

Forum

TIME TO ESTABLISH MEETINGS VALUE

CN and management consultancy Sensei UKE convened a panel of meeting industry experts recently at Cannizaro House, Wimbledon, to examine perceptions of value and return on investment and time.

The Business Visitors and Events Partnership recently estimated the value of events for the British economy at £24bn. Many organisers, however, are increasingly pressed by procurement and their bosses to justify the value of time spent at events. But just how do you determine the value of a conference or meeting?

Maximising return on investment (ROI) has become a mantra for many, with numerous industry seminars on the subject and even the odd category at industry awards. CN and management consultancy Sensei UKE convened a roundtable forum of industry planners and meetings experts to examine the issues.

In some areas testing ROI need not be too hard, with sales leads and PR coverage both measurable items. However, forum co-chairman, Sensei UKE's director Richard Ferguson, noted it was "worrying"



Co-chairmen Paul Colston and Sensei's Richard Ferguson

that there were attempts to turn events ROI into a science with its own institute in Norway and a special formula for success. "Our experience is that so many organisations haven't truly thought through what they want to get out of an event, let alone measure ROI," he told the forum.

Recession had heightened the challenge of engaging people, believed Johann Scheepers, GM of Thistle's Kingsley Hotel in London. He pointed out there were now fewer events where the chairman came along to address the annual 'do'.

The day delegate rate had rebounded, at least in London, Scheepers noted, with £35-£65 now being achieved, compared with around £25 at the depth of the

recession. "It's starting to come back," he said, adding that the Kingsley had gained from some companies trading down from the top end.

"The requirement for discussion does not go away," Ferguson stressed, advising clients to remember the business value of the event and make the appropriate investment. "Organisations don't always think about it in that way," he said.

Head of Group Internal Communications, Manchester Airport Group, Liz Douglas, said delegates were now demanding more and the format of the annual event was changing. The group's annual roadshow event had evolved and reaction to the content was closely monitored, she



Simon Philips and Gillian McGill

Forum



Scheepers, Philips and McGill



Conferencing at Cannizaro



Philips makes his point



Johann Scheepers with

explained. "We looked at the conference differently and the event was staged in one building split into zones," said Douglas.

The format was designed to appeal in its component parts more directly to individual sections of the business and ran from 8am to 9pm. Delegates could drop in to the zones and pick up content. "It was no more expensive but in terms of value to the business, we got much more," she added.

The airport group's annual survey found that key information was retained six months on from the new-style conference. Effectiveness and education, rather than an annual jamboree seems to be the way forward for securing value.

Ron Glasgow, MD of event management agency Glasgows, advised choosing your organiser carefully. "The great tragedy of the public sector is that none of those asking for events knows anything about events," Glasgow said. He is no fan of procurement calling the shots. Their processes, he noted, were "draconian and expensive" and put management companies under unnecessary pressure.

Demands for policies on sustainability, crisis management, disaster recovery and BS standards were time-consuming and added to costs without necessarily raising quality, Glasgow believes. "In terms of value for money, clients need to understand what they want. Procurement systems deliver the best tender, but not necessarily the best event management company."

Glasgow foresees big cuts to public sector events budgets, predicting some companies will go to the wall when the big

squeeze comes. "It is short-sighted and dangerous and you get what you pay for," he warned.

Glasgow suggested that the celebrity factor could be one area to cut. "It is preposterous when public sector conferences pay up to £20k, a third of their budget, for a celebrity speaker," he said. "Does a chief nursing officers' conference really need someone like Lenny Henry?"

Head of internal communications at Aviva, Gillian McGill, said the challenge for her team was now how to get more discussion and results from more intimate meetings. "Over the last 18 months we have concentrated on getting conversations going at the right level. Today the style is different. You have to justify bringing senior management to a conference. We are never asked to measure, however, but to justify."

Aviva's senior level conferences are all about value for time more than money, she noted. "You can't put a price on the value of getting senior managers in front of staff."

Director for leadership and organisational development at NHS Hampshire, Simon Philips, said he'd been sent to conferences to gather information on behalf of his whole organisation to save paying multiple delegate fees. "Managers are also aware of time, but the key issue for us is cost." The headline cost of the conference, he said, definitely affected the initial judgement on whether to attend.

As for mechanisms for feeding back value, Philips said increasingly there were informal ones. "After an event, websites can be populated with presentations and

this undermines the argument for sending multiple people."

Glasgow noted an increased use of webcasting. "In one example, we had 800 people logged on and sending messages to their board in real time. It is a good way of getting a large audience."

CN managing editor Paul Colston asked whether the panel thought the conference was no longer the place where you start discussion, but the forum for the culmination of the brief, extended through social media such as Twitter and Facebook.

Ferguson noted social media helped to "lock in" benefits from a conference, good materials that were often "left on the floor".

Philips said social media only worked once the value of an event has been established in the minds of individuals.

Social media is clearly not for everyone: Douglas noted that, even in 2010, the majority of her staff didn't have email accounts, let alone Twitter or Facebook. "Engage before, during and after a conference on the official website," was Glasgow's advice. The website could be a repository for conference documents and feedback post-event, he said.

Interactive technology such as SpotMe devices could be considered for speeding up networking opportunities.

Technology can save money, too. Glasgow gave an example of an organiser's request for 10 bilingual facilitators for one multinational conference. "I proposed dispensing with that and having interactive technology. It saved £15k."

Douglas cautioned on using technology

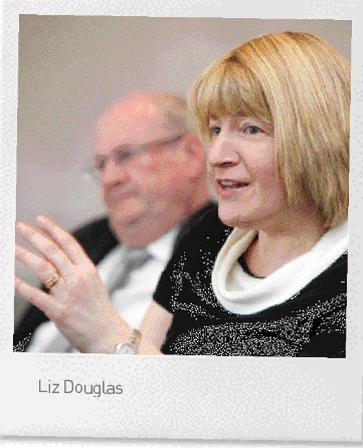
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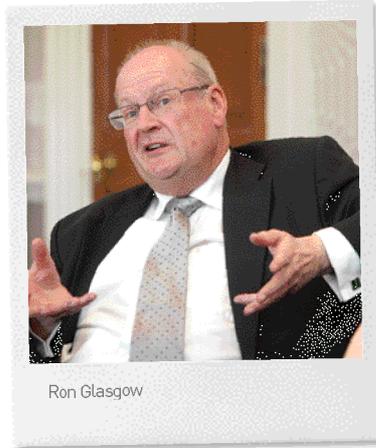
rs with a venue view



Richard Ferguson



Liz Douglas



Ron Glasgow

for the sake of it. "We tried going back to basics and it really made us think about what we spend money on," she said. "We still ended up needing a small amount on technology in order to capture the vast amounts of information we needed."

Ferguson noted that people often simply lose sight of what they want to get out of a conference. "There can be much effort poured into who will be speaking and what technology is used, rather than thinking 'Who's our target audience, who would benefit from it and how? We need to

agreements are for."

The five-point ROI methodology pyramid put together by the ROI Institute in Norway which claims to have a planning and evaluation tool for all events, was not taken too seriously. The first three pyramid levels, which include satisfaction with hospitality and content; what was learned and how to apply that learning, the panel thought were valid but no more than common sense.

Converting the business impact into a monetary value to then compare it with cost, in order to determine the ROI was not

What was measurable, said Glasgow, was the level of action and interaction at the conference. "If key staff come back stimulated, then great, but I hate box ticking. It doesn't have any value. It is impossible to measure outcome without changing that outcome by the process of measurement."

Philips sees a generational differences in terms of what is demanded and expected of conferences. Younger delegates, he said, weren't interested in tablets of stone being handed down, or turned on by champagne receptions. "Old school thinking is 'carrot and stick', but the last 30 years have shown that approach has only a marginal impact on an individual's thinking. More potent today are notions of autonomy and purpose."

He gave the example of using SpotMe technology. "Generation Y knows where the networking opportunities are," he said. "They want to be in charge, choose when to turn up, when to leave and get the outcomes they want." He contrasted this with the older generation that sat still and took notes.

For Philips, meetings are now about empowerment and the perception of value for time. And, with little agreement that we have arrived at a meetings science of determining return on investment, it seems, the phrase, 'time is money' is still the trusted barometer in estimating real value for our panel, at least.

Sensei is an international consultancy that helps deliver business results by improving human performance and optimising the value of team and leadership interactions.

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educate people to think about what they can get out the other end, what are the outcomes they are striving for."

Scheepers pointed out that perception is important. For one Labour Party conference organiser it was important not to create a fancy affair, even though the event was in a five-star hotel.

"Flexibility and accessibility are deal-breakers," said Scheepers, "always ask yourself if you really need things, you could save 10 per cent on your meeting cost.

"I've seen people manning empty registration desks for £10 an hour 'just in case' someone wants something.

"That's surely what venue service level

generally thought to be either achievable or even desirable. Glasgow thought the first three levels of the five-level pyramid were all measurable. "Public sector clients are happy with the first three. I believe the last two are just alchemy."

McGill said her sector was full of actuaries and insurance managers who loved to pick holes in such theories. "I don't think you can get true, measurable, science with ROI."

Ferguson believes extracting value from an event comes down to defining the value you want to get and being clear about outcomes.

Douglas said the kind of outcomes from events denoting success included messages and lessons being retained by delegates.