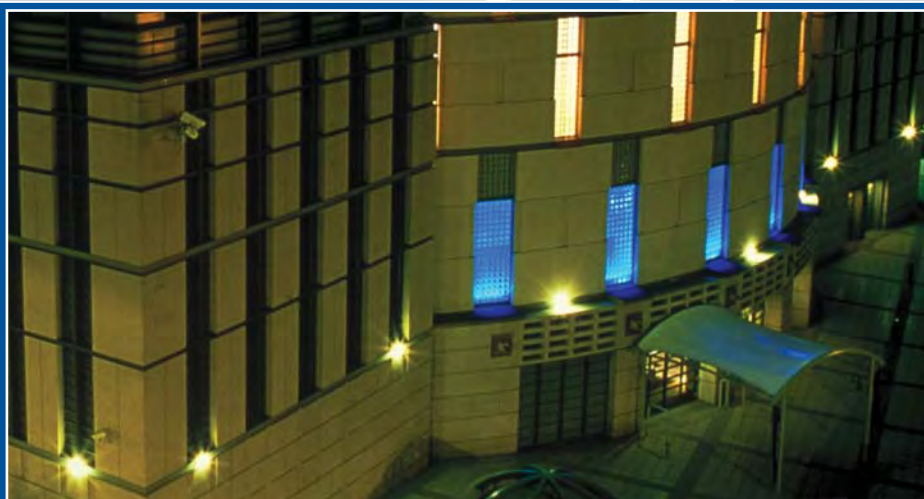
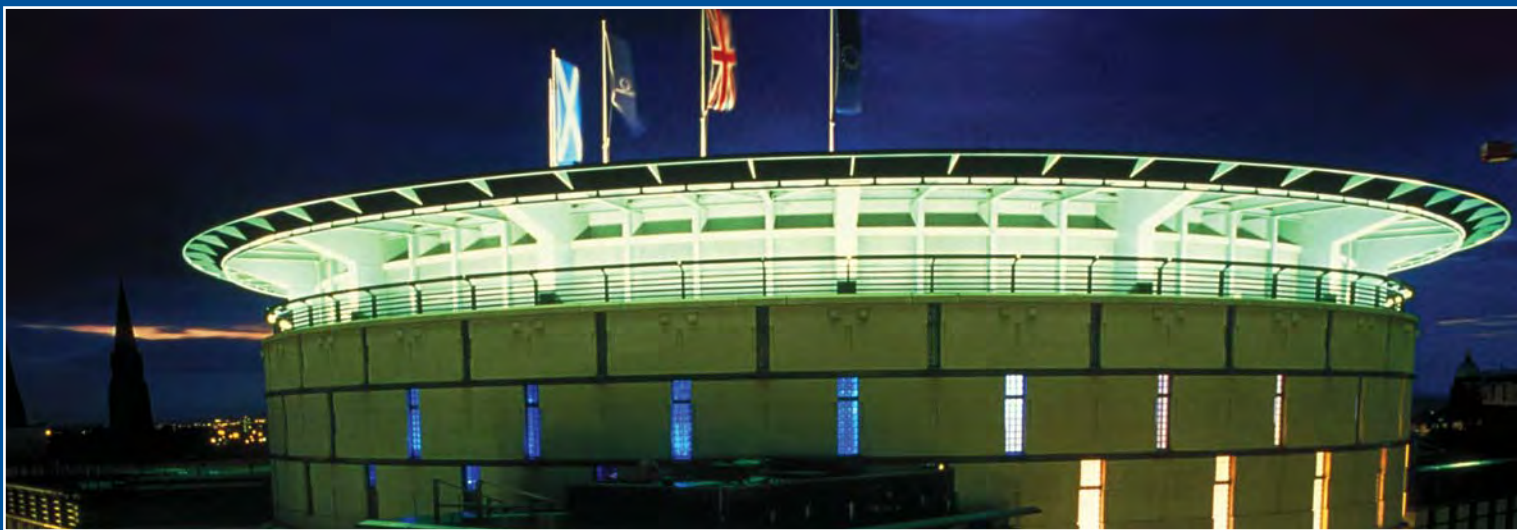




The Meetings & Conference Market

Are you really in the business?

THE MEETINGS AND CONFERENCE MARKET



A guide to conference marketing

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Introduction

Marketing a conference venue does not differ in principle from the marketing of any other product or service: first, define what you have to offer, then identify your market segment and finally promote your product to potential customers. Promoting to conference organisers, however, is more difficult than marketing to buyers in other industries.

There are three main reasons for this:-

- Locating the buyers – executives with job titles such as 'Conference Organiser' are rare and the decision to place a meeting could be made by anyone from the 'Chief Executive' to 'Secretary'.
- Building up customer loyalty – the problem here is that the person responsible for placing one meeting may well have moved on before the next one, and you need to keep in touch with the company or association, in order to be aware of these changes.
- Anticipating market demand – the number, type and timing of events held by companies, associations and public sector organisations all vary considerably.

With these potential problems, one might wonder if it is even worthwhile being involved in the conference industry. The answer is undoubtedly 'Yes' – providing that you run and market your facilities to the best advantage.

There has been considerable investment in meetings facilities in Britain over recent years. Cities and resorts have spent millions of pounds constructing purpose-built conference centres or renovating existing halls. The hotel industry has recognised the importance to their business of marketing, staging and servicing conferences, and an increasing number of residential conference centres are available at universities and colleges. There is also a rapidly increasing number of unusual venues being promoted to the meetings sector.

This booklet is designed primarily to help the smaller operator or those just getting into the meetings and conference business. In some respects, we may be accused of stating the obvious, but we make no apologies for this – sometimes things only become obvious when they are stated! Anyway, we hope you will find it useful.



Identify which market you are working in

Many establishments have function rooms and it is the job of the Sales Manager – or sometimes the Banqueting Manager – to keep these rooms busy for as long and as often as possible. The rooms can be used for private functions, office outings, office parties, marriages, birthday parties, Bar Mitzvahs, meetings and conferences, product launches or training courses – it really does not matter which! Or does it?

If you believe that it really does not matter, and you are doing quite nicely, thank you – then this advisory leaflet is not for you.

However, if you want to maximise the return on your functions business you should start by reviewing bookings during the past few years, and ask:

- For which types of function has the venue been most and least popular?
- Which type of function has most frequently been organised in the period when you usually most need the business?
- Which type has been the most profitable?
In a hotel, one should take into account the bedroom bookings which have accompanied the function, and the bar receipts, other meals and ancillary service charges.
- Which type might be repeat business – has the same company or individual name cropped up more than once?

If your study reveals that the meetings and conference business has been the most profitable – or has already proved itself to be repeat business (remember – a delegate at one meeting could be the organiser of another meeting), you may decide that this side of your business should be further developed, and that it warrants extra attention.



Research your market thoroughly.

Really get to know your market!

By finding out as much as you can about your customers, you can see how best to present your facility, to whom and where. You can have the best facility in the world, but it will not be successful unless it is properly marketed.

The Marketing Segmentation process is basically a matter of common sense and there are seminars available from the National and Regional Tourist Boards in UK, which can help you refine the process. The initial part of the marketing segmentation process will already have been completed if you made the study of your own business, as suggested in the first section.

The process goes further, however, and helps you to get to know your market in greater detail:-

- Who are the people making decisions about conferences?
 - How did they hear about you?
 - Article in magazine?
 - Listing in a directory?
 - Website?
 - Advertisement – where and when?
 - Recommendation – by whom?
- Why did they choose you?
- What are their basic needs?
- Are they local or do they come from further afield?
- What newspapers, periodicals or directories are they likely to read?
- How often do they organise meetings?
- Are those meetings of different sizes?
- Are they likely to have special needs?
- Do the delegates normally bring along spouses or partners?



Ensure your marketing targets the right people.

Know your product

Any staff member would probably be aware of the number of meeting rooms in a venue and the sizes of the rooms but, for a conference or meeting, the marketing team must have a much deeper knowledge of the product at their fingertips.

In terms of delegate capacity, a room will vary according to the different possible seating plans, and it is essential to know how many delegates can be comfortably seated in each variation of the seating plans (theatre style, classroom, boardroom style, U-shape, banquet, reception etc.).

Some meetings or conferences may need an accompanying exhibition, either in the same or an adjacent room. They may have a particularly heavy piece of equipment to display. Are you sure about the load-bearing strength of your flooring? The floor of a conference room in a London hotel gave way recently under the weight of a heavy piece of equipment, and caused a tremendous amount of damage.

- How many doors are there? Where are they positioned exactly? Where do they lead? How wide are they? A particularly wide piece of display equipment may need to be brought in, or some of the delegates may be wheelchair-bound and need ease of access
- You must also know how many electrical, lighting, telephone and ISDN outlets there are in the room and exactly where they are located.
- What is the shape of the room? A long, narrow room might be quite unsuitable; it is also conceivable that an L-shaped room is just what the organiser wants. Exact measurements of the two sides of the 'L' must be available.

The organiser may need to know the exact height of the ceiling – because of a particular display item, or audio-visual equipment he needs to use – or simply because he does not like low ceilings.

- Does the ceiling height vary – if so, where and by how much?
- Where are the overhead lights? Do they hang down? If so, can they be easily removed, if they get in the way of a projected image?
- How is the room lit? Is there natural daylight? If so, what are the blackout facilities, how do they work and how effective are they.



The right number of seats in the right room is vital.

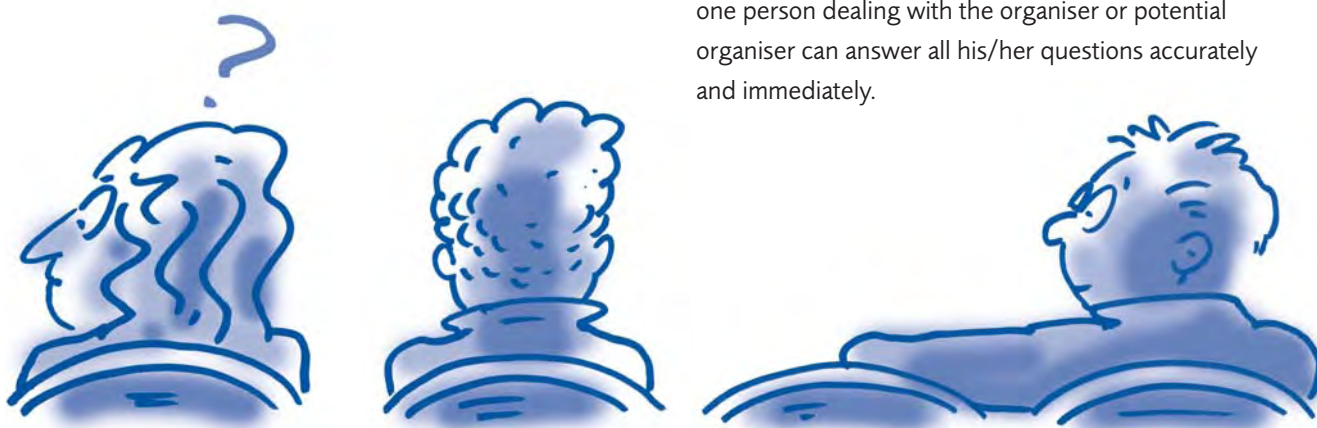


Accessibility for the disabled in all public buildings is now regarded as being highly important. The 1995 Disabilities Discrimination Act applies to all parts of the building/venue – not just the meeting rooms.

An Accessible Conference Venue Standard is being published which will award symbols to show how far the conference venue meets these standards.

- Are the doors lockable? There are growing numbers of reports of theft from conference rooms during periods when the delegates are absent (perhaps in a luncheon room). Smartly-dressed thieves, looking for all the world like conference delegates and complete with badges, have got away with many thousands of pounds worth of equipment. It may well also be that the subject of a particular corporate conference is highly sensitive and notes of the deliberations might be targets of industrial espionage!
- Are there pillars in the room? If so, where are they exactly and how big are they? They may restrict the audience view of the speaker and this must be taken into account, when you are talking about the different seating plans.
- Where are the toilet facilities and wash basins in relation to the meeting room? Are they for delegate use only or can other people in the venue use them? How many are there? Are they easily accessible?
- How easy is it to evacuate the room, if there is an emergency?

Different people in the venue may have the answers to all these different questions, but it is more impressive if the one person dealing with the organiser or potential organiser can answer all his/her questions accurately and immediately.



Describe it properly

So many hotels and venues produce attractive, glossy brochures, describing the comfort of their facilities, the attractive décor, the beautiful gardens, the fitness centre, the unique historical character etc.

These are fine for selling or marketing the venue as a whole. But, when it comes to the meeting rooms, there is usually simply a list of these with details of how many people they can hold for a dinner or a reception and just one or two pictures of a pretty boardroom table. The rooms are empty except possibly for a staff member smiling at the camera. This is not enough – you really need to be pro-active in the conference market.

There should be a separate conference facility brochure or information pack. This should give full details of floor plans, location of electrical outlets etc., equipment available (whether in-house or needing to be hired in), a map with clear instructions on how to reach the venue, and a price list, which should include hire charges for brought-in equipment, 24-hour delegate rates, day-delegate rates and/or prices for separate items or services, such as a telephone in the meeting room, tea/coffee services etc. It should be specified whether or not VAT is included in the prices shown.



An informative brochure or marketing pack is a great advertisement for your business.

Be Up-Front

It is essential to spell out very clearly to the conference organiser what is included in delegate packages. Some day and 24 hour delegate rates include refreshments during morning and afternoon breaks – others do not even include all or any meals.

It is always important to keep in mind that conference business can be lucrative repeat business, if the organiser and the delegates are happy with the facilities and services, and professionalism of the staff.

There is no point in exaggerating your facilities.

If your brochure claims that a room can comfortably hold 100 delegates in a theatre-style seating plan, whilst in reality they would have to be squashed together, or one or two of them would not be able to see or hear the speakers properly, they will not be happy! If they are not happy you have, at best, lost any chance of repeat business. It is better to under-estimate than to exaggerate.

If you are not really sure, it is essential to make a trial run of the seating possibilities, using as many of the facility staff as you can get together in the room!

The information pack should also list the items of equipment and facilities readily available in the venue – e.g. illuminated lectern for the speaker, microphones, flip-charts with pens, audio-visual equipment, video conferencing, internet access, business centre and/or secretarial facilities etc. Larger venues may also have closed circuit television, podiums and stage sets, interpretation services, spot lighting, television lighting etc.

If any of the above equipment is required and is not available in-house, do make sure that it can be easily hired in and find out the cost. Also verify that it comes with (or that you have) a supply of spare parts plus a technician to ensure that it works throughout the duration of the conference. There is nothing more irritating to a conference organiser or speaker, if a bulb blows in a piece of projection equipment, and nobody has the slightest idea how to change it!

The Descriptive Folder

To be cost-effective, it is advisable that the information section be printed separately from any descriptive section, as the data frequently alters and needs regular updating. This applies particularly to the price structures.

If you are going into several language editions of a descriptive folder, keep the changes to the type matter only – having the colour pictures common to all. This will make considerable savings to the print cost.

Please also remember that pictures of conference rooms are far more effective when they show delegates in situ – empty rooms, no matter how pretty, are boring!

It is also important to remember the cost of distribution (envelopes, postage, handling charges etc) may exceed the unit cost of the brochure. Keep to standard paper sizes (e.g. A4, A5, 1/3rd of A4). Unusual shapes can add extra costs which could be avoided and may also be difficult for organisers to keep on file.

Do remember to include the venue name, address, telephone and fax numbers, website and e-mail address in both the descriptive brochure and the information pack! This may seem obvious, but it happens surprisingly frequently, that the address figures in only one or other of the documents and not both. To be really effective, either print the name of the dedicated conference executive and his/her direct line, or make sure that the appropriate visiting card is stapled to each document.

The organisers will probably need details of the accommodation availability – the number of bedrooms in total, how many singles, how many doubles, how many twins and how many suites, and whether the doubles/twins can be let for single occupancy (and what the prices would be).



Can the organisers find you easily?

Minimum facility requirements

Meeting rooms should be dedicated to that purpose. Some smaller establishments have been known to try to make a quick conversion of a breakfast room or what is normally a bar area or other dining room into a meeting room, while the delegates are there.

This simply will not do!

The seating area per delegate should conform to (or exceed) the following dimensions:-

- Theatre style: 0.8 sq. metres (8.62 sq. ft)
- Classroom style : 1.6 sq. metres (17.23 sq. ft)

Due allowance should be made for space in which delegates can move around. If theatre or classroom style rows of seats are so close together that a late-comer cannot get to a seat without making delegates already seated get up and move out, he/she is not the only one, who is going to be unpopular; as the facility provider you will not be popular either.

Aisles between rows of seats should be at least 76 centimetres (2ft 6ins) wide. Chairs with arms should be provided for all day meetings. There should also be a clock in the room.

Easily adjusted and reliable heating should be provided. You may be proud of your air-conditioning, but no one wants to sit in a meeting and freeze! Air conditioning and heating needs to be quiet and unobtrusive in order not to distract speakers and delegates.

All meetings facilities should be cleaned at least once a day. Refuse containers should be emptied and water jugs and glasses should be changed twice daily. If smoking is permitted at all, ashtrays should also be emptied and cleaned, or replaced every time there is a scheduled break.



The environment you provide must be comfortable for guests.



Refreshments are an essential ingredient for most gatherings!

A coffee/tea service should be provided for delegates (whether included in the basic price or at an extra charge), and there must be enough room for the delegates to consume it in comfort. If possible this should be served either in an adjacent or nearby room.

There should be at least one pay phone per 100 delegates in non-residential conference venues. If there is seating for more than 1,000, there should be space for additional phones if required.

Toilet facilities and wash basins should be close to the meeting area, with separate male and female facilities for both able-bodied and disabled delegates. In non-residential conference venues, with seating for up to 500 delegates, the minimum ratios should be as follows:-

- **Female:** 1 WC and 1 wash hand basin for every 50 delegates
- **Male:** 1 WC, 1 urinal and 1 wash hand basin for every 50 delegates

For every 200 additional seats, there should be one extra set of facilities for each of the sexes.

Effective air movement and mechanical ventilation should provide not less than 1,000 cubic feet of air per hour per person in the meeting room. Where there is complete air conditioning and relative humidity of not more than 55%, the amount of fresh air could be reduced to not less than 500 cubic feet per hour per person, the remainder being re-circulated air. The ventilation controls should be in the meeting room and easily accessible.

As far as practicable, the ventilation system should be capable of preventing fire and smoke from entering or circulating in the room. It should obviously maintain hygienic conditions and be able to remove smoke or fumes direct to the open air.

Ideally, a first aid kit should be provided in each meeting room – certainly one should be readily and quickly available in case of emergency. A qualified first-aider should be on hand whenever a large conference is in session.

All conference facilities must comply with Fire Regulations laid down by Government. In order to obtain a Fire Certificate and advice as to how legislative requirements may be satisfied, the local Fire Brigade or Health and Safety Executive should be consulted. In Northern Ireland Fire Certificates can be obtained from the Fire Authority.

Exits should be clearly marked, and there should be two (unlocked from the inside) marked exits for any room with a capacity for up to 500 delegates, and a minimum of 1 marked exit for every 250 additional delegates. The exit signs should remain illuminated during the periods when the normal lighting is dimmed.

Direction signs to all the meeting rooms should be clear and easily seen and tested by a stranger before the event starts.

If it is necessary to have electrical leads crossing areas where delegates walk, it is essential that these should be covered with carpet tape.

All normal external noise should be muffled when doors and windows are closed – ideally, the meeting rooms should be completely sound-proofed. Doors to meeting facilities must open and close silently!

Lighting should be able to be controlled from within the room – dimmer switches are preferable. Ideally lighting should be controlled from the speaker's lectern, if this is at all possible.

All the above guidelines are minimum conference facilities with which any conference venue worthy of its name should be able to comply. The International Association of Professional Congress Organisers (IAPCO) has published a document entitled '*Planning a Conference Centre – The Requirements of Professional Conference Organisers*'. It is a very useful document for those planning to construct or adapt facilities intended for use by large-scale Conferences. Details of IAPCO can be found in the list at the end of this document.



Never forget, the safety of your visitors is in your hands.

Marketing Techniques

'If you've got it, flaunt it!' ...and to flaunt it you will need a budget, but the costs need not be exorbitant. There are several promotional methods which can be used, and by careful planning you can make them extremely cost-effective.

The two most important ingredients – the promotional & information pack and servicing/word-of-mouth recommendations – are dealt with in separate sections. Obviously, however, the personal recommendation by clients who have used your facilities only becomes effective after you have been established for some time.

One or more of the following approaches could be considered:

- **Join your local tourist board or convention bureau**
- **Directories**
- **Press and Public Relations Campaigns**
- **Direct Mail**
- **Advertising**
- **Exhibitions**
- **Consortia Promotions**
- **Contact Venue-Finding Agencies and Conference Organisers in the UK**
- **Personal Sales Calls**
- **Telephone Contact**
- **Facility Visits**

Join your local area tourist board or convention or conference bureau

By joining your local tourist board or convention bureau you will become eligible for membership benefits (eg. being featured in their directory, sales leads distribution etc) and have the opportunity to participate in joint promotional activity.

Directories

Using directories for research is an effective first step. In your local library you should be able to find directories of associations and other national companies, which could be potential customers. The British Tourist Authority and the National Tourist Boards can help you get hold of appropriate lists, but it might be more effective to look into your immediate area first. Sources for lists of potentially useful names and addresses are the Regional Tourist Boards, the Convention Bureau of the nearest town or city, the local Chamber of Commerce – even the local newspapers within (say) a radius of about 30 or 40 miles.

You could also consider taking an entry in one or more of the conference venue directories which are used by conference buyers to source event venues.

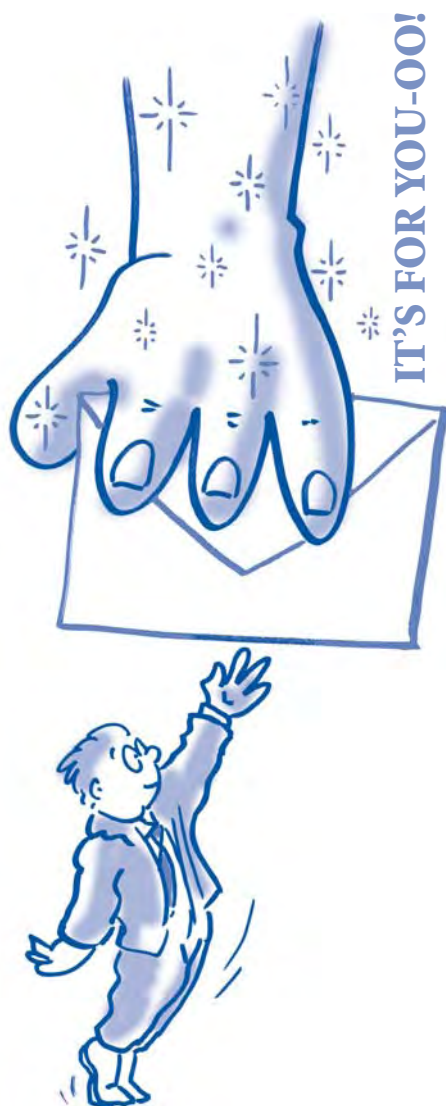
Press and Public Relations Campaigns

Issuing press releases and photographs of new facilities and services you offer or events which have been held at your venue (with the permission of the organiser!) is a cost-effective and easy-to-organise operation. Companies which regularly supply releases with a 'news' angle and/or photographs to newspapers, magazines – particularly trade publications – and to promotional organisations (eg BTA and the National Tourist Boards) tend to achieve the best coverage.

This may seem an obvious approach, but it is surprising how many venues do not make the effort and then wonder why their competitors gain such extensive press coverage.

If you're making news, tell the newspapers!





Let your target audience know that your mailshots are intended for them.

Direct Mail

The extent of the direct mail campaign will depend upon the research you have accomplished and, of course, upon the budget available!

A personalised letter will stand a better chance of being read and, to enhance your own image, it should mention important meetings of well-known clients which you have hosted.

The direct mail letter should also seek a response from the recipient – preferably on an easily-completed (and short!) Fax-back questionnaire. Show the recipient you are interested in his/her business and would like to know more about his/her needs. Some of the questions contained in the '*Really get to know the Market*' section could be used on the Fax-back.

It is vital that the database is kept up to date with regular cleaning exercises to eliminate old contact names from mailshots.

Your mailing list can be built up from:-

- Past contacts (both previous clients and prospective clients, who may have indicated an interest in the past, even if they did not bring their event to your facility.)
- Advertising Coupon Respondents (See below)
- Visitors to stands at Trade Fairs, Exhibitions or Workshops (See below)
- Purchased Mailing Lists
- Membership lists of local Chambers of Commerce, associations or industry bodies, obtained from your research
- Readership Subscription Lists of Industry Magazines, although the publishing house will normally wish to handle the mailings itself.

The most cost-effective method of gauging buyer reaction is the mailing of a promotional 'flyer' leaflet, with a reply-paid card enclosed, rather than sending out the main brochure or conference pack as a first-stage mailing item.

Advertising

Advertising in the printed media can be very expensive and it is as well to bear in mind that the chances of your advertisement being read by the buyer at the precise moment when he/she is looking for a venue are quite slim.

Use of the Internet is becoming a viable alternative – your site could include the brochure description and the room layouts. You should also consider a 'hot-link' to a site operated by your local tourist board or convention bureau or by a venue finding agency or a consortium (see below).

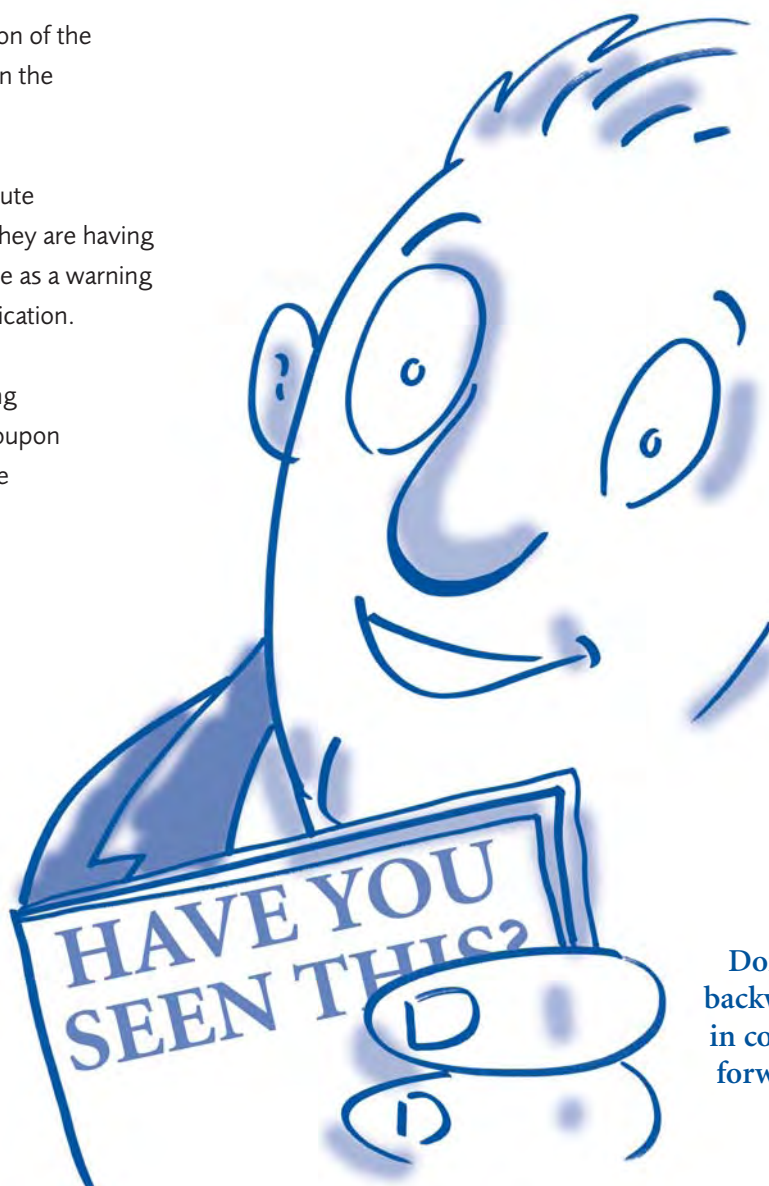
From time-to-time, newspapers and magazines run special 'conference facilities' supplements but, before committing your budget, you should ensure that the publication is going to be read by the right audience for your facility.

Do take into account the cost of production of the advertisement as well as the space costs in the chosen media.

Be wary of anyone selling cheap, last-minute advertisement space. It probably means they are having problems selling space, and this may serve as a warning about the quality or suitability of the publication.

You should devise some way of monitoring response to an advertisement – a reply coupon with a letter code in one corner is a simple and effective method.

Again, advertising in the local media is probably the best way to start. You may also consider taking space in the directories published by the National, Regional and Local Tourist Boards – they do have a better chance of being kept by the recipients for future reference, than do magazines or supplements. If you are interested in the international market, British Tourist Authority and the National Tourist Boards can advise on opportunities offered in markets throughout the world.



Don't be
backwards
in coming
forwards!

Exhibitions

The right exhibition can put you in touch with genuine potential clients, and it provides an excellent opportunity to present your services at first hand. Participating in the wrong event, however, is both expensive and time-consuming. A list of major exhibitions is available from BTA's Business Tourism Department upon request.

Your local Convention Bureau or Tourist Board may organise stands for its members at large shows such as 'International Confex' and/or 'Meetings & Incentive Travel Show', and such jointly-held space will reduce your costs.

They may also be members of the British Association of Conference Destinations (BACD), which organises the 'Confer' exhibition in London each autumn, and they can represent you at that show and in the venue enquiry service operated by BACD.

Information on British exhibition organisers and exhibition venues plus general advice on exhibiting is available from the Association of Exhibition Organisers and the Exhibition Venues Association and other industry associations, whose contact details can be found at the end of this document.



Make sure you are the right venue for the events you host.

Consortia Promotions

A cost-effective way for venues to promote themselves, is to combine activities with either a governmental body (such as the Local Convention Bureau) or with similar establishments to themselves.

Joining your Local Tourist Board or Convention Bureau will bring eligibility for a number of benefits. Promotions can range from joint literature to receptions and joint stands at exhibitions.

If your venue is a hotel you could consider joining a hotel marketing consortium (eg Best Western or Consort Hotels) who have separate executives and promotions for their conference seeking members.

If your facility is a university, you should consider joining the British Universities Accommodation Consortium (BUAC) or 'Connect' (formerly the Higher Education Accommodation Consortium). Both of these organisations promote the facilities of their members, hold one day exhibitions in London each year and have a free venue finding service for their members.

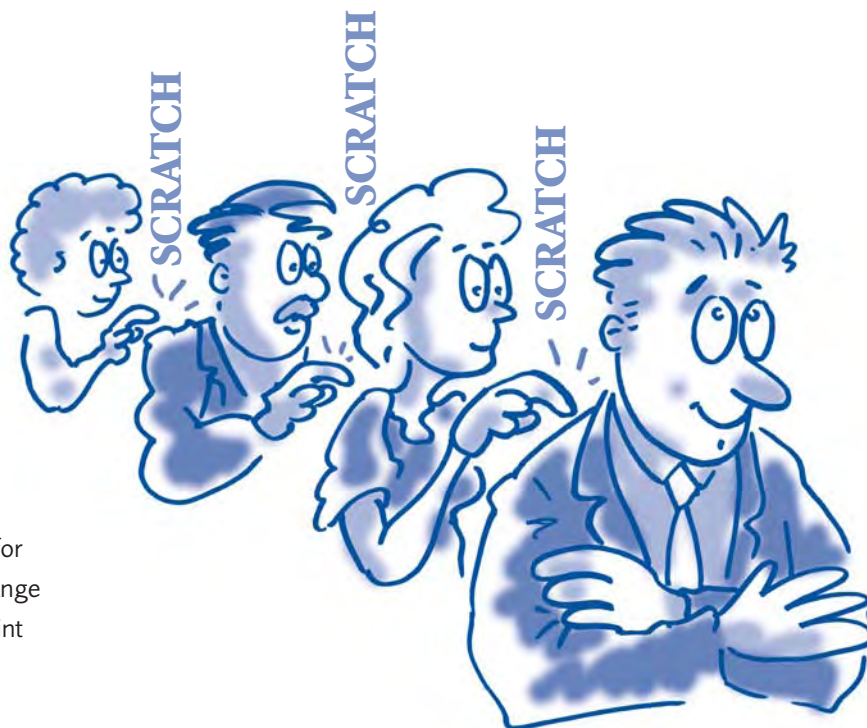
Venue-Finding Agencies

Venue-finding agencies find suitable venues for their clients' events and they work with venues on a commission basis. They frequently have commercial ties with venues.

Professional Conference Organisers

Professional conference organisers organise events on behalf of their clients and advise on appropriate venues.

The Association of British Professional Conference Organisers, the Association for Conference & Events and the Meetings Industry Association can provide contact details of their members who are venue finding agencies and/or professional conference organisers.



Working alongside others
can help everyone!

Personal Sales Calls

Research is, of course, the vital element in a professional 'marketing pitch'. Once you are satisfied that you have located the decision-maker and have been able to arrange a meeting, you should go armed with the knowledge of as many of his/her requirements as possible. This shows the potential buyer that you are keen, thorough and alert, and have a personal interest in his/her particular needs.

A follow-up visit to a client after he/she has organised an event at your venue is useful to gain feed back on the event and to build the relationship. This can also be used as an opportunity to gain information on other people in the organisation who may book conferences. Remember just about anybody in an organisation can book or influence the decision on where to hold a conference. This can range from the Managing Director or his/her secretary, to the Training Manager to the Trade Union Organiser – or the wife of the Chairman! Some companies do have someone with Conference Organiser as their job title, but this is not always the case.

Do make sure that you follow up sales leads within companies with which you have already been in contact. A booking may ostensibly have been placed by the London headquarters of the company but may well have been influenced by a local agency of that company, or even on the recommendation of a client or delegate company within your area.

Telephone Contact

Telephone contact should mainly be used for research purposes – it helps you refine and update your mailing lists on a direct and effective basis. It is especially valuable as a follow-up to a direct-mail campaign, once the Fax-back has established the interest of the potential client and the suitability of your venue to meet his/her needs.

Cold-call 'telemarketing' is not a good idea, however, as at best, it can be expensive and time-consuming; at worst, the recipient of a telephone call is likely to find it a nuisance and will be prejudiced against using your venue (if he/she remembers the telephone call at all!)

Maintaining personal contact with a potential or previous client can, however, be very effective (see 'Service' section).



There is no substitute for the personal touch.

Facility Visits

It is very rare – and not very sensible – for a customer not to wish to make a detailed inspection of the venue before making his/her decision.

Showing off your facilities at first hand to prospective customers is the ideal way to win business, but persuading conference buyers in general – and trade journalists – to visit your venue is not as easy as one might imagine. The genuine buyer or writer is likely to be too busy to 'waste time' and there are far too many people around who would regard such a visit as a 'freebie'.

The hosting of groups – for lunches, receptions, overnight stays and even over weekends – can be invaluable but the visits must be carefully planned and the buying and decision making power of the guests must be checked in advance.

All aspects of the venue should be available for inspection and these should include catering areas, fire and emergency stairways and even storage areas where these are close to public areas. If your facility offers accommodation any tour should show the smallest bedroom first, proceed to the standard size and end with the largest bedrooms or suites.

If you do identify a group of decision-makers and/or effective decision-influencers, it is important that such people should be given personal VIP treatment and an intensive programme.

As far as possible, try to ensure that the group members will be compatible and that the group is not too large for you to be able to give each of them adequate personal attention.

You should plan a social programme and ensure that the visitors see all your facilities. Otherwise, these visits can be an expensive and even a counter-productive exercise.

Tell your local tourist board or convention bureau that you would be willing to work with them by hosting groups of potential conference buyers.



Service

There have been a number of allusions already in this booklet to the importance of providing a real service to the conference buyers and delegates. Research has shown that the attributes of the facility itself (size, price, location and accessibility) all play an important role in the initial decision-making process but customer needs are as varied as the range of facilities which Britain has to accommodate them.

One simply cannot grade apples with pears!

One conference organiser may be looking for an easily accessible, modern hotel in a city centre or near an airport. Another may be looking for state-of-the-art facilities for the conference itself but not place so much emphasis on luxurious sleeping accommodation.

One may be seeking an away-from-it-all venue, either from a desire for complete confidentiality or because a country house hotel/conference venue has the advantage of fresh air or extra-curricular activities such as a golf course. Another may be looking for a prestigious location in a castle; for some, price is extremely important, whilst for others gourmet food may be the key.



All delegates are different: some want to stretch out, some want to socialise and some just want to get to their rooms.

It is for this reason that calls for a classification and grading-system for conference venues have now been largely abandoned.

The one thing common to all conference organisers' desires and needs is **SERVICE**.

Favourable recommendation from clients may well be a venue's largest, single source of repeat business, and one must remember that a delegate at one conference may be the organiser of a future conference. One must obviously make sure that all conference delegates leave with a pleasant memory of the visit – too often, departing guests speed away with sighs of relief rather than the wish to come again.

It is vital that there are dedicated personnel dealing with conference and meeting enquiries, rather than someone who is the Sales and Banqueting Manager.

When a booking has been confirmed it is essential that the same member of staff deals with the meeting up to and including the day(s) it is held.

As far as the delegates are concerned, all the staff at the venue should be aware that a conference is about to take place. Some establishments have got it all down to a fine art – their computers know when the guest is a repeat-guest (even after a year or more has gone by), and the receptionist is primed to say how nice it is to see that person again.



Do all your staff know what to expect?

The National and Regional Boards run 'Welcome Host' and 'Welcome Management' courses, and (currently available only in Scotland) there is also an excellent initiative called 'Conference Care' which addresses the needs of conference organisers and delegates. It would be well worth considering sending your staff on one of these courses. In Northern Ireland 'Welcome Host' courses are run by Abbey Training Services and Northern Ireland Growth Challenge.

Understanding the needs and objectives of the client

The conference organiser needs much more than simply making a delegate feel welcome – he/she needs:

- someone who is always on hand, whom he/she knows and who knows all the details of the venue's facilities and the organiser's needs.
- someone who can be there to put things right if they go wrong – from a dried-out marker pen for the flip-chart to the replacement of a light-bulb in a projector.
- Someone who can anticipate needs and is ready to make suggestions if last-minute emergencies occur.

Quite often these emergencies are by no means the fault of the venue. There may, for instance, be a sudden increase in the number of delegates only one week out from the start of a conference. There may be dietary requirements on the part of one or two delegates, of which the organiser knew nothing or which he/she forgot to pass on to his/her contact at the venue.

Mistakes and omissions can occur and the ability to rectify them and take matters in your stride will make all the difference to your reputation and to word-of-mouth recommendations.

- Someone who really cares! Do ensure that you or your staff write to the organiser after the conference asking for his/her feedback so as to provide a better service in future – and optimise the chances of repeat business. You should also check if anyone else in the company organises meetings. Building a relationship with the client develops trust and maintains awareness of your venue.



Show the conference organiser that you really care.

Ongoing research and evaluation will enable you to keep abreast of customers' needs and expectations.

The main thing is to pay attention to the smallest details, remain cheerful, helpful and resourceful and – at the end of it – learn from any mistakes.

Such mistakes may not be yours – they may be mistakes on the part of the client, but it is likely that you will get the blame anyway!

Whatever the cause, they should not be simply shrugged off – conference business is repeat business and even the same mistakes could be made again. Once you have encountered them, you can anticipate them and have a solution ready.



Learn from any mistakes that pop up.

Servicing a conference and a conference organiser properly is a complicated business, but it is easy when you really know how and give it the attention it deserves.

On the initiative of the Association for Conferences and Events (ACE), ten industry associations based in the UK worked for several years to develop occupational standards and National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications for the Events Industry. These have now been established at levels 2, 3 and 4 with specific 'strands' applicable to organisers and venues. To subscribe to these N/SVQs is another way to further develop your venue and staff in the conference sphere.

List Of Useful Addresses

Tourist Boards

British Tourist Authority

Business Tourism Department
Thames Tower
Black's Road
London
W6 9EL
Tel: 020 8563 3251
Fax: 020 8563 3257
Email: businesstourism@bta.org.uk
www.visitbritain.com/businesstourism
www.tourismtrade.org.uk

Northern Ireland Tourist Board & Conference Bureau

St. Anne's Court
59 North Street
Belfast
BT1 1NB
Tel: 028 9031 5513
Fax: 028 9031 5544
Email: nicb@nitb.com
www.discovernorthernireland.com

Scottish Convention Bureau

23 Ravelston Terrace
Edinburgh
Scotland
EH4 3TP
Tel: 0131 343 1608
Fax: 0131 343 1844
Email: conventionbureau@visitscotland.com
www.conventionscotland.com

Wales Tourist Board

Business Tourism
Brunel House
2 Fitzalan Road
Cardiff
CF24 0UY
Tel: 029 2047 5202
Fax: 029 2047 5321
Email: business-tourism@tourism.wales.gov.uk
www.meetings.visitwales.com

Conference and Exhibition Industry Associations

Association of British Professional Conference Organisers

6th Floor, Charles House
148-149 Great Charles Street
Birmingham
B3 3HT
Tel: 0121 212 1400
Fax: 0121 212 3131
Email: membership.secretary@abpc.org

Association for Conferences & Events

Riverside House
High Street
Huntingdon
Cambridgeshire
PE18 6SG
Tel: 01480 457595
Fax: 01480 412863
Email: ace@martex.co.uk

Association of Exhibition Organisers

113 High Street
Berkhampsted
Hertfordshire
HP4 2DJ
Tel: 01442 873331
Fax: 01442 875551
Email: info@aeo.org.uk

British Association of Conference Destinations

6th Floor, Charles House
148-149 Great Charles Street
Birmingham
B3 3HT
Tel: 0121 212 1400
Fax: 0121 212 3131
Email: info@bacd.org.uk

British Hospitality Association

Queen's House
55-56 Lincoln's Inn Fields
London
WC2A 3BH
Tel: 020 7404 7744
Fax: 020 7404 7799
Email: bha@bha.org.uk

British Incoming Tour Operators Association

Vigilant House
 120 Wilton Road
 London
 SW1V 1JZ
 Tel: 020 7931 0601
 Fax: 020 7828 0531
 www.bitoa.co.uk

Exhibition Venues Association

C/o NEC
 Birmingham
 B40 1NT
 Tel: 0121 780 4141
 Fax: 0121 767 3865
 E-mail: centre-exhibitions@necgroup.co.uk

International Congress & Convention Association - UK

Chapter

C/o British Tourist Authority
 Business Tourism Department
 Thames Tower
 Black's Road
 London
 W6 9EL
 Tel: 020 8563 3091
 Fax: 020 8563 3257
 Email: business tourism@bta.org.uk

Meetings Industry Association

34 High Street
 Broadway
 Worcestershire
 WR12 7DT
 Tel: 01386 858572
 Fax: 01386 858986
 Email: mia@meetings.org

Notes

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