CHAPTER ONE

Traditional Conferences: What They Do and How They Get It Wrong

Traditional conferences do have their place, and there are quite a few things that they get right. They serve an important role in the life of the professional and in the life of a professional organization. A traditional conference, for purposes of this discussion, is a face-to-face conference filled with scheduled sessions of speakers or panels that give a traditional long presentation followed by a question-and-answer period. Conferences are held by professional associations to educate members on new trends, offer networking opportunities, generate revenue for the organization, and bring members together to do the committee work of the organization.

Traditional Conferences Are Continuing Education

Other than professional and research journals, conferences are one of the more prominent ways that professionals continue their education as their career progresses. For those in academia, conference and paper presentations also help advance the road to tenure and gain professional pomp. These conferences are often the only way to gather points leading to tenure. People go to these conferences because they are expected to attend; this is part of an accepted process. Organizations often see conferences as a way to facilitate learning by bringing respected leaders in the field together in one location to discuss their current projects, interests, or topics. This facilitation of learning is one of the benefits of belonging to a large professional organization, and although members often pay to attend a conference separately from dues, conference learning is seen as a value-added service from organizations to their members. Many companies pay dues to professional organizations because it is seen as a necessity for the professional growth and development of their employees.

Traditional conferences bring together the dispersed members of an organization, which allows for diverse networking opportunities. Although there are many online social opportunities for almost any interest or profession, few things are better for cementing professional relationships than a happy hour with other conference attendees at the hotel bar or chatting after a session over coffee. The richness of these after-hour conversations led to the first iterations of an unconference … but that story comes later.

Attending a conference organized by a major professional organization often affords a rare opportunity to hear the leaders in a field discuss important topics. The keynotes of big conferences are populated by speakers with big ideas and motivating words for the crowd. Large organizations can afford to pay the money required to have important or well-known talking heads as featured sessions, so this is one of the few places that regular members of a profession can gain access, however limited, to the prominent people in their field. Access is almost always set up in such a way that everyone knows who has the important idea, and who is supposed to listen to those ideas.

Traditional conferences do have many advantages over impromptu or online offerings, and this book does not argue that we should entirely do away with the traditional conference format (with which many of us have a love/hate relationship). The problem with most conferences, though, is that they have become more about the organization putting on the conference than the people attending the conference—the people who actually need information and networking opportunities. The best things about traditional conferences are the people who attend them, and this is often lost in a quagmire of bureaucracy, talking heads, and a sea of faces.

Traditional Conferences, Useful Information, and Learning

If the main objective of a conference is to present useful information to attendees and to facilitate learning, most conferences simply scrape by, and many fail outright. The knowledge that the general profession needs is not the knowledge that is frequently presented. Sessions at conferences are sometimes so specific as to be inapplicable in any other setting. These types of sessions frequently leave out the most important part of their message: how to repeat, scale, and improve on the idea in some other place or in answer to some tangential problem. The other most common type of session has similar problems, but for the opposite reason. This is the session that is so general as to be useless. These sessions may simply involve a rallying of the troops, but the lack of practical knowledge can be disheartening. The most useful learning, which occurs between professional peers, happens everywhere at a traditional conference except in the large presentation hall with rows of chairs and a projector screen. The most important learning and community building happens outside the conference session. Nothing can kill motivation and passion like a 300-person auditorium and a PowerPoint presentation.

Professionals may find that after all the money spent to attend a conference, after all the time spent sitting in uncomfortable chairs, and after all the hours listening to speakers drone on about things that are not as exciting as they appeared in the program, they learned the most from their peers in the hallway. This can be a bitter and expensive pill to swallow, especially if you are paying your own way. In academia, the jaded realize that many professionals go to conferences to present and check off boxes on their tenure track, not to listen to others, or even to learn at all. The more academic the conference, the more likely it will be that the speakers will be presenting on topics that are so specific that they are not applicable in any other setting. Seeing the work of others is interesting, but it is not always useful.

People attend conferences to find socialization and community, but community is not found in a lecture hall. Most professionals quickly learn that the best community at a conference is found in nonsanctioned activities, either online or at the bar. Like the meeting after the meeting in the workplace, the hotel bar and unplanned activities at conferences often yield the most networking opportunities. Backchannels contain better conversation than what is happening up on the stage, and you are free to ask any question that comes to mind—no microphone needed. (A *backchannel* is an online side conversation that occurs simultaneously during a conference session, class, or other gathering.) Maybe it is the relaxed atmosphere of these settings (or perhaps the drinks!), but some of the most fruitful and passionate ideas have been sketched on cocktail napkins. Not all cocktail napkin ideas will change the world, but feel free to dream. Every profession needs dreamers.

Conferences are often seen as a way to network with other people interested in the same niches of the profession, but other than exchanging business cards, there are rarely built-in mechanisms for continuing relationships after the conference is over. Attendees may use informal methods of keeping in touch in online venues, but these spaces are not sponsored by or directly related to the conference. They might read each other's blogs or follow each other on Twitter (twitter.com), for example. Many tools, though, could easily be implemented to provide an online venue for sharing conference information and as a place to continue relationships begun at a conference. Wikis, forums, social networks, and photo sharing sites all provide a free way for conferences to add spaces for interaction and community building. These tools are not new, but traditional conferences have been slow to adopt and adapt them for their members—so members often take matters into their own hands and create these spaces themselves. A traditional conference could use online spaces not only as venues for continued conversation, but as a method of marketing as well.

At a large conference, the levels among attendees, speakers, and conference-planning groups are legion. Conferences are frequently planned either by members of the profession who have already reached the echelon of management or tenure, or by their secretaries, who may or may not have a good working knowledge of the profession itself. It is not that managers do not have relevant and important knowledge, but they do sometimes lack practical knowledge. This is especially true of managers for whom their position removes them, physically and organizationally, from the people carrying out the everyday activity of the profession. Speakers tend to be experienced leaders in the field. This often translates into management, and for many speakers it has been a long time since they placed a foot behind a service point, classroom, or lab. In academia, this can be compounded by speakers who have only research knowledge but no practical experience in the real world. Conference attendees, on the other hand, are those getting their hands dirty on the frontlines and behind the lab bench. The needs and experiences of conference attendees and planners vary widely, and it is hard to believe that many planners know or remember what it was like to be a simple cog in the machine.

This distance between attendee and planner or speaker results in some other unfortunate consequences. The conference planners may not actually know what the lower levels of the profession need to know. What problems does the profession currently face on a micro level? This separation of planners and attendees means that there is often a lack of practical and directly applicable information. At the conclusion of the conference, attendees seldom come away with actions to take home that will make the individual or the organization to which they belong better. Outside of gatherings of IT- or technology-oriented professionals, there is likely a huge technology gap and a gap in expectations within the profession as well. Greener members of the profession may expect things like free wireless, while many more seasoned members would not see the lack of wireless as a disaster of the largest proportions. Can you really have a conference without wireless internet access? The answer is yes, but I do not think a highly successful conference can be fabulous without one.

There are many ways that presentations go wrong at conferences. A presentation by a professional talking head may be inspirational, containing dreams, fluffy clouds, and bunnies, or it may be a dire forecasting if the profession does not change the world—yesterday! These two presentation types serve a purpose. They do motivate us to be better, stronger, and dream larger, but they do not give most professionals tools to accomplish this world takeover. Even worse are presentations to an audience of trench workers given by a management type who has forgotten what it was like to work with the public 20 years ago. Then, there are always the presentations that go bad due to the speakers' inabilities or to an unskilled use of PowerPoint, but these trends are not particular to traditional conferences and can sadly be found in almost any venue, anywhere, at any time. Unfortunately, in a traditional conference, attendees do not know how bad the presentation will be until it starts, and then it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape unnoticed. You, and 300 other sorry souls, are stuck for the next couple of hours in an uncomfortable chair, learning nothing.

The larger the conference, the more unlikely it is that the specific needs of individuals will be met. One person may be facing a particular research issue they need help solving and another individual may be looking for a way to create a new tiered level of company service. It is improbable that the scheduled sessions and keynotes will specifically address these particular challenges. Addressing specific challenges is not the purpose of a large conference, but they can be solved in a small gathering of one's peers with a more informal structure—at an unconference, perhaps. (We'll talk more in depth about unconferences throughout, but for now, an *unconference* is a gathering of people interested in a topic or idea, with no preset schedule or structure. The structure and schedule is determined by the participants on the day of the event.)

The conference-planning process bears some responsibility for the lack of timeliness and applicable presentations at a conference. Many conference programs are planned six months to a year or more in advance, because venues and big-name talking heads must be scheduled, programs must be printed, and advertising for potential attendees and vendors must be sent out. The problem is that in an age when timeliness is defined by technology and the internet, six months, a year, or beyond is far too long for a conference topic to be gathering dust. A conference topic submitted a year or more in advance will be woefully outdated by the time it sees a conference stage. An antiquated conference session, planned a year ago, does little good and certainly does not advance the understanding of the individual or the profession.

Conferences and the Internet

The internet has made new information available at a rate that has all but rendered the traditional conference presentation and the print journal (to say nothing of the scholarly book) useless. (This book has its own timeliness issues as well, so for updated information please visit the companion website at wanderingeyre.com/mobrule.) Professionals conducting research, writing down the next big idea for a profession, or simply discussing developments, can do it all quickly on the internet. Online journals, blogs, and even Twitter offer a quick way to push information to others with similar interests.

Communities like Twitter and Facebook (www.facebook.com) can be used to query professional colleagues when you face a particularly puzzling problem. No longer must a good idea go through a laborious print-vetting process, involving months of writing, editing, submitting, more editing, and finally publication of research conducted a year or more ago that is no longer relevant. The vetting process in the online community is quicker, faster, and more transparent.

A traditional conference, even of modest proportions, involves a large overhead of time, money, and space. Conference planning takes time to organize, and this negatively impacts the timeliness of the information presented. At a traditional conference, there are sessions to vet, programs and official schedules to print, rooms to set up in specific ways, and big-name talking heads to pay or convince to address your group. All of these things take significant amounts of both time and money.

Vetting the sessions and getting print materials together for a conference of any size is a large undertaking, and many organizations do this work by committee. Most vetting processes take time, and this is one of the reasons that papers and program proposals are requested months to a year or more in advance. Shuffling all those papers back and forth is always a lengthy process.

The size of an organization and its conferences is directly proportional to the amount of time and overhead needed to schedule the space to house all the members of a group once they descend upon a city. The American Library Association (ALA) holds one of the largest professional conferences, with an annual attendance of around 28,000 people, and tends to take over almost every large hotel in the host city during the conference.[1] It is staggering to think that some person is responsible for making sure that Room 237 in Hotel X has its chairs in the proper formation and the right signage is placed by the door. The time needed and expended on a conference this size is so great as to be prohibitive. There is almost no way a conference of 28,000 people can be reactive, or better, proactive, in seeking out timely information for attendees. Because of its size, ALA is limited to the cities that can hold that many bibliophiles descending in the span of a few days. ALA accomplishes this feat of scheduling with full-time staff and multiple divisions that are responsible for planning their own activities and meetings. Large conferences also cost more money; all of the planning, printing, space, and big-name speakers can require significant funding. Again, the size of the traditional conference is proportional to the money and hours spent on planning it.

Conference printing and work can result in a significant amount of waste. As soon as the conference is over (and occasionally before), all of the programs, flyers, and handouts go into the nearest trash bin. Paper cups, cans, and water bottles join the paper trash. Some conferences have tried to combat paper trash by putting programs and speaker handouts on preloaded USB drives, asking attendees to bring and reuse their own water bottles, or having recycling bins in the conference area. Some larger conferences have even begun to take notice of the food waste generated during meetings and programs. Green conferences are starting to gain more support and ground across industries, but waste continues to be a major issue at traditional conferences and business meetings.

Access to information about a conference, its sessions, handouts, video, audio, or other generated material is often limited because of usability issues or because the sponsoring organization has hidden the information behind a wall. There are various reasons and methodologies for keeping conference information behind a wall, but most of them have to do with money and access. Plenty of organizations believe that if they give conference information away for free, especially when it comes to session and event content, then people would never pay to attend a physical conference. This belief belies the real benefit that professionals reap when attending a physical conference, namely, meeting peers in informal settings, coffee breaks, and happy hours, and making important connections for future projects and research. A few organizations charge a reduced rate for synchronous online conference events, giving access to information with some added webcasts thrown in.

Conference websites can also be irritating to navigate if they are not easily searchable. Some websites are merely place holders for the venue information and do not contain session information at all. Other websites created for conferences have places for all of these things, but everything is hidden behind a wall. Sometimes a peek over the wall costs extra money, even if you *did* attend the physical event. Other times, attendees of the physical event will be given full access to this information, as long as they create and remember an account for the conference webpage.

The best systems for recording and storing this type of information are open, allow access without a wall, and can easily be edited at least by the speakers—and ideally by the attendees as well. The speakers can add links to handouts and slides, and the participants can add links to session summaries. The obvious example would be using a wiki for this type of information gathering. Some large conferences have begun adding official wikis to their conference information sites, but these types of community-building practices are still not the norm.

A Problem of Scale

All the challenges and issues that traditional conferences face can be reduced down to a problem of scale. As planners are further removed from the attendees, and as the number of attendees increases, it is less and less likely that any given individual will have his or her needs met. Traditional conferences are not where niche needs are met, and we do not normally expect them to be—but why not? Why couldn't we turn conferences into the long tail of professional gatherings? Chris Anderson argues that niches, not large blockbusters, are what will drive the future of business. This theory of the Long Tail, or the idea that the majority of the market can be served—and in fact, desires—small niche products that serve specific needs, can be applied beautifully to conferences.[2] If the needs of individuals are niches on the tail of conferences, then unconferences may be the answer to filling the niches. A small gathering of people, self-organizing, has a greater potential to meet their own needs. If individuals participate with passion in an unconference, they will have opportunities to share that passion and their ideas with others. At a small gathering, an individual is more likely to be able to convey the current challenge he or she is facing. Placing the challenge into a gathering of peers means that the challenge then has the opportunity to be addressed, sometimes even solved, by the gathering. Then the individuals can take that knowledge with them and use it to impact their professions, their organizations, the world, or possibly all three. This is what unconferences can do. Unconferences fill the niches in our professional gatherings. They make it possible to share the kind of passion that makes it impossible to leave the event without feeling like you are able to change the world. Our larger conferences have lost this ability of impact.

And is that not what all of us want? To change the world and make it better?

Endnotes

1. “American Library Association Conferences and Exhibitions,” American Library Association, exhibitors.ala.org (accessed July 19, 2011).
2. Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More, Revised and Updated* (New York: Hyperion, 2008), Kindle ebook.