

Buzzing: New beepers could save Canberra's convention centre billion-dollar deficit



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Latest News

Beepers to save a billion dollars

The big-money Canberra conference industry is banking on a small piece of technology to bring back the billion dollars it's lost because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The convention centre is about to take possession of 1300 wrist beepers which will warn delegates to conferences when they are closer than the regulated 1.5 metres.

The devices can also track people in the conferences so if they later contract COVID-19, their immediate at-risk contacts can be traced quickly.

In normal times, Canberra hosts countless conventions and business meetings which rarely get any publicity - but which bring in big money, not just at the meeting itself but in the high-end hotels and restaurants.

In those normal times, Michael Matthews, the chief executive of Canberra Convention Bureau, says business and academic get-togethers are worth \$1.12 billion to the ACT.

That's how much has been lost, not just in the six months of the epidemic but in the next six months through cancelled events.

It's prompted the ACT government and the National Convention Centre in Canberra to spend \$75,000 on the state-of-the-art trackers in a bid to reassure potential conference organisers that their event will be ultra-safe.

The wrist devices beep if they come nearer than the regulation distance to another device. They can be turned to silent with only a vibration.

They can also record the interactions of hundreds of people through the day at a conference.

The devices can also be used to limit the number of people in a room. If the limit is, say, 40, then sensors count the attendees via their wrist devices and illuminate a red "do not enter" sign.



Canberra Convention Bureau boss Michael Matthews shows off prototypes of the Smart Badge technology. Picture: Sithixay Ditthavong

The organisers say that the tracking information is wiped shortly after the conference, once the infectious period of the disease is gone.

The device is a classic business story of rising out of adversity.

The "COVID Smart Badge" has been developed by an Australian company which organised the country's biggest events until the country's biggest events were no more.

Harry the Hirer had the contract to organise much of the Melbourne Grand Prix, everything from the marquees to the big screens.

"Our traditional business collapsed literally overnight," Simon Finlayson, the general manager of COVID Smart Badge, said.

The Grand Prix opened on a Thursday and closed on the Friday, taking Harry the Hirer's main business with it.

So Mr Finlayson, who was in charge of the technology side, turned his mind to how to make events safer.

The result is the beeper which the convention centre in Canberra trialled and has now ordered, with delivery on Monday.

"We started down the path of designing a bit of tech to bring people back to events by giving them confidence," Mr Finlayson said.

It turns out that the beeper hasn't just been bought by convention centres but by other industries, too.

Meat processing, for example, has a high risk of infections because workers inevitably get close to each other. Caravan manufacturing is the same.

The beeper has been bought by companies in both industries so that if there is an outbreak of COVID-19, contacts can be traced quickly - and people not in contact can be ruled out so production keeps going.

The national distribution of the device is being done by Canberra-based Aspen Medical.

In the conference industry, Canberra is now competing for lucrative business with other Australian destinations because the international market has collapsed.

In normal times, a Chinese company, for example, might want to reward its top sales people with a trip to Australia. That, more than likely, means Sydney.

But now the absence of foreign customers means Sydney's venues are touting for Australian business that in normal years might have gone to Canberra.

Canberra makes a global pitch as "the meeting place of Australia". Its glossy brochures talk of "proximity and access to decision makers".

The city is "a dynamic intersection of government, science, arts, education, research and business which come together to create Australia's knowledge capital".

Before COVID, the convention centre was operating at capacity.

Since COVID, it's been dark. The people running it hope the beepers will bring the lights back - and the dollars.