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## The Impact of Public Relations on Conference Organisation

### Case study: SEOUL ICM 2014

MECI managed the International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM) in Seoul in 2014. From the outset MECI advised the organizing committee to retain a dedicated PR firm. However this was not to be and thus MECI put in place a fully-fledged PR campaign alongside their PCO mandate. As a result of their dedicated PR service, the event attracted over 250 reporters with more than 1,800 articles written and published about the event from January to August in 2014. In fact, the term 'International Congress of Mathematicians' became the most searched keyword online in Korea for some time. The success of MECI's work resulted in both the event and the PCO winning the Korea Event PR Award of the Year. With 5,200 registered participants and 21,000 from the general public, SEOUL ICM 2014 is recognized as writing a new page in the history of the ICM. Why was SEOUL ICM 2014 such a PR success?

#### 1. PR Strategy

Approximately a year before the event, MECI's Dohyun Kim prepared the event PR strategy. The strategy encompassed many strands including the rebranding of the ICM's *Fields Medal* award to "the Nobel Prize in the world of mathematics". MECI also tapped into some celebrity endorsement by involving James Harris Simons, a superstar in the circle of mathematicians who is known as the "88th-richest person in the world". This resulted in impressive news coverage during the event. They also organized a special Baduk match (otherwise known as the game of Go in Korea) between the world's leading Go professionals and mathematicians. Other PR tactics included: releasing a special memorial stamp album, offering 10 rounds of free lecture tours prior to the event, and organizing networking opportunities with actors from mathematics movies.

#### 2. Government Engagement

By designating 2014 as the 'Year of Mathematics', the Korean government officially created an excellent PR platform. Capitalizing on this, MECI partnered with a range of national organizations to hold diverse cultural events and mathematical games. Since these events were government-led, they attracted more media attention which led to more published articles on mathematics. In addition, MECI designated the *Korean Education Broadcasting System (EBS)* as the official broadcaster of *SEOUL ICM 2014*

which aired documentaries on mathematics throughout the event. The result was an event which was collaboratively supported by the local government, major press, TV and online news sites.

#### 3. Public Participation

To gain publicity with the general public, MECI leveraged - *The Fields Medal Event* by making the event feel open and fun. This included the release of a chocolate-version of the medal; the commissioning of a web cartoon series and the development of a TV Quiz show. Promotional videos of the event were displayed on the event's official website, YouTube channels, subways and on outdoor electric signage. In addition, a maths-themed calendar was distributed online and on three rounds of social networking events. MECI also garnered support from the student population by sending letters and posters to colleges and universities asking for volunteers.



#### 4. Crisis Management

Undoubtedly, MECI faced unexpected challenges during their PR effort. The most unexpected of which was the 2014 Ebola epidemic. The outbreak of the disease in West Africa became one of the largest and most concerning issues when the press discovered that *SEOUL ICM*

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Dohyun Kim majored in mass communications at Konkuk University and served as a chief editor of the University's student newspaper. In 2009 she took charge of the Multiple Cultures Division of Korea Migrant Human Rights Center. Since 2011, she has been working in MECI. Taking the lead in promotion efforts for ICM 2014, she made it to the final three nominees for the Innovation Award at 2014 IAPCO.



*2014* would have many participants from Africa. The event received unwanted media attention and was flooded with requests for interviews. However, the organizing committee was quick to set up a task force, enabling them to face an aggressive press head on. This proved so successful that the case was soon recognized as an exemplary response to the media.

Since the 2014 event, the ICM's Facebook account has more than doubled its reach with over 8,000 Likes. The event has also encouraged many more students to enjoy mathematics in school with departments of mathematics in universities reporting the highest interest in maths in their history.

It is clear that through a strategic PR campaign, PCOs can have a profound and lasting influence on the success and impact of an international conference. Learning from *SEOUL ICM 2014*, it is time for PCOs to go beyond the simple concept of arranging and supporting the operation of events. With innovative ideas and carefully planned strategies, PCOs can optimize and maximise the influence and impact of the events that they manage.

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