



Miles Clarke Business Events Communication Award 2010

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The Business of Teaching Business Events

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“Meetings, conventions, conferences, office meetings, congresses, AGMs, product updates”, I can already see the eyes of our students glaze over. This is Lecture 1 of BHO3421 – *Business Events* - and what our students would really like to be doing is learning about the high profile events that Melbourne is so famous for – the Grand Prix, the Australian Open and L’Oreal Fashion Week. Many students want the glamour, the buzz and the high profile events and not the boredom (in their eyes) of setting up business meetings, of having to do such things as bidding for a conference for the pharmaceutical industry (what is that exactly?), or of organizing satchels for a conference (how tedious!) or (horror of horrors) learning how to use a computer database system that requires them to enter delegate data manually (‘Do I have to do that?’, ‘Wouldn’t I employ someone to do this for me?’). Given that many may feel this way, do we need to teach this unit and all that is involved in understanding and running business events to our students? The answer has to be a resounding ‘yes’ for a great number of reasons.

The unit of study, *Business Events*, in our Bachelor of Business (Event Management) degree, arose out of recognition that business events are distinct yet similar to other events. They require a different set of skills. They occur in a different context and, most importantly, they are a very vital element of an entire palette of events that have made Melbourne ‘the Events Capital of Australia’. Students are often shocked and surprised when told that recent statistics suggest the business events industry is worth \$17 billion to the Australian economy per year (Deery, Jago, Fredline & Dwyer, 2005). Having taught the *Business Events* unit for 3 years now, the lecturing team has had the opportunity to reflect upon the benefits of the unit to students, within the classroom and also once they enter the workforce, and what this knowledge base may ultimately mean for the future of the business events sector.

The value of the business events sector is increasingly acknowledged by government, by many industry sectors and by the community (Jago & Deery, 2010). In Victoria, we (as educators and industry) understand the significance of this growth in business events. We appreciate the commitment of both State and Federal governments in the building of infrastructure, in policy and strategy formulation and

of course, in promoting the economic impact of business events. So what else do we need to get across to our students? Is this not enough?

No, not really. We want our students to learn that business events are different (as well as similar) from leisure-based events and that they require additional skill sets which include (amongst others) the use of computer software to manage a delegate database, putting together a proposal for incentive travel, and reading and responding to a Tender request document with efficiency, accuracy and with a view to the needs of the market – both current and future. When pulling together a proposal in response to a real tender document our students need to look to both the strategic and the tactical necessity of working with a convention bureau, of searching out the right PCO and considering a host of other factors.

It might not be what they had thought they'd be doing when they started their first term of study, but our students learn that they are to become part of the best communication tool that Australia has. Both creating and using promotional collateral our students will see how they are telling many very positive stories of their city, of their state and of Australia to a sophisticated international business market. In the process of doing so, in making good use of - for example - the relationship between Tourism Australia and the Australian Association of Convention Bureaux (AACB), they are developing skills that will allow them to be part of something that makes us all proud. This is no small order, but it is one to which we must commit.

We want our students to understand the wider field within which business events take place (yes, the pharmaceutical and engineering industries), we want them to understand the importance of business relationships that can arise out of these events and we want them to have communication skills that will enable them to deal successfully with people at all levels and within all related industries servicing the business events sector. This might be the CEO of a hotel, or the booking coordinator at a catering company, or with a coach company, or a visitor attraction, or with an entertainer or their agent. Or it could be any of the multifarious number of stakeholders involved in organizing a business event.

Armed with this knowledge and the skills necessary to survive and thrive in business events, we hope our graduates stand out from the pack when it comes time for them to compete for jobs post-university. Ultimately, we envision there will be flow-on effects for the business events sector in terms of increased professionalism. We aim to make these students advocates of the sector, spreading the word about the value of business events and the opportunities that await others wishing to forge a career in the sector. So, what we say, and what we (teaching staff and students alike) recognise is that our course must be both credible and real. To ensure it is, we talk to industry, and industry talks to us. The awakening to both the demands and to the opportunities for our students is measured and matched by an industry aware of the opportunity our students can help facilitate for its continued growth.

So three years on, 500 or so students taught, and far from the glazed and bored looks and the 'do we have to?' questions, it is extremely satisfying to meet Elise at AIME, one of our past students now working in the business events sector. We hear how knowing the computer software and skills learnt in the *Business Events* unit helped not only to secure her the job (working for an association of health providers), but that it has also made her somewhat of an expert in the organisation because of these

very skills. What, in turn, can we learn from Elise? She is one of many past students who have become hungry to do well in the business events sector once they have realised how much they can do with the skills they have learnt. They comprehend how business events can offer a continued buzz, often much greater than some of the more temporal opportunities that the world of special events may offer. The challenge for us as educators is to ensure that we instill this enthusiasm in our current crop of students so that there will be more students like Elise in the future. With these people the professionalism and credibility of the business events industry will continue to grow. In essence, that is the real business of teaching business events.

References

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