

The Solvay Conference 1927

Discussing the impact of a conference is often predictable. The association will mention the number of members who participated, the venue, the number of square metres sold, the destination, and the number of hotel nights booked. While these are all important elements, they do not touch upon the purpose of the event, which is the real key performance indicator.

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The Solvay Conference of 1927 is legendary. As one of the prestigious participants – Werner Heisenberg – commented: “Through the possibility of exchange between the representatives of different lines of research, this conference has contributed extraordinarily to the clarification of the physical foundations of the quantum theory. It forms, so to speak, the outward completion of the quantum theory.”

Admittedly, not every conference organised by an association will achieve such results. At the same time, it is important that associations are clear and precise about the purpose of their conferences and report on the results booked, especially if we want to attract the new generations that will soon take the helm at many of the member organisations.

As *Forbes* mentions, Gen Z is fueled by purpose. Having experienced a global pandemic, economic recessions, and major cultural shifts during formative periods in their lives, Gen Z sees the world differently. They’re passionate about solving societal problems, and they expect the places they work to have similar beliefs. So, if associations want this generation to attend their conferences, having a purpose and legacy will be extremely important.

Such a purpose can have many faces, benefiting different stakeholders. Obviously, there is the member community itself. As an example, this year’s theme of the **AIPC Annual Conference** is “Next Gen Venues”. The purpose is to provide the participants with insights into what next-generation venues will look like, allowing them to take the

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necessary action and adapt accordingly. At the same time, it will allow AIPC as an association to disseminate these learnings at a larger scale and to include them in our educational offerings.

Another stakeholder can be the local community. Associations can include a “giving back to the community” element in their programme, which goes beyond the purely economic one. For example, Sibos – the financial industry event – launched **Art@Sibos** in 2014, integrating art from local artists into the event. For its first edition, more than half a dozen pieces of installation art were showcased and the pieces were displayed in such a way that made it possible for delegates to interact with the art, walk around it, and even touch it. Delegates were also able to speak with the artists and, in some cases, actually purchased pieces of art. This initiative still continues today as one of several initiatives taken by Sibos to give back to the local community.

A third stakeholder can be the larger or even global community. An obvious example is the **2023 UN Water Conference**, which assessed progress made in the implementation of the UN’s International Decade objectives, while reaffirming the internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, including those contained in the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**. Although not at the same level as the UN, associations sometimes underestimate the impact they can have by bringing their community together and leveraging that collective brainpower to address societal challenges, directly or indirectly linked with the purpose of the association itself. Hackathons, for example, can be a great way of achieving tangible outcomes in a fun and interactive way, stimulating networking in the process.

As demonstrated above, having a clear and articulated purpose can elevate conferences to a higher level, benefit different stakeholders, and ultimately make the world a better place. It might be something different than the completion of the quantum theory, but it could still result in a big bang.

