



Category: Best Event

Company: Scottish Canals

Entry title: Changing the flow of the World Canals Conference

Brief and objectives:

In securing the annual World Canals Conference, our aim was to showcase our vision, scale of ambition and breadth of success - winning international recognition for Scotland as global leaders in delivering change in canalside communities.

We also wanted public, private and third sectors to know we are open to collaboration; whether they want to help us build houses, create public works of art, tackle the effects of climate change, deliver healthy leisure pursuits or establish training and volunteering opportunities for those furthest from the jobs market – all next to, on, along or around a canal.

Rationale behind event, including research and planning:

This conference, which had typically attracted 150 boaters or canal authority officers, marine businesses, often junior researchers, and small-scale consultants from around 10 countries, discussed low-level canal-related issues, such as dredging and engineering challenges facing ageing working assets.

We wanted to transform the conference, attract a new audience - without alienating the core supporters who had followed it for 30 years - and grow its scope, focusing on how canals are relevant in a modern, global world.

TedX was our inspiration for the revamped event - building a quality brand, creating a simple yet ambitious narrative, and engaging a worldwide audience to discuss canals as solutions to global challenges - tackling urban poverty in communities that have seen industrial decline; how services can use green and blue space to encourage greater physical activity and less reliance on GPs; and how canals can act as conduits for surface water run-off in flood-risk areas.

Strategy and tactics, including creativity and innovation:

We created a new brand identity and launched a digital hub for all marketing and communications. We introduced an e-commerce platform to sell tickets, enabling us to be more targeted and analytical and fully integrate our digital campaigns.

Facilitating networking and the sharing of best practice elevated the conference as we developed a bespoke mobile app that enabled us to push updates, news, and content to

delegates and functioned as a networking tool, allowing people to share messages, look up other delegates' profiles and arrange meetings prior, during and after the event.

A global recruitment campaign for speakers involved leveraging our relationships nationally and internationally with the likes of VisitScotland, the IoD and the American Scottish Foundation to attract world-class speakers and thinkers. Daniel Fabrega, Panama's ambassador to the UK; Pete Grannis, former Commissioner of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation; and Riccardo Marini, Director of Gehl Architects, were among those who signed up to speak for free.

We created a programme relevant to our ambitions, looking at environmental management, social change, water management, climate change, tourism growth, heritage management, urban planning, engineering and community engagement, and also created the first-ever World Canals Awards as part of the conference - allowing us to recognise global achievements in each of the conference themes.

Promoting everything that Scotland has to offer to a global audience was another key goal of the conference. Through a number of creative partnerships, we developed informative and fun study visits involving boats, castles and ceilidhs; a civic welcome reception; bespoke theatre performances; and menus that showcased the best of Scotland's larder from land and sea.

Implementation of tactics, including details of design, production and support teams employed:

Delivered stakeholder engagement campaign - implemented strategy 18 months before conference with chambers of commerce, SCDI, Department of Trade, VisitScotland and international network of Consul Generalsthat led to a partnership with KLM/Air France who offered discounted delegate flights.

Targeted digital campaign - paid-for digital campaigns on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn targeting key sectors in international markets using tailored images and video and tied in to key milestones, such as the announcement of new speakers. Generated £7,000 in sales from £700 spend; an ROI of 10:1.

Created a dual purpose event - ensured varied programme and offered boating groups free tickets and exhibition space to encourage inclusion.

Innovative partnerships - worked with the likes of Red Bull and EventScotland to hold series of #CanalMagic events to raise awareness of conference. Included Neptune Steps; the world's only uphill swimming race; the Edinburgh Canal Festival; and the #CanalMagic Festival on the weekend before the conference. The events attracted more than 6500 people and garnered national press coverage for the campaign and the conference.

Phased pricing strategy - multiple price points encouraged early booking and unlocked budget for additional spend on quality content. We monitored ticket sales daily and created a discounted IWI ticket price of £405 for the full conference to ensure boaters could afford to attend.

Measurement and evaluation:

439 delegates from 25 nations attended the conference – more than double the number of previous years and 50 more than our target. Attendees ranged from sector-leading academics to CEOs of international urban regeneration organisations, national and international politicians and business figures.

The conference also directly created a number of new international partnerships, with Scottish Canals signing a memorandum of understanding with national public company K Water in Korea to share best practice; supporting the Erie Canal in New York to deliver a shared community/arts project based on canals; and taking part in a European health research project being led by Caledonian University with the University of Stanford and canal authorities in Belgium and Italy. A construction company also won a £200k contract via contacts made at the event.

A post-event survey was distributed to all partners, sponsors, speakers and attendees. The conference's speakers were rated 4.3 out of 5; networking opportunities 4.2 out of 5; social aspects 4.6 out of five; and the overall conference 4.6 out of 5. A selection of comments can be found in the supporting material.

Budget and cost effectiveness:

Ensuring the conference broke even at the very least or made money was a guiding principle. PR, marketing, content design, raising sponsorship, identifying and securing speakers, and overall conference delivery were all handled in-house, led by a small team of five.

Venue hire and associated costs: £49,000
Transport and attraction admission: £10,110
Event management: £38,090
Printed material/merchandise: £9,500
Gala/welcome dinners and entertainment: £16,510
Marketing: £4,000
Speaker flights and accommodation: £9,000
Videography & photography: £5,000
Misc: £5,700
TOTAL: £147,910

We generated £92,000 in sponsorship against an ambitious £100,000 target and £61,000 in ticket sales against a target of £50,000. Total income was £153,000 – making 2016 the first time in its 29-year history the conference had not been a cost burden to its organisers. New York - the 2017 hosts - have now adopted this pricing model.