



# 'It always boils down to tailormade solutions'

Last year, the renowned PCO *Congress by design* invited a number of major players in the MICE industry to discuss the added value of partnerships. This discussion tasted morish, so on October 8 a number of participants were again invited to voice their opinions. This discussion, which was held at Congrescentrum Beurs - World Trade Center in Rotterdam, was conducted by Angelique Lombarts. This time, participants also included two members of two Rotterdam medical associations.

The first proposition stated by Lombarts was about the merits of congresses. Are these useful only for the academic world? Odile Frauenfelder disagrees. "Although most congresses have an academic basis and are used by participants to exchange knowledge and research results, they are also about education of the younger generation and about networking." "In the end, the academic basis is the main reason for the gathering", says Jan Roelof Polling. "Of course it is also about recognition of your profession and social cohesion, but if the academic part is

there, a congress will not be successful." Both congress organizers agree that the main issue is the exchange of knowledge. "But could this not be done via the internet, in stead of physically attending a congress?" Polling has his doubts: "Within our association more than half of the members do not speak English well enough. So it is difficult to have a good discussion. Of course webinars may be part of the congress, but it is the face-to-face contact that is crucial to getting the message across." "As an association you also have the obligation to widen the target group",

## At the table

- Angelique Lombarts, AloAconsultancy and day chair
- Nicolette van Erven, Congress by design
- Jeannette van Namen, Congress by design
- Daan van de Kamp, Congress by design
- Jan Roelof Polling, LOC XIIIth Congress of the International Orthoptical Association, Rotterdam 2016, Erasmus MC
- Odile Frauenfelder, nursing specialists Nederland, V&VN VS and ESPNIC, Erasmus MC
- Eric Bakermans, NBTC
- Yvonne Nassar, Amsterdam RAI
- Monique André de la Porte, Utrecht Convention Bureau
- Michiel Middendorp, World Forum Den Haag
- Bart Klaver, Den Haag Marketing
- Joyce Wittelaar, Rotterdam Marketing
- Martijn Bulthuis, Leiden Marketing
- Miranda Geerlings, Amsterdam Marketing

says Yvonne Nassar. "You can reach other target groups by, for instance, making certain parts of your congress accessible to virtual participants who cannot attend physically because of a lack of time, or for other reasons."

This added value is something Frauenfelder also recognizes: "Smaller professional associations are spread all over the world, but their members are certainly looking for contact and knowledge. It is partly for that same reason that we publish our presentations online more and more. We have also organized conference calls. However, this is something to consider critically, because it costs a lot of money, and in the end, you would much rather have people dropping by."

Nassar is convinced that it is also possible to develop a good profit model for a virtual congress. "But organizing a congress for a virtual as well as a physical target group requires a different format, because this is actually an event within an event."

Lombarts addresses the PCOs in the company, because in the case that a virtual component is required, these professionals can surely give advice. "PCOs are the intermediaries between the initiator of the congress, and all the other parties", Nicolette van Erven agrees. "We can support the principal in the organization, and because we know the way, you do not have to reinvent the wheel."

"We are the partner of choice to give advice and support in the matter of finances and finding the target groups", Jeannette van Namen adds. "And for the other aspects of the organization our partners, including the convention agencies and major locations present, offer possibilities we can use jointly to the benefit of association congresses."

"The advantage of collaboration is also that you can find out whether certain technologies already exist", Martijn Bulthuis indicates. "Leiden University, for instance, is a forerunner where online lectures are concerned. This technology, including registration, identification and financial participation is already a part of this and can easily be integrated."





“And nowadays, apps also offer possibilities”, Daan van de Kamp adds. “There are several event apps via which you can easily communicate about, for instance, the programme, the routing and the stay. This alone already saves programme booklets.”

**Content is leading**

Lombarts states a new proposition. Participation in congresses would be decided exclusively by the academic content. Frauenfelder: “The congress agency we work with, takes several aspects into consideration when choosing a location. The city must have a cultural appeal, but also be attractive financially and have a favourable tax rate. So it is not just about content.” According to Polling the choice for a city is not that important in his sector. “With 10,000 members worldwide, our association is relatively small and the majority of the members live in Europe. In general, the European congresses are very successful, whether they are held in Nuremberg or London.”

Of course, in the choice for a city the destinations can also play a role. Bart Klaver agrees: “An organizer can more easily attract certain groups to his congress when, for instance, there is a very specific study programme, or incentive provided by a convention agency.” Nassar thinks that you can take this even broader: “As a party to a partnership it is our joint task to find out where you can get the right political and legal information and how these should be interpreted.” Eric Bakermans stresses: “At the moment there are, among other items, questions about VAT and issues regarding visa. Of course we cannot speak for the ministry, but as an organization you are capable of connecting the principals to the right parties who have the right answers. But the NBTC and the cities will have to actively search to find people like you.”

“It was for that reason that during the last edition of our annual association symposium, we dedicated two sessions to pharma legislation, VAT legislation and the consequences of these”, Joyce Wittelaar explains. “We noticed that many of the attendees learned a lot from these sessions.”

Still, according to Bakermans, the exact moment an organizer needs specific knowledge is hard to pinpoint. “For academics or sector chairpersons this need for information is often latently present. Fortunately, most cities have ambassadors who can identify that need for knowledge and can refer to the party that has the right information.”

Middendorf thinks that a PCO has a major role in this. “Because they have contacts with associations that organize congresses on a regular basis. These associations must be able to concentrate on the content and leave the rest of the organizing to the PCO, including the provision and use of this kind of information. But then you have to be able to rely on this party.”

**Where does the PCO come in?**

The role of the PCO is further discussed in the third proposition. In contrast to convention agencies, the PCO’s role would be irrelevant in bid procedures. “Up to a point the PCO is very much relevant”, Polling objects. “In our case that was important in the realization of the bidbook and the budget. Especially with the budget we have had a lot of help in interpreting this correctly.”

“These days we mainly focus on the finances”, Frauenfelder confesses. “The PCO is important, but his work comes later, and merely involves the necessary finetuning.”

Lombarts asks the PCOs present how they see this. “Of course, as a PCO you want to be involved in the bidding procedure as soon as possible, if only because, for instance, you look at the location from a very different point of view”, Van Erven answers. “But in my experience, this is hardly ever the case. Sometime you are asked for a part of it, for instance to draw up a budget, and to make arrangements for the follow-up process of the organization. An other time, the association itself approaches several PCOs with a format.” “It also depends greatly on the experiences a PCO has had”, Bulthuis adds. “When you sit down with an experienced person, you can skip the first steps.”

“For instance, I can draw up a budget myself, but that is worth nothing if it is not monitored”, Bakermans says. “Often the costs precede the profits. A good PCO guarantees a good return on investment.”

**Unknown services**

So PCOs are important, but what about the convention agencies? And do academics even know they exist? “Actually, I did not know they existed, and you are not familiar with them when you work from an association”, Frauenfelder admits. But even if they do know of their existence, the services offer is often not clear. “Since 2010 Utrecht again has a convention agency, and we keep on communicating this”, says Monique André de la Porte. “But still faculties think that we are a commercial enterprise and that we charge a great deal of money. I have to keep repeating that we offer advice on a neutral, independent and free of charge basis.”

Klaver stresses: “I come across a great many associations that have never heard of the convention agency. We must change that by getting a much more visible profile. Exactly for that reason we participate in international trade fairs.”

However, when associations do know about the existence of convention agencies and where to find them, there is still the possibility that the services offer causes misunderstanding, says Miranda Geerlings. “We often have to deal with the fact that foreign associations have quite different expectations where our services are concerned. Certain cities abroad offer services that differ greatly from ours, and they offer much more attention than we can provide.”

“This goes to show once more that there are many different associations that each have their own approach – so it always boils down to tailor-made solutions”, says Jeannette van Namen. “It is quite interesting to see where the evolution of congresses leads, and which role a convention agency or PCO will play in this process. We are faced with an enormous challenge that will have to be met the next couple of years, and that gives us plenty of subjects for discussion!” ■