

ECSITE

A conversation with Catherine Franche

Ecsite, the European network of science centres and museums, started 25 years ago as a collaborative structure to co-produce interactive exhibitions and considerably grew since then, taking on a wider role. Catherine Franche, Executive Director, talks to HQ about how the organisation operates.

HQ: Could you briefly present Ecsite?

Catherine Franche: Ecsite is the European network of science centres and museums. We gather around 380 members: science centres, museums, universities, businesses, learned societies, aquaria... Anyone involved in what we call "science engagement": communicating scientific subjects to a wide audience and facilitating democratic dialogue between science and society. We represent our sector in the EU spheres, give members access to European projects, facilitate the sharing of best practice and resources... Our annual conference brings together more than 1,000 people and has become the largest science engagement professional event in Europe.

HQ: What does it mean to be a 'European' organisation? Some struggle with a clear-cut European identity...

Catherine Franche: Interestingly, this has never been an issue for us. We work with a broad geographical definition of Europe rather than a political one. We have members in the whole world - many professionals from other geographical areas are interested in our activities, in particular the sharing of best practice. We make one difference between European and non-European members: only organisations based in geographical Europe can become what we call "Full Members", have voting rights and be represented on our Board.

The values of science engagement in general and Ecsite in particular are very close to the ideals of EU founding fathers like Monet or Schumann: we stand for intercultural

and democratic dialogue, we believe that scientific literacy empowers citizens and that sharing knowledge and experiences beyond national borders can (humbly) contribute to a better world. Our Annual Conference sometimes doubles up as a peace-building summit: there we have seen colleagues of diplomatically estranged countries get together and start collaborations...

HQ: What do you find most challenging to achieve as an association?

Catherine Franche: Unsurprisingly, an obvious issue for us is funding: we receive no operational subsidies. We rely on membership fees, self-generated income (mostly from the Annual Conference) and complete our activities with relevant European projects.

Like many other members organisations, we have to be very pro-active in getting our members involved: for many of them, Brussels seems far away. We're getting better at fuelling a two-way exchange: members increasingly inform us when they contribute to a strategic paper, open a new space or receive a massive gift - and we put more effort in letting them know what is going on in Brussels.

Another challenge is to build a European scene in spite of very diverse - sometimes

divergent - national and regional situations. Some national governments for instance see science engagement as a democratic tool whereas others support it as a mechanism to provide the new generations of engineers and technicians our knowledge economies badly need - and aren't so interested in citizen participation.

When we put together teams for EC-funded projects, some of our members can't wait to work on art-science or responsible research and innovation topics, whereas for others different types of engagement activities prevail. I shouldn't forget to say that the mere existence of these European programmes is an invaluable opportunity: some of our American counterparts for instance look at Horizon 2020 with envy...



Ecsite Executive Director Catherine Franche

HQ: Can you tell us about the kind of events you organise? How do you decide where to take them?

Catherine Franche: Our main two events are the Directors Forum, a strategic senior managers' meeting in the autumn ; and the Ecsite Annual Conference that gathers about 1,000 professionals each spring. Both are hosted by members, chosen by our Board upon application.

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This is crucial to us: each event has a unique local flavour, something dear to participants' hearts. For hosting organisations, this is an opportunity to impress, to get known locally and internationally as a key player, to put issues on the agenda (e.g. with the choice of the conference's theme, one of the host's prerogatives). The social component is key: the Ecsite conference is renowned for its informal networking scene and fun parties. Some events remain very vivid in the network's collective memory, such as a farewell party in Lisbon in 2007 where participants mixed with locals in a giant street banquet or last year's conference

nocturne in The Hague that turned into a massive spontaneous jam session.

HQ: Do you work with a PCO or everything is done in-house? Why?

Catherine Franche: As explained, the host is in charge of most of the event's logistical aspects: venues, catering, social events, graphic identity... Some of them use a PCO. Take the Annual Conference. At the Ecsite

office we manage the "contents" part: we run the Programme Committee that selects session proposals and acts as a keeper of intellectual quality. We make sure that the collective know-how we have developed in organising this widely acclaimed event gets passed on and that hosts learn from each other. And of course we use our wide-reaching communications channels to promote the event.

HQ: How do you see the future of the association?

Catherine Franche: I would say that Ecsite has been going through a gradual process

of enlargement ever since it was created. We tackle broader questions now like science and society or responsible research and innovation (RRI) and we are welcoming members from increasingly diverse backgrounds. We started with a dozen science centres 25 years ago and now form a much more diverse family, constantly welcoming new members such as the Makers movement and their Fab Labs in the past few years.

We also develop more regular collaborations with other organisations. In this spirit, we recently signed a memorandum of understanding with the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) and Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BCGI). We are joining forces to engage audiences with biodiversity conservation. Together, the zoos, aquaria, botanic gardens, science centres and museums (etc.) members of our three organisations receive more than 240 million visitors a year. We are uniquely placed to deliver a large public engagement campaign in Europe, raising awareness about local biodiversity. We are hoping to launch it in September 2015.

www.ecsite.eu



Economist Pr. Ian Goldin delivering keynote speech at 2014 Ecsite Annual Conference in The Hague



Sessions always include hands-on workshops - here at the Makers Space at the 2013 Ecsite Annual Conference in Gothenburg