

A Focus on Conferences

Nico Macdonald

Spy

102 Seddon House, Barbican, London

EC2Y 8BX UK

nico@spy.co.uk

+44 7973 377 897

ABSTRACT

Conferences are still valuable for established attendees and potential new audiences, and the overall audience for events can be increased, helping alleviate competition between professional organisations.

In addition professional organisations need to avoid conferences being run-of-the-mill, and taking their audience for granted. They need to widen their primary and secondary audiences by helping potential attendees and presenters find out about events, evaluate those they might attend, and benefit in other ways from participating in; professionalising presentation and documentation; facilitating more controversial discussion; improving media relations (including with informal commentators).

Some of the solutions involved re-designing and re-programming events, greater inter-organisational cooperation, technical developments, and greater intelligence when thinking about audiences and stakeholders.

Author Keywords

Conference formats, conference documentation, conference discussion, conference attendees, presenters, presentation references, information sharing, conferencing reporting, Weblogging,

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m Miscellaneous

INTRODUCTION

I should begin by noting that the call for participation assumes that there is an assumption that professional associations, and specifically the events they program, are or could be of value to professionals.

Events in the area of design and human-computer interaction have a number of potential benefits for presenters, attendees, and related stakeholders:

- Finding new and high quality sources of information and ideas from presenters selected by a conference programmer or coming out of the peer review process

- Focussed, reflective, and visually supported learning about high quality new design work, research, and theoretical insights – and related references
- Developing a broader view of a theme or subject area
- Questioning presenters about their work, and learning from others' questions
- Meeting and engaging with old colleagues and new acquaintances, the latter introduced by old colleagues, identified in Q&A sessions, or met by chance
- Raising your profile as a presenter or panellist, or as an attendee in Q&A sessions

The trends around conferences have been discussed more in the design world than the HCI world, and the latter may be more aware of the design element of conference creation^{1, 2, 3, 4}. However, the issue of meta conference programming and coordination has been discussed relatively little.

Discussion

There are a number of factors undermining the value of events and conferences for attendees and potential attendees. These are expanded on in the 'Supplemental information'.

- Conferencing by default
- Taking the audience for granted
- Widening audiences
- Lack of controversy
- Media savvy missing
- Failing to connect

Challenges

I will consider potential solutions within the timeline of a typical conference.

Finding out about and evaluating events

Standards for sharing information about planned, forthcoming and past events need to be established between event programming organisations. Information about planned events will help organisations at least ensure there aren't date conflicts (as there will be between this year's CHI conference and INCLUDE 2005 at the Royal College of Art in London), and at best that conference themes are complementary.

Copyright is held by the author/owner(s).

CHI 2005, April 2-7, 2005, Portland, Oregon, USA.

ACM 1-59593-002-7/05/0004.

This information should be easy to incorporate into other information environments, including personal calendars, word processors (as citations), other electronic tools, and Weblogs (for instance, to allow Weblog hosts to indicate they are attending an event). It should be used by these and other organisations and publications to present event information in a strongly visual manner.

There should be an emphasis on annotating events announcements with information that would help potential attendees evaluate the events. This might include lists of registered attendees (who potential attendees may contact for their take on the event if they already know them), links to reviews of previous or related event, and to previews of the event. Reviews and previews should encompass Weblog entries.

Getting value out of the event

There should be an increased emphasis on working with presenters to improve the rhetorical and visual aspects of presentations (particularly at conferences based on peer review). Documentation should also be addressed, helping attendees to frame, structure and reference their notes, for their own use and for trip reports. The design and production values of conference proceedings should be reconsidered to make them more useful to attendees, and more attractive to potential future attendees and interested parties¹¹.

Much could be learned from presentations, moderation and documentation at conferences such as Doors of Perception, TED¹², and the AIGA National conferences.

Getting the word out

During and post-conference there should be an emphasis on telling engaging stories about the conference presentations, debates, and activities in a manner that makes it easier for media representatives to talk about them, and presents the conference as a coherent whole.

Media relations should also support Webloggers writing about the conference, creating a buzz during the conference that non-attendees can tap into, and seeding the public documentation of the event. The Doors of Perception conference is extremely effective in this area.

Material related to the conference and presentations should be made readily available (where copyright allows) and information presented in ways that make it easy to incorporate references into other writing, reviews, essays and books, Weblog posts, and conference previews. In this manner, the conference may become part of the information-sphere, clarifying its nature, making more impact, and widening its (and the total) audience.

Barriers

Barriers to these solutions, and their strengths and weaknesses, include:

- The difficulty of the process of developing and maintaining any standard for information sharing

- Territoriality of professional organisations, which in some areas are in competition, and in general may be unused to collaborating
- The tension between formalising and structuring information and the relatively unstructured way in which people tend to share information
- Creating dynamics that will encourage overall beneficial acts, such as indicating if you are attending an event, previewing an events, and sharing learning
- Raising standards in professional conference situations where volunteers are unremunerated and have little to gain by learning new practices

CONCLUSION

There is a keen desire for design and HCI knowledge, which can be seen in the development of events around groups such as AIGA Experience Design, Doors of Perception, O'Reilly, and individual facilitators. With greater pressure on professional organisations, clearer thinking about event design, and greater consideration of event documentation and information sharing, and open-minded collaboration and programming between professional organisations it will be possible to better serve professionals and other interested parties in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been collaborating in developing thinking around design and HCI event information (and broader areas of knowledge) with members of the steering committee of the AIGA Experience Design group including Robert Reimann, Julie Stanford, and Molly Wright Steenson. I have also been working with the UXnet calendar working group.

REFERENCES

1. 'Conference madness' Alice Twemlow, Eye issue 49, Autumn 2003
<http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature.php?id=71&fid=469>
2. Aspen 2004 conference review, John Maeda, Creative Review, October 2004
3. '1989: Roots of Revolution' Michael Bierut, March 6, 2004. On the biennial conference of the American Institute of Graphic Arts.
<http://www.designobserver.com/archives/000110.html>
4. 'Does Aspen Have A Future?' William Drenttel, October 9, 2004. Comment from Michael Bierut: The purpose of design conferences is still somewhat mysterious, and I say this as someone who has organized more than a few.
<http://www.designobserver.com/archives/000208.html>
5. Doors of Perception conference
<http://www.doorsofperception.com/>

6. February 9-12, 2004: O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference [<http://conferences.oreillynet.com/etcon/>] (San Diego)
7. October 23-26, 2003: AIGA National Conference: The Power of Design [<http://powerofdesign.aiga.org/>] (Vancouver, BC) and March 21-23, 2002: Voice: AIGA National Design Conference [<http://www.voice.aiga.org/>] (Washington, DC).
8. November 12-14, 2004: Design Engaged [<http://www.heyotwell.com/engaged2004/>] (Amsterdam)
9. October 16-17, 2003: HITS: Humans Interaction Technology Strategy [<http://www.id.iit.edu/events/hits/>] (Chicago, Illinois)
10. During December 2004 on the CHI-ANNOUNCE list alone there were almost 20 calls for participation for conferences and workshops (some part of bigger conferences). Over a year an industry professional might have to decide between 20 to 200 events they might submit a paper to or attend.
11. The conference committee for the 2002 Symposium on Designing Interactive Systems (of which I was a member) attempted this, with some success. See Proceedings of the conference on Designing interactive

systems: processes, practices, methods, and techniques. 2002. ISBN:1-58113-515-7

12. February 23-25, 2005: TED2005 [<http://www.ted.com/ted2005/>] (Monterey, CA). TED is the Technology, Entertainment and Design conference, founded by Richard Saul Wurman.

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

The author's qualifications

The author has been involved in programming design and HCI events for over years. Major conferences include Designing the Internet (London, 1994), and Design For Usability (London, 2000). He has been on conference committees for DIS2002 (including editing the proceedings) and CHI2003 and consulted on communications for DIS2004. He has programmed and chaired panels at DIS2000, DIS2002, CHI2003, and DIS2004. He is on the steering committee of the AIGA Experience Design group, has been involved in programming a number of its Summits, and founded and programs its London events. He was on the executive of the British HCI Group for three years, where he was key to the launch of its *Usability News* publication, on which he still advises. He also programmed and chaired the CHI2003 Development Consortium on Mass Communication and Interaction. In addition he has spoken at many conferences including AIGA and IID events.

A FOCUS ON CONFERENCES:

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION (NICO M.)

Discussion

Conferencing by default

One of the factors undermining the quality and value of conferences is the obligation organisations are under to put on a regular (and often annual) events, and the financial value of conferences (attendee fees, sponsorship income, and licensing or selling of proceedings). By contrast, some events have a strong individual character, and a distinct and intriguing theme. For instance the Dutch-based Doors of Perception conferences⁵, the O'Reilly Emerging Technologies conferences⁶, the bi-annual AIGA National Conferences (whose last two themes have been 'The Power of Design' and 'Voice')⁷, and the Design Engaged events programmed by Andrew Otwell⁸. In the SIGCHI area, apart from the DUX conference, the most significant recent event has been the HITS conference⁹, which combined an intriguing and timely theme with high quality and engaging presentations.

Taking the audience for granted

Another factor is a product of the established nature of many conferences and their focus on their traditional audiences. As a result, the audience is taken for granted, established presentation and documentation formats are not developed, and fail to engage potential new audiences.

Widening audiences

As design and, particularly, HCI have become more key to industry the audiences for events and conferences on these themes have broadened beyond the traditional academic and research communities.¹ Typically this wider audience doesn't have the incentive to submit papers that motivate

academics and researchers (peer kudos, departmental benefits, value when promotion is considered or in job applications, impressing potential publishers), nor will their employers have the funds to support attending a conference. There is also less value for this audience in the format of typical conferences or the nature of the level at which analysis is presented.

Lack of controversy

Professional conferences have tended to move from niche areas of interest to address wider audiences, and broader societal and business issues. However, programmers have often failed to address these developments, or where they do they often assume there are common interests and views across their audiences. As a result, programs often fail to engage new audiences, and new thinking is not effectively challenged or developed.

Media savvy missing

The focus on existing audiences, and the lack of controversy, also tend to lead to the neglecting of communication to new conference audiences and other interested parties. Although many events and conferences have formal media relations, they are often poor at selling stories in a manner that will gain coverage and appeal to audiences and other interested parties.

Failing to connect

With the proliferation of events and conferences, and of communication channels, it is becoming harder for potential attendees to determine which events are significant and which they might submit to or attend. The obligatory nature of many events, and the tendency to take audiences for granted, also leads to their communications being information driven and bland, leaving few ways in for people to judge their value.