



## *What does it mean to be a “conference ambassador”?*

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Taking on the role of ambassador really means you are taking on the challenge of the asking colleagues or your peers in your field to see Cork or Ireland as a vibrant centre to host a conference, congress or speciality meeting.

Like many of my colleagues in healthcare I have attended many conferences in several different locations all over the globe. I was keen to see if Cork could act as a suitable host centre and when the International Association for the study of Pain (IASP) agreed to let us host the biannual specialities meeting CRPS Cork 2017 was born! Not only had I taken on the challenge of hosting a truly international pain meeting in Cork for the first time I knew, from the outset, having the correct infrastructure was key to making this successful.

In fact, it is usually the logistics, the where, when, and how that will seem the greatest obstacle and these are most likely the reason you as an “ambassador” in waiting will abort the plan before it gets off the ground.

In my opinion, the support of the Meeting in Ireland team and the Cork Convention Bureau (CCB) is vital to kick starting the project. There are 3-key factors I feel are worth considering from the outset and perhaps adapting this into your plans include

### **1 Understanding the Needs of the Conference**

Meeting with CCB to put a bid structure in place that targets the needs of the event MUST to be put in place. Understanding the previous “fears” and needs of the group and present the solution to the committee is fundamental to ensure you present a well thought out plan from the beginning;

First Impressions Do Count!

Especially if you’re competing with established locations & other centres

Insight into suitable venues, hotels, networking options are priceless. The ability to “open doors” and provide general advice on funding pathway for a site visit are critical



For example, some of obstacles we had to contend with will be similar to many others, included;

- Secure Attendance: We had an active cohort of healthcare professionals who focused on CRPS. However, CRPS is a relatively rare pain condition affecting. So, the Irish base was always going to be very small but the international window was / is very large.
- Travel Issue: The international organisation IASP were more comfortable in Zurich, Rome, Japan let alone Cork. So, transportation of delegates was always a concern
- Poor Track Record of attendance: The last international meeting 2 years ago attracted 100 delegates & the last U.K. meeting was cancel because of lack of interest! Issues included poor venue choice, poor scientific content etc.
- Building a Quality Program: It is very important to focused on a clinical theme, to addressed the accessibility, the safety, the educational environment and the networking opportunity.
- Social Event offers networking: This needs to be integrated into the event but not allow dominate. Internationally we have a super record as “social” hosts but it is important ensure a balance is achieved between having relaxed educational environment and securing accreditation.

We succeeded not only ensuring the largest ever attendance of 240 delegates, 67% overseas delegates & extremely positive networking event reviews from sponsors & delegates alike

Roy Keane was right when he quoted Benjamin Franklin  
“Failure to Prepare, Prepare to Fail”

## **2. A Flexible Team structure**

My concern about any team is the Syndrome I refer to as “Team Paralysis”

Lots of limbs but none of the working!!

Establish a small, flexible & experienced team who could deliver the requirements needed. Fortunately, we had a 6-person Local Organising Committee (LOC) that was the “dream team”. These individuals were experts in their field, with great contacts, devoted to their area but with busy clinical commitments. Asking them to give up time is impossible, but achievable. The ambassador must ensure the LOC are respected and flexible to meet their needs.

In a modern conference, PR, funding and sponsorship is crucial to the success and a Conference management structure provides the insight & knowledge needed. After an interview process, we



settled on a company who knew the sector, understood our ambitions from the beginning and helped us deliver the conference we wanted on time and on budget.

### **3. Establishing your target & goals**

Each conference will need to set out its own ambitions, target & goals.

Defining this early will impose your ideas onto the conference so as to give focus & “favour” to your meeting.

We recognised that small attendance, cancellation and limited sponsorship plagued the last two conferences in this field. Therefore, our Conference theme was “Working together to succeed” This was of course inspired by another Cork man... Henry Ford

Having a theme ensured

1. That the “theme” energised the meeting.
2. Solutions are easy to find when you know what your end-game is.
3. Key note speakers will feel they are honoured to be considered & you will get huge input and promotion becomes easy
4. Delegates will be excited about attending a quality / good value for money conference: (50% of our income were “ticket sales”)
5. Sponsors want to network & gain business leads; priceless to the right sponsor (we doubled the attendance & secured 5 times more global sponsorship the previous similar event)

### **Finally**

Hosting a conference or specialist society meeting takes innovation and entrepreneurial spirit. Frankly, it requires thought and patience. Ambassadors need the ongoing support from Failte Ireland & CCB to help them deliver over the 2-3 year window from the bid to the completion of the project.

From a personal perspective being involved with “Meeting in Ireland” model has proven to be a very positive experience. 3 years ago I had the pleasure of successfully bidding to host the WIP 9<sup>th</sup> World Congress in the Convention centre in Dublin next May. This meeting is 3 years in the planning and in May 2018 we will have 2,000 international pain physicians in Dublin for the 3 days injecting 3.5 million into the economy.

To put this in context there are only 16 pain physicians in Ireland!



However, the “value” of any meeting to the local & national economy should not be measured in simple international delegate numbers or hotel bed nights; this is short-sighted & the impact on the economy will also be short lived once the conference moves on. For sure the “Meeting in Ireland” model must continue to elevate the regions. It should consider a program to ensure recognition of smaller society meetings where senior decision makers in healthcare & business can meet to influence research and development can grow.

Answering the opening question *What does it mean to be a “conference ambassador?”* I would ask you to consider John F. Kennedy (he wasn’t from Cork but he did suffer Chronic Low Back Pain) who wrote

*“Things do not Happen  
Things are made to happen”*

Take on the role of ambassador, rise to the challenge and enjoy the experience

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*The CRPS Cork 2017 conference was awarded “Best International Association Award 2017”  
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