

Would I do it again? My four days at SXSW...

 By Heidi Brauer

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SXSW in Austin Texas is huge. It's also the epicentre of pulled pork, food-trucks and hipsters, and a three-part hipster-geek festival of interactive, film and music that takes place over 10 days. My four days there left me feeling like I'd eaten a huge, shiny, red, American-grown apple that should've been delicious, but looked better than it tasted...

I'm not a newbie to conferences; I've been to and spoken at more than I can remember. I **love to learn**, and as a marketer whose world is becoming more and more digital each day, I figured (and was convinced by previous shiny-eyed SXSW-ers) that this was the shizz. Whilst I'm Mrs Just in Time, I do like to plan a little, and this is when the largest case of FOMO in the history of the universe first began.



Austin, Texas on the mighty Colorado River.

Just the Interactive programme at South by South West is attended by over 30,000 people, spans 5 days with 14 different programming formats (that means solo speakers, keynotes, panels, workshops, meet ups, and 9 more kinds), at 18 primary venues, each with anywhere up to 11 rooms per venue, 3 levels (beginner, intermediate and advanced) and 9-11 time-slots each day. Do some math in respect of the resulting number of sessions to choose from, add in the fact that the folk on the Starship Enterprise still haven't taught us how to instantly beam ourselves anywhere - that means walking, busing, cabbing, cycling between venues - and you'll get a result that equals 'OMW'. Politely put.

Weirdly, for an event at the epicentre of the digital universe, the Southby app wasn't as good as the paper-version pocket guide, so I took a pen and the advice of some veterans and methodically planned my day... all day long, because that's what happens when speakers don't arrive, lines are too long and you can't teleport. I did this according to some key variables - topics I already know about so should skip, topics I am dying to know about, speakers I really want to see, and that FOMO-induced thing that happens when the Twitters or your Saffer mates tell you about something you really can't miss. Oh, and don't miss the daily keynotes.



The Austin Convention Centre makes the ICC and CTICC look teeny.

Now that I've expressed how hard it is to even scratch the surface of the content at SXSW, I'll tell you there are the usual endless invite-only and open parties that go with such a festival/conference, gorgeous restaurants and meeting spots and more food trucks than you can imagine. Austin is a fabulous city, a bit like Cape Town, just on a river and with more refried beans, pulled pork and tacos. It was less Texas than I imagined it would be (read: didn't see a single cowboy hat and no *Dallas*-inspired hairdos) and I'm pretty certain it's the *de facto* origin of the hipster beard and plaid shirt.

Now, about the content that was hard to scratch. There's too much, it's just not well curated (though it is well run) and some of the speakers didn't arrive (Paul Budnitz, I was dying to hear about your Ello 'revolution' and why I'm 'not a product') or even vaguely stick to the advertised topic. I learned quickly that walking out is OK - well, it's done even if it's not OK, and it helps you get to the next talk in time. Or stand in line for it. Or quickly register for it. Or scabble through the printed pocket guide to replan your day. But even after that harsh overview, wotalotigot:

- I loved the talk by Machen and Morgan on Neuroplasticity and Technology and why brands have to change: because we can't multitask, we can only task switch quickly. Tech is making our memories KO and we suffer from 'tip of the tongue syndrome'. Good research.



Food trucks, beards and plaid shirts.

- I skipped Tim Ferriss (of The 4-hour work week) talking on 'How to rock SXSW in 4 hours', skipped Ryan Gosling - insert sad face, and missed Daniel Pink and a talk on Gamifying Peace, but heard the magnificent Paola Antonelli from the MoMA talking about designers building the future. I love what she said about creating bridges with other disciplines and the concept of having conversations from a point of 'generative and positive doubt and vulnerability'.
- I was looking really forward to a talk titled 'Brands as the new Medicis in Art's digital age', but the advertised speakers didn't turn up (again). It was a conversation not a presentation, and the only thing I learned was that Americans think an 'artist' means Justin Bieber, Jay Z, et al.
- A neuroscientist called Daniel Margulies and a German DJ/innovator picked up on the happiness hypothesis to try and understand where flow comes from by tapping into the DJ brain - apparently the world's happiest profession! Look out for the book coming soon, called 'Lead like a DJ'.
- Biz Stone, Twitter founder, was interviewed by one of the Fast Company editors. He spoke about his new stuff, [Jelly](#) and [Super](#). I think he referred to "Laslow's" hierarchy of needs. I may just have been in the same dark conference room for too long. I did like what he said about going for long walks with people smarter than himself and that it's time to redefine the success metrics of capitalism i.e. philanthropy. He said CSI is the new marketing. Yup.
- Saudi Princess Reema Bint Bandar al Saud said this, which I found special: 'If you stand still you give people the power to push you down; if you keep going they follow you'.
- She was followed, on my by now largely impromptu agenda, by the head of social media at NASA speaking about creating social colonies (that sounds funny from NASA) and building face-to-face, real-life advocates. Remember those?



So much of people and plaid shirts

- Then a foray into haptic polymers and wearables. I like the idea of a continuum with 'vintage' on one end, 'new' on the other, and 'recontextualising' in the middle. We're going to need this in everything as we run out of 'new' all the time.
- The ROI of WOM - here's a stat or two for you: WOM amplifies the effect of paid media by 15%. A WOM impression drives at least 5X more sales than a paid impression. [Click here for more.](#)
- My new hero is Professor Hugh Herr, who is a pioneer in the field of extreme bionics and thinks about the synthesis of biology and design. He built his own Inspector Gadget legs. He says 'she' when he gives examples, not 'he'.
- There was Malcolm Gladwell in conversation with Bill Gurley (blah, blah, disruption and something about Uber); Lyft's Logan Green (a kind-of dream about fixing transportation with humanity and technology); the pretty but pretty-naïf and chip-on-shoulder Winklevoss twins on why they've put money behind Bitcoin (they did mention M-Pesa as a precedent in this area); and the fabulous Jimmy Kimmel who made me laugh and reminded me to never give up.



Impressive queuing system, impressive keynote

- I sat in line for, and was utterly captivated by the humility, determination and grace of RZA (yes, he of Wu-Tang Clan). He says to make progress you need to get over what you're attached to ('go into the editing room and kill your babies'); if you can imagine it, it can be created; preparation is everything; and a whole lot about art, science, wavelengths and the importance of having a good teacher or mentor (he should know, he has Tarantino!)
- Jonah Peretti, CEO and founder of BuzzFeed and Huffington Post, was well-prepared, smart and generous. Their network integration model is so, so smart. Try and find his preso on Slideshare.



Martine Rothblatt in conversation with Lisa Miller, signed for hearing impaired delegates.

• Martine Rothblatt (*NY Times* cover story: The highest paid female CEO in America used to be a man) is in love with life! She's a medical ethicist, has written a book about mindclones and plans to create an endless supply of human organs for the world. Her transhumanism approach believes in diversity, unity and joyful immortality and she thinks like an engineer. She encourages the questioning of authority to pursue progress and is certain there's an insight to be gained from every human on the planet. Beyond mind-blowing and I'm not sure how the sign-language interpreters coped with translating her revolutionary concepts!

Would I do SXSW again? Nah, too much of too much and far too much FOMO. I could write a full article on the talks and speakers I missed. I did, however, get to eat grits for the first time and Brussels sprouts 15 ways. I connected with great people, learned how speakers shouldn't be allowed to behave, had an interesting experience in a Texas saloon, and RZA and Rothblatt have charged my mental batteries for a good, long while. Yeeha!

ABOUT HEIDI BRAUER

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