

Winning Entry in the Miles Clarke Business Events Communication Award 2009

Time to Embrace the Unvirtual:

Will the meetings industry still exist in ten years?

*By Ian Whitworth**

Bigger industries than this have been swept away by technological change, gone forever like the neighbourhood CD store. Why should we be exempt?

To avoid digital extinction, every business must constantly re-examine what it *actually does*.

Conferences were invented to distribute information and ideas among people with a specialised interest. People would travel from afar to watch experts project information on screens. And that's pretty much how conferences still operate.

What does that mean now, when you can get unlimited expert information from around the world, while sitting on your couch with a laptop, a glass of red and the TV on? Do slideshows still cut it when screens permeate every corner of our lives, and everything on them is better than PowerPoint?

With unlimited free information, plus growing environmental and financial objections to flying people everywhere, you could argue that the speeches'n'lunch conference model is as doomed as the fax.

The start of the solution is embracing digital behaviour – not the actual gizmos themselves, but the mindset of their owners. Conferences have always relied on the broadcast model of communication: delivering the compliant masses a one-way stream of information from the people who 'know best'.

The audience might play a small part, through Q&A and audience responders. But Q&A always feels like an afterthought, following a speaker who has already run over time. Each questioner feels the simmering resentment from the rest of the audience, who can smell the coffee and muffins out in the corridor. Responders are better, but they can only choose from answers pre-written by the organiser, blocking the unconventional thinking that might lead to a breakthrough.

Digitally-minded audiences won't wear this straitjacket. A sign of the future surfaced at a US developer conference last year, while the MC ran a badly received interview. A steady stream of people posted Twitter messages saying 'I'm in Texas at a conference session that sucks'. Soon they all realised they were in the same room, decided they had the numbers, and staged an uprising.

Ugly mob rule or exciting audience empowerment? Either way, the balance of power is shifting, and that's good. There are plenty of presenters out there who should be voted off the island.

Digital people – which will be *all* people ten years from now – don't have the patience for speeches. They're constantly time-shifting, sitting at the back with device in hand, flicking through a thousand other sources of interest, seeing if there's

something better on. Afterward they'll ask you to send them the three minute summarised version.

When conferences began, there was a happy place called 'Out of The Office'. That place doesn't exist any more.

And this holds the key to the future of meetings. Because when you spend every waking moment looking at screens and responding to random chatter, it all gets a bit - to use a digital word of the moment - 'meh'.

Consider a current sample of the blandness of on-screen existence. Pizza Hut has just launched Pasta Hut. The web site has buttons wafting over pictures of their pasta, saying '*taste me*'. Click them, and what happens? Words appear on the screen, saying something like '*mouthwatering meatballs in tomato sauce*'. The agency has sold that concept to the client as 'virtual tasting'.

That, pizza people, is not tasting. We've known which sense does what since we lived in caves. The invention of the internet doesn't mean that 'tasting' and 'reading a description' are the same thing.

So it goes for many digital experiences. Second Life, 2007's big destination for cashed-up corporates wanting to be 'edgy', has been revealed for what it is - a sad electronic refuge for the socially maladjusted. The Facebook surge will fade, as the correct answer to 'What am I doing right now?' is 'Tapping on a keyboard, alone.'

'Virtual' means a second-rate replica of reality. A totally digital life is a life of sensory deprivation. After too much of it, people will crave something real. *Really* real. That's where we come in.

The future of meetings is about delivering what they can't get online: tangible, emotional, unforgettable experiences. Things that engage all the senses that digital life neglects.

A conference must be the antidote to virtual living. We must deliver experiences they've never had before, that make them feel more alive.

They must be unique to those who actually turned up *in person*. Unpredictable, 'you should have been there' experiences, ones that can't be recorded and viewed later. If you couldn't make it, you missed out big time, and too bad. That sense of exclusiveness makes it more special for the people who *were* there.

We're social animals at heart. We like to run with the herd, to gossip and drink and argue and flirt. Sharing an amazing experience with others is immeasurably better than joining some Facebook group.

For a useful parallel, look at the recorded music industry. After decades of riches, it's all but destroyed by free file sharing.

Are musicians out of a job? Quite the reverse. Live music is booming. New festivals appear every weekend. A fair percentage of the crowd isn't even there for the music. They're just there to cast off their everydayness and go nuts with their herd. They know a live event has to have *life* in it.

Why must all conferences fit the same template? Why not send your corporate group to spend a week overseas working among the poor? They'd complain all the way there, and come back as a genuine team, having had the experience of their lives.

Where do we get the ideas to engage future audiences? The industry is full of brilliant young minds, and the ideas are there already. You'll find them in the pile marked 'Too weird or difficult' in the proposals file.

Experiences, not information. That's what meetings need to stay relevant.

And frankly, that sounds like a lot more fun.

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