



Heinz Marchesi, Executive Director, the European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR)

Interview

with *Heinz Marchesi*

For many associations, the day-to-day logistics and administration of organising a congress divert attention and resources from carrying out its core business. Many associations outsource the event logistics to specialists and professional congress organising (PCO) partners.

Heinz Marchesi, Executive Director of the European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR), shares with us their strategic decision for outsourcing their events and the opportunities it has created for the organisation.

MCI: What benefits do you see today for EULAR from collaborating with a professional congress management partner for the organisation of your events? What are the strategic implications?

Heinz Marchesi: Working with a PCO offers both operational and strategic opportunities. On the operational side, we can bring to bear expertise in areas that are not the core skills of a medical association. The wide range of logistical as well as infrastructure tasks related to organising a large scientific conference are handled professionally, we have a team of well-trained experts available that otherwise would have to be recruited, trained and maintained in-house. Generally speaking, we are seeing more flexibility and good cost-effectiveness as a result of such a collaboration. On a more strategic level, the experience of a PCO working with other clients and being permanently exposed to and involved in the meeting industry provides a broader basis for successful congress management. The PCO can also act as a consultant who provides our leadership early on with insights into potential developments, risks and opportunities.

MCI: What are your future goals and expectations in the continuation of this fruitful collaboration?

HM: First of all, we will be jointly working towards maintaining the success and

reputation of our congress as developed over time. Keeping financial stability in times of economic unrest and foreseeable changes in the industry and regulatory environment is another goal. At the same time, the emergence of new technologies offers new opportunities for creating additional value for meeting participants, for instance, exploring and implementing new ways of delivering scientific content, providing timely guidance on congress programming, or improving communications with participants in general. In addition to specialised partners we are using, for media work, mobile information systems or publishing. For instance, a PCO with expertise in more than pure congress organisation can serve as an advocate who stimulates fresh and critical thinking in our organisation. We also expect our PCO to help us identify early warning signs of industry or regulatory developments that may have adverse effects on our association's well-being as well as further positive developments.

MCI: Do you think that the financial efficacy of EULAR is enhanced by the collaboration with a professional congress management partner?

HM: Costs related to organising a major congress are substantial, mainly through personnel costs. Working with a PCO allows us to keep our fixed costs low. In-house staff for congress management can focus on performing those tasks that are of intrinsic worth for the organisation like

the scientific content and programming, and managing the PCO's manifold tasks from the organisation's perspective. By negotiating attractive contracts, an association can achieve savings in infrastructure, required management time, and ultimately operational cost.

MCI: What additional knowledge and expertise does MCI bring in?

HM: MCI, being more than a PCO, offers additional expertise and knowledge in fields like negotiating and managing hotel contracts and reservations, vendor relations, audio-visual and graphic design services, or using sophisticated electronic media solutions for content dissemination. Such an all-under-one-roof approach can help avoid the time-consuming coordination of different constituencies, dealing with different corporate cultures. Implementation of new ideas becomes more efficient. For an international association like EULAR it is an additional asset that MCI runs offices in all relevant countries and geographical regions.

MCI: How would you describe the main opportunities and/or challenges of outsourcing?

HM: Outsourcing helps an organisation concentrate its resources on core activities and key competencies. The organisation remains lean and flexible. Cost considerations can be a reason

for outsourcing, especially in view of personnel requirements and the annual cost of staff. An external partner may create additional value by supporting an association in managing its risks in a more comprehensive way, by sharing best practice or providing specialised consulting services. On the other hand, outsourcing needs to be managed carefully: work processes and coordination mechanisms must be established and supervised at a distance. Electronic communication tools and processes facilitate this but are not a solution per se. Outsourcing should ideally rest on a strategic and trust-based partnership. Confidential data may need to be shared. Working with an outsourcing partner creates a certain dependence that must be watched and controlled.

MCI: What an association should look for when selecting a professional congress management partner?

HM: First of all, the association should define what its needs are. What kind and size of congresses does it organise? What is the geographical scope in terms of locations and audience? What are the financial needs and expectations? Associations should examine a PCO's position in the industry and its track record, for instance of successful longer-term relationships with clients. They can consider the geographical reach or presence of the PCO with its own offices for example; they can talk to other associations for references. Then one

should also look deeper into the PCO's organisation itself, first of all, the human factor: what would a mandated team look like? What processes and technologies are in place? What does a typical success story look like? Not least, the financial situation and stability of a PCO is worth looking at, for instance by studying their annual reports. ■

Insider's view

MCI: You have been managing the EULAR Congress for 13 years. How has the relationship evolved over the years?

Antonio Guadagnoli: Business relationships can to some extent, but with obvious limits, be compared to human relationships. At the beginning, there is excitement mingled with fear, hope, expectations, questions...

Then, when both sides like what they discover and see, they start to grow, together. So grow the mutual trust, confidence, appreciation, knowledge and understanding of each other's needs, expectations and satisfaction. EULAR recently described our relationship as "symbiotic", and I think this says it all. Over the years, we have discovered and fine-tuned our mutual understanding, leaving adequate space to each other to allow mutual respect and expression. I think the current EULAR-MCI relationship is a perfect demonstration that 1 + 1 can make 3 sometimes.

MCI: How do you ensure you continuously bring value to EULAR?

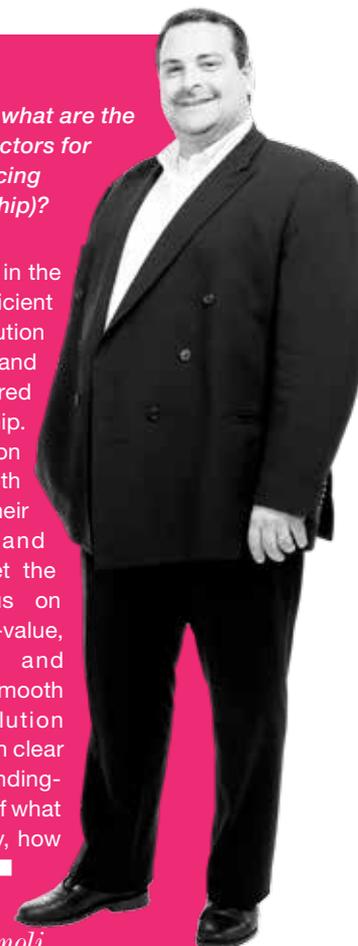
AG: The recipe includes various ingredients. The first and most important one is the most secret one that I will therefore only whisper... We don't work only for EULAR... This is extremely important as it allows the whole team to learn from many different sources, to share successful innovations and to discard failures, allowing EULAR to stay tuned in with innovation but without the hassle of permanent market screening.

The second ingredient is that we both - EULAR and MCI - focus on areas and elements where we can each add value, avoiding interfering with the other party's job when not necessary.

Other important ingredients are buying power, industry and market knowledge, continuous research and innovation, permanent and objective self-evaluation, regular and barrier-free client feedback, mutual trust and confidence, anticipation of client needs and expectations and a pinch of salt!

MCI: In your view, what are the critical success factors for a smooth outsourcing solution (partnership)?

AG: The answer is in the question. An efficient outsourcing solution must be smooth and must be considered as a partnership. A business solution is one where both parties bring their knowledge and experience and let the other party focus on its own added-value, understanding and know-how. A smooth outsourcing solution needs to be built on clear and misunderstanding-free explanations of what is outsourced, why, how and at what cost. ■



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