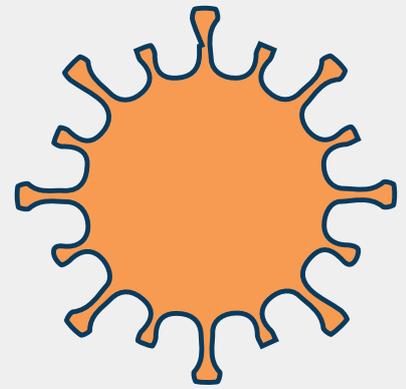


CASE STUDY ICONN 2020

Lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic

While the full worldwide impact of the COVID-19 outbreak is yet to be seen, the affects to-date are already widespread. Like many other professional event and conference organisers, Expert Events was scheduled to run an international conference at the time that the outbreak began to increase in seriousness. This case study examines the challenges, considerations, key learnings and outcomes from the public health emergency, for future events.



Background

In 2019 Expert Events was appointed by the Australian Nanotechnology Network (ANN) and The University of Queensland Australian Institute for Bioengineering and Nanotechnology (AIBN) to run and manage the 8th International Conference on Nanoscience and Nanotechnology and BioNano Innovation (ICONN 2020). The conference was held at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre from 9–13 February 2020.

While a year is what the industry would call a short lead time for a conference of this size, Expert Events rose to the occasion and using our industry experience, hard work and expertise in planning, set the conference up for success.

By January 2020 there were 820 conference registrants which included over 500 presenters.

Challenge

In January 2020 the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of a new coronavirus disease in Hubei Province, China to be a public health emergency of international concern. As there was a high risk of the disease spreading, the Australian Government banned all incoming flights from China to Australia and ordered quarantine for individuals who met specific travel criteria during the time the outbreak occurred.

With growing media coverage and a large number of registered international attendees, it became obvious that the health crisis would have a major impact on the conference. At the time that the travel bans and precautions were issued, the conference program had been finalised with all speakers and poster presenters confirmed and scheduled. As a result of the travel ban there was a frenzy of phone calls and emails resulting in cancellations from many participants.

Communication is critical when dealing with an unexpected crisis and it was imperative that Expert Events responded swiftly and regularly with all parties involved to ensure they had the correct information regarding the situation and also to prevent any unnecessary panic.

Key considerations

- crisis management and contingency planning
- short time frame (two week turnaround)
- supplier relations
- cancellations and refunds
- risk management
- health and safety
- event sponsors
- travel bans and overseas delegates
- insurance coverage
- accommodation charges and venue costs
- increased calls and emails
- communications
- virtual solutions

As there was some uncertainty around whether the conference could actually still proceed it was important for Expert Events to review all possible options in line with our risk management plan. Expert Events presented and provided advice to the committee on a number of scenarios and suggested the most financially viable solution.

After careful consideration, and as it was likely that over 70% of attendees could still attend, the decision was made to proceed with the conference. Expert Events continued with regular email updates advising of changes and precautions being taken for the conference during this time. This decision meant a complete overhaul of the pre-finalised program and scheduled speaker times, along with changes to accommodation, venue, audio visual and food and beverage numbers.

With less than two weeks left until the conference was scheduled to start, it was essential to act quickly.

With over 90 years of combined experience Expert Events was well equipped to reduce the risk to all parties involved. Having a great working relationship with many suppliers also proved advantageous during this time, in particular with the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre (BCEC).

Actions and outcomes

BCEC were very flexible and accommodating with the change in numbers for the conference and worked closely with Expert Events to ensure the safety of attendees. This included additional hygiene measures such as extra hand sanitiser and food service conditions. Of particular importance was BCEC's experienced audio-visual department that facilitated (at very short notice) the live streaming of multiple presenters in concurrent sessions, meaning components of the conference were run virtually for those who could not travel to Brisbane. There were 10 video presentations (three out of the eight plenary speakers, one panel discussion and six keynote speakers) for whom live video streaming requirements would need to be organised, taking into account differences in time zones and the program schedule.

Expert Events created a conference app that could be updated in real time, so even though the program needed to be completely rescheduled, delegates could clearly see the updated schedule on their smart device through the app. This also provided a platform to regularly communicate with delegates and make announcements about any changes.

Expert Events had the required resources to handle the influx of phone calls and increased emails and worked diligently to update the program and ensure the conference would be as successful as possible.

Key learnings

- it is important to be able to easily identify various budget scenarios in your event management system, in particular when unexpected events occur
- having a risk management plan in place for your conference and committee so you can act quickly in times of crisis or cancellation is vital
- it is beneficial to deal with an organisation that has strong supplier relationships that can be utilised during times of need
- accommodation and registration fees were fully refunded to those who were unable to attend – many venues will not allow changes so close to the actual event and the cost for attendee's food and beverage would still have been incurred
- it is important to have additional backup resources available for an increase in administration
- having a platform to communicate with all those involved with the event is imperative
- it pays to be aware of what event insurance covers, as a standard event insurance policy generally would not cover communicable diseases
- by utilising the latest in technology, Expert Events could make real time changes in the app and run parts of the conference through live video conferencing

Having a professional conference organiser to manage ICONN 2020 meant the conference committee only had a small number of decisions to make, and did not have to find the internal resources to handle an unexpected situation. By utilising our planning services and existing supplier relationships, Expert Events were able to secure a positive outcome for the committee and the conference to effectively minimise the impact of the health crisis on the event.

ICONN 2020 was a success with 72% of those registered prior to the outbreak attending in person, resulting in a break-even budget and a full return of all seeding funds to the client.

Conference management services



venue management



delegate registration services



program development and speaker management



sponsorship and exhibition management



marketing and branding



website development



accommodation management



real time registration data and reporting



destination management and coordination



social program coordination



technical and audio-visual management



conference app development



virtual speakers and session streaming

Could you please convey our (ANN management committee) sincere thanks to all involved in making ICONN 2020 a great success under trying circumstances. Congratulations to conference chairs, organising committee members, symposia chairs and committee members and all student and other volunteers and the Expert Events PCO team. All of you did a great job in making ICONN 2020 a great success. It has been a pleasure working with you all.

Professor Chennupati Jagadish
Australian National University