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Branching out along new neural pathways – the changing face of the congress industry

The annual congress of the European Academy of Neurology (EAN) gives a strong indication of where the international congress industry is heading. Digital elements are helping to bring congresses to an increasingly global audience, while democratising knowledge by reaching out to the next generation of medical experts. The trend towards traditional in-person congresses adopting virtual elements and recasting themselves as hybrid events is gathering pace. And with the range of spaces and outstanding IT infrastructure in place at the Austria Center Vienna, the venue provides the perfect setting for both virtual and hybrid congresses. The upcoming EAN Congress will be held at the Austria Center Vienna from 19-22 June as a virtual event.

“Like everyone in the congress industry, the coronavirus has hit us very hard. With just eight weeks to prepare, we switched the entire EAN Congress from an in-person event to a virtual congress last year. And we pulled it off: the total of 45,000 online participants not only showed how important scientific exchange is in times like these, but also helped to make the EAN Congress one of the largest neurology meetings in history,” confirmed Anja Sander, Executive Director of the Vienna-based European Academy of Neurology (EAN).

2020: focus on online knowledge transfer

Given such short notice, the decision was taken to put the focus on knowledge transfer. Around 1,500 scientific contributions were pre-recorded and broadcast in parallel in up to 20 virtual rooms. Live streams enabled participants and presenters to interact. Some lectures were also translated into other languages including Russian and Spanish. To ensure that as much ground as possible was covered, an exhibition for industry partners as well as a kids’ programme and yoga lessons also ran online. The pilot online congress was made available to participants free of charge. These measures enabled the EAN to send out a strong signal across the world about the Viennese congress industry, while reaching lots of people from poorer countries on all continents. Students and young neurologists made the most of this excellent opportunity to make their first forays into the scientific community during their studies. “We are making a major contribution to the democratisation of knowledge, driving scientific progress on the ground and stopping brain drain,” said Sander.

2021: online expansion and networking

The online platform was optimised and significantly expanded for this year’s EAN Congress, which will be broadcast to virtual participants all over the world from the Austria Center Vienna from 19-22 June. Reinforcements have also been brought on board with new IT, communications, social media and organisational experts joining the team. In addition to retaining the focus on knowledge transfer, the aim this year is to enhance the overall participant experience through networking platforms, quiz challenges, a live TV studio and chats. In the continued interest of democratising information, a cheaper option for online participants will be retained despite the highly professional offering. As the level of interactivity increases,

availability of sufficient bandwidth and failsafe infrastructure becomes increasingly important – both of which are covered by the Austria Center Vienna’s award-winning IT set-up.

2022: hybrid congress as a fully immersive experience

“We are planning another large-scale congress at the Austria Center Vienna in 2022, as personal contact and the emotional side of a congress just cannot be replaced by virtual formats. However, the coronavirus pandemic has given the trend toward digitalisation a major shot in the arm. For us, it could not be clearer: digital is here to stay. We do not want to miss out on the advantages brought about by increasing our global reach, doing our bit towards democratising knowledge and, in doing so, actively lending the next generation a helping hand. Going down the hybrid congress route seemed like the only logical step for me,” Sander confirmed. The foundations have already been laid for the hybrid congress: all on-site sessions will be recorded and streamed live.

All of the new features implemented over the two preceding years to bring together virtual and on-site participants will be retained and in many cases taken to the next level.

“The experiences gathered at the EAN Congress and the feedback we received from other customers shows that hybrid congresses will become the standard way of doing things in future. We have been hosting one of the largest hybrid congresses out there for years in the shape of the ECR. And now this experience is benefitting all of our customers. Our new green screen studio, virtual living room and LED walls in the halls, as well as live feeds from outside offer endless possibilities for virtual and hybrid congresses. So we are very happy that the phased nationwide reopening measures from 19 May are putting live events with up to 1,500 participants back on the agenda, thanks to a combination of pre-entry testing and a comprehensive hygiene plan. This is an important glimmer of hope for the entire congress and meeting industry,” said Susanne Baumann-Söllner, Managing Director of the Austria Center Vienna, giving a boost to congress organisers.

About the EAN

The European Academy of Neurology (EAN) is an umbrella organisation with more than 40,000 individual members. Headquartered in Vienna, it brings together all of the neurological societies throughout Europe. Each year its annual congress attracts around 7,000 participants. In 2020 it held its first-ever online congress, which was attended by 45,000 people. This year’s EAN Congress will be held online at the Austria Center Vienna, before playing out at the venue as a hybrid event in 2022.

About IAKW-AG

Internationales Amtssitz- und Konferenzzentrum Wien, Aktiengesellschaft (IAKW-AG) is responsible for maintaining the Vienna International Centre (VIC) and operating the Austria Center Vienna. The Austria Center Vienna is Austria’s largest conference centre, with 24 halls, 180 meeting rooms, and some 26,000 m² of exhibition space, and is one of the top players on the international conference circuit.

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