



Computer simulation of the National Conference Centre due to open in 2011

SHOW TIME

Whether it's an open meeting, seminar or conference, organising public events can be daunting. *Accounting Matters* offers some advice for those in the planning mode

When it opens for business in 2011, the National Conference Centre at Dublin's Spencer Dock will fulfill a decades-old ambition of Government to establish in Ireland a convention centre of international calibre. While the current recession may put question marks over its short-term profitability, its longer-term success and value is more certain. Although the IT age has transformed the possibilities of communication (see 'Virtual conferencing', page 45), there is little sign that the urge or need for societies, organisations or interested groups to gather in physical proximity will ever abate. The Celtic Tiger years saw a boom in hotel and leisure facility construction and conferencing services were an integral part of this.

There are clear reasons why this was so: delegates to any event need to be fed, accommodated, and entertained and hotels are the obvious service providers for these services. Organisers have also recognised that the venue itself, far from being a simple backdrop, is often critical to the attractiveness of the entire event, with golfing, dining and recreation facilities all weighed up by prospective delegates in deciding whether to attend or not.

The lucrative nature of conferencing has also made it attractive to other service providers, often far outside the hospitality industry. The RDS was established in the 18th century to encourage development of the arts, agriculture and science. For most Irish people, however, it is more easily recognised as host to a steady procession of trade exhibitions, business seminars and pop concerts all year round.

In the north of the city, one of the country's most revered landmarks has also emerged as a significant player. Croke Park was rebuilt as an Olympic-sized stadium in the 1990s and its redevelopment saw the incorporation of extensive conferencing facilities.

Conference checklist

Organising any event requires a huge amount of planning, checking and double checking. Recognising that the devil is in the detail, it is nevertheless important to have a clear overall view of what the conference purports to achieve; what its budget is; and what kind of support it is likely to have. Crucially, it's important to visit and get to know a venue personally in advance of hosting an event there.

- Location – an obvious start, but the right venue makes a difference in how events are perceived and who attends.
- Timing – ensuring your event doesn't clash with another significant event also sounds obvious but that doesn't mean this mistake isn't frequently made. Also, off-season bookings can make a significant difference in costs.
- On budget – few sponsors have deep pockets these days and, in the current conditions, your event will be expected to come in on budget. Ensure you have the best deals with the most reliable people and clarity on costs throughout.
- On message – most events have some opportunity for media coverage. Maximising this element of the event requires careful planning from the beginning and close liaison with your PR team. It can be hugely important in the perceived value of the event to your organisation.
- Managing running order – it's important everyone has clear guidelines and a clear idea of their part in the event, it's overall running order, and the facilities available to them.
- Managing the venue – it's important to

know and have access to the right person if decisions need to be made, whether this be the catering manager, exhibitions manager, duty manager, etc.

- Managing the room(s) – size, access and location (within the building) are all important. Is it backed up by the kind of equipment you need, i.e., podium, overhead projectors, web access? Who is managing sound and light?
- Catering – whether it's an afternoon meeting or a two-day event, catering should reflect the stature of the event and the traveling time of delegates. Ensure special dietary requirements have been considered and put time into choosing good wines and imaginative menus.
- Hotel facilities - are they suitable for your delegates? Do they know how to get there? Is there enough parking?
- Branding – from welcoming your guests to what is, otherwise, an anonymous venue, to positioning signage to make directions clear, it is extremely important to establish a sense of ownership of the venue and communicate your brand values through it.

Virtual conferencing

While the internet has transformed interpersonal communications, virtual 'real time' conferencing has been slower to evolve as a significant business tool when compared to other text-based interactions such as e-mail and webchat. Nevertheless, a variety of factors, from recessionary cost-cutting to travel curbs for environmental reasons, mean that web conferencing will increasingly be used to conduct meetings and presentations in the future. While web conferencing is, at its most basic, possible with a PC and webcam, in the professional context it is more usually availed of as an IT service with packages based on technology provision and usage per minute. Webinars are mixtures of internet and conference calling, with the presenter talking over a telephone line and explaining material on-screen. Some next-generation web conferencing technology now on the market uses voice-over-internet software (VoIP) to create a completely integrated internet experience. A webinar (web seminar) usually involves the speaker addressing the audience with interactive features such as opinion polling and 'question and answer' sessions. The internet has the potential to transform traditional conference formats radically. Not only can speakers make presentations literally from the comfort of their own home, audiences themselves no longer need to be gathered in the one space. Conceivably, delegates could sit at their own computer and be connected to a virtual event held on the internet. It's worth noting, however, that although the technology to enable virtual conferencing has been available for a decade, many aspects of the traditional conference format - from AGMs and trade exhibitions to networking and negotiations – have not yet proved readily transferable to an internet format.

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