The case for better business conferences

uncommon
CONFERENCES

contents

picture this...

When was the last time you went to a conference and thought 'Wow, that was a fantastic use of my time!'? (We'll wait)
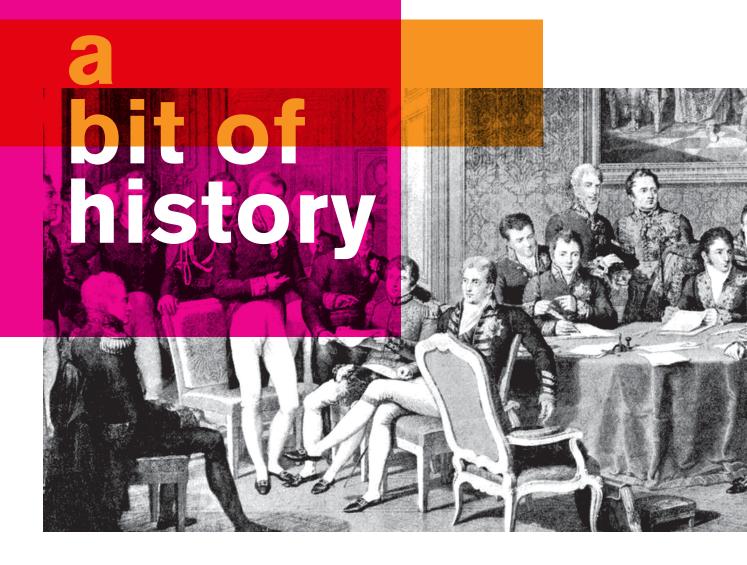
Surely (hopefully) you can think of one or two?

Sadly, the reality is that business conferences these days simply have not kept up their end of the bargain. As attendees we continue to pay thousands, fly hundreds of miles, hole up in below-average hotel rooms only to suffer through hours of PowerPoint sales pitches and awkward networking breaks. Let's not start on the hopeful sponsors and the amount of time, effort and dollars they plough into these supposedly lucrative activities.

We believe there has to be another way.

So we're calling for an end. An end to dull, uninspiring, cookie cutter conferences. Today's participants yearn to be taken on a journey; a thoughtfully curated and delivered, content rich experience.

It's time to bring joy back into conferences. Encourage interactivity and networking in more meaningful ways. And deliver tangible outcomes that makes joining conferences truly worthwhile.

Isn't it time for better conferences?

a bit of history

Humanity's need to congregate and confer has meant people have gathered and held "meetings" in some form since the early days of civilization. But it wasn't until Roman times that some formalisation occurred, driven by the requirements of increasingly important trade and commerce groups looking to build their influence and coffers.

One of the highest profile events in more 'recent' times was the famous Congress of Vienna held between September 1814 to June 1815 (obviously not all in one sitting). The Congress brought together the major world powers of the day to re-establish the territorial divisions of Europe at the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

It's within this notion of bringing people together, face-to-face, that we find the essence of what a conference is: a platform to exchange ideas and information, to discuss and in some cases negotiate, to build friendships and closer business relationships, to encourage better performance by individuals and organisations.

And whilst the labels may vary - 'conference', 'congress', 'summit', 'meeting', 'convention', 'briefing', 'AGM' - and the events may take different forms, the essential ingredients and objectives largely remain the same.

The advent of commercialisation

The present day 'conference industry' is of much more recent origin, and came into its own from the second half of the twentieth century, driven largely by industry associations across the USA and Europe (anyone else seeing the pattern here?).

Formalisation into an industry inevitably raised the profile of the opportunity, resulting in everyone feeling free to congregate, resulting in conferences covering every conceivable topic from world-changing matters to the World Taxidermy & Fish Carving Congress (we kid you not). And they largely looked and behaved the same, with standardised programming and formats.

Little has changed since, with the only notable exception being the integration of technology. Technology, which, in the early days, was predicted to bring about the end of the conference industry.

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why technology didn't kill the love

With the advent of faster internet it was proclaimed we no longer needed to waste precious time, effort and money traveling to conferences. And we could save the planet to boot! Instead we could "participate" from the comfort of our sofa, in a fluffy bathrobe and a bag of crisps by our side.

In theory it could have disrupted things, especially in certain parts of the world with super-fast broadband. Except for one important dimension: as humans we need human contact. And this is especially true in the case of our need to belong to a tribe, defined as a social group linked by a shared purpose or goal and common culture.

As helpful as social media has been in terms of connecting people, from across the office to around the world, most connections are loose at best. We could write a book about the stories of all the inappropriate behaviour that takes place in the "safety" of a group chat – from the simple overly-pushy sales pitch, through to photos that really don't belong on the internet, unless you perhaps make a living from such.

Face-to-face, palm-to-palm, cheek-to-cheek (depending on which part of the world you're in) is still the best way to form a true connection.

Why conferences are more relevant than ever

The desire to meet and confer is only growing. We are living in complex times and no one person has all the answers. Is it realistic to expect a band of "experts" on a stage to solve every problem? Social media isn't the panacea it was built up to be either. With research suggesting societies are increasingly suffering from severe loneliness, we would argue the value of live conferences will only increase.

Conferences also provide a unique opportunity to escape from our programmed and over-scheduled lives. They allow participants to not just immerse themselves in an environment and switch off from the distractions of work and other obligations, but to connect in a meaningful and focused way, with peers grappling with the same challenges.

Clearly then we absolutely need these platforms that bring communities or tribes together in a focused way to grapple with important issues.

Aside from gathering people for industry and political reasons, we also have organisations realising the value of staging their own conferences. The reasons for this are obvious: chiefly, control of the message, and the ability to "ring fence" an audience.

Moreover, modern-day marketing all but demands hosting one's own conference as an essential part of any serious organisations' promotional mix, whether they are for-profit or not. The rise in importance of 'content marketing' also lends itself perfectly to live events and conferences.

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what's wrong with most?

Where do we begin?! Actually, that's precisely where the biggest issue lies: lack of planning, from the beginning. As Benjamin Franklin supposedly once said "by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail" and sadly, we have witnessed many failed preparations in the conference world.

Beyond this, the list of "offences" is looooong. For starters...

boring programmes

We've all experienced it. Presentation after presentation without a clear rhyme or reason for each, featuring speakers at a podium reading off overly complicated slides in the hope they will impart some nugget of wisdom. Then it abruptly ends. And there's a rush to grab an underwhelming coffee or a soggy sandwich, before being subjected to it all over again for another 2-3 hours... We lose the will to live just thinking about it...

uninspiring speakers

Ever feel like you keep seeing the same names on conference programmes? That's because they often are the same people. And it's obvious why it happens – it's easier to convince someone to speak if they're already speaking at some other event. Of course, such people might well add a lot of value to a programme. But plenty of them definitely DO NOT. Then there's the vendors' pitches. We have no idea why they still do it, but almost without exception if you give a microphone to a person in sales or business development they will feel they have a right to bore you to death with intricate details of their wonderful company and its wonderful products. Where did you say the coffee stand is again?

painful networking breaks

Networking is something many people dread, perhaps even fear. And conference organisers often do nothing to help the situation. Usually because it's an afterthought, most networking involves nothing more than putting on a spread in the corner of the room, and the rest is left to chance. These rarely yield anything meaningful for the participants, except a bad impression of the event and precious time in their life they'll never get back.

is your conscience hurting?

Coinciding with the rise in popularity of congregating and conferring is the commensurate damage to the environment and the homogenisation of the "typical" participant. So many conferences pay little mind to the planet, and the myriad of people on it. Wastage comes in so many forms. And there's limited thought regarding accessibility for those who are differently-abled among us.

ineffective hosting environments

Venues can suck. There, we said it. From poor layouts, to inappropriate furniture, bad lighting to lousy menus. It's almost as though some are designed to work against your goals. They are either soulless or totally gaudy, therefore detracting rather than adding to the participants' experience. Then there's the food. Or not, as many people simply skip eating it. (Which must make sitting through those earlier presentations we mentioned a game of how to keep oneself awake!)

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how did we get here?

Some argue it's the lack of "professionalisation" of the conference industry that is to blame. And while that's changing in some parts of the world, with formal training programmes and certification, our own research suggests there's a lot more to it…

First up we have "it's just the way we've always done it" mentality. Rationale is, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. But is that really the case? Almost all the feedback we see suggests most events are headed for oblivion if they don't innovate.

Yet we keep seeing the same tired formats, programmes and speakers.

Depending on which part of the industry you're referring to, for some it's simply easier to go the cookie-cutter approach. By definition this drains them of any true creativity, and yields a 'pro-forma' event that is met with a shrug by most due to its lack of innovation.

In such environments there's a real fear of breaking the mould. The reasons are obvious – events are costly to run and taking risks might result in failure. Many would-be mavericks therefore hold back from innovating to avoid burning a pile of cash (although we'd argue the opposite is true! By not innovating you are dooming your event to failure. There are simply too many alternatives for participants to choose from, even if the majority of those are mediocre).

Then there's the issue of the industry's talent churn. Those who enter the world of conferences face a fast-paced environment, a host of obstacles, and pressure galore. It's truly not for the faint-hearted. This results in many who've been around the block a few times, exiting to less demanding roles outside of the industry. Taking along with them deep knowledge, relationships and invaluable experience.

With costs of staging conferences constantly rising, we also encounter a lot of finance related push-back. It's here that bottom-line profitability is prioritised over "experiences", and the focus is on costs rather than the outcomes. We fully agree the financials matter, but cutting a budget to the bare bones, and leaving an event with nothing but a venue and some speakers on a stage, will only result in a conference you may as well not have organised.

But herein lies a fun challenge… How could you take that budget and re-engineer the event so that both the 'financial' and 'participant experience' objectives are met?

Read on to find out…

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how do we do them better?

The clues to improving conferences lie in the problems.

planning

Lead times are everything in the conference world. Starting the whole process a minimum of 6 months out is a good rule of thumb in our experience. Unless the conference in question is very small, anything shorter than this and you're already on the back foot.

Do also keep in mind that huge costs savings could be yours for the taking with earlier bookings and commitments to venues and vendors.

designing

Design Thinking. Yes, you've no doubt heard of the phrase. But its application is straightforward: you need to step into the shoes of your prospective participant. This simple act can reveal a myriad of things that you might never have considered, or at the very least not thought important enough to address.

By going through the whole experience – from promotion of the event, the acquisition process, the registration process, the seating plan – as though you were experiencing it for the first time, will help you uncover gaps and build the best possible experience.

Moreover, expectations from participants for personalized, seamless experiences are only increasing. Conferences therefore need to take a proactive approach, which can only come through a detailed understanding of the needs of participants. As we explain next...

researching

The programme itself hinges on effective research. Structured primary and secondary research. Followed by data analysis. This means meaningful conversations with as many people as is practical, covering as much of the market/industry and all its players as possible. Relying on last year's programme or the words of a couple of so-called experts is a recipe for disaster.

With a rigorous research process a clear "red thread" should emerge, which is essentially a series of commonalities between each of the parts of the market you spoke with. Synthesise this and you have your "theme". This theme creates a compass, providing direction for each element of a programme. We're always amazed how, when asked what their theme is, organisers say they don't have one, and then wonder why their audience didn't really "get" the event.

programming

Following the robust research you've just done, you can start to build your programme, but try to avoid having a fixed idea of what that looks like. It's important to take on board what the market is saying they need, and look at how to deliver it in as innovative a way as possible.

Importantly, we're looking for meaningful ways to encourage engagement and plentiful opportunities for discussion and discovery. Only then can the issues that matter be thoroughly addressed. That said, it's a rare event that reveals something totally "original" nowadays, instead the value lies in facilitated exchanges and interactions between participants. And whilst we are at it, we need much better mechanisms to synthesise what's been exchanged so that participants leave with a clear plan of action.

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facilitating

We've found formal facilitation is an incredibly effective way to pull all the different strands of a conference together. Way beyond being just the MC of an event, a facilitator is essentially the glue that binds the programme, ensuring every participant gains maximum value and objectives are achieved.

But not just anyone can do this. It requires certain skills and abilities that only professionals usually possess. Importantly though, we've found facilitators don't need to be from the "inner-circle". In fact there are benefits in being from outside the business/industry because that removes bias (unconscious or otherwise) and allows for information to be processed and acted on with a fresh perspective.

engaging

Similarly, if the event is not already in a format where the audience actively participates in the content creation, then every session should be infused with some form of audience engagement, and prospective presenters required to incorporate this into their time slots. Touching on the latter first, all too often we see the tail wagging the dog. Reality is, being invited to speak at a conference is a privilege, one not to be taken lightly.

And whilst we're not advocating total prescription of presentations and presenters, there's certainly room to "guide" what is going to be touched upon, including ways to invite audience participation.

speakering

(yep, we made that one up)
Sure, certain industries definitely have a small clutch of "experts", but does that mean they are the only ones with insights into what's happening? We believe it's often at the fringes where you'll find the true innovation. The mavericks of the industry are sometimes a lot more interesting, and hopefully controversial. You just need to take the time to find them.

And speaker bureaus are not necessarily the answer. Yes, sometimes a high-profile headliner from outside an industry touching on a topic related to a theme is a powerful draw. However we advocate the use of speakers whom are in it for more than just a pay check. Although admittedly, finding and building those connections takes time and skill.

While we're on the topic of presenters and panellists, we champion a much greater effort with diversity. Taking the time to find the under-represented voices of the industry can result in much more inclusive and powerful outcomes.

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environmenting (okay, maybe that's a stretch)

Conference content and the space the conference is being hosted in need to support one another. This can only be done by learning about the needs of the audience and the capabilities of a space.

Compatibility and flexibility are key. Conferences need spaces designed for discrete needs, including quiet zones, wellness rooms, and bold, energising spaces - each delivered at the right time and with the right calibration, in terms of physicality such as lighting and furnishing.

networking

With participants already primed to share their challenges and start debates, designing networking opportunities should be a breeze. But don't drop the ball and leave things to chance. Designing a conference programme is as much about the formal sessions as it is the informal, less structured moments.

Taken to one extreme that can mean gathering insights about participants and looking for ways to help connect those who are aligned. The key to success is in truly understanding the audience and how they prefer to interact. And this is where technology is our friend. There's lots of fun to be had with this, especially in terms of the onsite experience!

financing

Conferences can be expensive to stage. And budgets are always limited. Whilst there are always creative ways to deliver a memorable experience, sometimes bigger is better when it comes to budgets.

Sponsorship is one way to increase the pot. Ticket sales is another. The latter is obviously not applicable in every situation though. But the former definitely is. Even brands can attract sponsorship revenue from other brands in the same eco-system for one simple reason: they are looking to reach the same audience.

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Strategic (contra) partners are another often untapped resource of value-add. And whilst these might not show up in a budget as a revenue line, their impact on an event can be enormous, delivering a lot more than the budget would otherwise allow.

thinking

And by no means less important because of its placement on this list, social consciousness is now a must. Going beyond the obvious lip service to reuse, reduce, recycle, it's about taking a holistic view and looking at ways that might impact both the environment and any participant within. Sustainability is a great place to start, and ditching the plastic bottles for water jugs and glasses is the simplest; it's also about considering the needs of all your participants who might have challenges that would otherwise exclude them.

Whilst you're at it, why not go the next step in the social equation and actively seek to create a connection with the local community? Again, this could take the simple form of inviting the local coffee shop in to serve a decent cappuccino or flat white, or moving a part of the programme off-site to re-invigorate participants' appreciation for nature and the great outdoors.

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every little bit helps

(a rain drop creates a river)

If you've made it this far in our manifesto, you might be thinking 'better conferences' are just too hard to pull off.

The reality is, even small changes in the way a single event is hosted can add up to having a big impact if we all subscribe to the ideas and values we've listed here. Every event that's a little bit better is a step in the right direction.

So we're calling on everyone involved in conferences to rise to the challenge, and take the opportunity to improve the entire ecosystem!

Let's inspire your community with better conferences.

who are we?

uncommon conferences is not your ordinary professional conference organiser. The hint is in our name. We're here to disrupt the very thinking around why and how conferences are run, and help deliver true value to participants through programmes that engage and inspire.

Work with us and we promise a vivid and outcome-driven experience for your participants with our fully customised, end-to-end conference management offering.

For more information on how Team UC could assist you in staging a better conference, schedule a no-obligation workshop by contacting us at:

hello@uncommonconferences.com

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