

The BLA wanted a strong attendance at its first conference so it charged no delegate fee and offered a world-class speaker. The result exceeded expectations

Organising genius

Any new association would be thrilled to have a keynote speaker who is universally acknowledged as a genius at their inaugural event. But when that person is theoretical physicist Professor Stephen Hawking, author of *A Brief History of Time* – and when you only find out he is attending three weeks before the conference – even the most ambitious planners might feel overwhelmed.

To the rescue came the British Laryngological Association's (BLA) senior project manager Dion Bassett and executive manager Sarah Garry. Both women work for the association on behalf of Kenes Associations Worldwide and Kenes UK – Bassett on event logistics and management, Garry on association membership growth and development. Both knew that there would be special facilities and considerations needed for Hawking at the event, which expected 120 delegates working in the field of laryngology – which deals with disorders, diseases and injuries of the vocal apparatus – at the Royal Society of Medicine in London.

The link with Hawking derived from his long friendship with Professor David Howard, the BLA's president and professor of head and neck oncology at Imperial College/Imperial NHS Trust Hospitals. The two met on a flight by chance more than 20 years ago, and Howard has been a specialist to Hawking, who suffers from a motor neurone disease

called amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, ever since. "Professor Howard had never asked Professor Hawking to do anything before. We soon saw that we had to provide a private area and dining room for him and his carers. Professor Hawking charged no fees and accepted only theatre tickets as a thank you," says Garry.

Bassett adds: "Definitely the most exciting

speaker of the day was Professor Hawking. His presentation lasted approximately 10 minutes, after which he had a private tour of the venue, which supplied all catering and audio visual requirements."

A 10-minute speech might not be too difficult to prepare for most, but due to his almost total paralysis, Hawking can only produce 10 words a minute. Delegates were

'The association wanted the first meeting to be free of charge for members... with a low no-show rate'



Dion Bassett
British Laryngological Association (BLA)

Event: British Laryngological Association Inaugural Meeting and Annual General Meeting

Lead agency: Kenes UK/Kenes Associations Worldwide

Attendees: 120 delegates in related fields

Venue: The Royal Society of Medicine, London

Date: 5 December 2012

extremely respectful of the professor's needs and told that there could be no Q&A session.

Added to these logistical pressures was the fact that the December conference was the inaugural event of an association that only came into being last June. Bassett adds: "The client wanted 100 members by the end of 2012, but by the conference, it had secured 130. This medical specialty is such a small one, with only 75 specialist laryngologists in the UK, so everyone was very pleased with this result."

"As a brand new society, we did not have an existing membership base to promote to, and the association also wanted the first meeting to be free of charge for members. This was challenging as we needed to ensure we had a

The most exciting speaker of the day: Professor Stephen Hawking

low no-show rate, so we decided upon only charging a £90 fee to those booking in the week leading up to the event. This secured the association some income from the conference and deterred members from booking at the last moment."

The strategy worked – and at a time when no one knew Hawking was on the programme. The venue was also chosen before this knowledge and proved an excellent choice for its facilities and accessibility. Bassett continues: "It was a great fit due to its medical links, but also for its glass atrium and exhibition area, where the sponsors' drinks evening was held."

The day also included a presentation from the American Laryngological Association, which presented Professor Howard with a ceremonial gavel to mark the launch of the BLA and future co-operation between the two societies.

The BLA hopes to target 200 members by the end of 2013 and sees it as critical that it includes all professionals with an interest in the discipline, such as speech therapists, not just specialists.

Other developments emerging from the conference include additions to the BLA website, the second part of which should be completed this spring. Hawking's speech will be featured and members will contribute their own work in a truly multi-disciplinary approach to future research.

Bassett adds: "The event provided a



Professor David Howard received a ceremonial gavel from Doctor Albert Merati of the American Laryngological Association

platform to launch the society, but it has since secured £80k in funds from four corporate partners – Acclarent, Merz, Olympus and Pentax – over its first two years, which paid for the conference and association set-up, branding, website and other related costs. The feedback from industry was extremely positive, with one partner securing orders of £250k on the day of the conference."

Two delegate comments summed up the event's success for Garry and Bassett. The first applauded the event's "welcoming nature and the feeling that people were willing to collaborate at a national level to run trials and audits that will result in better patient care"; while the second simply said: "Everyone who is anyone in laryngology is at today's conference." ●



PECKFORTON CASTLE

AN ENCHANTING HOTEL IN THE HEART OF CHESHIRE

One of the North West's leading events venues, with 48 luxurious bedrooms, 5 distinctive conference suites, team building activities, award winning cuisine and more, all found at one stunning location.

01829 260 930

www.peckfortoncastle.co.uk

Find us:



A UNIQUE CONFERENCE & EVENTS VENUE



5 SPACIOUS MEETING ROOMS



TEAM BUILDING ACTIVITIES