

As associations explore new ways to deliver value to members, many find that old models of conducting conferences are being reshaped by new approaches supported by technology, which can and has made some great advances in how conferences are done. But if you look past the buzz and beneath the surface at what attendees really want, it's not technology at all. It's new knowledge, applied learning, and promising new relationships.

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We've all been bombarded with invitations to attend Web conferences, Web seminars, Webinars, and online meetings that take the place of face-to-face meetings. They promise to deliver reduced travel costs, greater attendance, and increased revenues. The early adopters love these online tools. Many have yet to experience the value.

Other emerging technologies don't attempt to serve as alternatives to face-to-face meetings but rather aim to enhance them. Smart cards, for example, are now popular at major conferences. With the swipe of your card at a display booth, vendors capture your personal information and are able to target their marketing materials to your specific interests and needs. Such technology clearly enhances the value of the conference for both attendee and exhibitor.

So if the promise of technology is so great, what's keeping us from radically shifting our approaches toward delivering large group events? For some, the technology learning curve feels too great. Others compare the experience achieved through online technology to face-to-face events, and the online experience falls short. And then there are those who see a potential role for technology but don't see how to create a viable business model to support the tools — the return on investment just isn't clear.

With all the available technology, it's easy to lose sight of the real purpose of using technology in the first place — to serve members. With new technology everywhere, it's challenging to determine what you actually need and what you don't — or more importantly, what your members and other stakeholders will benefit from. Further, the tools are pricey, and finding viable business models that support the acquisition and use of new technology alongside break-even (or better yet, profitable) programs is not easy.

Conferences: Not About Content?

What do people remember six months after they attend a conference? Not new theories and PowerPoint presentations. Not even the content. They remember

their overall experience. While content is an important part of the experience, the location, the hallway conversations, the happy hour discussions, and the informal networking are the things that generate memories.

Content may draw attendees in the first place, but personal interactions leave the lasting impression. Looking beneath the surface, you uncover what really matters to people: applied learning through sharing and discussing stories, creating and rekindling relationships, and developing new business opportunities.

The annual TechLearn conference (www.techlearn.com) illustrates these points. TechLearn is widely regarded as *the* event for anyone interested in online learning technology. Immediately following the event, the keynotes and individual presentations are posted on the TechLearn Web site for the world to see. Why pay \$1,000 to attend when you can access the entire program after the event is over and without the time investment and travel costs? That's what TechLearn attendees do, though, because TechLearn's producers understand where the value of their event resides — and it's not in the content alone.

Now, circle back to technology. Where's the emphasis? A lot of technologies are great for delivering content, but as we've seen, that's only one part of the reason people attend conferences. Of the technologies you've seen lately, how many actually focus on enabling truly collaborative learning, fostering relationships, or brokering business opportunities between attendees themselves? Very few. But the vision is there. Some emerging tools that support traditional conferences include a variety of interactive devices allowing the audience to interact with presenters, typically through collecting and aggregating questions and conducting real-time polls. In addition, PDA-type products that facilitate focused networking allow attendees to create and store profiles that become part of a dynamic directory of attendees who possess similar interests. And it's only a matter of time until these PDAs begin serving as homing devices that indicate

when you're within range of a like-minded attendee.

Technology Forwarding Community

If people want conferences to serve as forums for collaborative learning, networking and relationship building, and developing new business opportunities, the good news is this: Many associations already provide these benefits as part of their existing events. But technology can extend the opportunity significantly.

The New Media Consortium (NMC), for example, is an association of universities, major technology companies, and museums focused on advancing educational technologies. Last fall the NMC produced a four-day online conference. Not only did the NMC produce the event without financial risk; it generated revenue and received rave reviews from its 225 attendees — 100 of whom were paying nonmembers, and therefore, potential new members. To see a streaming PowerPoint presentation of the conference, visit www.icohere.com/breeze/conferences/NMCWelcome/index.html.

Associations must deliver the core value that members want, beyond just once or twice a year. An emerging opportunity exists and is ripe for the taking — establishing core competencies that deliver the benefits associated with traditional conferences but on a consistent basis through integrating online events, face-to-face meetings, and the ongoing perks of membership. These competencies are important for exceeding members' expectations as well as extending the association's outreach to potential members.

Shaping the future of association conferences requires a fundamental shift in the assumptions underlying the role of large-group meetings and events. The challenge is this: To shift one's approach ultimately requires a strategy that positions developing community — the real draw of conferences — at the center.

Most communities share a number of qualities and characteristics: They are held together by distinct operating norms; members are distinguished by their formal and informal roles; trust must be built to ensure quality interactions; and a shared sense of purpose serves as the glue that bonds the community together. Communities are only "communities" if

they possess these characteristics and engage people in collaborative processes over time — not just once a year at a conference, for example. By creating online communities that explicitly link to face-to-face conferences, research projects, and special interest groups, associations can enhance member loyalty, increase participation, and reach new members as stakeholders gain resources and access to relationships that deliver real value and that they'd otherwise miss. Energy that's created during face-to-face meetings is harnessed and sustained through follow-up online activities.

A community is not a listserv, discussion board, or Web site. It is a mindset.

While communities may rely on these technologies, they first must include a strategy for sustaining a collaborative community over time — online and off-line. When it comes to technology, the question is how to use it to elevate the value of the community-focused services of the association to increase member loyalty, drive new members to join, and improve the bottom line. The vision of how PDAs can be used at face-to-face events is powerful — but consider linking the PDA capability to post-conference online debriefs among special interest groups, to online business development matchmaking services, or to brokering multiorganizational projects. The concept of community is key. And the possibilities are endless.

Associations can realize the power of community through developing competencies in the following areas.

Online conferences. Through integrating live Web conferencing, narrated presentations, and facilitated online discussions, it becomes possible to deliver an entirely online conference over several days or even a weeklong period. Just like face-to-face conferences, online conferences, when facilitated artfully, allow attendees to obtain compelling content from presenters, ask questions, network with other attendees, and obtain practical resources and information. Unlike face-to-face conferences, however, people can attend from anywhere and at any time that fits their schedule, which is ideal for an internationally dispersed group. The overall production costs of an online event are significantly less than its physical equivalent.

Preconference communities. Pre-conference communities "break the ice" prior to a face-to-face event. By engaging attendees in introductions and presentations through Web conferencing, online discussions, and conference calls prior to a face-to-face conference, it becomes possible to accelerate collaborative learning and networking when attendees finally come together in person.

Postconference communities. Post-conference communities extend relationships and learning following a face-to-face event. Rather than end the conference when participants walk out the door, a process is provided to keep people connected for a designated period of time. Such communities can serve as vehicles for sharing special interest group projects, discussing findings from research, and mentoring.

End-to-end conference communities. These include pre- and postconference activities. Some have likened the end-to-end community to a "digital sandwich," since the face-to-face meeting is typically sandwiched between group interactions supported by e-learning and collaboration tools and technologies.

Communities of practice. Unlike an event-driven community, communities of practice are ongoing communities that involve people who possess common interests in sharing, learning about, and advancing a specific domain of knowledge. The intent that ties the group together involves the desire to share and build collaboratively a body of knowledge that may be put into practice. These communities can become the technology-based platform in which online, pre-, post-, and end-to-end conferences are delivered.

A Case in Point

Now back to the New Media Consortium (NMC) — the organization sought new ways to engage members and walk its talk regarding the demonstration of new media and educational technology. The result was a four-day, comprehensive online conference. So how did it work?

After registration attendees were provided with a login ID and password to access the conference Web site. On the opening day of the event, participants from five continents and a dozen time zones logged into the online collabora-



tive environment, created a networking profile, and confirmed their time zone. Each attendee was met with a streaming media welcome and overview by NMC's CEO, Larry Johnson. Every day a new set of virtual conference rooms became available, where attendees could interact with presenters and other participants. A "collaboration café" enabled networking and group discussion through attendee-defined topics. Daily announcements alerted participants to news and events, and a daily "happy hour" provided an opportunity to mix with the day's presenters and other attendees. A searchable directory of participant profiles created additional networking opportunities. Instant messaging throughout the conference and public and private ad hoc virtual meetings created an easy, friendly environment to compare interests and exchange information.

One attendee commented, "What I appreciated most about this mode of conferencing was the ability to see and hear presentations — several times if needed — and ask questions either in a group forum or privately about matters one is interested in. It was much easier — than in a regular conference — to tailor the conference to one's needs. It is easier to network with people, too, if that is what one wants." Johnson says the NMC now views online conferences as an important competency that will be further developed and utilized.

Making Sense of It All

Many associations already provide a range of community-focused technology. We cannot overemphasize that technology is only part of the equation. More important than the technical architecture of a community is its social architecture, which defines the roles, communication plans, content development and management approaches, and member-involvement strategies. A well-defined social architecture helps avoid pitfalls like creating an undefined open-ended environment that you call a community (such as a discussion board) that eventually joins the ranks of the thousands of "ghost towns" on the Web.

In today's world, a wide variety of technologies exist to enable different levels of communication, collaboration, and online learning to gel across spatial and

temporal boundaries. (For a closer look at some of these synchronous and asynchronous tools, see more information from the authors in this month's *Executive Update Online* at www.executiveupdate.com.)

A significant step beyond this smorgasbord of individual tools are Web-based platforms that aim to provide some or most of the functionality of these stand-alone tools but do so within a single, integrated, collaborative environment. The integration and synthesis of these tools create a container that turns out to be far greater than the sum of its parts and can become the single portal for all community activities. Going beyond the hodgepodge of individual technologies can elevate members' experiences by encouraging collaborative learning and knowledge sharing.

Large group events and conferences, when connected to a broader community capability, will be a differentiator that will be tough to match. Given that attendees want more than content, associations are positioned to capitalize on the conference-community opportunity.

The fact of the matter is that online conferences, face-to-face conferences, and online communities are popping up everywhere. Members — and of course nonmembers, who represent potential members — are being presented with online learning options and other content-oriented alternatives every day. The bottom line is that associations are no longer the only game in town. Competencies and skill sets for facilitating community will become the differentiator.

When it comes to associations, one of the biggest barriers to embracing online conferences — and communities that incorporate online learning events — is the fear that these activities will cannibalize and erode revenue from traditional, face-to-face venues. This is a legitimate fear. But as has been said in the corporate world, "If we don't eat our own lunch, someone else will" — that is, if we don't explore new models and ways of delivering value, someone else will, and then revenue erosion will indeed occur.

Contrary to the cannibalization assumption, our view is that online conferences and community actually complement face-to-face events and rep-

resent an incredible emerging opportunity. But these activities require new models — from conceptualization to marketing to production and delivery. There's a learning curve — not a big one but a curve nonetheless. The good news is that if you're good at producing face-to-face events, you'll be equally proficient at producing online conferences. And if you're good at facilitating dialogue and facilitating networking among your members, which most associations are, you're on the right track, since online community building requires the same skills.

David Cooperrider, professor at Case Western Reserve University and founder of the appreciative inquiry approach to organizational development, describes his thinking behind choosing an online conference as the launching pad for his "Business as an Agent of World Benefit" initiative: "When I first explored the potentials of bringing appreciative inquiry and organizational best-practices sharing to online communities

in business and nonprofits, I soon came to the conclusion that creating a vibrant, alive, relevant, user-friendly virtual space was a mirage. But no more. I have now seen the future of positive organizational learning, collaboration, and knowledge sharing. It is real. It is exciting. And the potentials are vast." Cooperrider's conference will kick off a ten-year global research project with member affiliates around the world.

We believe that associations are well positioned to realize the opportunities that lie at the intersection of conferences and online community. New skills and technology will be required as we retool our competencies. In return, associations will benefit from these new models and approaches and reaffirm the value and contribution that they provide to their members.

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