

The 2018 Ultimate Conference Planning Guide for Associations

The 9 essential steps to
organising an **innovative, engaging**
and **well-planned** conference

**PLUS, BONUS
MATERIAL**

*Inhouse conference
team versus
external PCO*



Introduction

For associations, conferences play a significant role in the establishment, engagement and growth of its community.

In turn, this community has ever evolving expectations of their industry conference. For each conference they want to see a return on their investment of time, money and effort.

Now delivering a conference in itself is a difficult task. Yet, planning and delivering a conference that appeals, engages and innovates – time after time – is the ultimate challenge.

At Think Business Events, we know to achieve this you need to build on solid foundations, to keep up with industry innovations and most importantly – set objectives.

As a company, we're always looking at how we can continue to improve conference standards across the industry.

It's why we're pleased to provide The 2018 Ultimate Conference Planning Guide for Associations.

Based on our in-depth experience of conference planning, we provide key pointers on how to build an engaging, positive and appealing conference.

We address all the key consideration from the selection of your organising committee, choice of planning tools, to choosing your venue, speakers and how to please sponsors and delegates.

As an added bonus, we also discuss the standards you should expect from a Professional Conference Organiser (PCO) and more importantly – the steps you should take to hiring the best one for you.

**If you have any questions regarding delivering a conference,
feel free to contact us in Melbourne on 03 9417 1350 or Sydney on 02 8251 0045.**

Denise Broeren and Kim Stevenson
Directors

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Step 1

Plan Your Conference Committee



How to guarantee the most effective conference committee

Make the planning of your conference a smooth one with our top tips for creating the most workable team for your event.

Managing and delivering a successful conference definitely requires a team effort. And it's not just about which PCO you appoint, but also the conference committee you create to best represent your organisation and make prime conference planning decisions.

With plenty of jobs up for offer, the optimal conference committee comprises of around 6 members.

Here are the key committee responsibilities and our handy hints of who to allocate to which roles:

Conference chairperson

The conference chairperson is the lynch pin of the conference committee. They are primarily responsible for being first contact for the PCO, chairing meetings and settling any final decisions.

A committee runs best when the chairperson is someone who can manage committee differences and is comfortable with making independent judgement calls.

Finance / treasurer

The finance chair/treasurer is responsible for managing or overseeing the PCO on all financial matters and decisions such as budgeting, bank accounts, seed funding, tax, financial reports and audits.

Ideally the role should not only be filled by someone with fiscal smarts, but who is also authorised to make financial decisions for your organisation. For smaller committees this role can be combined with that of the chairperson.

Step 1 | Plan Your Conference Committee

Program strategy

The quality of a conference program highly reflects the value of a conference. The program chair is responsible for decisions related to the overall program – overseeing the call for paper process, selecting the keynotes, appointment of reviewers and chairpersons, the final scheduling of sessions and rooms. Preferably, this person needs to have a strong knowledge of member education needs and wants, industry trends and any special interest groups. They also need to be able to influence member cooperation for tasks such as reviewing submissions and chairing sessions.

Marketing, promotion and PR

Getting the word out about the conference is of course essential. The marketing chair has the responsibility of making this happen, overseeing the PCO and your organisation's staff in utilising every promotional tool available to the committee such as social media and print as well as making alliances with similar organisations or events. Ideally this person should be marketing savvy and be aware of your organisation's marketing capabilities.

Social program

The social events for a conference provide delegates an opportunity to relax in a more informal and entertaining environment than other aspects of the program. As one of the more popular roles on the committee, the social chair is responsible for decision making on venues, entertainment, seating arrangements or any party themes. Look for someone who will be able to provide an insight into the social side of your conference's demographics.

Sponsorship and exhibition

As generally the largest generator of funds, sponsorship and exhibition is an important component of the conference to consider. The Sponsorship and Exhibition Chair is responsible for providing insight into industry trends and working collaboratively with the PCO in the creation of a strategy that will best sell packages and raise income for the conference. Ideally you want someone within this role who has commercial nous and has access to key industry decision makers that may be otherwise hard to contact.

Our final tips

These roles are just a guideline but when creating your conference committee team make sure:

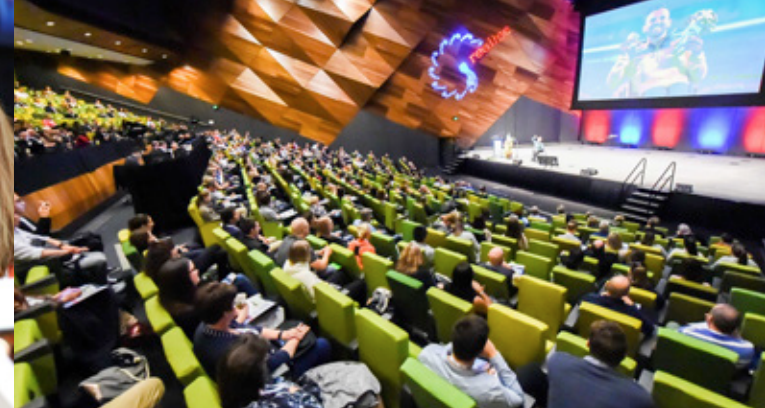
- to create a clear definition of roles, responsibilities and reporting structure from day one
- your committee represents the cross section of your membership to help deliver a balanced conference program
- your committee is committed to attending regular meetings and are willing to undertake tasks and not just offer opinions.

✓ *The most important tip?*

Make the committee experience a positive one.

Step 2

Select Your Key Planning Tools and Technology



The top conference planning tools and technology you can't do without

Planning tools and event technology are the key to building a solid foundation to your conference. Here's what you should have in your conference planning tool box.

Every profession has its own industry specific tools needed to get the job done. A builder is nothing without a hammer, nails or saw, just as a doctor can't get by without a stethoscope, thermometer or tongue depressor. Of course, conference management is no different – here's what you need in your conference planning arsenal

Conference budget

A budget is a key tool for planning a conference. Outlining projected income and expenditure is a valuable guide for key decision making. Budgets are of course easier to create with a well documented conference history. If it's an inaugural event budget planning is a little trickier.

Regardless, when creating a conference budget, we recommend the following considerations:

- Identify your financial objectives at the start – do you want to break even or make a profit. If a profit, what is your target?

- Create a flexible budget with comparative costings for minimum, middle and maximum expected numbers
- Add in a contingency cost for any unforeseen expenditures, circumstances or prices hikes
- With income, err on the side of caution (especially with new conferences). Estimate a higher percentage of cheaper early bird ticket sales. Remember, percentage projections can be adapted as actual registration data comes in
- With expenses, similarly it is wise to err on the side of caution, including some 'fat' in the budget should costs exceed expectations
- Account for tax for both income and expenditure

The budget is a live document and should be updated and monitored regularly. This way the committee can make evidence backed financial decisions.

Step 2 | Select Your Key Planning Tools and Technology

Critical path

While listed second, the critical path really is equally important as the budget. It's an invaluable planning tool that ensures nothing gets forgotten. The conference critical path lists every task requiring completion, who is responsible and required deadlines. Key milestones- such as call for submission and registration deadlines - should also be listed. It's also a live document requiring continual updating with tasks to be listed as started, completed or overdue.

A marketing plan

A conference manager also needs to don the hat of a marketer. If you don't promote your conference, audience attendance levels will be affected. This is where a multi-faceted marketing strategy comes in handy. Your conference marketing plan needs to incorporate digital technology, print materials, PR and advertising. At bare minimum, a conference marketing plan should comprise:

- **A marketing database:** a database of your target audience. This can include past conference attendees, association members or industry groups.
- **A conference website:** the main information portal for your conference. It needs to be updated with all relevant content.
- **Email marketing software:** Email marketing is a prime conference marketing tactic. You need email marketing software able to support multiple campaigns. This includes templates for easy design, analytical tools and list segmentation capabilities.

- **Social media:** Social media is a flexible marketing channel that can reach a wide target audience through advertising, build the profile of a conference and build engagement through the establishment of dedicated groups.
- **Related events, publications and organisations:** tapping into relevant events and organisations that attract a similar demographic to your target audience. This helps cast a wider promotional net than just your own members.



Step 2 | Select Your Key Planning Tools and Technology

Online registration and call for submission software

The call for submission and registration processes are often the first port of call for delegates, so they're important to get right. Both need industry best technology you can tailor to specific conference requirements. Each need to be easy and secure to use and provide full reporting capabilities.

The online conference registration system needs to:

- Securely record all relevant contact details
- Allow facility to make special event bookings
- Have the ability to reserve accommodation
- Note access and dietary requirements
- Offer options for and securely collect payments

Delegates should receive automatic confirmation of their registration along with a tax invoice. An industry best system also provides capabilities for committee members to access reports remotely.

Call for submission software needs to support the full submission, judging and selection process. Automatic confirmations and easy to use systems are paramount for both authors and reviewers alike. In-depth online reporting capabilities also helps to keep organisers informed for decision making and administration tasks.

Email marketing platform

Cvent and EventMarketer's 2018 "The Power of Event Data" report found 94% of event attendees view emails as the prime source of event information. Therefore, email marketing capabilities is an essential aspect to your planning. With email software, such as MailChimp or iConnect, you can easily tap into in-built templates, segment your communications and utilise the valuable data capabilities. Go for one that provides statistics on open and bounce rates and enables you to identify and delete inactive email addresses.

Website

The same Cvent report found 77% of delegates relied upon the conference website for information. A modern, well planned and informative website forms part of the overall conference experience. At minimum your conference website should:

- be a modern, professional looking website that effectively represents your conference brand
- be fast, responsive and easy to navigate
- clearly communicate key event information such as key dates, location, program and FAQs
- be continually updated with relevant information
- ensure all relevant links work - such as registration and call for submissions

See examples of conference websites

www.autismineducation.org.au and www.ranzco2019.com.au

Step 2 | Select Your Key Planning Tools and Technology



Conference App

A conference smart phone app is a great addition to a conference's success and improving the overall delegate experience. A key communication tool, a tailored conference app has the capacity to:

- provide a portal for detailed program information, allowing delegates to create their own personalised schedule
- list speaker bio, session details and abstract with added search capabilities

- give access to important conference documents such as delegate lists and attractions at the destination
- connect attendees and facilitate invitation requests
- promote sponsors and exhibitors via logo placements, advertisements and exhibitor floor plans
- deliver real time evaluation and live update alerts

Overall, it's a prime tool that helps foster better learning, creates connections between attendees and instils a sense of fun and engagement

Onsite registration kiosk

Delegates want a streamlined quick process that minimises the 'administration' side of a conference so they can quickly dive into the true value – the program. An automated name badge system allows for delegates to directly collect their name badge with minimal fuss. It can also cater for last minute changes to delegate information so that updates to outputs are instantaneous.

Post event data

Event data is an invaluable planning tool. The majority of data can be collected from the above technologies – email and email analytics, onsite registration data, as well as registration and call for submission break downs. Results can be used to enhance the planning of future conferences including sponsorship strategies, program and registration. Scanning into sessions onsite can also provide valuable data that helps in planning for space requirements for future event.

Step 3

Establish Your Conference Objectives



Achieve maximum return on your annual conference

Organising a conference is such a big investment of time, energy and resources, you want to see a valuable return. Here's our six simple steps to ensuring successful conference results (time after time).

At Think Business Events we consider conference 'outcomes' as one of the three most important aspects of delivering a successful conference. (The other two being process and quality).

While the idea of success varies from committee to committee, the steps to seeing a maximum return on conference investment, whether quantitative or qualitative, are the same. Each committee needs to identify their prime objectives from the word go. This way they can set KPI's that are continually monitored and measured throughout conference planning.

Here's our simple six step framework to successfully establishing and achieving your conference objectives:



Step 3 | Establish Your Conference Objectives

1. Set clear, measurable and realistic goals

In the infancy of planning, sit down with the committee and your PCO to identify the objectives you wish to achieve. You can have more than one objective, which can focus around aspects such as:

- **Financial Conference Objectives:**

Do you want to break even or do you have a set profit in mind?

Do you want to raise a particular amount in sponsorship funds?

- **Attendee Conference Objectives:**

How many delegates do you want to attend this year in comparison to the previous year?

Is there a particular sector of your membership you want more participation from?

- **Satisfaction Conference Objectives:**

Satisfaction levels lead to conference loyalty in the longer term – can you create a conference program that is relevant, interesting and valuable to your attendees?

- **Growth Conference Objectives:**

Do you want to raise the profile of your organisation?

If so, who to in particular?

Do you want your membership base to grow?

- **Engagement Objectives:**

What new ideas can you introduce to increase engagement of the delegates with speakers, each other, with content etc.

Write your goals down so the whole committee has a clear understanding of what you're setting out to achieve. Refer to it throughout planning and when you need to make decisions.

Examples of clear goals are:

- By the start of conference day 1 registration numbers are to have increased by 10% from the previous conference
- Abstract submissions are to reach a minimum total of 300 (a 10% increase from previous conference) with an aim of increasing student member abstract submissions by 7%
- Increase delegates satisfaction with networking opportunities by facilitating 2 new opportunities for connection
- Introduce one technology innovation that will allow for more streamlined audience interaction with the program and speakers

Remember to keep goals realistic, don't expect massive growth within one year, so review past conference history and put a target that is within reach, but that achieves conference growth.

2. Plan to your conference objectives

Now you've set your objectives for the conference it's time to start putting plans in place to meet these goals. This is where the experience of your PCO comes in handy. Your conference manager can guide you through the process using tried and proven conference planning methods and tools. For instance, using a well-planned conference budget to reach financial goals, a critical path to track your progress and marketing plans to each your promotional goals.

Throughout planning we recommend setting interim goals (such as registration numbers, call for submission or sponsorship fundraising) so you can continue to monitor your progress and instigate any additional actions if you're falling behind expectations.

Step 3 | Establish Your Conference Objectives

3. Know your audience

When it comes to planning your conference marketing, sponsorship and the program it's important to have a clear understanding of your audience. The demographics, their requirements and their expectations.

If you don't have the information it's time to start researching answers. Speak to key stakeholders, gain advice from past conference committees, review past conference reports and survey your membership database. Once you have a clearer picture you'll be able to devise a marketing plan that reaches, engages and encourages commitment from your audience.

We also recommend segmenting your audience database into different identifiable groups such as senior managers, employees and employers or students. You can also be industry specific such as researchers, practice managers and clinical staff. This way you can create event communications that'll directly appeal to each group's motivations and reason for attending. These steps are particularly beneficial for creating objectives centred around profile growth, delegate attendance and sponsorship sales.

4. Program for satisfaction

When you're devising the conference program it pays to keep these segments you created for marketing in mind. This way you can devise a stronger mix of sessions relevant to a larger cross section of your delegate base. A key tactic to identifying popular topics for your program is by putting a hot topic survey on your website with a request for delegates to nominate subjects of interest. This will ultimately positively drive satisfaction levels by fulfilling expectations, meeting education needs and improving skills.

Understanding the ins and outs of your membership base/target audience will lead to a growth in meeting any objectives around delegate attendance, conference satisfaction and loyalty.



Step 3 | Establish Your Conference Objectives

5. Use the power of technology

Taking advantage of the digital world is also an ideal way to monitoring how you're progressing with achieving your set objectives. Here's some of the conference technology you can use and how:

- **Online Registration Software:** Provides relevant data reports for measuring overall sales and by audience segments – such as students versus members and non-members
- **Call for Submissions Software:** Similar to registration software, abstract submission software provides access to the relevant data reports required to measure submissions
- **Social Media Groups:** Creating private social media groups for attendees to engage with. This can provide members additional connection opportunities, as well as allow you to monitor feedback
- **Conference Apps:** Conference Apps allow you to engage with your audience and monitor their participation through interactive agendas, session check-ins and social networking
- **Electronic Name Badges:** There is also a big shift towards conferences electronic name badges which will not only reduce waiting lines but also easily track delegate patterns of arrival. You will be analysing trends on when people arrive, which is useful data for planning catering, staffing and room sizes
- **Online Surveys:** Daily online surveys are also a useful way of receiving feedback and responding to any areas that may need immediate attention/adaption

Both the conference app and electronic name badges are valuable tools to collect data that allows you to measure your objectives for this year, as well as provide a basis to set future objectives. Data includes assessing delegate trends, which speakers and sessions were most popular and where the best investments were made.

6. Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate

While realistically if you monitored your progress throughout planning there won't be any 'surprise' results, but the conclusion of the conference is still the moment of truth.

It's time to collect and collate your data and compare it against the objectives at the very start of your conference journey.

Areas to review include:

- Reconcile your financial accounts
- Collate your registration data
- Review your survey results
- Monitor social media
- Speak to people
- Review membership renewals or applications

Did you achieve your targets?

Take a note of what you achieved and what you didn't.

If there are any targets that weren't achieved it will be beneficial to delve into the reasons why to record into the final report.

This will ultimately help guide the next conference committee to better set their own objectives. It will enable the continued growth of both your conference and your organisation. Year after year.

Step 4

Research and Book Your Conference Venue



How to avoid these top seven conference venue booking pitfalls

Conference venue selection is one of the first decisions a committee needs to make. Be aware your choice can make or break your event. Here are the top seven conference venue finding mistakes and how to avoid them.

Choosing the venue for your conference sounds like an easy task but it is one fraught with pitfalls that could not only leave a bad impression on attendees but also drastically impact your budget. When starting your search make sure you avoid these common seven venue booking mistakes.

Mistake 1: Thinking you have plenty of time

If your conference is not for another 2-3 years, thinking you have plenty of time to book a conference venue can be detrimental. Conference venues can often be booked years in advance.

Remember many conferences are usually trying to avoid the same external event dates as your conference, such as sporting events or school holidays etc. Therefore, there is high competition for similar months and dates, particularly during “conference season” traditionally March to May and August to December. Leaving your booking until too late will really limit your choices.



✓ **Top Tip:** *Draft up a list of potential suitable venues and request for them to pencil in your event dates while you're finalising your venue search/decision making.*

Step 4 | Research and Book Your Conference Venue

Mistake 2: Not knowing your conference program

While searching for your conference venue, you really need to know at minimum a general outline of your program.

This is of course much easier for conferences with a history, however, prior to commencing your venue search you need answers to these questions:

- Do you need an exhibition space, and if so roughly how many exhibitors?
- What types of presentations will your conference comprise and what space will you require to accommodate this?
- What technology will be required for these presentations?
- What will your catering and social event requirements be?
- Will you hold your social events in the same venue or an alternative one?
- Do your delegates need accommodation?
- And most importantly, what is your budget?

Create an overview of your conference venue requirements so you can create a shortlist of suitable venue options.

✓ **Top Tip:** *Remember your aim is to find a venue that is adaptable to your program, rather than you needing to adapt your program to a venue.*

Mistake 3: Over or under estimating your delegate numbers

With regards to conference numbers, event history is once again a blessing, yet it's an area that can be a minefield.

Book a space too large and you end up paying way too much, while booking a conference room too small can lead to your guests being cramped and uncomfortable. Neither are a welcoming scenario.

For an annual conference, take a look at the conference data of past attendance. As a general rule attendance will be affected by the state it will be held in – numbers tend to be larger in the Eastern states – particularly Sydney and Melbourne – than in the west.

If it's an inaugural conference, it's best to be more on the cautious side when estimating numbers.

We recommend reserving a larger space, with the option to be able to reduce space once numbers become clearer. This will minimise impact on your budget.

✓ **Top Tip:** *While it is essential to make sure your venue can accommodate your maximum numbers, only contractually commit to minimum numbers to minimise any potential financial ramification of penalties if minimum spends are not reached.*

Step 4 | Research and Book Your Conference Venue

Mistake 4: Failing to accommodate delegate needs

While accommodating for every need of your delegates will be impossible, ensuring that your venue has the accessibility to accommodate people with special needs is an important consideration.

This includes people in wheelchairs, with hearing impairments or more simply people with dietary requirements.

When conducting tours of your venue options make sure you assess the accessibility of each. For instance:

- Does the venue provide equal and easy access for all mobility requirements? Not only is it easy to access the venue but also freely move around it from room to room? Is it easy for speakers with mobility challenges able to access the stage in a dignified way?
- Is there a hearing augmentation system and does it function properly?
- Do venue staff have proper disability awareness training? For instance, are they aware that service dogs are allowed into venues.

✓ **Top Tip:** *Remember there are close to 4 million people with a disability in Australia – which equates to a high possibility of the need to cater for special needs at your event.*

Mistake 5: Poor location to save money

A venue in an unsuitable, inconvenient location will be guaranteed to get your attendees offside. Many committees fall for the mistake of selecting a venue that is not central to save money. However, as a result delegate numbers may fall due to the inconvenience of travelling to the venue. When seeking your venue think once again about the needs of your delegates:

- Will the majority of attendees be local and require to be a reasonable distance from home or work?
- Is the venue easy to get to from the airport?
- Will there be attendees from out of town who will require suitable accommodation options close by?
- Is there sufficient parking and public transport options?

✓ **Top Tip:** *Trying to save money with an out of the way venue, may result in a higher loss of income from low delegate registrations.*



Step 4 | Research and Book Your Conference Venue

Mistake 6: Skipping site inspections

If your event is not in your state or country, it can be pretty convenient to make the decision to forego the site inspection. Yet, relying on a distant desktop review of venue options – for budget and convenience sake – can really lead you into troubles that are otherwise easily avoided. If you're unable to attend, find someone with experience – an event planner or DMC at the destination – to conduct a site inspection for you in your absence. But be sure to provide them with the full overview brief that we discussed in point 2. If you can go along, we still recommend that someone with relevant experience accompanies you.

✓ **Top Tip:** *Have a checklist to review or standard questions to ask at each site inspection for comparison purposes. Check what other events are being held at the same dates to avoid any potential clashes; ask about any planned renovations and if you have time, arrive early for your appointment so you can quietly observe the venue in operation prior to your appointment.*

Mistake 7: Signing a bad venue contract

Once you've made a decision on the venue, it's time to deal with venue contracts and it really is a case of buyers BEWARE! With venue contracts problems will generally only arise when it's too late. For instance, one company who signed a venue contract prior to the appointment of an event manager, saw a loss of approximately \$30,000 because they over-estimated on numbers and couldn't sell all their reserved accommodation rooms or fill catering requirements. Go in with your eyes wide open:

- Look for hidden or extra costs such as security, power and cleaning
- Be aware of the payment schedule and request to adapt if need be
- Don't slip up on slippage requirements in the contract – it can get expensive!
- Be aware of the release date for room or catering bookings otherwise you may end up being charged for things you do not use

✓ **Top Tip:** *Get someone experienced – such as a PCO – who can go through the contract with a fine-tooth comb to look over your contract before you sign it.*

While finding a conference venue may sound relatively easy – or fun – there are a lot of pitfalls to avoid. Pitfalls that can have an impact on your budget and your reputation.

It's why we recommend getting an expert in to help out.

Step 5

Create Your Sponsorship Strategy



How to boost your event sponsorship in seven simple steps

Signing up sponsors to your event can be challenging and hard work. We simplify the process through sharing our top seven tips to easily achieving your sponsorship goals.

Sponsorship is a crucial element for the vast majority of events.

The income sourced from conference sponsorships and the exhibition area can play an integral role in the creation of a successful event.

The exhibition alone provides an additional educational element for attendees in the discovery of new products, services and players in the industry.

But let's face it, obtaining sponsors and exhibitors year after year can be challenging.

So, we've shared with you our seven top tips to maximising your conference's sponsorship income:

1. Know your stuff

Before you create your sponsorship prospectus – get to know your industry, competitor conferences and your venue.

Make sure you investigate:

- If your industry has any regulations you or your sponsors need to adhere to - for example, the medical industry needs to consider the Pharmaceutical and Medical Device Manufacturers Code of Conduct.
- If the venue can accommodate the packages you're offering with viable space for booths signage and networking spaces
- If you are comfortable with the entitlements you're offering. For example, branding in key sessions, opportunity for the sponsors to provide welcoming remarks at your dinner etc
- What are similar conferences within your industry offering – are these things you can accommodate?
- Other sponsorship packages and rates being offered at events targeting a similar demographic to you

Remember it's better to under promise than to under deliver.

Step 5 | Create Your Sponsorship Strategy

2. Know your audience

Potential sponsors will want to know your attendee demographics prior to investing in your conference. This is obviously easier to obtain if yours is a member organisation or the conference has a long history of data available.

By creating an overview of attendee demographics such as who attends, industry sectors, seniority of delegates and so on, companies can see if the conference aligns with their own target audience.

It's also beneficial to survey your delegates as to what types of companies, products and services they wish to hear and find out more about.

You can use the survey results to compile your sponsorship target list and as a business case when presenting to companies.

For instance, it can be pretty compelling when a company hears 80% of your delegates are interested in learning more about their type of product.

3. Know your sponsors

Your conference sponsorship packages need to align with a company's own marketing and branding objectives.

So, when first compiling your list of target sponsors, do your homework:

- Understand their brand, marketing and audience (this should be evident from their website or social media postings)
- Review the company LinkedIn page and employees to target the best contact

- Get to know what other events they attend
- See if you can get an understanding of their overall sponsorship objectives (e.g. profile building, connections, education etc)

Only approach those companies that fit your conference specifics—saving both yourself and the company time.

4. Be innovative

Companies want to invest in conferences that make them look good, enable them to stand out from the crowd and that optimises connection opportunities with their audience.

So, when creating your packages make efforts to break out of the mould of how it's always been done.

Examples of innovation include:

- Maximise networking opportunities with interaction hubs throughout the exhibition
- Add social activities such as receptions, dinners or even yoga sessions to maximise connection opportunities (for non-medical sponsorships)
- Provide exhibitors with the opportunity to hold education sessions
- Use apps or social media platforms pre/post and during the event to help forge connections
- Set up delegate / sponsor match making sessions
- Offer unique sponsorship offers – such as branded technology zones, touch screen advertisements, social media walls, reusable water bottles or even sponsored mobile recharge stations

Step 5 | Create Your Sponsorship Strategy

5. Create a process

Don't lose potential sponsors through silly errors in your approach. Breakdown the process into defined, achievable steps, such as the following:

1. Develop and practice your pitch – they need to understand the benefits of participation
2. Find the right connection to approach. If there's someone in your organisation, or on your committee, who has contact with a potential sponsor, ask for an introduction. It's always more powerful to be connected through an already trusted source.
3. Make initial contact to introduce the event and to ascertain interest. This is a good time to confirm their objectives
4. If the company expresses initial interest, send tailored invitation with relevant information – be clear in your request
5. Follow up your request either on the phone in person. Ask how it fits in with their objectives and budget and whether they wish to make any changes. Be prepared to be flexible and know post discussion if you have room to negotiate
6. Once a company agrees to become a sponsor – make sure the full process is smooth. This includes clear communication, easy invoicing and payment methods and ensuring you follow through with your promises/entitlements
7. At the conclusion of the conference give sponsors and exhibitors the opportunity to provide feedback on what worked and what didn't

If a company seems interested but doesn't commit the first year, it may be worth offering them a free registration to the exhibition so they can obtain a better understanding of the value of the conference in person.



Step 5 | Create Your Sponsorship Strategy

6. Tailor your offers

With competition high, you need to tailor your offers to each company accordingly – which if you've done your homework in steps 1 to 3, should be fairly easy.

For the companies you've identified as viable for larger investments – don't send them the standard package and letter. Tailor your request with a value proposition that appeals directly to their needs and objectives.

For those companies you're unable to pinpoint objectives, it's beneficial to create a shopping menu offering where they can pick and choose entitlements/packages that fit their own objectives. These companies also need to receive a personalised, tailored letter.

When sending communications – make sure you spell the contact and company name's correctly and be careful when cutting and pasting information as it's easy to make mistakes. This is obvious advice. But easy to overlook – and remember first impressions count!

7. Make it a year long effort

If you're relying on the same companies to return year after year, these relationships need to be nurtured over the long term.

There's no use just getting back in contact as the next conference comes around – as company staff and strategies tend to change and your conference may have inadvertently been left out of planning.

At the conclusion of the conference, hold a forum with sponsors and exhibitors asking for feedback on what worked and what different, and innovations they would like to see. Listen and implement changes for planning of future conferences.

By putting in the effort to build long term relationship you'll also get a better understanding of the company's ongoing needs and objectives so you can continue to tailor offers to suit.

Overall, obtaining sponsors for your conference can be a long and arduous process, but by implementing correct and thorough processes it can deliver a valuable return on effort.



Step 6

Book in Your Keynote Speakers



How to select a keynote speaker that delivers maximum impact

It's undeniable that keynote speakers can help make or break your conference. Here's our top tips to ensuring your speakers meet expectations and drive registrations.

A quality program is the centrepiece for a conference and the jewel of the crown is undoubtedly the keynote speakers.

The ability to hear industry and thought leaders that otherwise would be inaccessible provides a key motivation for an individual to attend a conference.

In effect, the right headliner can help boost registrations.

Yet, while finding the right mix of speakers that both expands learning opportunities and drives registrations is essential, it's not always easy.

Here's are top tips to finding the ideal keynote speaker for your event:

Discuss options early

Regardless of the industry you're in, it can be assumed that your top picks for keynote speaker are much sought after. Therefore, to land your ideal selection the committee needs to start discussing preferences early as we recommend locking in your speakers at least 8 months to year in advance.

Set your program theme

Get an overview of your conference program needs and decide upon the theme so you start drafting speaker options and topics that best fit within this.

Step 6 | Book in Your Keynote Speakers

Investigate:

- What current and future industry trends are you wanting to address?
- What do you want to achieve with your program?
- What topics need to be discussed?
- What type of sessions are you looking to fill?
- What worked and didn't work in the previous conference?

Understand your audience

Of course, this process in understanding your program and setting your theme also should correspond with gaining an understanding of your audience. Elicit their feedback through surveys or online portals ascertaining:

- the demographics of your audience?
- any knowledge gaps that need to be filled
- any pain points, current trends or industry issues that need addressing
- feedback from past conference programs

Draft a preference list

Now that you have an understanding of both your program, your theme and your audience, you can start creating a list of preferences for speakers that fit this brief. We recommend that to this list you also add 'reserve' suggestions in the instance that your first preferences are unavailable.

Know your budget

Now you have a list of possible speakers, it's time to look at your budget. What entitlements are included with your invitation? The usual for industry speakers is flights, accommodation, free registration and possibly a speaker's fee to cover costs. For 'celebrity' speakers expect the fee to be higher. Remember to get the most out of your investment, you can always extend your speaker's participation in the program with a number of different types of sessions. For example, one speaker can deliver a keynote presentation, participate in a panel session, run a dedicated workshop and offer a mentoring session to student members. It delivers a strong return on investment.

Send your invitation

Now you've got your top list of speaker preferences, it's time to send out invitations. For industry connected speakers, we recommend the committee take the time to invite the speaker personally to participate in the program. Once you may have initial agreement it's time to get your PCO involved managing the continued process of sending out an official invitation to managing entitlements, speaker agreements, and logistical requirements. For those corporate, celebrity speakers managed by an agent get your PCO to make contact.

By following these five simple – yet essential – steps in a timely and well considered manner you will be assured speaker satisfaction from the committee, delegates and even speakers themselves.

Step 7

Create a Marketing Strategy

Nine innovative marketing ideas to promote your conference

Using innovative tactics in your conference marketing strategy can also prove to make a difference.

Many of those around in the late 90's may remember the movie "Field of Dreams" where Kevin Costner's character hears the whisper "If you build it, they will come".

And sure, in the movie they flocked to his own baseball field, but really, it's not the best advice to rely upon when you're planning a conference.

For people to attend you need to get the word out, position yourself as a 'must attend' event and therefore a marketing strategy is a necessity.

Your conference marketing strategy should comprise a variety of the general tactics such as a website, email marketing, posters, calendar listings and so on.

But there are also alternative methods that can extend your promotion even further resulting in higher registration sales.

We asked our marketing manager some of the more innovative approaches she has used to spread the word about events:

1. Tap into industry influencers

In each industry there are usually top influencers who have a strong following that align with your target audience. Connect in with these individuals with the aim to promote your event to their community, especially if they have a large social media following.

Step 7 | Create a Marketing Strategy

2. Offer attendee incentives

If you have a devoted membership following who regularly attend your conference there is a prime opportunity for promotion by people who know and respect your event. Offer incentives to your database that if they promote your event to their network, bring a new attendee or make a group booking they receive a discount offer.

3. Use your speakers and sponsors

Both your speakers and sponsors will want to ensure maximum attendance at your conference. Provide each group with easy to use marketing packs – such as email templates or posters – which they can use to promote the conference and their involvement to their networks with little effort.

4. Get it on video

Video marketing is huge these days! Creating some videos to promote your conference such as testimonials from delegates, a collage of past conferences or personal invitations from speakers is a great way to build engagement, build your brand and encourage sales.

5. Be social

Use social media to your advantage. Through the creation of dedicated social media accounts and groups on Facebook, LinkedIn etc your delegates can network, comment and interact while you can send regular updates and create engagement. Also advertising on social media is a great way to connect with your target audience.



Step 7 | Create a Marketing Strategy

6. Find common ground

If you have a target audience that works predominantly within specific organisations, geographic areas or attend similar events, tap into any available promotional opportunities. Ask organisations if you can put up some posters, arrange for complementary organisations to promote to their members and advertise at events that cater to the same target audience. Some conferences also look to create marketing partnerships where they will exchange suitable promotional opportunities with other organisations to promote each other accordingly.

7. A little email something

Even the littlest promotions help – get the committee (and other stakeholders) to put a conference logo promoting the event within their email signature. This is an easy and cheap way to promote the conference to vast networks of potential attendees or sponsors.

8. Social media shares

Again, something small and easy but effective is adding a share button on the post purchase page of registration. This will encourage people to promote their involvement and the conference to their networks. Providing a template blurb on the conference for delegates to share will help you deliver the right message.

9. Use remarketing

If you have the budget, a remarketing campaign is an ideal way to tap into an already interested audience. Basically, through google ads – if someone has visited your website but not proceeded to purchase – you can position your online advertising to a defined audience to remind them of the event and their interest.

So, for your next conference, look at some of the innovative ways you can add to your marketing strategy that will extend your reach, boosting registration and sponsorship sales.



Step 8

Develop an Innovative Program



Seven top strategies to keeping your conference fresh

Delivering an annual conference and keeping expectations high can be a challenge.

Our seven top tips will keep your delegates and sponsors returning year after year.

When it comes to delivering annual conferences, it can be pretty tough to back it up successfully year after year.

With the rise in success of a conference program, so too does the expectation levels of delegates and sponsors. When you fail to meet expectations, it'll undoubtedly impact the numbers of impending events.

So how do you keep your conferences fresh? Here's our top seven tips to keeping the bar high on your annual events:

1. Ask and listen

One of the biggest mistakes that can be made is assuming to know what people want. Instead take the time to ask and – most importantly – listen.

Take advantage of the onsite surveys undertaken from the previous conference. Get an understanding of what worked and what didn't and then implement change accordingly.

But don't just rely on the feedback from people who attended – speak to your key stakeholders – the sponsors, the program committee and the recognised leaders and influencers in the profession. Even take the time to engage people in discussions about other conferences they've attended and what made them memorable.

Step 8 | Develop an Innovative Program

Evaluate the feedback and make concerted efforts to implement the changes that the committee agrees will make a difference. Put measures in place to review how these changes fared and make recommendations for the next annual event.

It's a good idea to communicate with your membership base any changes made to demonstrate you've listened, as well as, managing expectations for the following event.

2. Set your program goals

Planning a conference is a long-term game with the planning for an event often exceeding 12 months. Organising without clear direction or goals can make it difficult to actually plan a successful conference program. Set some objectives and measures to guide the organising committee into clear decision making. Objectives could

be as simple as:

- Increase satisfaction level of delegate attendees by 10% from previous conference (measured by surveys)
- Achieve an increase in participation from a particular sector of your membership
- Provide more opportunities for sponsors/exhibitors to interact and network with delegates
- Introduce three new program initiatives e.g. World Café, Hackathon, Campfire chats

With a shared vision, it will be simpler to deliver a fresh conference that'll get your delegates, speakers and sponsors talking – for the right reasons.



Step 8 | Develop an Innovative Program



3. Shake it up

Just because it's the way that it's always been done – doesn't mean a conference program can't change. While we wouldn't recommend completely altering a program that's been in place for years, making tweaks or introducing innovative technology keeps people interested.

It could be as simple as changing presentation formats and introducing world café style sessions, or an interactive panel session with live polling to engage the audience. You can make plenaries similar to shorter TED style presentations or even take people offsite for experiential tours.

Conference apps are also a valuable tool in changing up programs allowing delegates to interact and engage better during sessions. For example, live polling can often create some controversy leading to lively debate amongst speakers and delegates. Or simply allow delegates to ask questions online throughout the presentation so the presenter can tailor their content to what delegates are wanting to know.

4. Be an entertainer

While conferences are certainly more about learning and connection, it doesn't mean it has to be all business. Think about integrating theatrical or performance aspects to an event that will bring the conference to life.

This could be as simple as the types of entertainment at the opening ceremony or social events to the types of venues used. At one conference we held the gala dinner at a Maritime Museum with pre-dinner drinks served on the deck of a submarine which proved to be a memorable experience for delegates.

At another we hired a visual storyteller to capture the key points of presentations in illustrations. The images were displayed over catering breaks keeping the conversation focused on key points, presenting new perspectives and making it a more interactive and engaging process.

Both of these two examples were easily affordable and created quite a positive impact for all attendees.



Step 8 | Develop an Innovative Program

5. Dress it up

The way a conference is presented can have a positive impact on the perception and energy of the event.

Get a professionally designed conference logo and brand that is an attractive and fresh visual representation of the year's theme. You need something that will appeal to your target audience setting a level of excitement and expectation of what's to come.

Ensure this brand is consistently rolled out through all marketing and at the event with signage, staging and merchandise. It will really contribute to the perception of a high-quality event.

6. Be a matchmaker

Remember a lot of the value in attending conferences for delegates and sponsors is the connections they get to make. Each year you need to ensure you maximise opportunities for attendees to interact, network and simply chat.

However, this can present quite a challenge when many of your delegates are either first timers or don't really know anyone.

Ideas for getting delegates interacting and actively networking include:

- Connecting people through the app
- Introducing a 'meet and greet' activity for the welcome reception where a delegate has to find 2-3 other people with similar interests by matching tokens
- Help conference first timers with a tour of the venue and holding ice-breaker activities to help forge connections with others

- Looking at catering breaks and configuring furniture and meal selections to encourage delegates to mingle
- Holding structured networking sessions for people with similar interests or situations (such as delegates from regional areas or in the early stages of their careers)

One conference app we use provides the opportunity to schedule appointments or meet ups with people. This is great for sponsors and exhibitors to meet delegates and even for student and mentor introductions.

7. Improve the little things

When delegates attend the same conference year after year – they notice the little things, the differences and the things that just aren't working. Their expectations also change along with technology innovations and attending a wider selection of other events.

So always ask "How can we make this better or easier for delegates?"

Ensure that the usual processes are seamless - from how a delegate can register and book accommodation to how clear the communication pre-event is and the responses they encounter when they make an enquiry. It all counts towards perceptions of an event.

When the planning of your next annual conference approaches, be sure to take these seven tips into consideration to make it the best event yet. Until the next one that is.

Step 9

Impress Your Delegates



The top nine secret delegate touchpoints that make or break a conference

With the reputation of a conference largely impacted by the whole delegate experience, attention to detail is essential. Yet these nine invisible delegate touchpoints are often too largely ignored.

With delegates interacting with the conference long before day one, ensuring every aspect is considered and well managed is essential.

Following is our top nine essential tasks (outside of the conference program) you need to pay close attention to build a high-quality conference:

1. The look and feel

First impressions count and if the look and feel of your conference doesn't appeal to the audience from the outset, engagement will be low. We recommend getting a professional designer to create a logo and look for your conference that promotes the theme and sets expectations for the quality of your event.

Your conference brand also needs to be adhered to and enforced throughout planning including all marketing materials, signage, delegate merchandise and publications.

2. Website ease

A conference website is the key information portal and with the internet such a large part of everyday life, people have high expectations on how one works. Not only should the website be responsive and easy to navigate on all types of devices, but key information needs to remain clear and pertinent.

Step 9 | Impress Your Delegates



3. The registration process

Registration is essentially one of the first points of contact for a delegate so it's an important experience to get right.

When booking for events today, people of course expect an efficient, secure online process that is quick and easy to use. In addition, a dedicated person to professionally respond to enquiries and issues will go a long way in providing a quality registration process.

4. Call for submissions

Along with registrations, call for submissions is another avenue where people are getting their first taste of the conference experience. As a procedure where people are putting in professional effort to submit a presentation, they have the expectation of a system that is straight forward and easy to use. Be sure to have an industry best program that doesn't cause delays in uploading documents and allows for people to come back and edit or replace documents. With users of the IT system often ranging from novice to advance, the online system needs to be easy to use to accommodate all experience levels.

5. Your accommodation offerings

Where you stay for the duration of your conference naturally creates a lasting impression on an attendee's experience. You need to offer a range of accommodation options that suit a variety of budgets and needs that is close to the conference venue and is easily accessible. The booking process and management of deposits also needs to be smooth, filling delegates with confidence that their check-in and check-out will be without hassle.

6. Communications

Any communication with your delegates can really set the tone and level of expectations with your delegates.

You need to have processes in place where you can respond quickly and efficiently to any enquiries, ensure all written communications are professional, courteous and well written and verbal communications are friendly and responsive.

Step 9 | Impress Your Delegates

7. The conference venue

Of course, the location and quality of your venue also plays a large part in setting the quality of your event and determining the delegate experience. Before booking, you need to consider – is the venue easy to get to, is it big enough, does it fit the expectations of your members? With many of the conference staff also being onsite you need to consider their level of presentation and professionalism.

8. The onsite experience

From the moment your delegates step onsite, they have expectations they want met. They need easy to see signs that tell them where to go; a well-managed registration desk run by well-presented staff; an easy check in process, program changes to be well communicated; allocated rooms for presentations to be of suitable size; and audio-visual technology to be so seamless, it's invisible.

9. The catering conundrum

Now yes, the catering may seem like a small decision overall but it does make a large impression on attendees. Your catering should largely reflect registration costs. You should offer a variety of healthy options, be plentiful, suit a variety of dietary requirements and be easily accessible. But on the other hand, you don't want to waste resources (both financial and edible!) by over catering. Always make sure your account for the 'wash' of delegates who don't turn up.



Bonus Material

Inhouse Conference Team Versus External PCO



The standards to demand from your Professional Conference Organiser

When investing in a PCO to manage your conference, you need to expect a level of service that benefits your organisation tenfold.

So, your annual conference is coming up and you've decided to invest in a Professional Conference Organiser.

It's definitely a sound decision. But like any industry there's a standard of service and benefits you should expect to receive in return.

When hiring a Professional Conference Organiser don't settle for just any PCO. Instead benefit from a proven PCO with the right experience.

A proven PCO will save you STRESS!

When you mention to someone you're an event manager the usual response you get is "Oh that must be glamorous". Well a 2016 report in Forbes listed event management as the fifth most

stressful occupation. The occupations preceding it? Police officers, airline pilots, firefighters and enlisted military personnel!! Rated by taking into account 11 stress factors such as travel, deadlines, physical demands and public scrutiny it's clearly evident that event management is not as glamorous – or as easy – as widely perceived.

✓ **Benefit:** *A proven PCO is experienced in handling the stress (they probably thrive on it!) and can guide you through the whole planning process keeping your stress levels to a minimum.*

Bonus Material | Inhouse Conference Team vs External PCO

A proven PCO will save you **TIME!**

I once heard an estimate that it takes 100 hours of organisation for each day of a conference. Based on this equation it would take 37.5 days to organise a three-day conference. With planning for conferences usually starting 1-2 years out this estimate is obviously wildly inadequate. Do you – or your staff – have the time to step away from their main job role to manage the planning of a conference for a whole year? And with the unforgiving deadlines of managing a conference – will you be able to internally resource peak times?

✓ **Benefit:** *A proven PCO has the dedicated time to manage all the details of your conference (and meet the myriad of deadlines!) so you can continue to concentrate on your own job.*

Proven PCO's have a **FORMULA THAT WORKS**

Planning a conference is all about the details. With so many aspects that needs to be managed simultaneously – suppliers, attendees, marketing, sponsorship, administration, logistics, entertainment, transport – it can be a lot of pressure for someone inexperienced. Tiny details like confirming timing, audio visual requirements and ensuring that speakers know where to go and how to upload their presentations, can have major consequences if not attended to on time. Ask yourself – does your office have the internal skills, resources and industry contacts to actually manage it all?

✓ **Benefit:** *A great PCO will have a trained team, set procedures, a long list of proven industry contacts and the experience to deliver a conference fully.*



A proven PCO will save you **MONEY!**

Okay, the PCO fee seems like the most obvious line to cross out of the budget and save. But do you really save? A layperson won't know where to make savings, nor likely to have established relationships with suppliers to get better deals. As an example, a PCO can avoid venue penalties, minimise venue hire costs and negotiate food and beverage waivers. Therefore, the initial "saving" you made could be well and truly spent on unnecessary expenditure. PCO's know how to budget effectively to meet committee objectives without impacting the quality of the overall event.

✓ **Benefit:** *A proven PCO will make back their fee in savings, receive better pricing from industry contacts and manage a budget that will meet set financial objectives.*

Bonus Material | Inhouse Conference Team vs External PCO

A proven PCO knows how to **SOLVE A CRISIS!**

Speaker cancellations, bad supplier contracts, flooded venues, a broken-down bus, earthquakes – there are plenty of crisis's that can occur at a conference. (It's the top 5 most stressful occupation after all!) In fact, the long road of conference planning has a number of pot holes that can certainly make the whole journey pretty bumpy. Ask yourself – will you know what to do when something unexpected comes your way?

✓ **Benefit:** *A proven PCO has 'been there, done that' and will know how to effectively manage any crisis and minimise collateral damage to your conference.*

A proven PCO will let you enjoy your conference (and build your reputation!)

As the conference host – you actually want to enjoy your event rather than have your head down in the daily event logistics. With a proven PCO you can have an experienced team professionally managing the day to day logistics while you and your team are out networking with your members. And remember – while you've been planning the event for a year or two – the actual conference is what your colleagues and profession will see, experience and assess. If the event doesn't run smoothly on the day you'll likely be seen as the public face of that failure.

Can you handle that stress?

✓ **Benefit:** *A PCO will make you look good. Really good.*

When you select the Professional Conference Management team for your conference, make sure it's one that can deliver to this minimum standard. Their standards will impact on the standard of your conference.

Bonus Material

Hiring a PCO for Your Conference



The five essential steps to hiring the best PCO for your conference

Hiring a PCO is definitely a step in the right direction and finding the best one for your conference can be difficult. Make sure you undertake these five MUST DO steps before making your decision.

In terms of a vendor relationship, a PCO will be one supplier you and your conference committee will be working together with over a long period of time. It's requires close collaboration. You'll be required to meet regularly to plan what is often the highest profile event in your industry. You need to appoint a PCO that both you and your committee have confidence in to provide a service you can trust.

Prior to choosing your PCO, do your homework and take into consideration these five top steps to finding the best conference planner for you.

1. Do your homework

There are plenty of PCO's in the market – all of varying size and capabilities.

Of course, size is really irrelevant to how well they can manage or deliver a conference. What truly matters is experience in running similar size and scope of Conferences. .

Make sure you investigate your options by approaching more than one company to compare quotes and service offerings. Investigate:

- how long the PCO has been in business
- their experience in association conferences in your industry
- examples of their past work
- if they have any recurring clients (always a great sign of a good PCO!)

And most importantly – ask for references – and call them.

Bonus Material | Hiring a PCO for Your Conference

2. Don't accept costs at face value

It can be tough to compare costings that seem at the different ends of the spectrum – for example a low per delegate fee compared to higher management fees. When reviewing quotes, it pays to investigate deeper. Check for any hidden or additional charges not fully disclosed at quote stage.

For example: Will the PCO expect you to use their in-house services (such as marketing, AV, sponsorship etc.) and if so are these included in the proposal? If an additional charge, will the in-house services be billed at competitive market rates? Verify also whether any external suppliers used are passed on at cost.

3. Meet face to face

Once you have shortlisted your options – it's time to meet the PCO's face to face. Remember, it's a team you need to feel comfortable with representing your organisation. Ask to meet their team and take the time to ask the tough questions.

4. Know your financials

The financial health of your conference is of course one of the most important aspects of the event.

You need full confidence in how the conference bank accounts will be managed by your PCO. At your face to face meeting ask about their procedures and request examples of financial reports (avoid any unnecessary complicated ones).

5. Review your contract

When reviewing a PCO contract make sure you know the difference between a PCO that acts as your 'agent' versus a PCO acting as the 'principle'. When the PCO acts as an 'agent', the conference hosts take financial responsibility in signing off all third-party contractors (venues, AV etc.).

This eliminates any opportunity for the PCO to artificially inflate costs. When a PCO acts as the "principle" they will contract all services within their own name. This means that while they shoulder the financial responsibility with suppliers, they have the capacity to manipulate the base costings of goods. This supplements their own income rather than that of the conferences.

Make sure you get your contract reviewed by a lawyer so you are aware as to what you will be agreeing.

Don't be overwhelmed

The PCO industry is full of professional agencies delivering the utmost professional service that will perfectly suit your needs. Unfortunately, there are also those that won't. These tips are safeguards to ensuring you find the very best PCO for you and your conference from day one.



About Think Business Events

Think Business Events is an experienced PCO that shines in the planning of conferences for associations, academic groups and government bodies.

Established in 2006, our team is led by two company directors – Kim and Denise – both accomplished conference managers who've been in the industry for more than 15 years each.

Our mission is to create high achieving, innovative and engaging conferences that holistically deliver a valuable return on investment and effort for all key participants including event hosts, delegates, sponsors and speakers.

With offices based in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, the team has skilfully led committees through the full meeting planning process with an ease and skill that achieves milestones and delivers ultimate positive outcomes.

Visit our website at Thinkbusinessevents.com.au for more information on our services and conferences we deliver.

Melbourne Office

Unit 17, 3 Waterside Ave
Port Melbourne, VIC 3207
Ph: 03 9417 1350

Sydney Office

1/299 Elizabeth St
Sydney, NSW 2000
Ph: 02 8251 0045

Brisbane Office

Ph: 07 3062 7323

Our Directors



Denise Broeren
+61 (0) 438 741 188
deniseb@thinkbusinessevents.com.au



Kim Stevenson
+61 (0) 402 448 834
kims@thinkbusinessevents.com.au

thinkbusinessevents
passionate about conferences

Thinkbusinessevents.com.au