

ORGANISING A CONFERENCE: SOCIAL EVENTS PROGRAMME

A conference provides an opportunity to further one's knowledge, or one's training, at a professional level. It is an intense time for the participants, who invest significant amounts of time and money to attend.

With all the many different, often rival, conferences on offer, the potential participant must make a choice. Among the participant's selection criteria, apart from the conference itself and the destination, it is sometimes the social events programme (soirées, free time, sports, sightseeing tours...) that becomes the determining factor. The social events programme is more than a merely promotional aspect of the conference; it is one of the keys to a successful event, a momentous occasion that participants will remember long after the conference is over.

A) Definition

The social events programme includes all different kinds of activities offered to the various types of conference conference-goers (participants, spouses, stand-holders...). It encourages social interaction, communication, relaxation and the discovery of the cultural and touristic heritage of the region in which the conference is held.

The social events programme usually includes: official cocktail evenings and receptions, soirées, sightseeing tours, sporting and cultural activities and pre- and post-conference tours.

Depending on the event, some social items are indeed an integral part of the conference itself (official cocktail evening, gala evening...), while others are considered an optional extra for conference participants (sightseeing tours, pre- and post-conference tours).

B) Design

To contribute to the success of the conference, the various activities offered (optional or otherwise) should take into account:

1. Participants' previous experiences and expectations

- The social events programme offered in previous years
- The smooth scheduling of social events (no timetable clashes with working sessions)
- The programme designed for spouses
- The participants' budgets (cost of activities)

- The participants' expectations (significant factor in deciding whether or not to attend the conference)
- The free time available to participants (for dining out with colleagues or attending a private function organised by a stand-holder...), the possibility of drawing on and promoting the touristic and/or cultural assets of the region.

2. The potential of the conference centre and the surrounding region

- The inclusion of activities that are related to local culture (folklore, gastronomy...)
- The uniqueness of the conference (events that can only be experienced during this particular conference)
- The need to adapt to the region itself, which sometimes affects the structure of the conference (if the conference is held on the coast or in the mountains, it is preferable to create free time slots that allow participants to make the most of the surroundings, even if it means scheduling working sessions early in the morning or late in the evening)
- The official nature of some functions (cocktail receptions in Town Hall reception room, or in the Chamber of Commerce....)
- The possible coincidence of unique regional or local events occurring during the course of the conference. Participants may wish to take part as VIPs (festivals, sporting or cultural events, grape harvesting...)

C) Running the events

The activities must be of the utmost quality so as not to risk tarnishing in any way the image of the conference. In order to achieve this, it is vital to:

1. Capitalise on skills and know-how

- Create a sub-group within the organising committee to be in charge of setting up the social events programme (by teaming up, for example, a local official who is familiar with the setting and the wife of a committee member, who will play an important role in designing the programme for spouses)
- Capitalise on the expertise of local bodies (Conference Bureau, Convention Centre, Tourist Information Centre, meet-and-greet contractors, event planners) that have an intimate knowledge of the locality, its advantages and disadvantages. Sub-contract the social events programme in part or in full (convention centres very often have a specialised service which can undertake the whole social events programme at inexpensive rates)
- Avoid offering too many options (outings, pre- and post-conference sightseeing tours...). If there are not enough participants, you will find yourself having to make cancellations, reimburse the participants...
- Include transfers in the activities, even for short distances (being in a group makes people more passive)
- Examine the possibility of having radio or telephone contact with coach drivers if organising transfers
- Arrange for individuals who may so desire to come back early from events (arrange a temporary taxi rank)

2. Test the suggested activities and the contractors

- Test in advance the various services that are available (sampling the kind of menu offered by the caterer...)
- Make sure that the caterer does in fact have the resources (kitchen facilities, equipment, staff) and experience to cater for the expected number of participants
- Verify the group capacities for any sightseeing tours (entry into museums...) and stagger the group visits if necessary to ensure optimum visiting conditions
- Ascertain the real duration of each activity (taking into consideration, for example in the case of a soirée, the actual time needed for: seating everyone on the coach, negotiating traffic conditions for the given time and day, seating people at their tables, allowing caterers to serve, speeches, gathering coats from the cloak room at the end of the evening...)

3. Verify your administrative authorisations and your insurance

- Verify that you have all the necessary authorisations (for private use of a public place, lighting fireworks...)
- Verify that a social events programme, even if optional, is covered by your “civil liability” insurance policy as an events organiser
- In the case of musical events, make a declaration to the SACEM, France’s Society of Music Creators, Composers and Publishers (the music rights management organisation) and pay royalties
- Ensure that all conference participants can attend the various activities (choose premises capable of accommodating all participants for a gala evening, if not, the participants who miss out on places, regardless of your selection process, will be dissatisfied)
- Rather than trying to impress with hi-tech solutions, opt for tried and tested resources (going by successful past experiences)
- Avoid being over-optimistic and systematically include poor-weather facilities or a back-up plan
- Steer clear of high-risk activities or activities that require training or high levels of fitness (MTB downhill runs, parachute jumping, scuba-diving, even if the location is ideal for it. In the event of any problems, you will be held responsible.)
- For large groups, arrange for emergency medical care (ambulance or mobile medical emergency service, such as the *Samu* in France, or the Red Cross)
- Before confirming a reservation, negotiate the prices for various group sizes (since the exact number of expected participants is rarely available beforehand, particularly for optional activities, it is wise to negotiate a price per person)

4. Take extra care when organising dinners and soirées

- Avoid, if possible, pre-arranging the participants’ seating at dinner tables (except for the head table). It is a complicated affair (last-minute changes) even when using a specialised computer programme
- Avoid organising dances for evenings where the participants will all be of the same sex and when spouses have not been invited
- Avoid events that are too Franco-French if you are hosting an international conference (for example, a French-speaking stand-up comedian would be lost on foreigners)

- Select events that are appropriate for the customs, culture and age of the participants
- Opt for traditional menus and ensure that they are in keeping with the themes of the evening, the season...
- Balance the menus in such a way as to provide a variety of dishes and set-menus throughout the entire conference
- Be prepared to cater for vegetarians or arrange pork-free menus should the need arise
- Ensure sufficient staff for the cloak room at the end of the evening (guests are eager to return to their lodgings at the end of an evening)
- For events held in public places, print the invitations, or tickets if there is an admission fee (wearing a badge for the evening is often frowned upon)

D) Costs

The social events programme is not usually considered a money-spinner.

All costs relating to the social events programme events that are included in the conference registration fee (cocktail reception, gala evening...) should be included in the conference expense budget, while taking into consideration any non-paying participants (invited personalities, guest speakers...), as well as costs ranging from *SACEM* royalties to tips, from overtime room hire charges to staff overtime rates, from drivers' meals to musicians' pay checks, from caterers' fees to florists bills, from invitation printing to sub-contractors' invoices...

Events arranged for spouses and optional activities are generally budget-neutral, which is to say that the fees for these events cover the costs.

Some events can be financed by sponsors or partners (cocktail reception hosted by the local authorities, dinner sponsored by a stand-holder...)

Remember

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Organising the social events programme, a vital element for social interaction during a conference, requires meticulous attention to detail and careful planning.

It must be unique and of the highest quality.

When organising the social events programme, it is important that it:

- impinges as little as possible on the conference budget,
- does not occupy the organising committee's time and energy
 - includes sub-contracting as appropriate