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CONGRESS insight

Interview Inge Hanser, Managing Director CPO HANSER SERVICE

Ms Hanser, you have been a congress organiser for 40 years, what exactly is your business?

We organise national and international congresses in Germany, Europe and worldwide. These are mostly scientific congresses, but we also organise non-scientific events. The scientific congresses are primarily medical congresses. We started our business in Hamburg with the company „CPO Hanser Service Hanser & Ko“ and half a year later founded a second company in Berlin. Berlin is a very interesting location with a very large congress centre and many international congresses. We offer a so-called „full service“, i.e. we organize congresses from A to Z, starting with the question of where the congress can take place and ending with budget preparation, scheduling, concept for marketing and advertising, hotel reservations, staff, technology etc. We take care of the exhibition, the sponsoring, we organize supporting programs, i.e. everything that belongs to a congress all around up to the fiscal aspects and afterwards statistics and invoices.

Did you have a lot of competition back then?

We originally started in Hamburg and initially concentrated on congresses that took place in Germany. There weren't so many competitors here at that time, and they only joined us in the course of the next few years. Today, we have to deal with many competitors, including competitors with an international reputation, but also many small, so-called PCOs who don't really deserve the name (Professional Congress Organizers), who organize correspondingly small events.

Are these small PCOs trying to do business by offering low prices?

These companies are forced to do business via low prices, which of

course also causes us problems, because there are a number of companies that have to pay a lot of attention to money and mistakenly think that if they accept the service of a small PCO with lower prices, they will get the same quality, but this is not what they get.

Who takes care of the abstracts and the speakers within the framework of the congress organisation?

This is usually done by the professional society with a scientific committee, which determines the programme and also selects the keynote speakers and then tells us who they would like to invite. From there, we usually correspond with the keynote speakers and arrange further details. But this is only a part of the content planning of a congress: In connection with a „Call for Papers“, scientists from all over the world are called upon to submit papers; we collect these abstracts, short contributions from possible sessions, and submit them to the scientific committee, which reviews and evaluates these abstracts and decides which of them are accepted and which are not. The abstracts will be divided into oral presentations and poster presentations, because not all abstracts that are accepted can be presented in one congress, not least because there is not enough space. So the actual content of the programme is usually determined by the Association and then further developed by us.

How have congresses been financed in the past?

There are hardly any professional associations that can invest money to hold a congress – or they don't want to. As a rule, a congress has to be self-financing, through participant fees, through the fees for participant registration and through the involvement of the industry, i.e. through

sponsoring or participation in exhibitions... But there are also congresses that receive additional funding, either from certain foundations, from EU funds or sometimes, if congresses are held in certain cities, from subsidies from the city or country in question.

Were there in the past any criticisms from the medical profession regarding the Pharma-Involvement or was it well received?

In the past, everything was generally very positively received. In the past, the industry also invited participants to attend the congress very often. Nowadays, this has changed a lot because, due to the different pharmaceutical codes that exist, the industry is no longer allowed to invite doctors so easily, not to say not to invite them at all. The participants now have to finance their participation in the congress themselves, and this often means that congresses today often, not always, have a smaller number of participants than in the past.

What else has the Code of Transparency brought with it?

The codes of the pharmaceutical industry have already made themselves felt. First of all, there are different codes from the pharmaceutical industry and the equipment manufacturers, and they are also partly contradictory, which does not make it any easier for us to deal with them. As a rule, it is primarily a matter of complete transparency. Now an important factor is where the pharmaceutical company is located: For example, if the company is based in the USA, the regulations there are usually much stricter than those of a company based in Europe. However, experience shows that the stricter regulations in the USA set the trend here, which is also reflected in Europe shortly afterwards.

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Basically, the companies are called upon to publicly announce how much money they support a congress with. This information is published on a website and in some publications. How much money has the company invested in the organisation of a satellite symposium, how much in an exhibition stand... this also goes so far that it has to be announced which speaker is dependent on which companies, which funds they receive – but not only for industrial symposia, but for any scientific programme the speaker has to announce exactly where he is supported by whom. Gifts may no longer be distributed to the participants; in the USA, a company that distributes a ballpoint pen must even register by name to whom the pen was given. Catering may no longer be sponsored, i.e. coffee breaks or lunches have usually been cancelled. We recently had a case where a company was also no longer allowed to serve coffee on its stand.

This was mainly a voluntary initiative of the pharmaceutical industry. This self-commitment now ultimately means that they can only present their research work and products to a smaller target group at the congresses.

That is right, it is a self-regulation that the industry has imposed on itself. There are certain legal regulations in the USA, but they are much weaker, but most of the regulations have originated in industry. The response from the medical profession is heterogeneous: some doctors are in favour of the transparency initiative, others even reject any industry support and pay for their own meals. And there are also some, as yet few, congresses that hold their events entirely without the support of industry. This can work, but it is not so easy.

More and more pharmaceutical manufacturers are offering training events themselves. Is that a trend?

There are many pharmaceutical com-



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panies that organise their own training events, which is very transparent. Of course, this is not necessarily a reflection of the diversity of scientific research on a topic. Moreover, these events are usually not CME-certified.

Some professional societies are experiencing a massive drop in the number of participants at their congresses, which has serious economic consequences for the societies. At the moment we are in a transition phase where new models are being tried, often with decentralized offers, where the central events are partly digitally reproduced and events are held in smaller groups, broken down to practical workshops, for example. Does this play a role in your everyday life?

We too can see that there are certain societies that have seen a decline in the number of participants at congresses over the years. But there are also congresses with stable or even growing numbers of participants. It strongly depends on the content of the congresses. There are certainly congresses where one should reconsider the frequency: In some specialist areas there is not so much that is new that it is objectively worth-

while organising an annual congress. For example, we have noticed that there are speakers who give the same lecture several times due to a lack of current data - and of course the participants notice this too. Many societies automatically associate an annual congress organization with a financial gain. However, this is rarely the case; in some cases they would be better advised to hold their congresses only every two or three years. In addition, there are also many competing events – to prevail against these, you need very good and up-to-date content, an ambitious scientific advisory board and a good scientific committee in close cooperation with a PCO, who are willing and able to determine the right topics and activities.

A congress that is attractive for participants includes not only the right topics but also an attractive form of presentation. High-profile scientific sessions in frontal teaching style seldom appeal to doctors in their practices... Societies must therefore ask themselves „who is my clientele, what does my congress deliver, what others do not deliver and where are the new exciting projects in the industry? Increasingly important are

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interactive sessions and other new forms of knowledge transfer where the participants can make a good contribution, such as hot topics, pro & contra formats or smaller workshops with a maximum of 20–25 people with a strong practical orientation.

So the fact that the congresses are no longer self-running, even for professional associations, may well be an opportunity to make better congresses, both in terms of form and content?

Absolutely. The individual scientific associations behind the congresses are structured differently. There are large scientific associations, which are also managed very professionally, for example the European Cardiology Congress with more than 30,000 participants. A staff of one hundred people also organises smaller congresses in between...

Smaller associations, on the other hand, cannot afford this and are well advised to have a Professional Congress Organiser who is not only responsible for them as a service provider but also as a consultant. And this is also what has changed over the years: In the past, we were only a service provider for a congress, we offered certain services - today we are more of a consultant, a professional consultant who advises the congress on how it can better position itself and market itself, what it should include in the future and the like. This is also the difference between the countless small PCOs who continue to offer only their services as service providers and the few large PCOs who have international experience and whose portfolio today includes much more than just congress organisation.

What has digitalisation changed?

Quite a lot... Today it is no longer absolutely necessary for a speaker to be present at a congress in person. In the past, people had certain reserva-

tions about inviting speakers from distant countries with long and expensive journeys and often limited themselves to one to three speakers with long journeys. Nowadays, it is much easier to invite speakers who can sit in their hospital in New York and give their lecture there and even enter into discussion with the participants in the congress centre. It's not just a matter of cost, but also of time, which saves the speakers the need to travel. Digital also means that information can be delivered very quickly, programs can be adapted quickly, and content can be announced very early on, for example via an app that delivers the preliminary scientific program very early on. Digitally, the content of the congresses themselves can be displayed in real time and subsequently further exploited.

What experience do you have with the use of digital services by the target group?

That varies greatly. There are societies and disciplines where we find that this is accepted very positively, but there are also groups and contexts in which this takes place very slowly. Younger people are still generally more interested in digital formats than the somewhat older ones.

Do online CME training offers compete with congresses?

Ultimately one can ask oneself whether congresses are still necessary today or not and whether they are still perceived as relevant. I am convinced that congresses are not in competition with digital training offers. In addition to the variety of content on offer, personal exchange, networking and getting to know the cities play a major role in the decision to take part in a congress, and digital offers complement and expand the range of congresses.

What do you think of decentralised congresses, i.e. turning 1 into 5?

Under certain circumstances, this

can make sense. Especially when you consider such mammoth congresses as the ESC (European Society of Cardiology), which covers an immensely wide range of different disciplines, you can ask yourself whether a congress has to have 30,000 participants. Once a congress has reached a certain size, one could certainly consider dividing or quartering this congress and organising some smaller congresses from it. We have already had some experience in this respect: there are certain congresses where some disciplines cannot be adequately represented, which are covered by one or two sessions, which is far from being enough. For example, we co-developed the Schizophrenia Congress, which was removed from the complex indication area of psychiatry because we realised that the clinical picture of schizophrenia is „a science in itself“ and developed our own Schizophrenia Congress from this. We have repeated this with the ADHD Congress. The topic has always played a marginal role at psychiatric congresses, which by no means did justice to its relevance in practice and research. Today, this congress has 2000 participants – a concept that has proven itself.

What will have changed in 10 years?

Digitisation will increasingly find its way into the planning, design and implementation of congresses. New forms of communication, interactive formats will play a greater role. Even more special congresses will be developed; large congresses, on the other hand, will continue to strengthen. In order to survive, certain smaller congresses will have to fear that they will have a hard time surviving because they will not receive sufficient attention, also from the industry, which will be less able to participate in a huge number of congresses due to reduced budgets. Today, the industry participates mainly in two or three, if it comes to four con-

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gresses in one discipline. The social media are also becoming more important – anyone who loses touch here is missing out on many opportunities.

How will you position yourself over the next few years?

We invest a lot in digital media, and have also founded our own IT company that is able to implement projects for us and our clients very quickly... Registration, abstract management systems, hotel reservation systems – as a PCO you have to adapt to the requirements set by the associations. We implement professional apps that connect the different systems with each other, so that, for example, a participant can register with the association via single sign-on and is then automatically listed at the congress... These technical aspects have become incredibly important today in terms of competitiveness as a PCO, as has the training aspect, i.e. the exploitation of the congress content as e-learning modules – and the integration of the industry in these digital formats. In the past, the industry was always just the player that gave money, i.e. a one-way street; today, however, it has to be a more balan-

ced relationship, i.e. a new relationship based on partnership beyond the mere transfer of funds. These are certainly all important issues that must be taken into account for the future.

What makes you different from other PCOs?

What distinguishes us from other PCOs is that we are a company that has been active on the market for almost 40 years, a family-run business whose owners take care of the further development of the congresses and the customers in a very personal setting and provide very personal and individual advice on the respective problems. Although we are still one of the larger PCOs today - we employ many highly motivated, long-standing staff – we are not a „congress factory“ with 2–3000 employees, which for obvious reasons can no longer be personally managed. Furthermore, we are very strong in the digital field with our own IT company and can respond very quickly to the relevant requirements of our customers.

You are also breaking new ground by getting involved independently of the professional associations and organising your own events ...

Why?

Because we believe that we do not want to act exclusively as a service provider for a professional association. We do and will continue to do so. In addition, we have certain ideas about how congresses should look like in the future - and this cannot always be implemented with every professional association...

We feel very committed to certain scientific areas, we think it is important to promote and develop certain contents. Therefore, we have decided to act as a self-organiser in certain indication areas and to organise congresses with full risk, just as we believe that this is a good way to maintain a good standing in areas that have been underrepresented in the scientific congress landscape up to now.

Do you compete with the professional associations or do you simply supplement their offerings?

I don't believe that we are competing, but that we are breaking new ground and are not necessarily in direct competition with societies. We develop a new product and set new contents, new priorities. I see it as an addition.