Living in a material world

ICMAT, organised by the Materials Research Society of Singapore, is growing by leaps and bounds, reports NISHA RAMCHANDANI

POVIDING new entrants to the meetings, incentive travel, conventions, and exhibitions (MICE) sector with the necessary support could help to fuel the growth of the industry, according to president of the Materials Research Society of Singapore, BVV Chowdari. Non-profit societies, for instance, which have no experience in organising conferences or events may be concerned about taking the plunge.

"Firstly, there's the financial challenge. These are all non-profit organisations," Prof Chowdari pointed out. But the issue of learning the ropes can be easily tackled, he suggests, by putting them in touch with more experienced organisations so as to facilitate the sharing of knowledge. "Every event matters, whether it is small or large," he emphasises.

Prof Chowdari, who also teaches physics at the National University of Singapore (NUS), landed the Business Event Ambassador award at the Singapore Tourism Board's 2010 Singapore Experience Awards (SEA). Meanwhile, the International Conference on Materials for Advanced Technologies (ICMAT) 2009 – which is organised by the Materials Research Society of Singapore – won Association Conference of the Year at last year's SEA awards.

"I have got so many requests from Australia to Canada to Malaysia to India, (for ICMAT) to take place in their country. They are willing to work on our terms. But this is a Singapore-born activity," Prof Chowdari underlines. "The primary objective is to serve the members of the Singapore material communities. If we allow it to go out of the country, our people will stand to lose." Prof Chowdari reckons that moving the event to a far-flung location such as Canada would mean that the number of attendees from Singapore – which include local graduate students – would likely fall by some 90 per cent.

"This year's ICMAT attracted much larger participation and we had 3,300 people. The objective of the conference is to bring people together (from all over the world)," says Prof Chowdari.

Some three-quarters of the 3,300 attendees were from overseas markets such as Japan, China, India, Taiwan, Europe, and the US. In contrast, the very first edition of ICMAT, which was held in 2001, was attended by about 1,600 participants in all.

"With Singapore being quite small, we have to rely quite a bit on international participation. We thought that we should provide a platform to meet not only our own people but overseas participants," he continues. The 2011 ICMAT was also attended by as many as four Nobel Laureates – namely Albert Fert, Ada Yonath, Klaus von Klitzing, and Andre Geim.

Aside from the increase in participation, the programme line-up was also expanded this year. The 2011 ICMAT featured 40 symposia versus 24 previously. "We've grown very rapidly, which is a challenging task and which also may be tough to sustain," Prof Chowdari adds.

Awards such as the SEA help to boost awareness and the reputation of the conference, he notes. "We're happy our efforts are recognised. That has probably also contributed to the success of 2011. But that doesn't mean we can relax and take it easy. One has to continue to work. I always keep my fingers crossed until the event is done," Prof Chowdari says, laughing.

Organizing ICMAT costs some $1.5 million. Generally, the society's funding tends to come from membership fees, sponsorship, and conference fees. Space is another obstacle as the conference – usually held at Suntec Singapore Convention Centre – grows in size and scale, especially since it also incorporates an exhibition which features suppliers of research equipment.

"This is one place where (the suppliers) can meet the whole of Asia. (Raising) awareness is their main objective – to talk to the people and establish links. We get thousands of researchers, young and old," Prof Chowdari highlights.

Quite a few of the companies are also repeat exhibitors as they see the value in being part of the exhibition, he stresses. Enquiries for booth space at the 2013 ICMAT have already started to come in. This year, the fee for exhibition and booth space for ICMAT 2011 meant that part of the conference had to be held at the Pan Pacific hotel.

Going forward, the Materials Research Society of Singapore will focus more on enhancing the quality rather than the size of ICMAT to ensure that the conference can be sustained, given rising costs and limited resources. This could mean keeping the number of symposia to 25, for example, Prof Chowdari says.

Nearly 95 per cent of the local members of the Materials Research Society of Singapore come from NUS, Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star), while 10 per cent are from the industry. However, the 3,400-strong society has international members as well.

While ICMAT is the largest one he has organised to date, Prof Chowdari has been involved in MICE events since 1986. Other smaller-scale conferences that Prof Chowdari - who is also the president of the International Union of Materials Research Societies (IUMRS) – has organised include the International Conference on Solid State Ionics.

Another event that he has helped to initiate is the inaugural 2012 International Conference of Young Researchers on Advanced Materials (ICYRAM), launched by IUMRS. "Many times, at any established conference it's the senior people that steal the limelight," he notes.

However, ICYRAM will be limited to young researchers under the age of 40, giving them an opportunity to present their research as well as the chance to network with, and learn from, the international community of other young researchers.

Great minds: (from left) Prof Chowdari with the four Nobel Laureates who attended ICMAT 2011 – Albert Fert, Ada Yonath, Klaus von Klitzing, and Andre Geim.

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