

In the hot seat

Claire Wormsley, Director of the Global Conference Network, talks to *CN* about the changing meetings industry and the importance of graduate training

How did you get into the industry?
It was after I spent two years in Sydney, Australia, where I worked in advertising. When I came back to the UK, I wanted a change of career and was looking for a new challenge. This led me to apply for a job as a conference producer at IIR.

What was your first big challenge?
The first conference I had to produce was on 'financial volatility' – a really technical subject. It involved having to speak to bankers with PhDs in quantitative physics and maths, about complex financial modelling, which was something I knew nothing about at the time. It made me realise that you don't need to be an expert on a subject to produce a good event, you just need to ask the right questions, listen well and talk to the right people in the market.

What do you like about the industry?
Conferences are full of bright, entrepreneurial people. Each conference is unique with so much innovation, whether it be in a new product, format or location, with people who are creative. The organisers possess the ability to really get things done, often with tight time scales and small budgets.

How has the industry changed since you started and if you could pick two key innovations what would they be?
When I started in the industry, the vast majority of revenue came through delegate fees. Now, a significant proportion of conferences' revenue comes from sponsorships, so the importance of bringing the 'buy' and 'sell' side of the market together has strengthened considerably.

Marketing has changed massively. When I started my career, it was a direct mail, number crunching exercise. Now, the role of the marketer is infinitely more complex, covering websites, SEO, online campaigns, social media, partnership marketing, telesales etc. It has become much more varied, although I'm not sure the number of conference marketers has increased with the work load.



“By having outstanding talent coming into the industry, conferences will be able to continue to develop and thrive”

How many projects are you working on?
Lots! The fifth Conference Awards take place on 13 June, and we're holding our third Graduate Conference Academy in July, where we provide free training for graduates. We also host a number of roundtables for conference directors throughout the year, along with issuing monthly conference newsletters. Our new Event Marketing Summit, full of insights into event marketing, is taking place on 3 October and we have just launched GCNTalent – a dedicated recruitment service for the conference and events industry.

How has the Conference Awards business developed?

The Conference Awards has grown from 400 people to 700 in five years - we've had to move venues to Battersea Evolution this year to accommodate everyone. The number of companies involved with the awards has continued to broaden, as has the quality of entries. Winning an award is tough now, the standard has become incredibly high. The Conference Awards still remains the largest event for industry professionals to come together to recognise the sector's success and celebrate its achievements.

What is the USP of your business?

We are completely focused on the conference industry. Everyone who works in our events teams, whether it's for the Conference Awards or the Graduate Academy, has a background in conferences and understands how important it is for us to deliver exceptional quality. We also have excellent networks, including director-level contacts in conference companies, who get involved in all our events.

Most successful personal achievement?

I'm proud of our work with graduates. I strongly believe that by having outstanding talent coming into the industry, conferences will be able to continue to develop. Through the Graduate Conference Academy, we've been promoting the industry to the Russell Group of Universities, providing free training to high-achieving graduates who we then help to place in the industry.

What is your passion outside of events?

My family, friends, Arsenal, cricket and tennis.

Prediction for the future of our sector?

Digital media is changing the way people access and consume information. However, the value of face-to-face events is still vital. We need to work on developing more innovative and interactive products to deliver outstanding experiences in terms of content and networking to our audiences. **CN**