

Practitioner Report

Winning a Tough Bid & The Value to a 2nd Tier Destination¹ Convention Bureau Environment - Part I

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ABSTRACT

The paper is to provide a greater understanding of the bidding process to convention bureaux team members outside the field of bidding, allied supporters such as suppliers and government aka ministry, and students of business events (BE). The paper discusses about the bidding challenges, and importantly, the key benefits of winning the bid to the convention bureaux of the world, to society, and of course the community of a destination. The story is naturally bigger than this paper provides. For example, this study is developed from a 90-minute PowerPoint presentation and workshop developed by the author.

KEYWORDS

Business Events, ICCA, Tough Bid, Convention Bureau Environment, Sarawak Convention

Introduction

My profession is in the business of Business Events². My immediate last position was as the managing director of the Sarawak Convention Bureau (SCB), now known as Business Events Sarawak (BES). The core objectives of my paper here are as follows:

- To share a case study on a very tough bid SCB and partners won (despite all the challenges), for an important and valuable conference, and
- To share the subsequent improvement, as a consequence of the win, to the SCB's mode of operating or working (MO).

The paper aims to provide a greater understanding of the bidding process to convention bureaux team members outside the field of bidding, allied supporters such as suppliers and government aka ministry, and students of BE. The paper talks about the bidding challenges, and importantly, the key benefits of winning the bid to the convention bureaux of the world, and of course to society, the community of a destination. The story is naturally bigger than this paper provides. For example, this study is developed from a 90-minute PowerPoint presentation and workshop developed by the author.

Some context: In late 2011 I was heading up the Association of Australian Convention Bureaux (AACB).³ In that regard, I was contacted by an industry stalwart who had been part of the team that established the SCB in 2006, the first convention bureau in Malaysia. He asked for help in finding a replacement for the SCB's founding CEO. The task proved difficult because anyone that I approached was put off by the short contract of two years. Cutting to the chase, I suggested I could be of service and was kindly accepted as SCB's managing director, commencing duties on April Fool's Day, 2012.⁴ On arrival, I inherited a well-trained, established, but still learning team of BES destination marketing specialists who loved The International Congress & Convention Association (ICCA)⁵. I had yet to fully figure out SCB's love affair with ICCA.

Part 1 - A Case Study on the Bid for ICCA 2016. Incorporating the core reasons for bidding, the methodology, and the many challenges.

Challenge No. 1 – Are we talking to ourselves?

ICCA operates an annual congress bringing together those involved with the convention bureaux and convention centres around the world for continued education, networking, and business development. It is, without a doubt, one of the toughest conferences to bid for.

Weeks after I started at SCB, the then-CEO of the excellent and versatile Borneo Convention Centre Kuching (BCKK), Mr Paul D'Arcy, approached me with his objective of hosting the 2016 ICCA Congress.

I was not keen, and had questions, e.g.: ‘Why talk to ourselves?’ , and ‘Where is the value?’ The first question reflected my questioning of the value to society in hosting such a bid. From my experience of owning a destination management company specialising in business events, and later as CEO of AACB Inc addressing the national results data, staff education, and federal lobbying needs of Australia’s convention bureaux, I had had little to do with ICCA headquartered in Holland, but a lot more to do with Destinations International headquartered in Washington DC , an association more focused on marketing (a core role of convention bureau) than ICCA was. That was my not-so-humble opinion at the time.

My team was not happy, and with a robust argument, they explained to me why they supported BCCK’s then-CEO’s proposal. In summary:

- SCB had been founded on the value of ICCA’s association database and research tools, plus
- the best models of the Australian Convention Bureau that, mostly
- hunted businesses using the outstanding database of ICCA, just like SCB did, and
- knew that most international associations rotated their conventions, thus offering exceptional and productive business exchange forums.

So, I gave full support to the SCB’s Bid Team to develop the bid in liaison with the host (BCCK) and Sarawak Government (The Ministry).

Challenge No. 2 – Winning the Right to Bid

Working with BCCK, SCB’s Bid Team got things going, enhancing their MO in developing a bid. For example:

- Identifying clearly the objective of bidding, i.e. ensuring and portraying evidence of the value to Sarawak
- Addressing the bid process required by ICCA, including deadlines, key and total requirements (if you do not address this element, you are immediately on the back foot), and more importantly
- Providing ICCA with a ‘Letter of Intent’, a normal component of the bidding process, is the starting point. It is either a letter, or a phone call, or you can indicate vigorous intent by having the Chief Minister or the State Secretary, i.e., a person of prominence to lobby, thus emphasizing the value of hosting the event to your destination. In this case, Kuching which is the capital city of Sarawak. In this regard, the BCCK’s departing CEO and I appealed for full-government support from the then minister for tourism, now the premier of Sarawak – YAB Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Abang Abdul Rahman Zohari Abang Openg. The case for benefits to Sarawak being sound, the minister kindly offered his full support.

It went further, of course. For example, I made a few calls before lodging our intent and the bid. Not to those that had won in the past (I left that to the bidding department as part of their normal MO), but to those that had not yet won previous bids, e.g., Houston in Texas. I wanted to know why they had not won, i.e., do some homework.

The bid for ICCA's Annual Congress took place in two stages:

- 1st **Winning the right to bid, i.e., getting on to the shortlist, then**
- 2nd **Presenting a final written bid and making a formal in-person pitch to ICCA's Board of Directors (BoD) at the annual IMEX Trade Show in Frankfurt, Germany.**

We lodged our first written bid to ICCA's BoD, to be reviewed at their annual congress, this time in San Juan, Puerto Rico. As stated earlier, most associations rotate their congress destinations, thus providing business exchange opportunities for convention bureaux to target – a forum at which ICCA excels.



Based on SCB's excellent relationship with ICCA, Paul D'Arcy and I, along with key members of our teams, flew to San Juan fully expecting to be a key contender and on the shortlist. Confident in the extreme. We almost failed.

Feedback started drifting in - comments such as "dullsville", "no soul", "little value to ICCA members", and "little value to ICCA itself", i.e. comments from the association tasked with providing value or ROI to its members. We had been over-confident in the extreme. What a reality check.

We were devastated. ICCA was looking for something out of the box. They expected from us a written presentation that would give them the wow factor, that would make them weep and laugh, just as Sarawak via SCB did when they won the best marketing award at ICCA's congress in Victoria, Canada in 2006.



ICCA's then Chairman with SCB's CEO and Marketing Team, Victoria, Canada, 2006.

Despite SCB's recognized creativity, all we did was meet the basic criteria. For example, while we spoke with the former winners and losers, we did not call anyone at ICCA. We simply thought they loved us anyway!

In San Juan, one of our team members resolutely pointed out some of our flaws, offering 'what we could have/should have done', etc. I immediately put her in charge of the next step, and I am glad I did. She is pictured on the extreme right in the picture above, and today she is BES's CEO.

Challenge No. 3 – Getting it Right

What is the next step? And, as an aside, this could well be your starting point if you only get one chance to bid. We were lucky. We had a second chance:

1. We had to re-group
2. We had to get everyone, absolutely everyone related to BE in Sarawak, Malaysia and South-East Asia behind us and the bid
3. We needed to move the bid into a marketing environment to 'move out of the box'
4. We had to get federal and local government support (we already had strong, unequivocal support guaranteed by the state government)
5. We had to find the wow factor (which we failed to do in the first process of the bid)

6. Specifically, we had to address Stage 2 of the Bid Process, importantly:
- o It is all about the research aka market intel
 - o ICCA's Criteria must be fully addressed (miss one element, and you are done for; and this applies for all significant congresses – another subject for another day)
 - o We had to prepare for a Site Inspection of Kuching by ICCA's CEO, i.e., we had to be scrupulously honest in what we could do for ICCA and its members, and prove that we had full and robust support
 - o We had to:
 - » Address the development and creation of a Bid Committee encompassing government and industry stalwarts and supporters,
 - » Address the preparation of Version 2 of the bid for review and approval by SCB's BoD and BCCK's BoD, and
 - » Last but certainly not least, address the preparation of the Pitch to ICCA's BoD at the IMEX6 Trade Show in Frankfurt in May 2013, the same BoD aka selection committee that said we are boring! This component would be in-person and in writing, i.e., it was a contract

We had six months to get our act together. So, we started to do the homework – what we should have fully focused on in the first place.

Challenge No 4 – ICCA's CEO Site Inspection



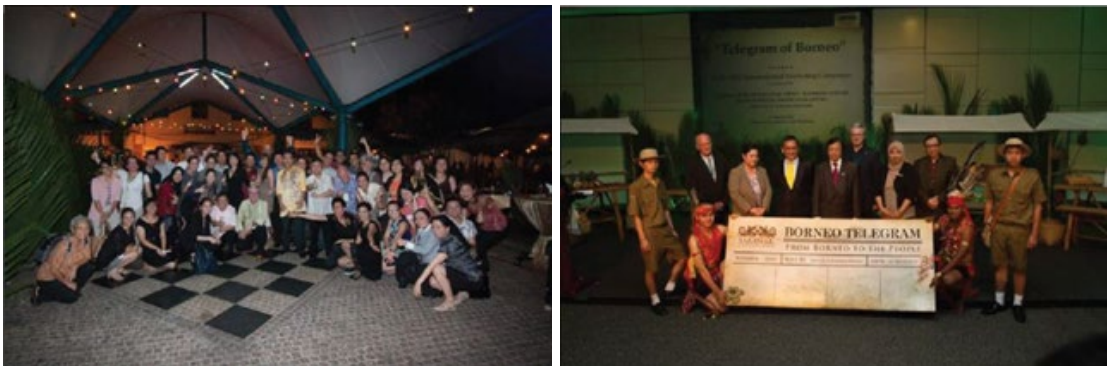
BCCK's CEO Paul D'Arcy met ICCA's CEO in Kuala Lumpur and escorted him to Kuching.

The CEO of ICCA visited Kuching for an audit to ensure we could do the job. We were still pretty raw from our experience in San Juan. But we started to get it right. For example, we treated our distinguished visitor as if he were a delegate to the actual congress:

- By setting up ICCA signages on the dedicated immigration counters at Kuching airport, in the baggage hall, and in the process making it clear that ICCA delegates will be guests of BCKK, SCB, Kuching, Sarawak, and Malaysia from the moment they step onto Malaysia's soil, and we would (did) apply the same sort of greeting at Malaysia's gateways of KLIA (Kuala Lumpur's airport) and Kota Kinabalu in Sabah.
- We presented examples of ICCA 2016 collateral such as name badges, goody bags, and H2O – all recyclable, including plastic bottles.



- We ensured ICCA's CEO experienced a mini event of what ICCA members would experience, for example, a welcome reception, CSR initiatives, a gala dinner, and such like – all events being requirements by ICCA.





- We also had to produce a theme to target the organisation and its members, and we presented it to ICCA's CEO during his visit. The theme is presented below for information: -



I share this element to point out that a theme to portray the key benefit/s to your prospective client is an unbelievably valuable branding and event-enhancement tool.

Our proposed theme, a “Gathering of the ICCA Global Tribes”, was designed to connect the event with ICCA, its members, and its chosen destination. And robustly addressed one of the core global objectives of ICCA. It won their hearts, but more on that later. The Kuching’s Bid Committee and BCKK addressed these matters to perfection.

The Site Inspection worked. ICCA's CEO was happy and he kindly shared valuable advice before he departed Kuching for ICCA's home base in Holland - 10,903 kilometres away.

Here I conclude Part 1 of the paper. In summary: I addressed the logic to making the bid, and I shared the surprising results, plus opportunities emanating from the first stage, and some of the challenges plus solutions and actions taken to address the final bid. Part two of the Paper will address the final and most significant challenge (and solution) to this particular bid, the process and methodology of the final bid, and the core benefits to Sarawak's convention bureau as a result of the overall bid.

My sincere appreciation and respect to you, dear reader, for giving up your valuable time to review this educational process so far.

Notes to Part 1

¹ In general, "second-tier" destinations are not (well) serviced by international flights. The cities are considered to be mid-sized with less than a million people (at that time Kuching had a population of around 750 thousand). Though smaller in scale than first-tier cities, mid-size cities still tend to have a strong job market, first-class amenities, and plenty of cultural opportunities.

² Why the term aka sector description of 'Business Events'? "If there is one element which distinguishes us, i.e. Business Events from the rest of visitation (such as tourism), and stamps our close connection to communication and trade, it is the fact that the converging of our group in one place has at its heart; a business raison d'être. It is not leisure, it is not a festival, it is not a sporting event. It is being held because of business reason/s, whether for exhibiting, marketing, launching, training, academic exchange, negotiating, diplomacy, rewarding. It is all about business. It is all about business communication through business events. Even the scientific, professional, academic and government meetings – they are all about their respective areas of business."

This rationale was ratified by the Business Events Council of Australia (BECA) members.

Source: The Business of Events, Elizabeth Rich 09FEB2006 in consultation with the business events sector of Australia (significantly), and abroad

³ AACB Inc: <https://aacb.org.au/>

⁴ Mike Cannon: After more than five successful years heading up the Sarawak Convention Bureau in Kuching on the island of Borneo, Mike decided in April 2017 to step down and embark on an independent venture. Mike Cannon Business Events – Asia Pacific (MCBE) is a consultancy launched in 2017, specialising in the profession of Business Events in the Asia Pacific region and specifically focused on business development, marketing and branding, training and representation for organisations needing that expertise. The impact of Covid-19 brought most of his new endeavours to a screaming halt, but he continues to advise when called on.

In his role as Managing Director at Sarawak’s Convention Bureau (SCB), Mike was responsible for overseeing the administration and general operations, as well as guiding the talented bureau team. He liaised with Sarawak’s business event suppliers and the Federal and State Governments of Malaysia and Sarawak and successfully brought the SCB into an international business environment. His introduction of a long-term strategy ensured that his SCB team was given a clear vision for the future (the Covid-19 environment notwithstanding). Mike was also responsible for developing a strategy to ensure a closer working relationship with the government, industry, and hi-academic sectors of Sarawak, and for spearheading the winning campaign for the prestigious ICCA2016Congress.

From mid-2000 to 2012, Mike headed up the Association of Australian Convention Bureaux, commonly known as AACB Inc. before being headhunted and moving from Sydney to Kuching. In 2018 he was inducted into the AACB’s Hall of Fame, co-sponsored by IMEX.

Mike began his career with Trans Australia Airlines (TAA) in Papua New Guinea as a cadet and later worked with Qantas, then Dalgety Travel as State Manager for Victoria in Australia. In 1978, he started, and for 22 years running, his own successful destination management company, Australian Farming & Industry Tours (AFIT) – specialising in association study tours plus corporate meetings and events. This included owning a sales and service office in Hong Kong (1986-1996). He was a founding board member of the National Tourism Alliance of Australia, had served on the board of the Australian Tourism Export Council for two years as Chairman, and was an integral part of The Australian Federal Tourism Minister’s Advisory Council under the Howard Government, driving the needs of the Australian convention bureaux and business events sector.

Raised in Kenya, Uganda and Papua New Guinea and a graduate of Harvard Business School’s Owner/President Management Program, Mike’s interests include justice, philosophy, art, music, CSR, the preservation of ‘special places’, and the happiness of his wife Annie (a writer and creative director) and children. Tom (a physiologist in Sydney), plus Jennifer and son-in-law Tim (UK-based artists). For further details, please email Mike: mike.cannon303@gmail.com.

⁵ ICCA (The International Congress & Convention Association): <https://www.iccaworld.org/>

⁶ Destinations International headquartered in Washington DC (<https://destinationsinternational.org/>)