

The mark of quality

» Membership of an association brings many benefits, not least peace of mind for clients

As if there weren't enough trade associations in the event industry, one has sprung up in the burgeoning Northern Ireland market. The emergence of In Any Event, a collaboration of eight event companies, means the number of event associations has increased again in an already overpopulated sector.

Over the past couple of years the preponderance of associations has brought much criticism, and rightly so. Can each of them really claim to be serving the future of the event industry, rather than the interests of a very select few companies?

But it's not all bad. Within the exhibition industry one event association does appear to have taken the economic bull by the horns and is delivering some real financial gains.

In mid-October, Clarion Events gave a 23-show contract to Aztec Event Services and DB Systems. The contract will see the two firms work with Clarion for three years, providing they pass a three-month probationary period. One of the key factors in winning the business, cited by the suppliers and the exhibition firm, was the aid of the association ESSA.

The Event Supplier and Services Association represents contractors and suppliers of goods and services in the event industry. It shares a secretariat with sister organisations the Association of Event Organisers (AEO) and the Association of Event Venues (AEV), and an £80,000 war chest, announced earlier this year, to promote the event industry in general.

But industry associations seem to be loathed at least as much as they are loved, so what does ESSA think sets it apart?

"An effective trade body is all about trust, quality and standards. A trade association can support members to sell and develop their businesses in a number of ways, and ESSA has identified some specific ways to help," says its director Chris Skeith.

"Quality assurance measures such as these make associations like ESSA stronger than a 'pay and play' association. There have been cases where membership has been required as part of the tender process and this is often cited when members renew."

Skeith is talking about ESSA's reasonably rigorous membership qualification, which includes financial and insurance checks and a sort of trial by public jury, which makes existing members aware of all applications to enable any justified reasons for refusal of membership to be voiced before a new member is accepted.



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Director, ESSA

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The quality vetting process is enough for firms such as Clarion, which actually joined the AEO in 2001, and The Logic Group, which recently asked DMN Solutions to tender for an exhibition in Paris. DMN account director Mark Lamont, talking about his experience with The Logic Group, says: "I was asked this question directly by email: Can I also ask you to confirm that you are a member of the stand-building trade association ESSA?"

Increasingly it seems firms are using the association to guarantee quality, especially relevant at a time when companies going out of business and phoenixing are increasing suspicion and damaging the reputation of the industry as a whole.

"There are also wider benefits of membership to the industry," says DB Systems sales director Oliver Richardson. "For example, DB's operations director Mark Damvers sits on an ESSA sustainability committee. It will discuss environmental issues that may be communicated to other members as a way for them to improve their service offer from an environmental position. This can benefit customers because they know they are working with companies that display corporate responsibility."

For those who doubt the real power of joining an association, a clause has recently been appearing in some tendering contracts explicitly mentioning how being a member of a trade association should be seen as favourable.

Trevor Pearson of Aston Display often works as a consultant to exhibition organisers looking for suppliers, and suggests the following clause to those he works with: "The exhibitor may use a contractor of his choice for the construction and erection of stands on space-only sites, and interior fitments for shell stands. It is strongly recommended that only contractors who are members of ESSA are employed."

Given the obvious competitive advantage this gives, it might be worth the signing-up fee after all.

"An effective trade body is more than just a club or a badge," argues Skeith. "It helps clients buy with confidence. It is a quality mark, a cohesive group of organisations with similar standards, a vehicle to effect industry change and a great way to develop a community of people dedicated to their industry."



Oliver Richardson
Sales director,
DB Systems

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