

ORGANISING A CONFERENCE

FINDING FINANCIAL PARTNERS

Conferences are not usually organised as profit-making ventures, but rather for other, more scientific, reasons. A conference's budget sometimes constitutes the takings of an SME whose activity is concentrated into just a few days. For the organiser, who generally lacks initial liquidity, the financial risk involved is enormous because of the time lag between outlay (publicity costs, booking the convention centre) and returns, payments that are often late and which arrive in a random fashion.

The registration fee (often capped) generally does not cover the actual expenses involved in the conference-goer's participation.

It is very important, therefore, for the organiser to find financial partners and sponsors who can be of assistance in achieving financial balance in return for certain services.

A) Potential financial partners

The basis of the search should be one of mutual benefit, where there is some aspect of genuine interest to each party.

- For the partners: visibility, brand image, Public Relations, information, distribution, lobbying, introduction to and/or marketing of products...
- For the organiser: financial support (additional revenue, cost-transferral – services undertaken by partner, thereby reducing expenditure), providing services or activities during the event,
- For the participants: added attraction, information...

1. Government and parastatal bodies

- Ministry in charge: sponsorship of the event, official presence of Minister or Ministry representative, subsidies...
- Regional authorities, France's *département* authorities: in some cases, subsidies can be granted,
- The town hosting the conference. It is increasingly rare for local authorities to grant subsidies for conferences held in their municipality, on the grounds that their financial contribution is implicit in the building and partial funding of the convention centre. However, in some cases they will offer reduced rates on hall hire or services in kind: conference signposting around the town, use of public notice boards, floral decoration, inviting conference participants to an official cocktail evening...
- Chambers of Commerce and Industry: in certain cases they may grant subsidies or undertake technical company tours, provide a data base...
- National railway company (*SNCF* in France): discounts for conference participants' travel and sometimes meet-and-greet service at station,

- Air France: discounts for conference participants' travel (in return for exclusive rights as official carrier) and discount advertising for international conferences,
- France Télécom: perhaps creating a cyberspace for the conference,
- the French Délégation Générale à la Langue Française (operating under the Ministry of Culture and Communication): may, given certain conditions, contribute to the cost of simultaneous interpreting for international conferences.

For all of these potential partners, it is important to:

- create a dossier on the conference, its purpose, the participants expected...
- arrange appointments in person, preferably sending your local representative.
- get the process underway very early (it takes several months to put together the dossier).

2. Private enterprise

These are mainly firms involved in the economic sector addressed by the conference and for whom the participants are clients or prospective clients.

Several partnership possibilities:

- financial contribution (official partnership)
- promoting their products and services
- advertiser (buying advertising space)
- meeting the cost of a number of services (financial contribution in the form of cost transferral)

In order to contact these businesses:

- use the highest-level contacts possible
- prepare specific dossiers (general dossier for stand-holders, dossiers for advertisers), quantifying the support desired and what can be offered in return. Highlight everything that the firm can expect as a return on its investment,
- establish a specific marketing plan: telephone, individualised mail-outs, reminders, contacts...
- contact the company as early as possible (marketing budgets are often set in September for the following year).

Searching for partners in an unrelated sector (luxury goods, car rental companies, banks...) is often disappointing as the patronage of these businesses is very much in demand and they generally opt for major events. Investing a lot of time in approaching them could be fruitless.

3. Media

- Specialised press, involved in the economic sector of the conference: seldom any financial assistance but significant publicity potential, possibly hosting a session, publishing articles before and after the conference...
- Wider general press: unless your conference and its themes are very topical, don't expect significant contributions.

B) Saleable products

Services that, as the case may be, can be "sold"

1. Financial contribution

- Subsidies from government or parastatal bodies
- Hiring stands (exposition)
- Providing souvenir bags for participants (with both logos appearing on souvenir bags)
- Promotional cards in the souvenir bags
- Exclusive production signature by a business: of the draft programme, of the book of abstracts, of the conference minutes (hard copy, CD-Rom or internet),
- Ad banner on the website with hyperlink to the advertiser's site,
- Purchase of advertising space in the draft programme, in the programme, book of abstracts, conference minutes,
- Corporate sponsorship of a workshop (guest speaker from that firm, mention made in the programme),
- Symposium created by a business (mention made in the programme),
- Provision of space (show-room),
- Participant registration for the conference...

2. Cost transferral

- Providing simultaneous interpreting (displaying a sign in the conference hall: "Interpretation courtesy of ...")
- Meeting the costs of guest speakers (certain speakers invited courtesy of a firm, or laboratory: covering registration fees, travel expenses, accommodation...)
- Running the promotional website for the conference,
- Technical company tours (transfers, tour, reception),
- Sponsoring a coffee break, a meal or a soirée (mention made in the programme, opening address),
- Supplying badges (logo on the back of the badges)
- Article or publicity in the media (mention made in all the conference documents of the partner in the media)
- Advertisement in the programme on the internet with a hyperlink to the advertiser's website...

Remember

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The conference is an event which can involve partners that, in return for services or undertakings, make a vital financial contribution to the conference.

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The search for partners must be clearly targeted and requires genuine marketing operation.

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In the search for private sector financial partners, one must not lose sight of the purpose of the conference: to create a platform for information, communication, exchange. It is important to strike the right balance so that the conference is not reduced to a purely commercial or advertising venture in the eyes of the participants.