Organising a Conference

Organising a conference is a great learning opportunity. Not only do you learn about organising events but also you will also learn a lot from attending sessions. You learn from the other people on the organising committee and it’s a great opportunity to network. What is your specialist area? What do you want to learn about? Is there a gap in the library conference market? It might also be a great way to fill a knowledge gap for you but also for the library sector.

So you’ve decided that you want to organise a conference, what do you need to consider?

**Programme**

* What is your conference going to be on? Will there be a specific subject? Within that subject are there themes? Think of conferences you have been to. For example the annual CILIP conference has to appeal to all librarians and so naturally has a broad theme of ‘library and information sector. However within this they often have subject specific themes. UKSG is a conference about serials. Every two years the health libraries group hold a conference, as do law libraries and other special interest groups. Internet librarian International is about technology and innovation in libraries. LILAC is about information literacy. The Forum for Interlending and Information Delivery has a conference called Interlend.
* How long will your conference be? How many days? If you have sessions, how many will you have and what type will they be? Will you run parallel sessions? For example LILAC is a 3 day conference. We have to fit into our schedule: Three hour long keynote presenations and a mixture of 30 minute “short papers”, 45 minute “long papers” and 60 minute workshops.
* How will you attract papers? Are you inviting people to present? Or are you having a call for papers? How will you decide to accept people? Some conferences have a formal review process where the papers go out to a body of reviewers for consideration. What will your criteria be for a successful paper? How will you then benchmark all of the papers against each other? Once accepted, will presenters be able to attend at a discount? Or attend for free? All things you need to work out before you start advertising your conference.
* Will you have Keynotes? Will they be paid speakers or unpaid? Some keynotes will agree to speak for free if you pay their travel and accommodation expenses. Others charge exorbitant rates. I investigated one speaker and they charge £70,000. Needless to say, I have still never seen them present!

**Who**

* Who is your target audience? Who are you aiming your conference at? Library and information professionals in general? A subset of librarians? Library and university staff? Students? Academics? Commercial libraries and companies? Charities? Special Collections Libraries? You need to think about who your audience is and what they want. What will they find relevant? What are they interested in? You will need to tie your thinking on keynotes and papers into your audience work. What is their budget? Do they have time concerns or staffing issues? Would a 1 day conference be easier to attend than a 3 day conference? Will they be able to find the money for accommodation if it is more than one day? Where will promote your conference? What mailing lists do your audience read? What social media channels do they use? Do you need to think about advertising/getting an article accepted in a journal or magazine that your audience reads?
* Who is your organising team? You will need a dedicated team to organise the difference aspects of your conference. How many people and how many roles each person takes on will depend on the size and length of your conference. LILAC is 3 days long and attracts approximately 300 delegates. We have a team of 8 to organise the conference plus 2 local representatives from the host venue. The roles/tasks we have are:

* Chair
* Treasurer (also the treasurer for our parent body - CILIP IL Group)
* Finance and Bookings
* Call for papers
* Programme (what the delegates receive in their packs on arrival, brochure, badge, useful information etc.)
* Marketing and communications (website, social media etc.)
* Sponsorship

Is your team doing this as part of their role at work or is this something extra? If it is something extra when will they be doing this work? Do you need to be aware that at some point they will be incredibly busy? What is their normal workload like? If everything is busy at once, will they be stressed? How can you support them?

**Venue**

* Where will you hold your conference? This can often depend on the size of your conference. There are some venues that are designed specifically for holding conferences but commercial conference centres can be quite expensive. They are however purpose built and have very experienced staff that can help you and your delegates. How many people do you want to attend? Will they all be in once place at any one point? How many people can the venue’s biggest lecture theatre hold? 100, 250, 300, 400? Whatever this figure is, will need to be your booking cut-off point.
* What else do you need? How many rooms? What sort of rooms do they need to be and how many people do they hold? (Will presenters want delegates to do group work? Will they want to move the furniture around?) What technology is in the room? Is there a pc and a data projector? Will presenters need laptops? Is there internet access in the room? Will the presenter be able to do live demonstrations? Is sound enabled? Will people want to provide computer workshops? Is there an IT suite? How will delegates get internet access? Will it be reliable?
* You will need to present the venue with your list of requirements and ask for a quote for the estimated costs. Visit the venue when you are making your decision, it’s often quite different seeing a venue in person rather than looking at photos. It is a good idea for your whole team to visit the venue at some point. It makes planning easier as you can visualise the place and its equipment.

**Money**

* How much are you going to charge delegates? You will need to make sure the price covers the costs of the venue hire, catering and refreshments and any social events you might decide to include as part of the package.
* How are delegates going to book their places? How will you record this information and how will you take payments? If there are multiple sessions, do you want people to be able to book them in advance? How high-tech do you want the parallel session booking process to be? You could always start with paper sign-up sheets on walls or poster boards.
* Where will the money you are taking be paid into? Can you use an established bank account for your organisation? Or will you need to open an account?
* Having a treasurer and/or finance officer to look after the money is invaluable, particularly anyone with a finance or accounting background. Having someone who understands legal requirements to do with tax and accounts is a hugely reassuring and means that you don’t end up with any nasty surprises.
* Are you insured to hold a conference? You will need to public liability insurance at least. Check with your Host organisation or venue. If you are a special interest group, check with your parent body, if you are holding something in the name of your organisation or institution then check there too. Some venues require you to have the insurance and want to see your certificate before they will commit to holding your conference.
* Are you going to try and get sponsors for your conference? If so, what sort of packages are you going to offer and how much will you charge them? You can add them to your website, offer them leaflet space in the delegate pack, they can sponsor drinks receptions or other social events or exhibit at the conference. If they exhibit, what does this mean? Where will they be and what will they get for their money? A table, 2 chairs, power outlet/internet access is usually the least people can expect. Sponsors will need to be in a space that delegates walk passed frequently and preferably where people have the breaks and lunch. Delegates will not go out of their way to see sponsors and your sponsors will feel aggrieved if they do not have the opportunity to chat to their customers. Who will your sponsors be? Again – think about your audience? Who is coming and what products do they use at work that also link to the subject of the conference. Sponsors will also want to know who will be coming, numbers and where your delegates come from.

**Accommodation**

* If your conference is longer than a day then your delegates will need to find accommodation. Who is providing this and who is booking it? If you are not providing it then it is best to leave this up to your delegate to organise for themselves. It is hard work organising a conference anyway and this will add more work and more responsibility for your team. Hotels are also something out of your control which can cause headaches for the team. You can provide links to local hotels instead. (If you liaise with the tourist board, they will sometimes offer preferential prices to your delegates; however you need to ensure you are not liable for any payment if hotels rooms are not taken up.)
* Is it part of a whole package? Depending on the time of year some conferences held at universities also offer accommodation in student halls to delegates.

**Social events**

* Are you going to provide delegates with social events? They can be fun and offer attendees the chance to network and unwind. If you do decide to have social events, what will you have? A drinks reception straight after the event? This can be quite nice and it goes down well with your sponsors if you hold it in the same area as the sponsor exhibition. However if it’s a one day event you might not get many people staying for it. A networking evening? A dinner? If so where will you hold them? If it’s just drinks or a networking evening, will there be food? Will people still need to eat a meal before or after? Do they know this? Will you need to hire a venue and organise catering for the events? Will you offer free drinks or perhaps a couple of free drinks? If you are limited to a couple of free drinks, will there be a cash bar afterwards? If you hold a dinner, will you have entertainment? An after dinner speaker or a disco or band? Again what alcohol will you provide and what will people be able to buy themselves? There are a variety of things to consider but it can be a nice way to get people together in the evenings, something that can be nice for those delegates that come and don’t know anyone.

**Advertising and communication**

* The other thing that you need to consider is your online presence and promoting your conference. A good way to do this is to create a website. This can be where you put the majority of information that your delegates need to find out about the conference, before and after they book their place. Many conferences include information on their speakers so that delegates can use it to decide whether they want to come and plan their time once they have booked their place. It can be the focus of your promotion as it provides you with pages to link to from your social media channels and any emails that you send out on mailing lists. You can also use it to make links available to any venue and location information. At LILAC we ensure that all presenters provide us with a copy of their presentation. If they are PowerPoint slides we add them to our slideshare account and link them and any other web-based presentations to a section called LILAC Archive.

**BEST FOR**

* Developing your network
* Filling a gap in the market

**MORE**

* Working on creating something people enjoy and find useful is incredibly rewarding
* It can be great fun.

**WATCH OUT**

* It’s a lot of work on top of your day job. Make sure you have support from line manager
* If you’re managing the staff involved ensure they have the support and time to do everything.

**Reference:**

LILAC Website: <http://www.lilacconference.com/>