

# Business Network

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## Shaping up for the main events

There's more to organising a conference than sending out the invitations, writes **Janine Perrett**.

THE problem with Dianna Crebbin's business is that the better she does it, the less the client appreciates it.

In the intense world of conference organising, if everything runs smoothly it leads many people to think it must be so easy they can do it themselves.

"You get plenty of people who say 'My secretary can do that', and they have no idea of the complexity of what you are undertaking," Ms Crebbin says.

"It's a big challenge to educate the client to appreciate the amount of work and planning that goes into it so that it all works beautifully."

Improving awareness is only one challenge among many for Ms Crebbin's DC Conferences Pty Ltd. It not only organises exhibitions and conferences but raises the event funding.

And if you think handling one bank account for your business is painful, try negotiating dozens of different accounts for each conference and running budgets of up to \$500,000 on each one.

"There are a lot of nervous breakdowns because of the stress of organising everything," Ms Crebbin says.

"I don't want to go down that path so we have the systems in place to ensure we aren't working under too much stress."

Ms Crebbin is a 20-year veteran of the industry and does not look like a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Experience has taught her to keep the business at the smaller, manageable end of the scale.

DC Conferences runs eight to 10 significant events a year and has five full-time employees. They are university graduates, picked and trained for a lengthy career in the business.

And networking and word of mouth are more crucial than traditional marketing and advertising for the business.

Her company specialises in conferences for professional associations, particularly medical groups. The Australian Pain Society was her first client and she still organises its annual conference. It all goes back to the unusual career path that brought her to the business.

Ms Crebbin did a science



Highly organised: Dianna Crebbin of DC Conferences.

PICTURE: LISA WILSE

degree, specialising in biochemistry and microbiology, and worked in medical research for more than a decade. She travelled extensively and attended many conferences, which is how she came to her next career phase.

"I was thinking, totally naively, that having gone to lots of conferences myself that I could do that because I thought I had those organisational skills," Ms Crebbin says.

She is concerned that clients can set up a conferencing business, undermining the professionalism of the industry. Price cutting is another issue, with unprepared players charging unrealistically low amounts.

"It's a challenge to charge as a professional consultancy because we can be handling up to half a million dollars of clients' money," she says.

She says DC Conferences manages the money, takes out its fees and returns the surplus to the client. Pricing is based on the number of delegates, breakout

sessions and length of the conference.

DC Conferences prices the accommodation and other facilities according to a budget it devises, although there can be surprises.

"Often it is hard to get a comprehensive brief from the client because, quite often, they don't know what they're actually asking us to do," she says.

"While many conference organisers do not offer the service and outsource it, Ms Crebbin finds it can help with an event's budget."

"The conference and exhibition fee subsidises the registration fee for the delegates," she says.

But she says it can be difficult explaining to the client the separate charge for raising the money. She says DC Conferences has never run an event at a loss.

This is also testimony to the company's financial management skills. "There's all the accounting and the pressure, as we're running their budgets, paying their bills and reconciling each account," she says.

"Ms Crebbin's DC Conferences must do everyone else's paperwork, as well as its own. And with each conference having its own bank account, the red tape burden is increased."

"The banks don't understand our business as we don't fit into any of the categories. So every time we go to open an account in the name of the conference, we encounter huge problems," Ms Crebbin says.

"Our girls go to the bank every couple of weeks and are turned away because the banks don't understand what they're doing for this account. They spend hours at the bank trying to explain."

Despite the pressure of the business, Ms Crebbin maintains her professional composure and continues to run the

### CHALLENGES FOR DC CONFERENCES

- Educating clients to appreciate it's not as easy as it looks
- Charging correctly to reflect complex work
- Handling accounts and budgets and dealing with bank bureaucracy

business smoothly, for all its cyclical nature.

In recent years, DC Conferences has weathered the SARS outbreak and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which threatened to disrupt overseas attendances at conferences in Australia.

After a quiet period two years ago, the company has been growing by 30 per cent a year. Ms Crebbin believes growth next year will be slower, but still a respectable 15 per cent.

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## A lesson to be learnt: best to toe the line

JANINE PERRETT



A CAREFUL perusal of newspapers and the web each day can provide small businesses with a surprising number of stories relevant to their own situation.

I'm not talking about the obvious stories on rising interest rates or soaring petrol prices, nor even tax reform debate — it's the tiny little gems that can prove helpful or serve as a timely warning.

Recently there was a small news item about a trickster ripping off customers with a fake microwave accreditation business.

Jason Crosson's company, Microwave Safe Australia, paid for thousands of "workplace safety bulletins" in Department of Commerce envelopes complete with the NSW coat of arms.

The official-looking pamphlets gave the impression that he was affiliated with the Government and that there was a legal duty of care under occupational health and safety laws to have microwave ovens inspected annually.

And it fooled many workplaces, with Crosson's business inspecting up to 12,000 microwaves a year, charging from \$45 to \$85 an oven.

He was successfully prosecuted for false and misleading conduct, but small businesses in particular has to be vigilant against such skulduggery.

**⚡ The official-looking pamphlets gave the impression that he was affiliated with the Government and that there was a legal duty of care. ⚡**

After all, who hasn't been so overwhelmed by ridiculous rules and regulations in OHS and other areas, that they could easily be fooled?

Recently Darrell Lea and Cadbury went to Federal Court over the use of purple in branding. With Woolworths and BP also slugging it out in court over trademark issues on the use of green, it is a cheap way for small business to find out what the future might hold in these areas.

Other stories of interest recently include the removal company owner who was charged with theft after a worker found a cache of jewellery in furniture he moved for an elderly woman at a nursing home. Police charged the owner with theft after he failed to return the items — a timely reminder on the "honesty pays" adage for business.

And there is an endless supply of stories about surveys that can prove invaluable or useless depending on how you quote them.

In *The Age* recently we read that "old computers are harming office morale".

Apparently a survey of 2700 offices in Europe found that "aging and unreliable computers make workers unhappy and more likely to take sick leave". Newspaper letters pages are full of opinions that resonate with small business.

Take this recent one from Malcolm Beeson, of Turramurra: "If our company wants its products at supermarket checkouts, we have to pay a premium — bribe? If we have a new product we want to pay a contribution to advertising. When the Cole inquiry is over, can we have a Woolworth inquiry?"

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### Understand fixed and variable costs when pricing

**David Dandie**  
Head of Business Advisory and Training, Westpac

To help DC Conferences charge correctly, Dianna needs to be clear about her fixed and variable costs.

She needs to consider things such as wages, overheads like rent and equipment, and forecast what profit she would like to make before she issues a client brief. Dianna should break down the work involved for each event into units of time and complexity and charge accordingly at different rates. She should keep track of time spent on each task — by using timesheets — and develop a system that will help make the entire event management process more manageable.

Dianna should re-assess past events where the business might have undercharged and look at how she could do things differently; one task estimated to take three hours might realistically have taken half a day. It's likely that many events will use a similar formula and many aspects of the job will be repeated.

Knowing when to outsource could also help minimise costs. For example, perhaps she could hire someone to meet and greet clients at the airport, which would help free up staff time to concentrate on other tasks.

Finally, testimonials from happy clients should be included on the company website explaining how DC Conferences helped their business. These are a great way to educate new clients about what the company does.



### Position your business at the top end of the market

**Pruce MacSween**  
Director, Verve Communications

Dianna's unique offering is that she raises funds for the entire event. This is compelling as it minimises the client risk and adds value to her service. She seems to be typical of many SMEs that undervalue themselves and are afraid to price services at the proper market rate. Dianna should make it a policy not to work with clients who nickel and dime her. She should position her business at the top end of the market and walk away from jobs that compromise her product. The client who doesn't understand the value of your service will never be happy.

While she says she is making profit, I suspect she is over-servicing and underestimating the hours she devotes to each event. Dianna needs to ensure she has completed a detailed budget for every job before she quotes on it and begins work. There should also be a contingency plan for the hundreds of unexpected issues that will arise. Perhaps billing clients in segments or providing work-in-progress reports throughout the process would help.

As she said, client testimonials would be the key to her continued growth and success — you can afford to charge a premium when you have a great reputation. Time spent on gathering these testimonials and filming and photographing her work would be a worthwhile investment.



### Ask your bank for a personal banking manager

**Rajarshi Ray**  
Head of Small Business Express, American Express

The main lesson is that other small businesses could learn from DC Conferences is that there is no shame in charging what your work is worth. In fact, in the long term it's essential. Otherwise, what you're really doing is a hobby... not a business.

I have two suggestions for DC Conferences: one practical and the other slightly more strategic. The bank account issue that her staff seem to face so often on behalf of clients could be addressed relatively simply: Dianna should ask her bank for a personal manager. If the bank won't give her one, she should change to one that will. She is certainly generating enough business to warrant personalised service, and someone who is familiar with her company would be able to help her establish accounts on an ongoing basis.

The strategic suggestion for DC Conferences is to try to generate additional revenue streams to help smooth out the cyclical nature of the business. Someone with Dianna's skills, and indeed her employees' skills, is valuable in fields outside event management. Given that Dianna wants the business to remain a certain size, she could consider acting as a consultant and contracting her expertise as needed. For example, there might be a demand for stand-alone services in project management or fundraising.



### Guarantee a profitable event and charge more

**John Stewart**  
Director, Stewarts Business Advisors

Dianna should change banks and seek the best offer from a different financial institution. She is entitled to a relationship with someone from the bank who takes responsibility for each new account. Alternatively, she should demand this service from her existing bank and leave if it is not provided. Opening client accounts with significant cash deposits would be attractive to many banks.

Dianna should develop a simple piece of marketing material that charts workflow and helps clients appreciate the complexity of managing events. She could use the document each time she's selling and take clients through the steps involved in event management. The chart could show total hours involved and should be cleverly designed so that it's simple to read and present despite communicating complexity.

Dianna says she's never run a conference at a loss. She could back her experience and give clients a guarantee that the conferences she organises will be profitable. She should charge a bonus for the guarantee of 25 per cent of the conference profit. If the event operates at a loss, she should offer to meet 25 per cent of the loss. In this way, she's promoting the company's excellence and track record and increasing her revenue by sharing in the conference's success.



### Fine-tune processes for proposals and pricing

**Carolyn Stafford**  
Director, Connect

Just as Dianna has a process for managing events, she needs to fine-tune the firm's processes when securing jobs to ensure she prices correctly and educates clients about the value DC Conferences offers.

Dianna needs to develop systems to create more accurate briefs. By breaking down every step involved in managing an event, she could more accurately assess the correct amount to charge and help clients understand what is involved. Part of the process in the initial stages is to clearly demonstrate value to the client and manage the briefing process. Dianna might need to reassess her pricing model and identify whether it's better to charge a fixed fee or an hourly rate. Perhaps she should consider hiring a professional proposals writer.

She should educate clients by showing them a reel of past events DC Conferences handled and what they actually did. She should demonstrate how a good event manager can save them time and money, and highlight what could go wrong if they don't invest in a seasoned expert.

DC Conferences should also make a point of its specialisation in certain industries. The business should detail what it does differently, or better than other event managers, which could help justify its price and emphasise its value.



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