

Get "Fest-ed!"

by Jim Carroll

How many times do you open your annual conference and tell everyone to turn off their cellphones and Blackberries?

I've thrown a few association executives a curve ball in my recent keynotes, because I get up on stage right after them and tell everyone to TURN THEM BACK ON!!!!

After all -- we're in the age of interaction and innovation, and it's the era of doing things differently! Why do I do this? Text-message polling. Here's the thing: we're in the age of interaction -- and your annual meeting is going to change quicker than you think.

We're in the age of continuous partial attention. People are going to surf, read email, interact and browse, during events and conferences. We have to get used to it. We need to adapt, structure needs to change, interactivity needs to be built in. The brutal reality is this -- we're on the edge of something very different here in terms of the audience at the events we run or participate in.

Dealing with that is best done by jumping into the new world of meetings, and getting your feet wet -- fast.

There are dozens of things you can do. Here are a few thoughts to start.

Get interactive!

Remember those clunky audience survey gizmos? They're toast -- they're from the olden days. These days, you can get interactive for a fraction of the cost.

For the last several months, I've been using a cell-phone text-message polling tool to open my keynotes. It provides for some very cool, fast interactivity at the start of the session. And not only that - at any point during a keynote or workshop, I can stop, build a poll, and get some instant feedback. It's WOW!

I'm using the services of a startup company called QuickMobile. I pull up a webpage that features a customized, industry or association specific multiple-choice question -- and a text-message number. People text in their answers, and as they do so, a pie chart on the screen starts updating dynamically. I keep the poll open for three minutes -- and it's a blast because the crowd really gets into it.

I just did this for an audience of 300 insurance professionals, and it was a blast.

Here's what's really interesting -- many of the baby boomers in my audiences don't know how to text-message. The Millennial's know this, and take right over, skewing the results -- which provides me with the segue for some pretty dramatic opening comments on the rate of change that surrounds us today -- because generational dynamics are proving to be one of the biggest challenges for associations to deal with today!

Which leads to the question: what are you doing to keep your conference program relevant for the text-message generation?

The cost to bring interactive technology into the meeting is collapsing. QuickMobile's polling service is a good example of that. Check them out at <http://www.csae.com/staff/scripts/ite/scripts/www.quickmobile.com>

Change your conference/event/tradeshow brand?

Does your conference marketing suck? Maybe it does, and you don't know it.

People today don't want to go to an "annual conference" and attend "plenary sessions." Kids (and today's 30-40 somethings -- the demographic you increasingly want to get to attend!) go to FESTIVALS.

I think they're expecting the same brand image velocity for the conferences or events that they might attend. Would you rather go to the "121st Annual Tree Farmers Association Annual Meeting and Trade Show?" Or would you rather go to "TreeFest 2009 - The Place Where Tree People Rock!"

Last week, I keynoted a corporate event, known as the Satisloh Users Group. Essentially, a group of engineers and management from optical labs throughout the U.S. Do you know what they called their conference this year? SLUGFest 2008.

That's cool, and that's a good brand. It puts a certain different spin on the event, doesn't it?

You can apply the same thinking to your program titles: rename them! Add some zest, some spice, and kick things up a notch! Back in May 2005, I wrote a column in an Association Agenda called, "10 Ways to Not Have a Boring Meeting." I still see a lot of annual conferences and events that follow the same old formula, and do the same old things.

Try change -- it's great!

Explore new worlds

Maybe things are changing faster than we think. I also recently did a keynote for the launch of Virtualis, a new conference and learning center found on Second Life; its launch was covered extensively in the U.S. meetings industry, including Successful Meetings and Meetings.Net.

The site was launched by professional event planners, and it truly is a wonder to behold. Get yourself an invite for a tour from Dan Parks, the creative genius behind it. He is at cpudan@mac.com -- watch the video at <http://silverandgoldie.com/virtualis.htm> (Dan lives on an island in B.C., but has some global momentum behind the initiative.)

My first reaction, when I was invited to speak, was, well, "that's the dumbest idea I ever heard." Then, I realized that's one of the "innovation killer" phrases that I rant about. So I bit my tongue and took part -- and boy, do I have a different perspective on the "world."

Did you catch the National Post article last week about how Arcelor, a global mining company, used Second Life for its annual meeting? Maybe there is something going on here.

I don't think our human-based conferences and events will ever disappear -- but I think they will change in curious and mystic ways. Maybe we will see a blend of real events with real beer, backed by virtual events with, well, who knows?

Understanding some of the unique things occurring out there is a great first step in trying to comprehend what *might* happen.

Get short!

People are losing their attention spans. We're all thinking in bullets. Short sentences. Web copy. Quick Blackberry messages. Small phrases.

Keynotes and plenaries and such things used to run for 90 minutes. I'm noticing whether I'm speaking, or someone else is, that attention spans seem to be topping out at 45 minutes. Either you draw the one-way knowledge-delivery to a close at that point, or you need to build in an interactive panel, pre-planned Q&A or some other type of interactivity beyond that. The audience increasingly wants to participate, and that needs to be a part of the program.

The same holds true for workshops and breakouts. I'm finding that well-planned panel discussions are a hit -- make sure you've got lively people ready to go with some unique insight. And this is where the talents of a well-trained moderator, topic expert or speaker can come in: they might cost money, but those folks *know* how to make such a discussion work.

The key point is: we're all losing our minds in a mass of swirling, fast information, and annual conferences and events need to do things differently to keep up with the mindset of those who attend (or need to change to draw in those who don't attend!)

Get networked!

It's crunch time with some budgets, right? Given some economic uncertainty? Sponsors are more important than ever before -- but you might not be able to get them if you offer the same-old, same-old.

That's why learning to network with your peers is critical. That's what CSAE is for. There are other powerful resources too; for years, I've belonged to both the MiForum (<http://groups.google.com/group/MiForum>) and MeCo (Meetings Community - <http://www.meetingscommunity.org/>), in which hundreds of meeting planners, association executives, speakers and bureaus participate in an ongoing discussion of industry issues.

There have been numerous requests for people seeking new "sponsorship ideas," and each and every request has resulted in a flood of postings. There are a lot of people out there with a lot of ideas on how you can make your meeting or event work -- learn to network in a different way!

There's more!

There are lots of ideas, aren't there! What are yours? Let me know, and we'll make this a running dialogue. Send me your thoughts on "how to make meetings work" -- reach me at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com

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