

THE EVENT PLANNING GROUP, LLC (TEPG)
CASE STUDY OF AN INTERNATIONAL COCOA SYMPOSIUM

Introduction

The University of California at Davis, one of the nation's top public research universities and a leader in agricultural studies, developed a public-private partnership with the Mars Company, a global, family owned business producing some of the world's favorite snack foods, to elevate the science of cocoa. Recent advances have been made in understanding cocoa's impact on society in the context of culture and potentially the environment, modern health and medicine. Both UC Davis and Mars, Incorporated, sought to explore and heighten this research in the multi-disciplinary format of a Cocoa Symposium in 2004.

Overview/Analysis

The symposium's purpose was to provide attendees with a series of multi-disciplinary presentations discussing the groundbreaking advances in cocoa research. The goals of the symposium were determined to be threefold: 1) to explore in-depth the ability of agriculture to deliver life-changing advances in medicine, nutrition and public health; 2) to identify and reveal recent scientific advances in cocoa, illustrating its potential ability to positively impact health, nutrition, culture, medicine and the environment; and 3) to promote and build scientific collaborations to further enhance the positive impact of cocoa and other food crops on society.

To accomplish these goals, TEPG worked with the partnership to identify affiliated organizations conducting various cocoa research. This outreach was performed to ensure a broad spectrum of cocoa's impact in many different areas. The symposium included such partners as: United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service; University of California, Santa Cruz; USDA Forest Service International Programs; Union of German Academies of Sciences and Humanities; The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew ;Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute; United States Agency for International Development; Chinese Academy of Sciences; Rabobank; World Agroforestry Centre; and STCP / IITA.

The symposium was further strengthened by being hosted at the most prestigious U.S.-based scientific organization – The National Academy of Sciences.

With sponsors and venues determined, TEPG moved forward with the creation of a theme, proposed agenda and speakers, and meeting dates. The chosen theme was, "Theobroma Cacao: Ancient Crop, Medicinal Plant, Surprising future." Theobroma Cacao is also known as, "Food of the Gods." The scientific themes of the symposium were determined as: plant science of cocoa,



anthropology of cocoa, and biomedical implications of cocoa, with speakers chosen from those fields. The meeting dates were chosen to fall close to Valentine's Day to supply the "chocolate" hook for the media.

Collateral pieces were developed to communicate to the sponsors, supporters, attendees, and media, including the former website, www.cocoasympoium2004.com. A vital piece was the backgrounder, written to capture the science of the conference and to promote cocoa's importance in the world. This is an excerpt:

"... the science of cocoa has recently grown from one of practical application based on empirical observations to one of fundamental understanding based on world-class scholarship integrating state of the art methodologies from diverse disciplines. Recent advances have been made in understanding the value of cocoa to society in the context of culture, the agricultural and environmental potential of cocoa, as well as modern health and medicine. In some ways, it can be viewed as a model for studying the diverse impacts that a unique food crop can have on society at many different levels.

This global meeting is being convened to consolidate these advances and provide the foundation for more progress in a multi-disciplinary format that brings together leading scientists from around the world. This meeting will stimulate sharing of information, discussion and a broader understanding of the current state of science, and hopefully provide an environment to build multi-disciplinary and global scientific collaborations that will ultimately further enhance the impact of cocoa on society."

The target audience of the symposium was world-leading scientists in the disciplines of agroecology & plant science, biomedical sciences, sustainable agriculture, nutrition, medicine, and anthropology. Because this event was a new concept and the partnership wanted to make the symposium as easy to attend as possible, attendees were invited free of charge, excluding travel and lodging. While a "free" symposium could have indicated there was little value in the event, TEPG and the partnership realized the credibility and the value would be found in the intended scientific presentations, venue and affiliated partner organizations.

Status report

The cocoa symposium serves as a best practice for TEPG because it shows how an event can elevate groundbreaking research resulting from a public-private partnership.

The main measure of success of the 2004 event was the attendance of 200 registrants, which included researchers, academics, non-governmental organization executives, embassy staff, government officials and industry representatives. Due to a press conference that was held during the event, another successful measurement was the resulting media coverage the event received, much of it surrounding the suggestion of flavanol-rich foods, such as specific cocoas, that could provide an unexpectedly large benefit in the management of the two most common causes of death in today's world: cardiovascular disease and cancer.

An additional benchmark of the symposium was the establishment of the event occurring every two years, expanding to two-days and featuring more in-depth discussions on cocoa-related aspects of plant and biomedical science, sustainable agriculture, nutrition, medicine and anthropology, along with roundtable discussions on issues facing the cocoa-growing regions of West Africa, East Asia and the Americas.

Plans for the 2008 symposium are underway and will take place in Accra, Ghana, West Africa, one of the largest cocoa producing countries in the world.