Your conference sucks: Part 1

By Richard Mulholland   21 Oct 2009

I'm often asked what the difference is between a small business owner and an entrepreneur. To me it's simple - small business owners are driven by love and/or expertise in their chosen field; entrepreneurs look at that field from the outside and say, "This sucks; I think I can do it better." I'm an entrepreneur in the presentation and conference space, and I can safely say that it sucks.

Over the next few articles, I'll be looking at why conferences and presentations suck so much, and hopefully what people can do to change this. First, though, we need to understand why we have 'em in the first place.

There're a few reasons - pick yours:

1. We're launching something
2. We need to show that we have visible leadership
3. It's a great vehicle for team-building
4. I dunno, really; we have them every year

Sadly, the number one reason for a conference is generally number four - we do it because it's what we're supposed to do. This isn't all bad, but if that is the case, we probably need to fill the time with something worthwhile.

Consider the cost

Let's stop for a second and consider the cost of this exercise. Generally, we calculate the true cost of a conference at roughly twice the allocated budget. This figure comes from the time spent by the delegates at the event, as well as the cost-of-implementation of the ideas proposed. So if you've allocated one million rand for your event, understand that it's costing you closer to two million.

Despite this, two things happen at just about every conference:

1. Troops are rallied , gauntlets are laid down, teams are built, alcohol is consumed, vows are broken, promises are made, then...
2. Nothing changes.

Why?

Well, it's because a conference is generally made up of hastily thrown-together presentations, each with their own parochial objective, boringly delivered to an audience that quite frankly couldn't care less. We know this going on, so how do we rescue it?

Make the garnish look good

We hire a hotshot speaker (allow me to give you my card) or better still, we surprise everyone with their own private rock show/party/team-building exercise. That's okay, I mean, if you can't fix the meal, at least make the garnish look good. Right?

Wrong! Very, very wrong.

At the heart of every conference is an objective, and this objective exists whether or not we choose to acknowledge it. In the 11-years I've spent in this industry I've realised one truth; the truly great conferences, the ones that don't just entertain you but that rock you or your business to the core, are the ones that embrace that objective wholeheartedly.

They're the ones where every speaker is out to tackle the same problem, where the delegates know from the outset what they're trying to achieve, and where the puzzle slowly comes together as the event rolls out. They're the ones where people leave understanding their role in this objective.

Don't get me wrong; they should be fun and memorable too, serious is okay…boring isn't.

The others, the ones that simply exist for the sake of it, induce brain-fart by the combination of great parties and terrible presentations...

...those ones suck.

ABOUT RICHARD MULHOLLAND

Richard Mulholland is the founder of Missing Link (www.missinglink.co.za), a specialist conference and presentation strategy company. Rich's dynamic way of thinking took him from rigging lights at rock concerts to telling CEOs what and how they should present. A renowned speaker, strategist, creative thinker and capitalist punk, Rich is the guy you hire to make your presentation or conference rock. Email him on rich@missinglink.co.za and follow him on Twitter at @RichMulholland and Missing Link at @presorockgods.
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