

What makes for the perfect internal conference?



Forty private and public sector communication professionals joined together in multiple [high intensity workshop sessions](#), to design the perfect internal conference for the twenty-first century.

Here's the result.

Hosted at Mazars, London, 11th November 2010

The contributors

The recommendations and findings within this report are from the contributions of the following participants working within a series of time limited SpeedShops – EventExtra™ high intensity/rapid delivery work group discussion format.

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Overview of the event

On Thursday 11th November 2010, up to forty communication professionals from different sectors gathered in London to explore ‘What makes for the perfect internal conference?’



The objective was to identify the factors which differentiate a productive, outcome driven conference from one which is not. What’s wrong today? and What should the future be like?

Using SpeedShops, a unique, high intensity workshop format developed by EventExtra™ each of the five groups had just twenty minutes to determine what is wrong, what is right and what the future should be like and then reach one hundred percent on their recommendations.

There were three twenty minute sessions across the five groups, with participants able to choose which topic group to join after each changeover. There were two additional ‘open’ discussion groups available if participants wanted to create their own topic area for discussion. On the night neither of these two options was taken up.

Due to the **one hundred percent buy-in process**, all the ideas and concepts presented in this report enjoy the total support of each group debate.

It is anticipated that readers of this report will use its findings within their own event planning to maximise success for all stakeholders.

The five group topics are:

1) Venues and hospitality

Participants explored issues including accommodation, food and beverage, On-site staff, recreation/fitness and many more.

2) Conference communication

Participants explored the use of communication channels. Specifically how they might be applied to useful effect before, during and after conferences.

3) Presentation technique

Participants explored issues such as length and style, content, training, technical support and AV.

4) Workshops and facilitation

Participants explored issues such as technique, deliverables, and outcomes.

5) Outcomes and effectiveness

Participants explored issues such as what success means to participants, budget holders and the wider organisation. Also, how to measure and what is required to produce success in the first place.

Executive summary

A review of the key outcomes from the groups.

Venues and hospitality

Conferences are notorious for unexpected challenges. Critical to success is good service and support staff. This service should extend to excellent local knowledge, which benefits any questions held by organisers and delegates. The venue itself should possess all necessary facilities for the comfort of guests. Specifics include good Internet connectivity and readily accessible charging points.

Conference communication

Delegates commonly arrive at events unprepared or badly briefed on what's expected of them and the objectives of the conference. Very often they have had no opportunity to gather the opinions and views of colleagues to make them true delegates to the event. Well planned and executed communication in advance of arrival ensures well briefed participants who in turn are better prepared and able to focus on what they are there for. In-house communicators need to assume greater responsibility for developing objectives, which in turn will lead to higher quality outcomes, which are communicated after the event.



Presentation technique

All inexperienced speakers should be compelled to accept training/coaching in advance of the event. This must also extend to top management speakers and include public speaking skills and advice/assistance on the correct use of support collaterals such as PowerPoint. Keep messages and message formats simple was the overriding recommendation.

Greater ongoing interaction with participants is required. Q&A should not be just a final bolt on. Audiences will be more engaged if they truly understand why a speaker is present and are able to interact with that speaker. It was suggested that internal social media could both help shape presentations and provide a vehicle for questions in advance. All presentation technology should be 'appropriate'.

Workshops and facilitation

Too often, workshops are seen as 'talking shops' by all the stakeholders. As a result, discussions rarely turn into outcomes. If outcomes are achieved, they are rarely implemented. To change this, use skilled facilitators. They will ensure that a balance of views are heard, not just the most vocal minority. By introducing the issues prior to workshops, participants can consult regional teams. This results in less 'top of mind' thinking, which means discussions are more meaningful. Combining playful and serious formats also contributes towards better engagement and outcomes.

Outcomes and effectiveness

If the conference is part of a wider initiative, this must be clear to participants. Stakeholders need to define and agree on the desired outcomes in advance. This doesn't preclude unexpected benefits, but creates a frame on which to measure success. If participants arrive better prepared through good communication, the outcomes will be stronger. Senior management need to support post event outcomes with appropriate resourcing and public support.

1. Venues and hospitality



Facilitator: Les Sinclair

Definition: This covers the organisation of a positive environment that supports the event's objectives. It includes the physical, logistical and motivational needs of the attendees, such as rooms, meeting space, audio visuals, food and beverage, transport and social activities.

All the ideas below were generated with **total buy-in** from the three event discussion groups.

What's bad?

Ten issues that make a poor conference venue:

1. Poor food quality/lack of variety
2. Unhelpful venue management and staff
3. Unreliable/inadequate Audio Visual equipment
4. Unclean/unhygienic/uncomfortable environment
5. Poor location of venue leading to lengthy transfer times/poor transport links to the venue
6. Lack of business facilities and meeting rooms/areas
7. Lack of security leading to theft
8. Lack of social activities in nearby proximity
9. Bad signage
10. No venue welcome packs (as distinct from conference welcome pack)

What's the future?

Groups decided that the following characteristics would contribute towards creating the perfect internal conference venue:

- Good service and support staff is essential. They should be flexible, responsive and ideally empowered to overcome your challenges efficiently. (*Organisers on-site team AND venue staff*)
- The venue should be appropriate for the size of your conference

- "User friendliness" important. Guests should be able to navigate their way around venue easily
- Delegates should receive an easily understood venue welcome pack. This should detail all facilities available to them *and any social programme or support activities*
- Location matters. There should be good transportation / transfer links
- There should be scope for a great social programme. Either onsite or nearby
- Specific facilities should include internet connectivity (*either free or at a reasonable price*), charging points and a sufficiently equipped business centre
- Comfortable accommodation for delegates
- Dedicated spaces for networking and social interaction, including bar areas
- Venue staff should have good local knowledge to answer questions from both organisers and delegates

Facilitator's comment:

The problems with venues and hospitality that concerned the groups most came from the direct experience of the group members – they were not just abstract wish lists. The reality and honesty of the feedback enabled us to achieve a 100% consensus on a "hit list" of factors over and above the basic logistical requirements that would contribute to a 'perfect internal conference venue'.

2. Conference communication



Facilitator: Nick Saalfeld

Definition: Conference communication embodies both the channels as well as logistical and content-related messaging. This includes what takes place before, during and after the event.

All the ideas below were generated with **total buy-in** from the three event discussion groups.

What's bad?

Ten issues that make poor conference communication:

1. Delegates arrive without a clear briefing, purpose of conference or desired outcomes
2. Speakers booked, then thread cobbled together, instead of speakers being booked around an ideas agenda
3. Communication function not given sufficient authority, thus not taking enough responsibility. Result is process-driven rather than outcome driven communication channels
4. Inter-cultural considerations not managed properly
5. Inappropriate use of communication channels, lacking coherence (e.g. tweets which conflict with written collateral)
6. No follow through: after conference, "it's done". No commitment to execute on new ideas / plans
7. Gimicky 'in-event' technology that doesn't add value, employed without a reason
8. Feedback not acknowledged or acted upon
9. Little or no opportunity to co-create content or agenda
10. Obsession with 'bells & whistles'. Too little attention paid to content

What's the future?

Groups decided that the following characteristics would contribute towards creating the 'perfect internal conference communication':

- Delegates are clear about conference objectives and desired outcomes prior to arrival
- The on-site programme is clearly communicated

- Delegates are clear about the value that speakers add to the programme
- Use of technology is relevant and understandable; and used to drive engagement (entertain, stimulate, challenge)
- Communication practitioners driving outcomes, not driven by the logistics process
- Face to face events positioned as beginnings of a process, not the end
- Successfully sought buy-in of management to ensure outcomes are properly resourced
- Speakers are clearly briefed about support technology available to them - and they own it: they dictate e.g. use of tweet wall etc
- Feedback tools allow for collaboration and are well managed by communication teams
- Communications team to use technology to 'oil the wheels' of collaboration, facilitate inclusion of ideas from participants/ the wider organisation

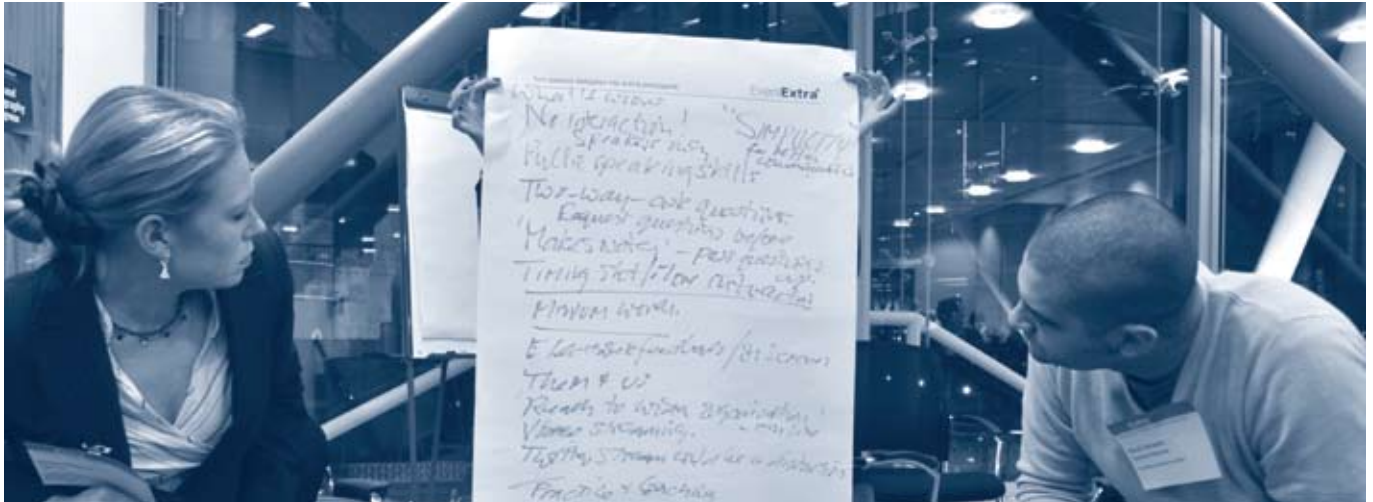
Facilitator's comment:

These groups were very vocal about communication tools and felt, above all, that whilst the technology toolkit grows year on year, our ability to use it effectively does not. The reasons were unanimous.

Communication professionals feel that they have too little authority and time; and this leads conferences to becoming process-driven ("it's what we've always done") instead of driving relentlessly towards a specific outcome(s). Without these objectives, no amount of media or collaboration techniques will rescue the result.

This is exacerbated by a feeling that once a conference is over, the noble intentions are lost in 'tomorrow's hectic agenda'; indeed technology may well have a role to play in keeping decisions made at conference alive for far longer than is the case today.

3. Presentation technique



Facilitator: David Paul

Definition: Most conferences have presenters that impart information to delegates. When we talk of ‘presentation technique’, it refers to length and style of presentation, content, speaker training, technical and AudioVisual support available.

All the ideas below were generated with **total buy-in** from the three event discussion groups.

What’s bad?

Ten issues that make for poor presentation technique:

1. Little interaction with the audience
2. Little or no public speaking skills
3. Speaker training not made available
4. Overly complex presentation. Too many ‘facts and figures’
5. Misuse of PowerPoint
6. Lack of focus in the presentation
7. Regurgitated information – Nothing new
8. Bad time keeping /over running
9. Audience questioning not invited
10. Volume of content per presentation too high

What’s the future?

Groups decided that the following characteristics would contribute towards creating the ‘perfect internal conference presentation technique’:

- PowerPoint minimised
- Speakers are properly briefed about how their contribution adds value to anticipated outcomes
- Audience are clear about why the speaker is there in advance. Reinforced by on-site ‘link man’
- Simple message, clear delivery
- Good time keeping

- Greater interaction with participants
- Ensure speakers are offered training/coaching in advance
- “Intelligent” use of appropriate social media tools to facilitate interaction with audience before and after event. Use these tools to get questions and even help shape presentations
- Include inspirational and relevant external speakers whose message is aligned with the conference objectives
- Ensure there are meaningful networking opportunities available for ‘private’ questioning and discussion with participants
- Draw speakers from the ‘grassroots’ of the organisation to be relevant and decrease typical ‘them and us’ mentality

Facilitator’s comment:

The groups were adamant that conferences should be far more about participation than is commonly the case.

Whereas they recognised the importance of some plenary presentations, these must include presentation training for all speakers – even the boss – and the content of slides and other support materials must be kept simple with the minimum of text. Speaking directly off slides is simply not acceptable.

Interactive devices that allow audiences to easily ask questions of the speaker without the embarrassment of spotlights and roving microphones should also be commonplace. This can be as simple as passing a note to a ‘link man’ or using mobile devices. Interestingly, all felt that the use of twitter feed displays were ‘disruptive’ and added little value.

There was also overall agreement that the use of 3D laser technology and video screens to involve absent speakers and participants would increasingly make a valuable contribution. In summary, presentation technology should be appropriate and not just for its own sake.

4. Workshops and facilitation



Facilitator: Matt O'Neill

Definition: Most conferences have a workshop component. This is where smaller groups of delegates break away to discuss conference related topics in greater depth. We look at technique and format and how outcomes are carried forward afterwards.

All the ideas below were generated with **total buy-in** from the three event discussion groups.

What's bad?

Ten issues that make for poor workshops and facilitation:

1. Lack of preparation prior to arrival. No input from colleagues who are not present
2. Monotonous, repetitive formats
3. Poor facilitation leads to discussions being dominated by 'loudest voices'
4. Perceived pressure to 'tow the corporate line'
5. Highly 'contrived' familiarity building sessions
6. No consideration given to cultural issues as relate to diverse nationalities represented
7. Loss of focus on issues at hand
8. Participants arrive with low expectations and 'workshop fatigue'
9. Lack of faith in 'consultant' facilitator coupled with general cynicism
10. Participant fear of internal politicking

What's the future?

Groups decided that the following characteristics would contribute towards creating the 'perfect internal conference workshop and facilitation process':

- Use interactive/social media to brief participants and seek input in advance of arrival at workshop
- Use fresh, creative icebreaker techniques to increase participant familiarity. Builds trust

- Introduce shared recreation activities prior to serious discussions. A shared experience amongst participants builds trust
- Introduce varying, playful workshop formats. Greater likelihood of engaging wider variety of people in the process
- Use skilled, professional facilitators to secure a truer balance of viewpoints from participants
- Consider alternative off-site locations. What about a coffee shop?
- If participants are an international mix, facilitator should recognise the cultural sensitivities
- Invite appropriate participants who are empowered to make decisions and act to produce meaningful outcomes
- Ensure a follow through process is in place to make participants and senior management accountable for decisions after the event

Facilitator's comment:

All groups felt there was a tendency for workshops to be dominated by the most vocal minorities. This leads to great ideas not being heard and developed upon. Additionally, the reverse was true. Those who are naturally quieter than others sometimes feel pressure to speak. Professional facilitation coupled with varied formats was considered an answer.

The dominant theme across all groups for the future of workshops and facilitation was ensuring that outcomes were followed through. This would create meaningful value for all stakeholder groups.

Personally speaking, change comes about when we do things differently. I was inspired by the idea of hosting workshops in 'alternative' locations. One group suggested bringing people together in a coffee shop. Being out of the office environment, the resulting informality might contribute towards more free-flowing discussion.

5. Outcomes and effectiveness



Facilitator: Jason Bates

Definition: All internal conferences should deliver business benefits. The Outcomes and Effectiveness discussion aimed to establish what's meant by 'conference success' and how stakeholder groups measure it. (Delegates, budget holders and the organisation).

All the ideas below were generated with **total buy-in** from the three event discussion groups.

What's bad?

Ten issues that make produce typically poor Outcomes and Effectiveness for modern internal conferences:

1. No specific, measurable, or clear objectives established from the start
2. No plan to actually measure the conference against those objectives
3. Traditional, sterile, formulaic event formats are 'safe' but don't engage participants, or produce results
4. More focus on location, timing, budget and catering than on delivering real business value
5. Conference not integrated into wider business change initiatives, projects, and programmes
6. No change when delegates return to work - creating a negative cycle of disengagement
7. Lack of senior executive involvement, ownership, and participation in planning and delivery
8. Broadcasting information at an 'audience' rather than interacting with 'participants'
9. Structured around what the executive wants you to hear rather than what 'participants' want to contribute
10. Silo'd delivery by the communications team, rather than full end-to-end collaboration with the business

What's the future?

Groups decided that the following characteristics would contribute towards creating the 'perfect internal conference outcomes and effectiveness':

- Conference clearly positioned as part of a larger initiative, with clear objectives - which are measured against
- Events are designed from first principles with an outcome in mind, rather than relying on traditional convention
- In addition to the event itself, the budget/effort is spread across preparatory work, and effective follow up
- Participants arrive having already participated in designing the event, with a clear understanding of what will happen
- Participants co-create and own the outcomes of the conference and are accountable for implementation
- Senior management are seen to lead, listen, and participate fully in the meeting
- The design and delivery of the event is a joint effort between the senior management, communication team, and participants
- Fun and work are not 'either or' choices. Drop the treasure hunts, and have a 'new revenue stream' competition

Facilitator's comment:

The participants felt strongly that, in general, stakeholders do not define and agree on the desired outcomes as a key driver for internal conferences. Without these objectives many conferences lose their way, become disconnected from business imperatives, silo'd in their delivery, propaganda opportunities for senior executives, and subjects of derision from the general workforce.

If we are to create effective events that inform, engage and align our organisations and conferences that deliver real return on investment, we need to drop the sterile and formulaic approaches of the past and turn our 'audiences' into 'participants' in doing something meaningful together. We need to make our events matter, contextualising them within a larger process, and within the wider change initiatives that the organisations are pursuing.

About EventExtra™

EventExtra™ transforms internal conferences through better communication and extending team engagement – before, during and after your event. EventExtra™ achieves all this through two separate, but fully interconnected, services: EventExtra™ Online and EventExtra™ OpenSpace.



Together, EventExtra™ ensures that:

- Your participants will arrive at the venue already properly prepared and briefed
- You will gain measurable outcomes and deliverables through innovative event design and active delegate participation
- Your conference can reach out to include and involve your wider organisation
- You will increase your return on your investment in the conference through more productive post-event follow through and implementation of workshop outcomes

EventExtra™ Online

Traditional conferences operate within the venue and physical space in which they are held. All too often participants arrive ill prepared and ill informed to maximise the opportunities for face-to-face engagement and debate in both plenary and workshop arenas.

EventExtra™ Online is a managed conference platform that not only addresses, briefs and informs your participants prior to the event, but also allows open discussion and debate on key issues surrounding your conference and workshop agendas.

Better prepared participants create a better conference and your online platform goes on to provide extended life-cycle support BEFORE, DURING and AFTER your event.

Typically, the online platform goes live four weeks prior to your event. The EventExtra™ team works effortlessly with your teams to populate your platform with a range of different media. These include text, audio, video and interactive live webcasts. Most importantly, the platform enables interaction on conference issues amongst participants. Furthermore, with organisations cutting physical participant numbers, the platform opens discussion with the wider organisation.

Full details: <http://www.EventExtra.net/event-resources/>

EventExtra™ OpenSpace

The real knowledge, experience and creativity to influence positive change already exists in abundance within your organisation. Traditional conference presentation formats supplemented by delegate workshop agendas with pre-defined topics can create real barriers to gaining new ideas and a commitment to change.

EventExtra™ OpenSpace increases participant ownership of conference workshops and their outcomes by creating facilitated environments that are directly relevant to participants' needs and interests.

EventExtra™ uses a total buy-in model for workshops. That means only those recommendations and proposals that enjoy the one hundred percent support of each workshop group are ever put forward for presentation to senior management.

Total endorsement from all participants carries more weight and group commitment. Of course it is never truly one hundred percent until next level management has also bought into the recommendations. For them, knowing their teams have come forward with full commitment to suggestions on new ideas, processes and initiatives lends a new and more powerful authority to the outcomes over traditional workshops and far greater potential for implementation.



EventExtra™ OpenSpace facilitators ensure that everyone's voice is heard. Not just the vociferous. One of the group rules is that silence means agreement. This is a subtle but powerful way to seek out views and decisions from even the quietest participant.

Full details: <http://www.EventExtra.net/event-resources/>

EventExtra™ works best when both Online and OpenSpace services are combined. That's because the online communication hub ensures that all participants arrive better briefed and prepared to contribute to event objectives in a truly meaningful way. It also enables the EventExtra™ team to get closer and more involved with the views, climates and internal processes of those who are attending.

You're staging the conference anyway. Why not work with EventExtra™ to make it truly memorable and productive?

EventExtra™ supporters

EventExtra™ would like to extend special thanks to the supporters who helped to make this event possible.

BigWheel Theatre Company – www.bigwheel.org.uk

(Roland Allen)

Big Wheel provides entertaining and instructive interventions for conferences and training sessions. This also extends to presentation coaching.

Hans Staartjes Photography – www.hansstaartjes.com

(Hans Staartjes)

Conference and event photography that captures vitality and spontaneity.

Heart Shift – 07768 208 999 (Jason Bates)

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Global Cynergies – www.globalcynergies.com (Les Sinclair)

Global Cynergies is a truly global team that uses specialist processes and leading-edge technology, combined with many years of experience to select venues and negotiate contracts for all types of events. We find venues that are the best match to our clients needs and negotiate the best rates - all at no cost to our clients.

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An international, integrated and independent organisation, specialising in audit, accounting, tax and advisory services.

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We produce videos that always exceed our customers' expectations, delivering their messages with creativity and style.

YooDoo – www.yoodoomedia.com (Nick Saalfeld)

Yoodoo is the multimedia e-learning platform for the majority - not the swots, but the 90% of people who need engagement to perform to the best of their abilities. To drive participation and buy-in to your e-learning, induction or change management programme.

Additional thanks extend to:

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Valerie de Kergorlay – Chartered Institute of Environmental Health

Turn passive delegates into active participants

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