

Intellectual full body experience

How to make great conferences

By Media Evolution



EUROPEAN
REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT
FUND



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INTRO

Our conference – The Conference – has been going for 10 years. Some 300 plus speakers have come through it with 1000 to 5000 persons participating each year. So we've learned a great deal about how to gather people, and we've learned a great deal about the art of curation.

There's a "truth" that the world is moving fast and that we need to figure out what the latest trends are in order to have a relevant program. Our experience from having curated conferences and seminars for ten years is that it's actually the same themes that's been apparent for all these years. In a grander scheme of things development – technological as well as societal – is going slower than we think. And by the way a minute is as long as it always has been, it's just that we are able to cram more things into it which might make it the experience of a minute faster.

So from a curational point of view it might be wise to dare to focus on a topic for longer periods of time. So maybe three years of time, instead of having a new topic each month. ,

It's easy to think that conference organising and curation is all about getting the right content, that if we only get the right people to speak we will have a successful event. However, our experience is that it's all of the other things you do, and can do, that makes a difference.

The following are the mindsets and tools we've developed for making those choices. Additionally we've added insights from conversations with some of our favorite conference organizers across Europe.

MINDSETS

Zoom out

Ask yourself what industry am I in, really? What is it that is going to go down? What is the purpose of what you're doing? Here's an example: Think about the record industry circa 2001. Things are getting haywire. Piracy is huge, and the music industry said; "Okay, what are we going to do about this", and it is obvious that the solutions to the industry's problem wouldn't come from within the industry, because at the time they identified as the *record* industry, and if you identify as a record industry is very hard to to sort of think creatively about what an mp3 can do, or what streaming can be. Instead one needs to identify that we're in the *music* business or in the *cultural* business. So, really try to zoom out and see to the fullest extent, what you're doing.

In the case of conferences our belief is that they are a ground for debate, human connections and a place to generate new knowledge and insights.

Establish and live your values

Before you start designing your gathering and inviting speakers, spend plenty of time to define what your values are, and then make sure to use those values on a day to day basis. Furthermore it's of utmost importance that these values aren't individual values, but rather values you as a group or as a company agree on and hold each other accountable for. Use values as arguments when making choices.

[An example from The Conference](#) is that we early on committed to having at least 50% female speakers. It took two years until we reached it, and has lived up to that value for seven consecutive years

Be a host

Organizing a conference means hosting other people. Then it is your job to lean in and make sure that the people that you've gathered feel at home and feel seen. At Media Evolution we often remind ourselves of how priests in churches greet people, and the fact that he or she always greets everybody by the door, looking people in the eye, saying welcome. All of this makes humans feel at home, it's an invitation to participate. And so this is something that we always do when we have events. And even at The Conference with some 1000 participants, all our staff members will be at the door, greeting everybody saying "Hello, welcome".

Sharing is caring

Events come and go. Being in the physical space experiencing them comes with a certain magic, but it's also a bit of a waste to have good ideas shared with a limited number of

people. It is relevant to consider in what ways you can record and document what is being said and have that shared in an asynchronous way. Not only is it generous to share, it is great marketing that builds an audience over time.

Ask for help, and collaborate

Asking for help can be much harder than expected. One reason it's hard is that it's hard to be of help. And so in asking for help, you need to really know what you want. The clearer you can be with your goals and your values the easier it is for people to help. A good way of getting help is to establish partnerships with organizations that are reaching for the same goals as you.

Invest in curatorial trust.

In most cases you as an organiser will host more than one event, meaning you are not only it for the next event you are in the business of building trust for your curatorial brand. This is an important recognition because it means you need to invest in the long run, and not only make decisions that benefit your very next event. Trust is really hard to earn, but when you have people will at least pay attention next time you send an invitation to a gathering.

One consequence this might have on the practice of inviting speakers is that you judge them not only by their qualification, but also personality and eagerness to invest time in what you are doing. There is a big difference between choosing people that are willing to make an impact versus people that are conceived as the *winners*, in their field. For The Conference we've deliberately offered stage time to people who are super eager to participate and spend time at the event, staying for four days instead of four hours. Taking meetings with local companies, exploring the city of the host, participating in speaker dinners and so on.

This strategy also offers the audience unexpected new acquaintances that they years after might see on television and other high-stake contexts. It is also much more fun to build trust in your curation with people that are actually really, really good, but maybe aren't that well known yet. And most of the time the quality will be better with engaged juniors versus disengaged seniors.

Success is in impact, not numbers

We live in a time when we measure everything by numbers. But we much rather want to consider what impact we have. We rather have a deep impact on one person's life than briefly touch ten people.

In measuring success we need to acknowledge the full body and all the senses of our participants, and not just count the fact that there is a body in the flesh present. That

doesn't really matter at the end of the day. In his book *Poetics of Space* the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, writes that "It is the inner immensity that gives real meaning to certain expressions concerning the visible world.", meaning humans are huge on the inside and very small on the outside. So let's acknowledge that, especially when we are gathering people, it's what happens on the inside that matters.

CHOICES

It's easy to take things for granted and to go with the flow without stopping and make those thoughtful value and mindset based choices that make the whole difference to what you are doing. We have realized that conference making is about making choices, and to make very deliberate choices and to know why you're making certain choices.

Scale

How big do you want your event to be? We resisted moving to a bigger venue for many years, because we wanted to be sold out earlier, sort of build up the hype before we made that move.

How does digital manifest itself

This year and next year, the big question is going to be about what aspects of your event should be digital. The funny thing with the conference is that we've always had a live stream and there's always been an open archive of all of the talks. And that has always been for free. And we've done that in solidarity with all the people who couldn't afford to be in the room or didn't get a hold of a ticket.

When it comes to organizing fully virtual or hybrid events you need to really know what you are doing, and maybe even more importantly why. The pandemic has offered everybody experience of how it is to attend virtual meetings, seminars and conferences. A big realisation is just how much of the capabilities to connect humans in a serendipitous way get lost in a digital space, it really can't be thought of as a gathering, which in our understanding is what a conference is all about. If it's not a gathering of humans, it's "only" a knowledge sharing session, that could just as well take place on a YouTube link.

An interesting piece of insight that came out of a survey we did is that conference goers are okay with having a keynote speaker be present virtually from another location. So instead of the hybridity of an event being about having participants connect digitally the speakers would participate online. This also speaks to the fact that people go to conferences to meet other participants, not only to get the knowledge that is shared on the stages.

Scope – convergence

Try to resist topical or industry silos. Your audience need a broader scope than you think. Even though you're running a an event that is for a specific industry, it's wise to always bring people from the outside, because that's where where we can actually learn new things. When you listen to somebody who works with similar things in an adjacent industry you can take

leaps in your thinking, it's simply easier to develop borrowed ideas when you can't just copy and paste them.

The place and the location

The importance of the venue you choose can't be stressed enough. The venue is one of the most important tools for creating something that evokes interest. It can be an atmosphere you're chasing, or you can use the venue as a surprise element. It can be a place that the topics you have aren't usually discussed in, which put your participants slightly out of their comfort zone, in a good way.

TOOLS

Create a world

Again, a conference is much more than a stage with a speaker. A tool to use that has a big impact and shows your participants that you take responsibility for the full experience of the event is the use of set design, smell, light etcetera to create a world.

At Media Evolution we often debate our experiences of restaurants. What the difference between a good and a bad restaurant is. That it's a restaurant that not only focuses on the food on the plate, but also thinks about the music, the acoustics, the light, and all of that, because that's what sort of eventually makes an experience good or bad.

In the words of the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa: "We remember through our bodies as much as through our nervous systems".

Consider sequences

Portals are a great way to create a sense of human scale at big gatherings. Again, churches are interesting as benchmarks since they always had a small room before the huge room. Because the huge room of the church is there to sort of make you feel that you are this big divine world. The small room you first enter – where the priest stands and says "Hello" – is there to make you feel comfortable within those premises.

Another way to use sequences as a tool for creating a human scale is to create rooms within the rooms. They can lower the roof in a big space and create hubs to cling onto when a crowd becomes too much. Furthermore, a lot of rooms enhance the memories from an event. This is something we learned from our speaker Ed Cook. He's a grandmaster of memory, one of those guys that can memorize 60 decks of cards. He spoke about the importance of hosting excellent parties, and that the difference between an excellent party and a poor party lies in how many locations it occurs in. This is because humans remember through the spaces we're in, so if a party is only hosted in one room, we will have a poorer memory from that party, unlike a party that is hosted in three rooms.

Another important sequence to get right is the fact that an event takes place before, during and after the actual days of the happening. It's common that you spend all of the effort on the during phase. Especially there is a huge untapped potential in being mindful about what you do before and how you onboard people into an experience.

Rhythm

Just as in a theater play or in a classical concert different tempos keep the audience's attention, the switching from fast and slow, and back from slow to fast is a great tool for a

conference organizer. Change of pace and different rhythms through a gathering can be conceived in many ways. An example is the way in which you can take responsibility for the participants' blood sugar levels. As an organizer, you might think that “Okay, let's always have candy available to keep everybody happy”, but that will only cause people’s blood sugar to rush to the top, and then an hour later be all the way down again, and then you have a problem. And so we have a rule that the only time when candy is served is before the last keynote presentation. Because by the time the blood sugar levels are on the bottom again the conference will be over.

Similarly you can think about how you create spaces for rest, how do you inspire physical movement, how can yoga be a part of the program in a relevant way etcetera.

Mediate

Think about the situation of an art exhibition. In front of you there are huge abstract color field paintings. Okay, so there's the block of red and a piece of white. What do you make of this, when you're left to your own devices. If you need help you'll go find an audio guide. And through this audio guide you can learn what the artists intentions were, in what context they were made and so on. All the things you need to connect the art to your own thinking. Just as it's challenging to be dumped in an art exhibition it is unlikely for a conference audience to just get it. Humans need help. So use all the contextual knowledge you as a curator gather in the process of putting a program together and make sure you share it before and after the content, the speaker. Hold people's hands. Always be contextualizing.

Because it's, again, easy to think that when you're running a conference, you're in the content business. That you're booking speakers and putting them on stage. Content, done, check. But you need to spend as much time on thinking about how you communicate the context in which the presentations take place, because that's where you help the audience connect the dots for themselves.

This is communication

Art and culture is communication, and so is conferences. A lot of great creativity is wasted on poor communication. So, when you do put something out there, don't make the mistake of not spending time for people to know about it, or understand it. And in this semantics matters, graphic design matters, and set design matters.

Communication is all about showing you care for what you've produced. If you care about the experience, and if you care that people actually listen to what you have to say, then they will eventually read, listen, or see it. But it doesn't happen automatically.