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# An INFORMATIVE Experience

Industry conferences need to be distinctive in terms of content and networking opportunities. Informa Australia strives to create a unique and enlightening experience for all delegates at the company's events.

Images by Scott Ehler

**S**piro Anemogiannis, Managing Director of Informa Australia, has been in the commercial conference industry for 24 years. "I started off with a company called IIR in 1990 and then worked for a company called AIC, which is now called Terrapinn, and for the last 17 years I have been with Informa Australia, which is part of Informa PLC Group. When I joined, it was a public company and still is, but then it was known as IBC Group PLC. So I have been running this business for 17 years with Informa. During my early years, after finishing university, I worked for the government in industrial relations and human resource management."

According to Spiro, the largest challenge for Informa has been the increase in disruptive technology and the barriers of entry into the

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industry. "To give you an example: 20 years ago, the number one, most important, and hard-to-attain asset to start up or run a business like this was the database. It was very hard, costly, and time consuming to actually build or find a database because it was predominantly direct mail in terms of how we attract attendees to our events. With the advent of technology and so on, it is very easy, quick, and cheap to get lists and databases and acquire names from all sorts of avenues. So the biggest challenge firstly over the last 10 or 15 years is that there has been a lot of low-cost competitors coming to the market and increasing the competition at the lower level.

"What disruptive technology has done over the last 10 or 15 years most certainly is that a lot of content can be found online somewhere. Secondly, the

networking: the next generation networking is done by technology, by computers, or by hand-held devices. The landscape is changing in terms of events, in terms of the drivers for why middle or senior executives would want to attend or send someone to an event. Our objective is to create a must-attend experience around all our events, because it is very easy to say, 'I can network by doing this and I can find a contact by doing this'. Our biggest challenge is to add value in other ways to entice the next generation of middle and senior managers to want to attend an event."

While technology has changed the landscape of the conference industry, it has helped with the marketing of events. "It was easy to jump on the social media bandwagon seven, eight, or nine years ago, and all this stuff on Twitter and Facebook. We realised >





that without great content, it was a waste of time. So we have invested in a content-marketing strategy, which is still evolving. We have also learned that not every social channel will work for every industry. The positives are that much of this new technology has helped reduce the marketing spend, the promotion spend, and changed the marketing pie, so we don't send 50,000 envelopes with brochures to our target market; we developed communities around the industry.

"We run a lot of rail events, for example. They are active on LinkedIn, so we provide great content from our speakers, sponsors, and our own research. This content gets shared, and we now have several thousand rail professionals in one LinkedIn group. We do that across a whole lot of sectors. The way we reach out to middle executives has changed; it's moved away from direct marketing and some telemarketing to more of an online

content-marketing approach to entice and get the events in front of people's faces."

Informa is in the business of providing important information that middle and senior executives need in any medium they desire. "That can be by way of publication, which can be online or hard copy, so we have newspapers around the world, we have a newspaper here, we have trade magazines, and we also have training courses which can be customised, or they can be public courses. We have conferences, obviously, and we have exhibitions. We're moving now into a lot of consumer exhibitions because much of the growth in exhibitions worldwide is in the consumer space, and up till fairly recently we have been solely B2B in terms of what we provide the business community. But now we are moving very much into the consumer space, especially in exhibitions. We provide information to business executives

in any form they require, and it can be in any format that they prefer."

With more than 8,500 staff across over 43 countries, Informa is truly a world leader in publishing and conferences. "When I joined, the operating profit for the group was about £14 million, and now it is over £300 million. Over the last 17 years, the company has grown worldwide, so there are hundreds of businesses and small companies covering all parts of the world. All managing directors, like myself, run it as our business; it is our P&L, and we report back to the main board. We have recently had a change of CEO for the first time in 30 years. He took over on 1 January and was here visiting recently. The management now is looking at strategies for revenue growth rather than profit maximisation. That is the new mantra under the change of leadership."

The support of this immense parent company has helped the



Australian arm establish its place within the local market and continues through close collaboration across the Informa network. "There are a lot of central IT systems that are used throughout the whole group. There are a lot of personnel exchanges; many of my staff go and work in other offices, and vice versa. We have regular management meetings at my level, but also at the next level down. We have global marketing meetings and creative meetings. There is one happening in France in early June, and I am sending three rising-star staff members to that. There is always a constant information exchange, not only through the internet, but a lot of meetings and phone calls, emails, and lot of content sharing."

Due to the size of Informa, the Australian arm of the business has the buying power of a global company behind it, which helps facilitate close working relationships with suppliers. "We have good relationships with all our suppliers, and we are very much focused on the feedback we receive from our customers. It is not cost first, but actually quality first. We are always receiving evaluations from all our

delegate speakers, exhibitors, and visitors, and we act on that regardless of how longstanding or how good the contract is with our suppliers. We have long-term relationships with all our suppliers, and it is always based on quality-service delivery that they impart—and that is worldwide, not just Australia. It's how we operate. We are not a cowboy outfit that picks the cheapest supplier and then disregards the quality of service, because we wouldn't be around long term if we went down that track."

The conference sector is changing, so Informa is doing the same to facilitate the shifting industry. "Our selling point for that aspect of what we offer is that by attending one of our events, we want you to go away with at least one good idea, one competitor's secret, or information, or tip. And that can be, 'I can save money by doing what company X have said they're doing'. If delegates can come away from the event with just one good business tip that will either save them money or make some money, then we have done our job and that investment in their outlay is worth it.

"In terms of exhibitors, it is not so much the number of visitors but the quality of visitors to the exhibition that generates leads for them. If we provide the right calibre of visitors and if they come away with even just a handful of hot leads and a whole lot of warm leads, then we have done our job and they'll come again the year after."

Spiro sees a bright future ahead for Informa as the industry becomes increasingly digitalised and clients' expectations change. "The future for Informa here in Australia is certainly one of change, adding more of an experience, adding more value to an event, rather than just relying on the content and the networking. As I have said, technology is disrupting those two offerings, so we need to offer an experience; we need to offer a bit more than just 'you can network with this person' or 'you can get this content'.

"We are changing the way we operate and we are also moving away from the smaller events and trying to become part of the industries that we operate in and deliver industry events that the industry wants, rather than what we think they want." •

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