

[youtube:<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHoGRBuRsKQ> auto]Keynote to 4,500 event organisers in Las Vegas. Why most conference formats are still stuck in a late-twentieth century time-warp. Little has really changed in the last 15 years apart from Powerpoint replacing 35mm slides - and a few videos? Corporate events can be powerful and time-effective drivers of business success - but can also be great wasters of time and energy. So what does a great conference look like, in a world of intense time-pressures, online communities and networks, where attention span is seconds and multi-tasking in meetings is normal?

Why corporations are going to be far more sensitive about the “total opportunity cost” of meetings than in the past. Growing need to prove tangible value, measurable benefits to individual executives and the whole organization. Need for sharper definition of meeting purpose, clearer aims and objectives, and why organizations will be under pressure to achieve multiple objectives during the same time-frame eg client events scheduled alongside internal meetings.

Why audience experience is even more critical in an increasingly virtual world where delegates really want to breath the same air, feel, touch, engage and be changed. We should be thinking about “theatre”, while most conferences have more in common with classroom, lecture or (badly made) TV program. (More on this later).

Life's too short to waste on things that don't matter, that we are not passionate about. Why the future of conferencing is about emotion: engaging with issues that are of immense significance to participants, things they really care about.

Ideas can be read about, researched, Googled and the rest – but we are about changing people's minds and how they feel – which is entirely different. Gather people together for a life-changing experience, not to force-feed their minds with data sheets and graphs.

Does it really matter to me? Simple test for every speaker and every part of every presentation. Am I really passionate about this? If not, dump the slide and move on. Don't expect the audience to care either and why waste their time, they can get it all online.

Why tribalism is vital to business success and every event builds a tribe: every brand is a tribe, every team creates a new tribe, every customer group is a tribe and every corporation is a tribe of tribes. The reason most mergers destroy shareholder value is that the Excell spreadsheet numbers stacked up fine but the tribes did not. The stronger your tribe, the stronger your business will be – customer loyalty, staff loyalty, war for talent. Conferences are one of the most effective strategies for building tribal identity, and tribal gatherings will be vitally important in future. Five ways to turn your events into more effective tribe builders.

Reality check: do's and don'ts of conference technology. How budgets can rise and audience experience fall with clumsy use of new tools . Good and bad use of electronic polling, e-briefing

packs, digital devices given to delegates, SpotMe and similar meeting enhancers.

Using virtual teams and websites to prepare participants for an event, shape future events with participant input, and deliver stronger results.

Key question: who is making the decisions about who attends your meetings? If people were given a totally free choice, would they choose to attend at all, and if so, for how long? Are they attending entirely as a free choice or to be seen, to get on, to play their cards right?

Work-life balance impact on conference planning. How career objectives are changing and why work-life balance is now number one or two career priority. How conference organizers have often failed to keep pace with growing angst over time away from home. What it all means for program design, location, length, timing of start and weekend travel.

Third millennial clients events – new shapes and strategies for new situations. Expect growing demand for premium client events, positioning corporation as thought-leader rather than merely as a smart organization with great products or services. Ever greater search for out-of-conference client experiences – [risks](#) and opportunities. Culture – but whose culture? One person's heavenly experience is another person's discomfort – or even embarrassment. Challenges with after dinner speakers, comedians (big risks), and conflict with other needs – enough time to talk at dinner to other guests. Opportunities for community experiences – eg table magic, busking musicians, roving entertainers.... May be great venue but 25 minutes each way in a coach?? Beautiful setting but pity the weather was so cold for outdoors reception – backup plan?

Difference between excellent event and truly world class is the elusive 0.5%. Expect huge efforts to discover a new formula – which will be difficult since part of the secret is constant innovation, creativity, the elusive element of surprise, the ability to outshine an audience's expectations.

Why the details really matter: eg name badges too small or too low to be read from two metres away, hotel check-in with room details already printed and keys in envelopes, enough serving points for rapid coffee breaks to actually happen, free internet high speed wireless networking for all participants in all areas including hotel rooms (life's too short), dinner tables that are not too large and round (ever tried talking to someone other than on immediate left or right – long thin tables win every time), name boards in front of participants on tables that are large enough to be read from a long distance away, very brief pre-reading – who really bothers when faced with going to bed at 3am on last night at home for a week?

From Lecture to theatre: why performance will be everything. Lectures are about imparting data but computers do that faster at home. Theatre is about engaging in a community experience, about changing how people feel as well as how they think. Lectures can be watched at home, TV programmes on a mobile on a train, but theatre requires total presence and demands audience commitment. People don't drift into a performance late, nor rush out to take a call, nor do e-mails at the same time.

So what does it mean to create theatre out of a lecture? Lessons from theatre are many – but almost totally ignored by event organizers and presenters.

Seating is critical. Just think how much people will pay to be 5 rows nearer the action. Round tables are great for group work but almost useless for theatre. Raised seating can work wonders, theatre in the round or why not use a real theatre rather than try to create one in an old aircraft hanger or exhibition hall. Lighting is everything. Poor lighting means a disastrous show. Brilliant lighting engages and holds attention. Lighting creates atmosphere, tension, expectation, mood and focuses where the audience looks. Most hotel ballrooms are entirely unsuited to third millennial events – lighting is just one of their drawbacks. Movement creates an irresistible force – it is almost impossible to keep looking at a performer who is motionless, if another performer is moving rapidly across the stage. Staging – just look at the trouble rock concert organizers go to with stage extensions, and creative positioning, to allow performers to move right into an audience. Intimacy is created when a performer turns to address the audience directly – seen most powerfully in solo stage performances of plays.

All of these things can be developed at relatively low cost in medium and large sized venues. Turning lectures into theatre enhances the power of every idea, increases speed of understanding, assists memory, is interesting and entertaining. It requires joint planning by event creators, event designers, the performer (presenter) and the entire technical team.

The most important thing of all: informal networking. Then there is the most important part of conferencing which is not what goes on in sessions, but in informal meetings during every unstructured moment. How do we push this kind of activity up a level? Importance of virtual or physical message boards. Opportunities to integrate with what people already use eg SMS and mobile phones. Match-making with table or seat pre-allocations – when and where to do this.

Culture, language and jet lag. Radical approaches needed to biggest unsolved challenge for global teams: daylight. Issues in video conferencing, and short conference meetings. Need for creative timing of sessions – for example starting afternoon and ending at night if fits better with most body clocks. Form of torture is sleep deprivation in a prison cell. Variation on this is sleep deprivation in an important meeting. What language are you using, English? International English or American or British or Australian English (it really matters). What speed? Who is really going to take the translation (pride issues). How many are we using for the slides on screen?

Virtual conferences – how to make them happen better. Despite premium for breathing same air, expect more events to have virtual audiences grouped around a physical event. How to make video work for you. The most important rule is audience engagement and

The greatest tool is..... eye contact. 20 second demo in meetings – get everyone to turn to neighbor and talk about what they usually eat for breakfast – with no eye contact – look only at hair line.... Or eyebrows. It is a disturbing and strange experience. Welcome to video conferencing – screen in one place, camera above, no true eye contact in most cases. Same in video links with corporate events – watch audience light up when the speaker for a few moments turns direct to camera and talks to a remote site directly, returning to do the same

regularly. (demonstrate this in my presentation – few seconds to do)

Second rule: pay attention to audience and speaker dynamics. If a speaker would usually pace the stage, don't videolink them in sitting at a table in front of a microphone. Even better, display behind them an identical set to the one we would see on a huge screen if they were standing in front of us in the flesh right now. (demonstrate this in my presentation – few seconds to do).

Economic and environmental worries - impact on conferencing: Impact of economic instability – more short-termism in conference cycle management. Oil prices, dollar – euro and other issues likely to impact global conference planning. Why environmental decisions about your next events will be driven by emotion rather than science (which only gives us a range of guesses about life in 50 years time). Working out carbon-impact of your next event and why it really matters. How to future-proof your events from environmental critics. How some corporations will significantly alter pattern of corporate travel with new restrictions which will impact events. Carbon trading and offsetting – how it works, why it will be increasingly controversial (because of some rogue schemes) and why despite this it will become a key part of conference planning.

Emerging markets – the next big think in conferencing – obsessions by many corporate, opportunities for interesting and exotic new conference locations. Discovery programmes – total immersion in new experiences, kinds of organization, culture as tools for new learning and insight.

And finally – winning the war for talent – attracting next generation of high-flying, radical, creative thinkers with passion for excellence and world-class ability to make great things happen. The secret is purpose and the hunger to find it at work (surveys). It is not enough to pay more. Offering a better work-life balance is also not enough (though without it the best talent will often walk away). When people see that you are making a difference, that the world changes because of what you do, that lives are touched, careers energized, life-ambitions fulfilled, that organizations are transformed for the better and that people are empowered to take hold of their own future... then you will find you have the pick of the talent.

Take hold of your future events- or the events will take hold of you.

This is an extraordinary time to be alive – and through our events we are privileged to be guides to those who attend, as they seek answers for their own futures.