

Questions and answers on improving standards

By James Cobb

OVER the next two issues I would like to raise questions – and hopefully provide a few answers – as to how the event industry needs to work at all levels towards improved standards.

In the last few years everyone has become more conscious of health and safety issues and with the drafting of BS8901, the event sector will very publicly tackle issues of sustainability over the coming year. Whilst the overall aim of working more safely or sustainably is hard not to support, complying with regulations, guidance and standards may cost significant time and money; particularly for the multitude of small businesses working in events. There will need to be some considerable changes in attitude if noteworthy improvements are to be achieved.

It's not necessarily all about safety – although that's important, and in events there is still some pretty unsafe practice around. It's about quality management – delivering what the client needs on time, on budget, safely, efficiently, and reliably.

Not only can applying the very best practice have an implementation cost, but also in some circumstances simply operating within the law can make a supplier uncompetitive. We all know that there are crew working hours that are far too long, not just for their own stress-levels and well-being but for the safety of themselves and others.

But if we were to do the job properly, really properly, could we be competitive? A fresh crew for the load-out, two trucks to deliver the equipment and a driver who takes a break rather than also working on the event. Sounds sensible. But if it doesn't fit the client's budget, we either lose the business or we lower our standards. And that will be the case until either no supplier is prepared to lower standards, or no client is prepared to accept it. That might seem a distant dream. But is there anything we can do to start moving in the right direction?

Clients need to know when the job is being 'got away with', and when it's being done right. All too often I suspect they don't. Even then some clients will choose to consider economics above all else. But it would be a necessary start to be able to

demonstrate the kind of quality we're delivering and hopefully the value of that (in a very broad sense) will then become apparent.

I don't think insisting that the very end client – the person writing the cheques – is present on site from six in the morning until six the next morning is going to work.

There are some very valid arguments against standards published by the likes of ISO and BSI – one of the best known being the ISO9000 series for quality management. It is an unfortunate truth that some businesses go through the process of certification without really changing; without taking anything to heart.

Even worse, some standards really are jargon-laden waffle that should never have been written at all (try wading through BS8900 if you desperately want an example). Even good standards come at a price – quite a substantial one. They can work when freely distributable, but sadly organisations like BSI frequently price themselves out of their own market. Don't dismiss them completely. Compliance with a standard is one way we can show clients how we do the job rather



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than just that we get it done.

Most people are probably familiar with the ISO9000 series already mentioned. But there's also OHSAS18000 series for Health and Safety Management, ISO14000 for environmental management and then of course there's the forthcoming BS8901 for sustainability in event management. Alongside those there are schemes like Investors In People. They may not be for every business and there's no point getting certified without real commitment. But it's worth serious consideration both in terms of the positive effects the process can have on your business and when it comes to demonstrating competence and good working practice to clients.