



### **To Event – or not to Event?**

Optometry and Ophthalmology are steeped in educational events each year – approximately 144 occur in a 12-month period. They range from one-day intimate meetings held in hotel venues (E.g. UKISCRS Cornea & Cataract Day, or the OSI magazine meeting) to larger conferences held in Educational settings (E.g. the Oxford Ophthalmological Congress). You then have even larger-scale events that attract over 1000 delegates, such as 100% Optical (ExCel) and Optrafair (NEC).

The struggle, for both delegates and industry, is often how to choose how many and which ones to attend. For delegates, content is the key deciding factor closely followed by how many CPD/CET points can be attained. For Industry, the delegate mix and ‘quality’ is nearly always the decider. At AOS we look at who the programme will attract and where we can tie that interest into our software – compared with cost\*, location, how many team-members are required to attend and how many days the event runs for. The inclusion of any ‘industry-invited’ social events is also key – as this is where so many business relationships are forged, trust is gained, and appointments booked.

*\*Cost is not just the price of the stand space, design, and furniture, but the accommodation, subsistence, staff badges and more.*

So – what do we do now? What are we missing, and can it be replaced? Who does it hit hardest? And should events restart? There are different concerns for each stakeholder.

- **The delegate:** How do they continue to receive ongoing professional development without teaching, in this format, being available? Where can they socially interact with peers, friends & colleagues to disseminate the latest education face-to-face and learn from each other?
- **The exhibitor/industry:** How do we promote, innovate and expose our product/device or service to the market? How do new relationships get created and existing ones nurtured? How can we advertise to our audience and deliver an effective & affordable marketing strategy? Massively reduced revenue will be a huge, if not terminal, challenge for the Ophthalmic & Optometric industry.
- **The venues:** Wow – this is a big one! Every venue from Academic Colleges, to Hotels, to the purpose-built Expo-Centres are hugely affected. Not only is all their bedroom and F&B revenue crushed, but the income derived from Conference & Events is now being salvaged through contractual agreements & rescheduled dates and is a pittance compared to the budgeted amounts. In some cases, many may not survive this crushing blow to their income.
- **The project managers:** Let us not forget the impact on Event Experts/AV providers, Caterers, Exhibition Stand-Builders...

A recent white paper documented that the UK meeting and events industry provides 700,000 jobs to people in the UK and contributes £70bn to the UK economy per year. Whilst the threat of transmission of COVID-19 at organised meetings and events remains high, they have been rightly banned in the UK. However, there is a threat to these 700,000 jobs as the supply chain struggles to support itself through the ban on organised meetings and events.

As this threat level subsides, will it soon be possible to hold our industry meetings and events while prioritising the safety of event attendees and the people they may come into contact with? And when we *can* return to events – will we? Industry Health Professionals need to revalidate and earn their CPD/CET. But haven't we been doing well providing this via on-line and digital learning? And if we have to social distance, reducing the permitted footfall – will our Industry Companies, ourselves included, see the 'value' of attending a meeting or Congress? We must begin to ask if there are there other direct ways to market via the digital platform.

We know that some events - planned earlier this year – made the commitment to reschedule to the Autumn. This was vital for venue budgets and maybe also provided some hope that COVID-19 was not here to stay for the long-term. The 'furlough' scheme has certainly saved many jobs within the event industry, with the view that it will be back up and running in the Autumn. Is this likely? It is just too early to tell yet. In reality will we see some of these rescheduled events turn 'digital' like the WOC and ESCRS? And then what will the charges be for delegates and industry alike? Can this widely adopted 'webinar' platform work long-term?

It is positive to see a framework, outlined in the recent 'Safer Events' white paper, for venues and event organisers to plan events in the medium term whilst the COVID-19 threat remains present. However, there is an understandable lack of confidence and consensus in the measures from delegates, faculty, industry and planners alike.

Will AOS be attending rescheduled UK events that had been booked earlier in the year (Optrafair: April to September & UKISCRS: May to November)? I would certainly like to think so. Are our Industry colleagues thinking the same, or will industry specialists adopt different ways to reach out to our audience? And if this becomes a choice across our industry, how then do our historical educational societies and meetings survive? These are all questions that, in my opinion, will remain unanswered for many weeks to come.

In my next blog I will look more deeply at the plans for restarting events to include screening, staff training, social distancing, PPE and Sterilisation. I will also be asking if meetings can charge as much for exhibitors and delegates when there is such uncertainty.

It is my personal wish that our wonderful Ophthalmic/Optometric industry can soon be joined together once again; learning, communicating, demonstrating, building relationships and socialising. We do work in an industry with mind-blowing academia presenting life-changing medical advances, unbelievable innovations in AI & technology and constant improvements in services and patient care.

If our population can continue to social distance, follow the government guidelines and keep safe then ‘hopefully’ we will see a downturn to this shocking virus and a return to some normality. In the comedic words of the old English proverb however “hopefully doth butter no parsnips”!

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