

The changing landscape of medical meetings



The introduction of the Sunshine Act and new General Data Protection Regulation has already impacted healthcare meetings across the globe

by Alexander John

Over the last decade the world has experienced major political, economic and cultural upheavals. And these have had a significant socio-economic impact. The way businesses operate today is very different to the way it used to be a decade back.

Since the global economic crash in 2007-2008, disruption has been the mainstay for businesses. A number of industries have not recovered and, if anything, they have completely changed the way they do business. This has had a direct impact on the meetings industry.

During the last ten years the meetings industry has been in state of flux. Disruption has been constant and what has become quite apparent is that the rules of engagement have changed. These have either come from within the industry or have been dictated by governments defining new regulatory frameworks. In all cases, the ultimate goal has been to become more transparent.

In 2010, the Obama Administration implemented the Sunshine Act. This healthcare law was instituted in the US to increase transparency of financial relationships between healthcare providers and pharmaceutical manufacturers. And in Europe, EthicalMedTech, the European trade association representing the medical technology industries, launched an online portal to bolster ethical and compliance initiatives of the sector. These updated and revised regulations came into effect in January of this year.

The good news for the healthcare industry is that there is an increase in transparency, compliance and ethical behaviour; however, the economic impact of these new regulations is significant. Medical meetings are expected to lose up to 30% of their revenue

due to the changes in the way delegates are sponsored to meetings, which translates to a reduction in attendees. This then translates to sponsors and exhibitors wanting to reduce their financial contributions to meetings, hence, compounding the loss in revenue.

While circumnavigating the intricacies of EthicalMedTech and Sunshine Act, there is a new elephant in the room, the protection of data. The European Union's tough new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) law came into effect on May 25, 2018. GDPR gives individuals more control over their data, requires clarity on privacy terms and conditions, and forces organisations to build the new personal data protection standards into their governance.

The scope of personal data covered by the GDPR is more than just a name and address; it covers all areas of data collected: from income and health information to food preferences and cultural information.

This law has a direct impact on healthcare meetings across the globe. Why? Because, as long as you have a delegate attending from

Europe, they are protected under this law. This added regulation requires vigilance and non-compliant organisations can face stiff penalties to the tune of four percent of annual revenues or 20 million Euros, whichever is greater.

It is also just a matter of time before similar laws are implemented across the Middle East, Africa and the sub-continent. Some countries have already instigated large swathes of these regulations in their countries and the United Arab Emirates are all addressing issues of compliance and ethics.

The writing is on the wall, the industry in the Middle East will eventually align itself to global standards. While this is inevitable, we can foresee the following outcomes:

- Reduction in delegate, sponsor and exhibition revenue
- Increase in compliance and regulation as they align to global standards
- New technology products that will be instituted for reporting
- Increase in expenses due to the various changes, i.e. direct impact on manpower, technology and legal costs.

To navigate this labyrinth, planning is important. Conducting thorough research, developing local relationships and partnerships, and building checks and balances that address key areas of compliance, regulation and data protection is vital.

This is anything but the end. And one thing is for certain, as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus stated: "Everything changes and nothing remains still."

It would therefore be prudent for associations, organisations or those planning to conduct meetings across the Middle East, to keep abreast of the ever-changing landscape. ◦

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