

13 Million Kids— NO PARENTS

Defining Success Against a Deadly Epidemic

BY MITCHELL BEER, CMM

When more than 30,000 participants gather from more than 140 countries to confront one of the world's deadliest epidemics, what can they hope to learn or achieve that will make a difference when they get home?

"Thirteen million kids—no parents," was the message on one of dozens of placards on display during a grandmothers' march that marked the beginning of the XVI International AIDS Conference in August. The placard, the march and the grandmothers' gathering were among countless highlights from a five-day event that generated enormous media attention, new funding commitments and boundless dialogue among participants.

But this biennial conference, like any other major event, leaves questions related to return on investment, event accomplishments and milestone

assessment.

HOW TO MEASURE MEETING SUCCESS

The International AIDS Society (IAS) asked those questions for years before it undertook a systematic conference assessment in 2004. Evaluation Consultant Diana McConachy said a top priority for the 2006 meeting was to track its immediate and long-term impacts on attendees.

Survey results indicate that "the things delegates gained at AIDS 2006 will have an impact far beyond the conference and the individual delegate," McConachy said. The majority of the more than 7,000 respondents committed to at least one follow-up action, and many planned to pursue multiple activities.

Four months after the event, a repeat survey of 135 attendees found that each of them had done at least one thing differently after attending the conference.

But McConachy says the evaluation uncovered a series of questions that are common to many large events: Is the conference too big? If so, what is its optimum size? What do participants expect, and can those expectations be met? What constitutes success and how can success be measured?

FROM NETWORKING TO RESULTS

Pam Graham, president of Congress Canada, the Toronto firm that produced the conference along with German PCO partner K.I.T., and McConachy both stress the difficulty of maximizing interaction and measuring results with such a huge event.

"Participants vary enormously in terms of their backgrounds, skills, experiences and work contexts," McConachy said. "Many of the changes the conference sought were complex, involving processes

such as health promotion, capacity building, partnership development and knowledge transfer."

McConachy says that the outcomes were difficult to define precisely or standardize, and some lengthy causal pathways may be difficult to attribute to a specific intervention.

Graham also notes a difference between international events and corporate meetings, which generally seek the means to an end, as opposed to actually being the end.

For international events, the goals and objectives are more likely to focus on a single program. The difference in approach might be worth pursuing, Graham says, although the event relies upon voluntary attendance and different people attend for different reasons. At corporate meetings, by contrast, she says, "you're bringing people together to introduce new product lines, new strategies, and they have to deliver on what they've learned at the meeting. The purpose is very different."

PUTTING STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FIRST

Robyn Sussel, strategic communications advisor with Signals Design Group in Vancouver, British Columbia, agrees that planners must help their clients set objectives early on.

"Everything falls from there, including the format of the sessions, guidelines to reviewers, even the means to judge scholarship applications," said Sussel, who worked on the 1996 AIDS conference and the 2006 International Harm Reduction Association conference.

For the harm reduction meeting, an emphasis on evidence-based advocacy, practical resources, collaboration among peers and quality research translated into more interactive sessions, a strict peer review process and space in the program book to jot down names and addresses.

Sussel and Graham agree that organized follow-up is the exception after a

large international event. But environmental health specialist Renaud de Plaen, who organized a series of AIDS 2006 satellites for Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), says the synergies that developed on site made the experience worthwhile.

BIG CONFERENCE, SMALL NETWORKS

IDRC's location in the Global Village, rather than the commercial exhibition hall, attracted many people

"It increased our visibility to a level we wouldn't have imagined," de Plaen said. IDRC also used the conference to launch a Web portal for all its work on HIV/AIDS across a variety of disciplines.

"Our Web hits on HIV/AIDS skyrocketed during August and remained impressively high through September, October and early November," he said. "People kept coming back to the site. To me, that was a sign that we benefited from our visibility in Toronto."

But de Plaen says the prospects for drawing participants to breakout sessions are limited at a large international conference.

"When you have more than 30,000 people, how do you attract their attention?" he asked. Participants were often drawn to the breakouts by high-profile speakers or simultaneous interpretation, sometimes to the detriment of the content of other sessions, de Plaen said.

He says the conference brought new attention to his specific research focus on the links between HIV infection and food security.

"AIDS 2006 was one of the first conferences where the link was recognized, and there was a lot of synergy with other organizations that were reaching the same conclusion," de Plaen said.

Still, he questions the dollars and effort required to organize an international AIDS conference every two years. He says a combination of larger and smaller meetings might be more effective

in fostering new ideas and dialogue without losing the media attention and star power of a less frequent global event.

THE HONOR OF A LIFETIME

Sussel points out that it's difficult to track tangible results for a conference like AIDS 1996 or 2006.

"How would you measure that?" she asked. "Lives saved? Infections prevented? Those things are difficult."

Yet for many of the planners, suppliers and freelancers who worked on the International AIDS Conference, the experience was the honor of a lifetime.

"I've run conferences for 27 years, and for the most part, we make rich people richer," Graham said. "For the first time in my career, we were able to use all those skills for something that really makes a difference in this world, using our technology and logistical skills to help people whose lives are at risk every day.

"Where else can you have a meeting of the minds between the poorest people from the most remote parts of the earth in the same room as Bill Gates, the wealthiest man on earth, and all of them there for the same monumental cause?"

Graham says Congress Canada staff and suppliers feel the same.

"We wanted to be part of something big and contribute to something important, and we did," she said. "We were able to get deals that I thought were impossible. We kept pushing ourselves, our suppliers and our lifelong industry friends, and we made it happen." **TMP**

MITCHELL BEER, CMM, is president of The Conference Publishers Inc., www.theconferencepublishers.com, and was one of two project managers for the daily newspaper at AIDS 2006. He can be reached at mitchell@theconferencepublishers.com.