You're thinking about organising a sales conference. You want to get it right. You want to engage your staff, capture their imagination, inspire them and leave them feeling privileged to be part of your company. So, what do you need to do first?
1. LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION
Ensure you choose a destination that will capture your staff’s imagination. A genuinely intriguing host city with character and appeal will create a tangible buzz around the event. Use the city’s attractions to your advantage and build social and networking opportunities around them. People love cosmopolitan cities with great shops, restaurants, nightlife and a good range of hotels. Culture and history are also big draws. Make it a feature of your conference programme. For many, it can determine whether or not your meeting is a success. Access is also important. Attendees will want a destination that is easy to get to, so consider the rail, road and air links, including low-cost airline services. And finally, consider safety. Visitors will want to be able to wander around the host city without feeling they are at risk.

2. THE VENUE
A great destination is no good without a world-class venue and a team of experienced professionals dedicated to making your event as successful as possible. Scout your venues carefully. Look for testimonials and professional awards demonstrating the commitment and expertise of the staff and management – a good service will significantly reduce the burden on you. It’s worth remembering that at a purpose-built conference centre, you are often the sole client using that venue at any one time and so the attention you will receive will be second to none. Also, check the location. There’s little point being in a great city if you’re stuck out in the suburbs or on some peripheral business park.

3. THE ‘WOW’ FACTOR
Long gone are the days of overhead projectors and death by PowerPoint, so don’t limit your ambitions. The leading venues will provide a quality-of-stage technology you would expect at the Academy Awards. If you have the budget, look at ways of delivering a genuine ‘wow’ factor. For instance, ask venues if they can provide the Encore system. Best known for its use by rock band U2 on its recent Vertigo Tour, the Barco Encore presentation system provides the ability to screen six different moving images simultaneously using live and pre-recorded video and data against a high-resolution backdrop. If the answer is yes, request a demonstration – it will open up mesmerising audio-visual opportunities. The venue should also be able to receive your presentation files from you online and test them fully well in advance. In addition, ask if they can arrange options such as interactive digi-voting and internet café facilities. Spotme is also rapidly becoming established as a ‘must have’ of the modern events package. It helps people network and introduces a personal element to the mass event. Ask your poten-
tial venue for advice. And ask them what else they can provide in terms of inhouse technical production – you can quite often make considerable savings on room hire costs if you take the venue’s production service from the outset, and their knowledge of the building’s strengths is invariably a huge advantage.

4. MAKE IT TASTEFUL

Staff often expect conference food to be bland and unimaginative, with predictable menus and pre-cooked meals. Defy those expectations and give your event an edge by using a centre that prepares fresh, imaginative food from locally sourced ingredients. The best venues will listen to what you want and provide sample menus to match your needs – everything from a sandwich platter to a three-course banquet. They should also have creative ideas for themed menus and be able to provide fun, healthy options such as fruit stalls and smoothie bars, as well as the usual tea and coffee at break times. Ask for advice on the format of your catering. A seated meal may be best for comfort but, if there is a big desire for staff to circulate, a standing buffet could be a fun and effective alternative. And whatever you do, ask for a menu tasting.

5. GET PEOPLE MIXING

Far from being a frivolous add-on, a good social programme is invariably integral to a staff event’s success. Managed well, social events will generate excitement and create a relaxed environment for colleagues across the board. For some, this part of the event will not only be the most fun but the most fruitful in terms of sharing skills and contacts. Ask the venue for good ideas and use the destination city to its best effect by giving people the opportunity to get out and about, and mingle in landmark locations. If you are looking for an alternative to a gala dinner setting, why not think about a ‘dine around’ using a number of different well known restaurants in the city. Arrange day trips and nights out. Engineer meetings between people you think will have interests in common. And keep people entertained.

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6. CREATE A THEME
Why not create a theme that gives your event (or part of it) a truly distinctive flavour and encourages everyone to get talking? You could incorporate interactive and team-led sessions based on TV programmes such as The Apprentice or The Weakest Link. It may seem wacky but it’s often in environments such as these, where people are stimulated and relaxed, that great ideas and innovations emerge.

The Dragon’s Den model is another good one. Why not invite five people to present their great innovations within your particular field, and have a panel of experts providing feedback? This can make great viewing and spark further innovation. On the social front, you can also create themes for dinners or networking events. For instance, you could embrace the culture of a nation. In Scotland, Burns Suppers in full Highland dress with pipers and dancing create a magical flavour to night-time events. Again, it’s all about thinking outside the box and grabbing people’s imagination.

7. CONTENT IS KING
For all the attractions of the setting, good content is essential. This requires careful planning. If you are appointing speakers, it’s a good idea to choose some people who the delegates would never normally have access to. A moderator drawn from the world of TV or radio is a good way of adding panache and professionalism to an event – and ensuring that speaker panels and other contributors are kept on their toes. Whoever is involved, ensure that the material to be discussed is as stimulating as possible – and maybe even ground-breaking. Conferences are perfect for launching a new product or company direction.

8. MAKE THE FORMAT EXCITING
Put yourself in your staff’s shoes. What would they hope to get out of the event? Encourage creativity. Consider ideas such as speed networking, role play with actors, filmed events, interactive breakout sessions and discussion forums. A daily conference ‘newspaper’ produced on the premises is also a great addition for events that run for two or more days. And remember, an event is like a film – it needs to be action-packed, have a good beginning, compelling content and a strong ending. In between, you’ve got to give people a chance to catch their breath without giving them too much time in which to become bored. Crucial to these factors are timings and, again, a good venue should offer you a wealth of advice.

9. PAINT IT GREEN
Consider the environmental impacts of your event. What changes could you implement to make your event more sustainable? What can you do to reduce energy use? How far is food transported from? Can they suggest practical and imaginative ways for your staff to offset the carbon footprint of your event? There are plenty of small ideas that can be built into the mix. For instance, why not minimise transport use around the event by coming up with fun and creative walking tours of the city? Communicate your plans with your delegates and get them thinking about it too.

10. BUILD ANTICIPATION... AND MOMENTUM
You’ve chosen a great destination and a superb venue. You’ve sorted out a truly imaginative programme with first-rate speakers, great interactivity and a diverse mix of team-building social events. Now you’ve got to market it to your staff. Okay, so the chances are that those you’ve invited are obliged to attend, but you want them to be enthusing about it in the corridors and counting down the days to the big event. Highlight the benefits to them – not just the company – and don’t shy away from the fun element. Keeping people entertained while meeting business demands is important too.

You need to consider the post-conference strategy too. Does the event end when the last staff member leaves? No! The success of any event is measured by the activity and feedback it generates, and the momentum it creates for follow-up events. You may want to stimulate that process by organising a short programme with first-rate speakers, great networking, interactive breakout sessions and discussion forums. A daily conference ‘newspaper’ produced on the premises is also a great addition for events that run for two or more days. And remember, an event is like a film – it needs to be action-packed, have a good beginning, compelling content and a strong ending. In between, you’ve got to give people a chance to catch their breath without giving them too much time in which to become bored. Crucial to these factors are timings and, again, a good venue should offer you a wealth of advice.

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Inspire your delegates

A practical guide by Becky Strong

10 steps to create an inspiring sales conference

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