's important for delegates to be able to see the speakers clearly so consider some stage lighting or, for events for a thousand or more, a video camera relaying the action on stage to video screens.

Having established the basics, give some thought as to how the stage area will be used, and decorate it accordingly. Try to avoid the usual corporate felt backdrops and instead create a set that itself reinforces the conference's message. A colleague used traffic lights, road cones and Men at Work signs to create a superb set on a minimal budget to support a conference entitled 'The Road Ahead.' The chairman even walked on wearing a high-visibility jacket and a hard hat, making jokes about 'builders' bums', which got the programme off to a great start!

And the programme is, after all, what people are at a conference to experience. While PowerPoint can make our slides look fantastic, it can't make an inexperienced speaker into a first class presenter. Communicating to a large audience, like storytelling, is a craft learned through practice and attention to the finest details. Skilled speakers will not only rehearse their words, they'll even practise and perfect their pauses, because they know that the rhythm of their language is just as important as their vocabulary. With this in mind, choose your speakers carefully and, wherever possible, consider replacing the conventional slide presentation with a film, team activity or discussion session.

If you are caught in the all-too-familiar trap of having to accommodate the contribution of a senior manager who, while great at his day job, should never



be left alone with a microphone, try an alternative approach like an interview or facilitated question and answer session. Be sure to use a facilitator with an ability to reframe questions succinctly and, where necessary, politely cut short a long-winded answer.

As the programme begins to take shape, challenge every element of it by asking yourself 'is this as engaging as it possibly could be?'. In the past we've scrapped pre-printed name badges and instead opened the programme with an activity in which each delegate decorates a large sticky label with illustrations of the skills and interests of another delegate, along with his or her name. This simple exercise not only broke the ice but also saved time and ensured nobody went without a name badge – some were so good that their owners kept them long after the event.

Pay particular attention to food and refreshments. This is most vulnerable to criticism from participants and, sadly, the area many hotels will skimp on to maximise profit. Yet it's also the element of the conference that your delegates will have most expertise in. Unless

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they go to several conferences a year they might not be able to consciously critique the stage set and lighting but, sure as eggs is eggs, they'll know what a good lunch looks like. The food itself should be energising and appropriate so, unless it's mid-winter, avoid heavy, greasy dishes like casseroles, which lead to drowsiness. Crisp, clean salads with fish, poultry and cheese are a far better option. Before the event, give every delegate the opportunity to let you know of any special dietary requirements and, unless you know your audience well, it's wise to avoid pork-based dishes altogether.

Extend this focus beyond lunch to the breaks as well – coffee and biscuits are expected, so I'd advise against replacing these but instead suggest you add at least one alter-

native item to each break. For instance, sliced fruit in the morning and ice creams in the afternoon, with a range of chilled soft drinks and smoothies available to grab on the conference tables. Air conditioning will generate thirst, so allow for at least half a litre of water per delegate, more in summer.

So will this be enough to keep your delegates awake and attentive during the 'graveyard shift'? I would hope so but, if not, there is a guaranteed remedy. Just like the solution to the terrifying slumber that threatens to engulf the driver who is longing for the next motorway services, a few moments of movement will overcome the drowsiness and reboot the system, restoring concentration and bringing mind and body back to the real world. It really doesn't matter how, or even *why* the delegates get off their seats and move but, the moment they do, like the motorway driver, they will be fully restored and the 'graveyard shift' need not be feared. ■

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