

# What's the point?

**Nicky Whyman**, commercial director, KDM Events, says that if you don't set benchmarks before you plan an event, your evaluation afterwards will be worthless

**A**sk any senior corporate event planner what would make them really happy and chances are that they'll ask for the means to demonstrate the value of their conference. The events industry is under pressure to produce a measurement tool to meet that need.

But to focus exclusively on the post-event measurement process is to ignore the other side of the evaluation. Until event planners are clear from the outset on what they want their conferences to deliver, there will be no way of proving how that event has impacted, or otherwise, on the company's performance.

This thinking is hardly revolutionary to events industry practitioners, but I can't help wondering if we are trying hard enough to get this message across to our clients.

The industry needs to work together to dispel any illusions that conferences are 'nice-to-haves' that can be jettisoned whenever budget cuts are threatened.

At the Office show, at Olympia this month, our

own company is running a seminar to help PAs introduce measurement and evaluation into their conferences. This initiative was conceived following some research conducted at the end of 2014. We surveyed 49 in-house event organisers to find out what 'event success' looked like to them and how they were measuring and analysing their event outcomes.

Our research showed that event success is still largely being attributed to logistical effectiveness and delegate experience. We learned that some in-house organisers are not aware of the board strategy that determines the original reason for holding their event. Others confuse business objectives with the logistical and budgetary imperatives of the conference itself.

An alarming 14% of our respondents claimed not to be setting event objectives at all, but from the pure business objectives cited, education (staff training and raising staff knowledge) was top scorer, and goals such as communicating business strategies and raising staff morale were frequently listed.

Business goals that could produce easily measurable outcomes, such as reduction in staff churn, increase in sales conversions or collecting new leads, received far fewer ticks.

Even when planners mentioned measurable objectives, their post-event analyses rarely compared outcomes against original target figures. Fewer than a quarter of those who confirmed

that they undertook post-event evaluation said that baseline measures of delegate attitudes, knowledge or performance levels had been made before the conference as well.

If planners are not taking pre-event benchmarks, their post-event evaluation is going to be at best vague and at worst meaningless.

We also found that the levels of data being collected to prove achievement of business goals - such as effect on motivational levels (cited by 35%), learning of new skills (33%) and other specifics relating to the conference's business content (37%) were disappointing.

Corporate planners continue to ask their events agencies for a demonstration of ROI. This request in itself reveals a lack of strategic thinking, because ROI is measured in financial terms, and not every conference can be expected to yield a purely financial return or saving. Far better to remain focused on identified event objectives, and to devise the process for putting target figures against those objectives in order to be able to demonstrate the conference's effectiveness.

Some corporate organisers have started to think this way. My company is beginning to receive smarter briefs. But this change in approach can be accelerated - by having early and strategic conversations with clients to help clarify desired business outcomes for their events.

It is, of course, the responsibility of industry practitioners to help their clients achieve the most for their budgets. But here again, objective setting plays a key role.

Effectiveness stems from all stakeholders having a clear understanding of the business rationale behind the conference. It follows that all those charged with delivering the event can craft a solution that truly yields a return on objectives. **CA**

