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PERILS AND PAYOFFS OF ASSOCIATION CONGRESSES

WHEN I JOINED THE TRADE ASSOCIATION THAT I CURRENTLY MANAGE, ALMOST 20 YEARS AGO, THE LITTLE I KNEW ABOUT THE ORGANISATION CAME FROM MY INVOLVEMENT IN ITS ANNUAL CONGRESS. I HAD BEEN GREATLY IMPRESSED WITH THE MORE THAN 1000 DELEGATES FROM SOME 50 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES GETTING TOGETHER DURING FOUR DAYS AND INTERACTING INTENSIVELY WITH EACH OTHER.

TEXT LUC MAENE

The importance of this event became even clearer to me a year later when I became responsible for organizing it myself. I became acutely aware of the daunting challenges involved.

Means of communication were slower than today, which, in some ways, actually simplified preparations for the event since fewer changes were made. In those days, delegates still made travel plans well in advance and would not modify them unless absolutely necessary. Since then, we have seen dramatic advances in communication technology and international travel has increased significantly. These make it easier to work across multiple time zones, but have also given rise to a just-in-time culture where plans are often made shortly before an event and members have no scruples about changing their minds several times.

Overall, organizing an annual congress requires a great deal more professionalism today than two decades ago. Despite all the modern tools at our disposal, many constraints have emerged on all fronts. Negotia-

tions with conference venues and hotels have become very time consuming, and growing demands from delegates have increased the complexity of managing room blocks and meeting facilities. In this context, IFA's practice of having an observer from the following year's venue attend our congress has paid off immensely. It helps to significantly minimize the inevitable surprises much more than even a very detailed briefing can do.

On top of traditional organizational details, security in a very broad sense has become a central issue. In addition to matters related to providing a safe environment, we must now take into account the complexities of ensuring that our delegates from well over 60 countries can enter the host country. Between such questions and delegate concerns about locations that have recently been in the headlines, our choice of venues is now much more limited than before, despite being in the age of the Global Village. Since the general assembly is held on the occasion of our annual congress, we are obliged to select a destination that all members can access.

Such restrictions make it very challenging to respond to unforeseen developments, like a general hotel strike just weeks before the conference. With almost 1500 participants, how is it possible to have a Plan B? In our case, we were very lucky: while in a meeting to decide whether to cancel the event, we received word that the strike had been resolved. What a relief! However, this illustrates something else that must be added to long list of factors related to organizing large meetings, namely: *risk management*.

I would, nonetheless, like to conclude on a positive note. Despite the growing number of challenges and the many uncertainties involved, it is a very rewarding experience indeed to hold a successful annual congress. For most associations, these events are central to their *raison d'être*. The personal exchanges that take place on these occasions are worth the difficulties, and the delegates' satisfaction is particularly gratifying after a sustained period of very hard work.