Fit For The
FUTURE

The Future of Conferences

Ten Things Great Conference Organisers Do Differently

Gihan Perera

# Table of Contents

Introduction

Videoconferencing, online meetings, telepresence and other collaboration technology are gaining traction. Does that mean the in-person conference is obsolete? No – not by a long way! But its role has changed. Some of the benefits of coming together for a conference can be achieved just as effectively in other ways, but that's a good thing because you can focus on the things that make the conference experience special.

In this report, we look at ten trends affecting professional conferences and events, and how conference organisers take advantage of them. Good conference organisers adapt to these changes. *Great* conference organisers embrace them to create transformational experiences.

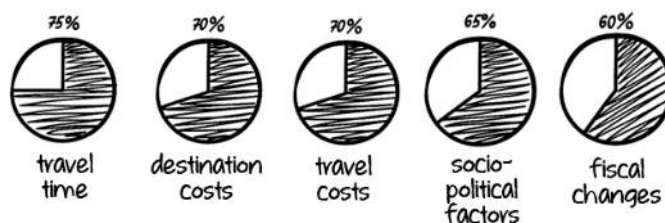The good news for the industry is that most professionals in it are optimistic about its future:

How optimistic are you about the MICE industry for the next 15 years?

65% very

95% very + somewhat
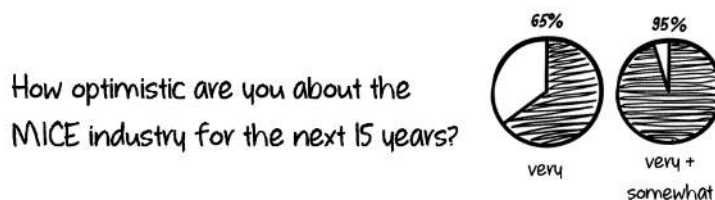
(Note: This, along with most of the other statistics reported here, comes from *"The Future of Business Meetings Industry Report"*, from McCrindle Research)

We might take this with a grain of salt, because these are professionals reporting on their own industry. But it's also reflected in the 2018 American Express Meetings & Events report "Global Meetings and Events Forecast", which is based on external criteria, such as hotel bookings, and business travel.

That said, back in Australia, it's not a time to be complacent and assume automatic continued growth. In fact, the industry is being squeezed by a number of external factors, and industry insiders readily identify the two biggest: costs and time.

What are the biggest challenges the industry will face in the next 15 years?

75% travel time

70% destination costs

70% travel costs

65% socio-political factors

60% fiscal changes

Naturally, this puts a strain on events and conferences, because businesses and individuals are making clear decisions about where they will spend their hard-earned money. Unfortunately, too often, events and conference are often at the front of the queue for the chopping block.

With this as background, let's see the ten things great conference organisers do differently:

1. Networking is not enough. Your attendees want to make strong **connections** and build lasting relationships.
2. Their thinking starts before they arrive. Help delegates with better **preparation** so they make the most of the conference.
3. They are not just attendees sitting silently and listening; they want to be active **participants** in co-creating the conference.
4. They don't come to the conference for more information. They want actionable **insights** that make a lasting difference.
5. They don't want you to work at keeping them entertained and engaged; they want a conference that **flows** effortlessly.
6. Gadgets and gizmos don't impress anymore, unless they are **transformational tools** that enhance their experience.
7. They want to take their corridor conversations inside, and actively take part in **in-session collaboration**.
8. There are other places where they can learn new skills. They want the conference to **shift thinking** instead.
9. A conference isn't a one-off event. It can now be an integrated part of their entire **journey.**
10. Online events aren't the enemy of in-person conferences. They can **enhance and extend** the overall experience.

Notes for the second edition

This is the second version of this report, which I first wrote in 2015, which is only three years ago, but an eternity now in this fast-paced world.

In that time, we have seen rapid growth in technology such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, online collaboration tools, personalisation and customisation, social media, and much, much more. It goes without saying that much of this technology affects the Meetings Incentives Conventions & Exhibitions (MICE) industry, but not always in the most obvious ways, and not always to the same extent. This revised edition reports on the latest trends and their impact, especially in the Australian market.

As with the first edition, I wanted to make this more than just a "white paper", but also a source of practical ideas for great conference organisers. So, as before, I have included practical ideas for you to created more compelling event experiences. In fact, I have gone much further than the previous edition, including more in-depth ideas and more references to external sources.

I hope you find this report both enlightening and educational.

1. From Networking to Connections

People have always attended conferences for the chance to connect and reconnect with peers and colleagues.

Good conference organisers know the importance of creating spaces during the conference for networking and relationship building.

Great conference organisers also facilitate connections with speakers and help delegates connect with each other before they arrive.

It's no secret that many delegates attend events for the in-person interactions and connections, especially when they have so many other virtual collaboration tools available for other communication.

In fact, delegates want more networking time at conferences, even while saying they want shorter conferences overall.

How will events change over the next 15 years?

55% shorter events

65% longer networking

40% shorter keynotes
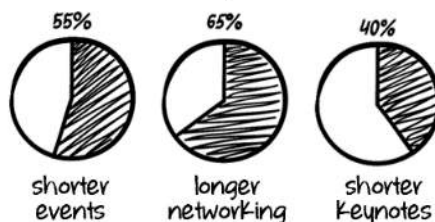
But they are now going further, and want organisers to help facilitate these connections.

Delegates want digital matchmaking to help their networking

70% important

Engage with speakers

Publish speakers' contact details – especially their LinkedIn address – on the conference Website and in the event app, and encourage delegates to connect with speakers.

Some speakers will volunteer this information and encourage you to pass on their contact details to delegates. But don't assume they will – ask for it!

Engage with each other

Publish delegate names and contact details as they register (with their permission, of course), so they can connect with each other before they arrive.

Again, LinkedIn is a good balance between access and confidentiality. It's the best social media platform for connecting people at your conference because It's a business/professional platform, many of your participants are already using it, it provides space for positioning and profiling, and it has built-in features for publishing, connecting, recommending, and collaboration.

Make the most of LinkedIn

Although LinkedIn is one of the oldest social networks, and boasts over 400 million users worldwide, many people still don't use it well. Here are ten things you can do to boost your returns from LinkedIn (Share this with your delegates and speakers).

1. *Update your profile*: Ensure your profile is professional, current and accurate.

2. *Change your public URL:* By default, your page on LinkedIn has a weird URL, but you can customise it to make it more readable (for example, mine is **linkedin.com/in/gihanperera**).

3. *Add a Professional Portfolio*: Enhance your "Summary", "Experience", and "Education" sections with documents, pictures, videos, and slide shows.

4. *Connect with people you know*: Connect only with people you know (both for incoming and outgoing invitations). There are some exceptions to this rule, but this is a good start.

5. *Search for interesting people*: Use LinkedIn's Search feature to find people you might want to connect with at the event – including speakers, panellists, and other delegates.

6. *Ask for introductions*: If you want to connect with people you don't know, find a mutual contact and ask them to make the introduction.

7. *Write Recommendations*: Write testimonials for people in your network.

8. *Share other people's material*: Be a quality filter for your connections by sharing links to articles, blog posts, videos, and other online material.

9. *Share your own material*: Write articles and share them with your LinkedIn connections.

10. *Participate in groups*: Search for groups you like, join them, and contribute.

Read more: gihanperera.com/2016/05/10-must-linkedin-ideas-building-authority/

2. From Promotion to Preparation

Don't assume all the real thinking by delegates only happens at the conference itself. Now, you can get them thinking well before they take their seats.

Good conference organisers use a variety of promotional tools – including speaker videos, e-mail bursts, social media, and in-person promotion.

Great conference organisers take this further by sparking conversations, seeding ideas, and building momentum for the sessions.

Interviews with leaders and key influencers

Interview leaders and key influencers about the key messages and objectives of the conference, and distribute them to delegates before the event. The obvious choice is to record these as video, but you could also offer them in audio form as MP3 downloads.

Educational articles

Ask speakers for high-quality articles you can use in your pre-conference marketing e-mails.

Many speakers already have a selection of articles related to their topic, and will allow you to share them with your delegates to build buzz before the event. Some will even tailor or customise the articles for a particular industry, organisation, or even event.

Customised pre-event videos

Ask speakers to create a 60-90 second video to introduce themselves to delegates and give them something to consider before the event.

These don't have to be studio-quality productions – in fact, it's better if they are not. Instead, a simple selfie video with a casual background is good enough, and creates rapport between the speaker and delegates.

Self-assessment tools

Ask delegates to complete an online self-assessment survey based on the conference theme and objectives. Keep this brief (7-8 minutes at most) because delegates are already time-poor, so they don't want to spend 15 minutes completing an online survey!

A tool like SurveyMonkey.com allows you to create an online survey in minutes, but it doesn't give instant feedback to the participant based on their responses. For that, use a more sophisticated tool like outgrow.co.

You don't always have to create this survey yourself. Some of your speakers or exhibitors might already have an appropriate tool they use in their own business, so ask around.

For example, when I speak about disruption and the future, we suggest the conference organiser offers our "Is Your Business Future Proof?" self-assessment tool to delegates. It takes a delegate about 5 minutes to complete and gives them a report to help them understand their potential disruption points in their business. More importantly for the conference organiser, it gets the delegates thinking about the event well before they arrive.

Try this yourself: gihanperera.outgrow.co/futureproof

Twitter hashtag or event app

More and more events are using Twitter or an event app now to increase engagement during their event, but it's not always easy to build momentum. One way to address this is by using and promoting the event hashtag or app before the event.

It's not easy to encourage delegates to do this, but you can definitely ask your speakers and sponsors to take part. Ask them to share relevant material (for example, links to interesting articles) and ask interesting questions.

Note: Sponsors and exhibitors will naturally want to promote their product and services, and encourage delegates to visit their stand. Of course you don't want to ban this promotional material, but encourage them to also share educational material.

Pre-event gifts

Instead of waiting until the event starts before you start awarding prizes and gifts, find ways to offer them before the event as well. Ask your sponsors, exhibitors and speakers to offer prizes and gifts.

For example, if delegates are using the conference hashtag before the event, you could offer a small prize to the best post, best response, or most-liked post.

3. From Attending to Participating

Your audience mix is changing, with fewer than a third of them happy to just sit and listen to lecture-style presentations, as Baby Boomers have done in the past.

Good conference organisers also cater to Generation X attendees, who like group participation and facilitation.

Great conference organisers also cater to Millennials (Generation Y), who value individuality, social media, and technology seamlessly integrated into the conference experience.
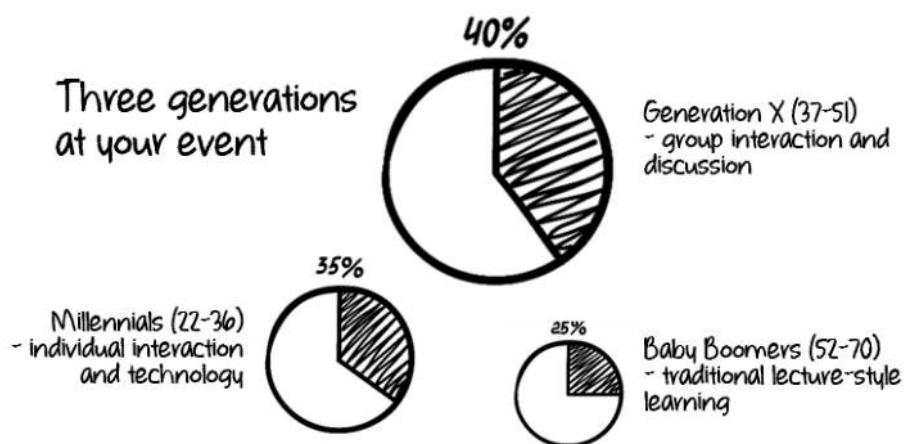
As the shape of the audience changes, there are clear indications that people want less of the "sage from the stage" and more opportunity to participate actively. Don't assume this only applies to Millennials (and, soon, Generation Z); instead, provide these opportunities to *all* participants.


Ask speakers to use the interactive tools

Encourage speakers to go beyond PowerPoint slide shows and use the interactive technology you're making available during the event.

For example, many event apps now support live feeds, interactive Q&A modules, and online polling. But these tools are useless if the presenters don't integrate them into their sessions!

Even if your event app doesn't support these tools, you can find low-cost online services that do the same thing – such as PollEverywhere.com for online polls or Sli.do for managing Q&A.

Don't be limited by basic interaction tools, either – they can now be very visually appealing. For example, here's a Poll Everywhere interaction from one of my presentations, where I gathered responses into a word cloud rather than a plain list:

Here's another, from Padlet.com, where audience members shared their best ideas from a panel discussion:
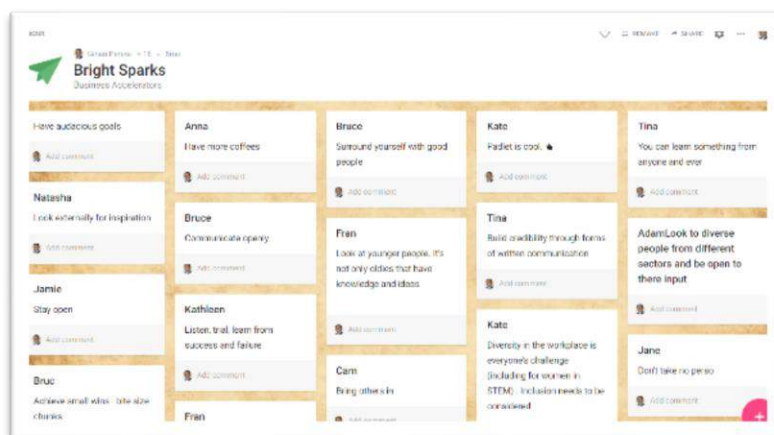
Live stream sessions

Invite input and feedback – even from people who aren't at the conference – by providing a live stream of selected sessions, with a Twitter hashtag for anybody to comment during the stream.

Live streaming used to be riskier and less reliable, but fast broadband Internet and better streaming tools make it a viable option for many events now.

The bigger concern comes from clients who worry that live streaming will cannibalise registrations. After all, if you open up your conference material to outsiders with live streaming, Twitter hashtags and public comments, doesn't that diminish the value of registrations?

No – not if you do it right!

The power of your conference is in the people, not the material – and people have more influence than ever before. Your delegates have access to networks you could never reach. By allowing them to share with their networks, you gain access to those networks as well.

You don't have to provide access to everything. Choose bits and pieces that provide high impact and enhance the event brand, and watch what happens. Chances are you'll improve the value for everybody – including yourself.

Seed social media

Many conference organisers have high hopes for their event app feed (or Twitter hashtag), but if it isn't used actively, it can look like a ghost town, and that takes the shine off the event experience. So, look for ways to "prime the pump" to build momentum – for example:

» As noted earlier, encourage speakers, sponsors and exhibitors to start posting *before* the event.

» Promote the Twitter hashtag widely during the conference, and ask presenters to promote it on their opening slides.

» Appoint social media leaders to seed the online conversations.

» Display the live feed in a public area such as the exhibition space, or (if you're confident!) as a live stream on stage during presentations.

Here's an example of a Twitter live feed that was displayed prominently in the conference foyer and trade show:

Involve delegates more

Don't assume delegates only want to "consume" material from your event. Involve them more in creating the experiences, and they will value those experiences more. Behavioural economist Dan Ariely calls this "the IKEA effect", because his research shows that people who are more involved in creating products place a higher value on them.

Alexandra Mottershead reinforces this idea in her article *"Inclusion in the Process: What Millennials Want From Meetings and Events"*. The title gives it away: *They want inclusion in the process.*

The article also highlights other ways to engage Millennials (Generation Y) in your event:

» Millennials are craving immersive and memory-making experiences over material goods and products.

» Millennials still recognize the importance of physical meetings and interactions.

» Millennials want opportunities for professional networking.

» They understand the value of hearing others' career stories and keeping in contact with professionals in our future industries.

» They are looking for maximization of technology – such as charging stations, Wi-Fi, social media walls, and event hashtags.

» They want a way to virtually interact with presenters and presentations, while being simultaneously physically engaged.

» Despite being willing to spend money on experiences, they also keep tabs on spending.

» Ultimately, and most importantly, Millennials want to be included in the events and meetings planning processes.

Read more: socialtables.com/blog/event-planning/what-millennials-want-events/

4. From Information to Insights

People don't need more information in their life, and they certainly don't need to attend a conference to get the information they need.

Good conference organisers create programs that balance information with interaction, collaboration, and participation.

Great conference organisers find ways to capture insights in the moment, package them for future reference, and distribute them in bite-sized chunks.

Dave Lutz describes the important shift in delivering conference education, in his article *"Shifting from Delivery to Discovery Conference Education"*:

Current System of Education: Delivery	Better System of Education: Discovery
» Participants passively consume information in long segments.	» Participants uncover what the content means to them.
» One-size-fits-all, impersonal and disconnected.	» Participants do the cognitive work in thinking about the material.
» The speaker does most of the thinking, sense-making and explaining.	» Understanding and sense-making result in new ideas and approaches.
» Evaluate learning with right and wrong answers on a test.	» Measure the quality of thinking, not just right or wrong answers.
» The speaker does problem-solving and shares solutions – which participants then copy.	» The speaker tailors the presentation based on questions and interaction.

Read more: velvetchainsaw.com/2018/03/22/shifting-from-delivery-to-discovery-conference-education/

It goes without saying that you should book external speakers who are true professionals in delivering insights to your delegates, and can help delegates make sense of the information overload (rather than adding to it!).

But this is not always so easy with your internal speakers, who play a vital role in your event, sharing inside industry knowledge, case studies, mentoring, and other valuable expertise and experience.

Unfortunately, because most internal speakers are not good presenters (and why should they be?), their presentations can diminish, rather than enhance, the overall conference experience.

You can't turn inexperienced speakers into brilliant presenters overnight, but it doesn't take much to give them simple guidelines and tools to help them improve their presentations. The key is to give them ideas they can use *fast*, because they are already overloaded at work, so don't have the time to work laboriously on their presentations.

As a professional speaker, I often coach presenters about how to design and deliver their messages simply and effectively. I'll share four processes here, which you're welcome to share with your internal speakers as well. These are summaries, with links to more detailed information (which of course you're also welcome to share).

Build it in five stages

Many presenters struggle with building their presentation because it's overwhelming to design a 30-60 minute presentation starting from scratch.

The solution is to build it in parts, starting from the main point and building on it. The secret to doing this well is to imagine you have limited time, and deliver the same message in different ways, based on this (imaginary) time constraint.

1. Just get to the point

If you have limited time, you must get to the point immediately. This means you focus on your goal, which has two perspectives:

» Audience: Know the outcome you want from your audience.

» You: State your point clearly and succinctly.

2. Show them the shift

Imagine having coffee with the most important person who needs to hear your message, and they give you five minutes to present it. You don't have a PowerPoint deck handy (and it's not the right place for it anyway), but you can grab a pen and paper napkin to sketch a diagram. This isn't a work of art; it's just a diagram showing your current situation, and you then draw arrows or circles showing what you want to change.

3. Get them on board

If you have more time, instead of "bulking up" your content, focus on what happens immediately before and immediately after your presentation:

» Before (framing): Get the audience in the right frame of mind to hear your message.

» After (pacing): Step them through the specific action you want them to take after you end.

4. Add colour and texture

Now it's time to add more content. Your presentation so far has a point, a goal, a diagram to show a shift, understanding of the audience's frame of mind, and clear action steps. But it doesn't have much depth. It's a cartoon, not a painting. So, let's add colour and texture to it.

We have two main tools available: stories, to appeal to their emotions; and data, to appeal to their logical mind. Most business presentations have too much data and too few stories. To make your presentation more effective, use both stories and data to reinforce your message.

5. Make it active

You now have an effective presentation. Its only weakness is that it's one-way delivery only, with your audience sitting there passively absorbing it. The final step is to build in opportunities for

audience interaction. Rather than adding more points, more stories, or more data, use that extra time for audience interaction.

Putting this all together gives you a framework for a powerful presentation:
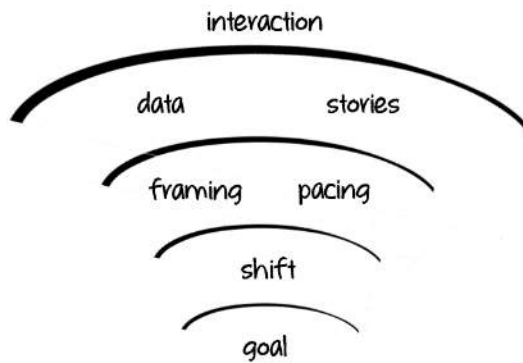
You build it from bottom to top, adding more components to fill the available time.

Read more; gihanperera.com/2017/08/hack-next-presentation-smarter-sharper-faster/

Make the numbers sizzle

Statistics, graphs, and other numbers are important tools to support your message. But you don't need to present them in a boring way (as most presenters do). Many presenters make one of two mistakes:

» Too little meaning: They present raw data without making it meaningful to the audience.

» Too much detail: They present it in a complex way that hides the real message.

Fortunately, it doesn't take much to fix either problem.

If you're worried about overwhelming your audience with data, it's tempting to leave it out altogether. But that's not the best option. Instead, consider how to relate your data – especially numbers and statistics – to something the audience understands.

For example, Jamie Oliver starts his 18-minute TED Talk with a fact about healthy eating:

"Sadly, in the next 18 minutes when I do our chat, four Americans that are alive will be dead through the food that they eat."

The late Hans Rosling, who was Swedish professor of global health, became world-famous for presenting data in an interesting way. For example, in one of his presentations, instead of saying, "The survey participants performed worse than chance", he says:

"So I went to the zoo and I asked the chimps. You were beaten by the chimps."

You can do the same with any important fact, number or statistic in your presentation – simply look for ways to relate it to something the audience understands.

The second mistake is providing too much information – in other words, cluttering up the data so the important point doesn't shine through. To avoid this mistake, eliminate anything that dilutes the value of your data:

» *Use round numbers*: Instead of saying "21.5% of our customers", say "20% of our customers" or "One in five customers".

» *Remove unnecessary data*: Be sure all your data support your point, and ruthlessly eliminate any clutter.

» *One idea per slide*: For example, if you have a table of numbers with two important points on it, show it on two slides, each with an extract from the table.

Read more: gihanperera.com/2018/01/numbers-graphs-statistics-make-presentations-better/

Build better visuals

Have you ever sat through an online presentation with boring PowerPoint slides? Of course you have! But the problem is not with PowerPoint, but with the way the presenter used it.

Don't use a typical PowerPoint template with bullet lists and headings. It doesn't take much to make your slide decks more visually attractive. For example:

» Show images that take up the full slide, rather than a decorative image next to a bullet list.

» Turn bullet lists into Smart Art (a powerful but little-known feature of PowerPoint).

» Make only one point per slide. If you have multiple points, use multiple slides.

» Treat your PowerPoint slide deck as a visual *aid*, not the main visual (*you* are the main visual in your presentation).

I taught these principles and more in a webinar *"Stunning Slides"* I presented for Citrix (the people behind GoToWebinar, GoToTraining and GoToMeeting). In this webinar, you learn:

» Strategies for designing and optimising slides for online presentations

» Tips to build attractive slides quickly and easily

» Sources of free and low-cost graphics you can use legally

» Little-known PowerPoint features that turn bullet lists into attractive graphics – in seconds!

Because Citrix specialises in online tools, this webinar uses examples from online presentations. But the ideas apply just as well to in-person presentations, so you're welcome to share the webinar recording with your internal speakers.

Watch: gihanperera.com/2017/07/stunning-slides/

Learn from TED presentations

We can thank TED.com for setting a new standard in presentation skills, and millions of people in businesses around the world should be eternally grateful. Audiences expect far more now from presenters – even in stock-standard, "boring" business presentations.

That's a good thing in general, but it can be a challenge for the typical internal speaker at a conference, because they are being judged by different standards. Most presentations are not ideas that change the world, delivered by "the" world expert on the topic.

But all is not lost! You can still learn from the best TED Talks, and use or adapt these techniques to make your next presentation zing!

I discussed these things (and more) in detail in another webinar I delivered for Citrix. In this webinar, I share the secrets of the best TED speakers, and show you how to use them in your presentations.

You will learn how to:

» Build rapport quickly with your audience.

» Design attractive slides (fast!) to enhance your message.

» Selectively use your webcam to provide a more personal connection.

» Shift the energy regularly with interactive engagement techniques.

Again, because Citrix specialises in online tools, this webinar uses examples from online presentations. But the ideas apply just as well to in-person presentations.

Watch: gihanperera.com/2016/09/5-ted-talk-secrets-revamp-online-presentations-2/

5. From Energy to Flow

Managing delegates can be like herding cats, and one of your biggest challenges is keeping their attention, focus and energy.

Good conference organisers manage their delegates' energy by arranging the program to balance action and reflection, listening and talking, education and entertainment.

Great conference organisers align everything with the conference theme, and help delegates *flow* through the conference, so they manage their own energy and achieve their own goals.
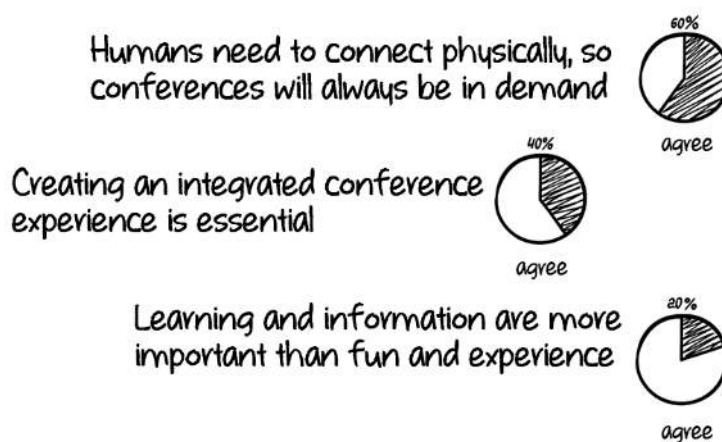
Design better panel discussions

Many conferences use panel sessions to involve more people, hear from many voices, and shift the energy on stage. These are all worthwhile goals, but too often panel sessions fall flat and lack impact. A successful panel needs more preparation than just asking panellists to "Speak your mind".

In her article *"Creating Powerful Panels That Engage Your Audience"*, Sarah Michel shares her "Ten Panel Commandments", which are worth sharing with anybody participating in a panel at your event:

1. *Thou Shalt Serve the Audience.* Help them solve problems and find solutions, and help them connect the dots.

2. *Thou Shalt Be Prepared.* Research the other panellist's positions. Keep your answers concise. Prepare 3-5 key messages that matter.

3. *Thou Shalt Not Bluster.* When you are speaking, keep it short. People prefer snappy, well thought-out answers to interesting questions.

4. *Thou Shalt Be Additive, Not Repetitive*. Don't repeat what has already been said. Speak up if you have a different perspective or point of view.

5. *Thou Shalt Disagree Diplomatically*. Respectfully disagree without being disagreeable. Disagree because the discussion will benefit the audience.

6. *Thou Shalt Not Self Promote*. Nobody wants to hear your sales pitch!

7. *Thou Shalt Not Pontificate*. Don't talk down to or lecture the audience.

8. *Thou Shalt Remember Laughter is Good*. Have fun.

9. *Thou Shalt Remember Images Speak Louder Than Words*. If you're using PowerPoint use text sparingly. Select an impactful image that conveys your message.

10. *Thou Shalt Remember Attention Span*. Change up the energy every 10 minutes with an audience question, poll, story or 30 second rapid response to a question.

Read more: velvetchainsaw.com/2016/04/08/creating-powerful-panels-engage-audience/

Expect customised presentations

You want your external speakers to deliver a polished, high-quality presentation, but that doesn't mean it should be exactly the same for every audience. Emphasise that they must customise and tailor their session to the audience and theme.

The true professionals will ask about this in the presentation brief, and will ensure they make small adjustments to customise their presentation – for example:

» Researching the organisation and sharing inside knowledge

» Knowing whether to refer to "customers" or "clients"

» Using industry jargon

» Using local spelling and language in slides and other materials

» Knowing the "hot topics" in the industry

Much of this information can be shared in the speaker's presentation briefing – which is an important part of your event preparation.

Brief external speakers

Of course, you should brief your speakers before their presentation, but too often a presentation briefing defaults to discussing logistics. That's important, but also use this as an opportunity to share ideas about your organisation, the conference theme, and the audience expectations.

The best speakers will help you prepare by supplying some briefing questions, but many won't, so provide your own briefing notes to help speakers prepare.

Here are a few of the questions I ask clients – you're welcome to use them to create a briefing sheet to send to your other external speakers:

» What can you tell me about the audience (Age? Males vs females? Roles?)?

» What do you want Gihan's presentation to accomplish? These questions might help you:

What do you want them to SAY after it?

What do you want them to THINK?

What do you want them to FEEL?

What do you want them to DO?

» How receptive is the audience to change?

» Is there anything Gihan shouldn't say or imply (i.e. is anything taboo)?

Coach the MC

Coach the MC to tweak speaker introductions and session announcements to align with the conference theme. A professional MC will do this anyway because they realise it's an important part of their role. But if you're not hiring a professional MC for your event, emphasise this to the MC.
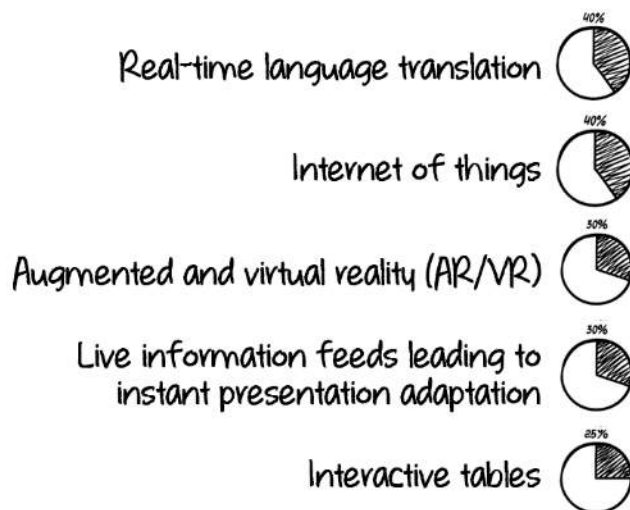
6. From Gadgets to Tools

Technology has the power to transform the entire conference experience, but only if it used effectively, and not just a random collection of Bright Shiny Objects.

Good conference organisers use technology that replaces old techniques – such as a conference app, online session bookings, and downloadable resources.

Great conference organisers use technology that enhances and *transforms* the in-person experience, rather than just making it more efficient.

It's interesting to see which technologies event professionals see as important. When asked which would have a significant impact in the events industry in the next 15 years, these were their top five responses:

Real-time language translation — 40%

Internet of things — 40%

Augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR) — 30%

Live information feeds leading to instant presentation adaptation — 30%

Interactive tables — 25%

Some others that have gained a lot of media hype didn't make the cut, including holograms, heat maps of foot traffic, artificial intelligence and robotics, and facial recognition software. Although these technologies could have some impact, it's clear that event professionals have clear priorities in mind – and that's a good thing.

Event technology changes so quickly that it doesn't make sense to recommend any specific tools here, because any list rapidly becomes obsolete. But there are some general principles to follow when choosing your event technology.

Solve a problem

When Jaime Casap, Google's head of Global Education, speaks to school groups, he says:

> "Instead of asking students what they want to be when they grow up, I ask them what problem they want to solve."

This is a sound guiding principle for us all: What problem does this technology solve? If it doesn't solve a problem, add value, or enhance the event experience, ditch it! This is the best way to avoid Bright Shiny Object Syndrome.

Ask your speakers and exhibitors

Your external speakers, sponsors and exhibitors often attend many conferences as part of their jobs, so they see and use a variety of event technology. Ask them to share their experience about what works (and doesn't!), and use that experience to inform your choice.

Ask your organisation's employees or members

Don't assume you know more than your delegates, either! Many of them – especially the Millennials and Generation Zs – love technology, and will readily share what they know.

Don't get stuck with what you know

It's easy to rely on what you know has worked in the past, and it might even continue to work in the future. But if you only ever stick to what you know, your events will soon look stale and old-fashioned.

For each piece of event technology you use, first identify the problem it solves, and then ask, "If we didn't have this, what's the best way to solve this problem?" You might still end up using this technology, but it also gives you the opportunity to choose something better.

Expect it to fail!

However well you test your technology, have a backup plan in case it fails. Even just knowing you have a plan B puts you in a stronger position, because it gives you more confidence to push ahead with plan A. As my brother-in-law Neil Mattingley said to me when coaching me in tennis, "You're only as good as your second serve".

Ask Corbin Ball

In this fast-changing technology world, it's rare for any industry to have a stand-out expert. But in the Western world, the undisputed expert in event technology is Corbin Ball. Follow everything he does at CorbinBall.com.

7. From Corridor Conversations to In-Session Collaboration

If so many delegates think the conversations they have outside the formal presentations are the most valuable part of the conference, why do you bother with the presentations?

Good conference organisers know the presentations *are* important, but only if they allow opportunities for participants to chat, contribute and collaborate.

Great conference organisers look beyond the presentations and find other ways for delegates to interact – both at the event itself and in the extended online community.
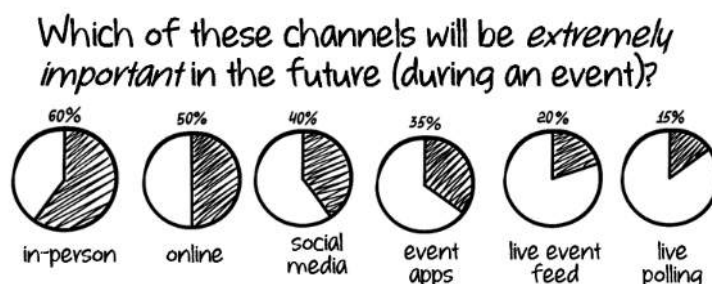
Create planned serendipity

When creating your conference program, don't just focus on presentations, even if they are highly interactive. Also create spaces for delegates to connect, network, and reconnect.

For example, Simone Poetscher describes the value of speed networking in her article *"Speed Networking at Your Next Conference"*:

» Attendees speed network with experts and speakers in a group, workshop style, with a focus on pre-selected topics.

» Attendees speed network individually, based on the speaker's focus.

» Speed networking among conference attendees.

But she also cautions conference organisers about getting it right:

"Speed networking can be a huge success or a total disaster. Done right, it provides a structured way to match the right individuals with each other, creating a massive return on investment from attendance. Approach speed networking from the lens of your attendees, and consider which connections will serve them best."

Read more: socialtables.com/blog/event-planning/speed-networking-conference/

Design interactive sessions

Design sessions that allow back-and-forth interaction with the presenters, group discussions, and one-on-one conversations. There are some obvious session formats that encourage participation and group discussion, including panel interviews and moderated discussions. But also consider newer techniques, such as World Café and Open Space Technology.

Even with traditional presentations, you can enhance the interactive sessions with online tools like Sli.do or fun microphones like the Catchbox:
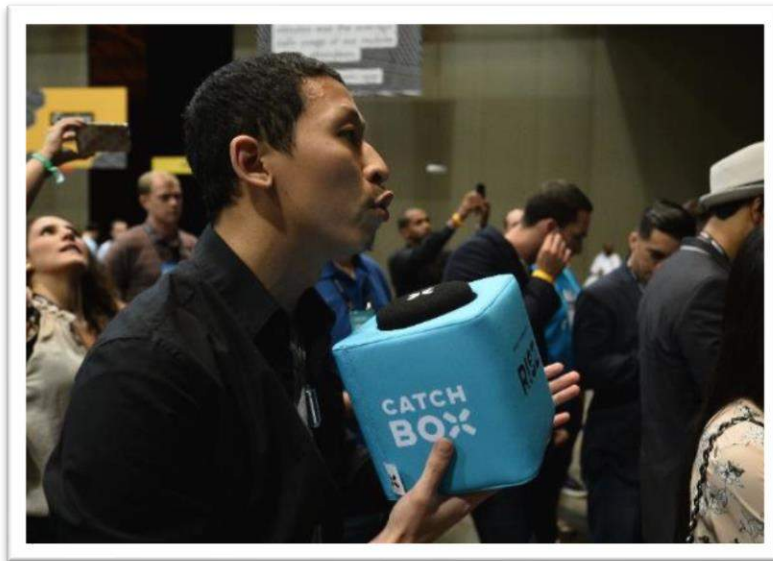

Image credit: Collision Conf

Encourage online engagement

Use live streaming and the conference Twitter hashtag to spark conversations, ask (and answer) questions, and invite input and feedback – even from people who aren't at the conference.

As we have discussed elsewhere, opening up your event to the world doesn't diminish its impact; it enhances it.

8. From Skills to Shifts

There are so many channels available for learning new skills, and a conference isn't usually near the top of the list.

Good conference organisers include *some* sessions for developing skills, and provide multiple streams to help participants self-select the most valuable sessions.

Great conference organisers focus on shifting thinking rather than teaching skills, and plan the program around ideas, mindsets, and inspiration for new ways of thinking.

Shift thinking

Choose external speakers who shift thinking rather than just inspiring delegates or building skills.

In our presentation briefing with clients who book me for a keynote presentation, I ask these four questions:

» What do you want the audience to SAY after my presentation?

» What do you want them to THINK?

» What do you want them to FEEL?

» What do you want them to DO?

Importantly, I *don't* ask, "What do you want them to KNOW?", because my job is to shift their thinking, not to increase their knowledge (they can ask Google for knowledge!).

Link keynotes with breakout sessions

Ask keynote speakers to provide breakout sessions that reinforce their key messages. This is one area where a presenter *can* teach skills, because they have already shifted the thinking in their keynote session, and can now add practical take-home value.

If you use the same speaker for both sessions, you ensure a smooth transition between them, and don't risk two different speakers clashing in their principles (which will confuse the audience).

Encourage fearless conversations

Schedule sessions that encourage fearless conversations on controversial topics. Don't shy away from these difficult conversations; instead, embrace the opportunity, because your event might be the best venue for all the interested parties to share ideas and insights.

You might need to engage a skilful facilitator for these sessions, because you want them to deepen thinking rather than drive people further apart.

Use online courses for skills training

Online courses have transformed the way people can learn new skills. Instead of using valuable conference resources for skills training, encourage and promote online courses instead.

There are large online course providers like Coursera.org, but it's easier to start with smaller – but still high-quality – providers like Open2Study.com (backed by leading Australian and New Zealand universities).
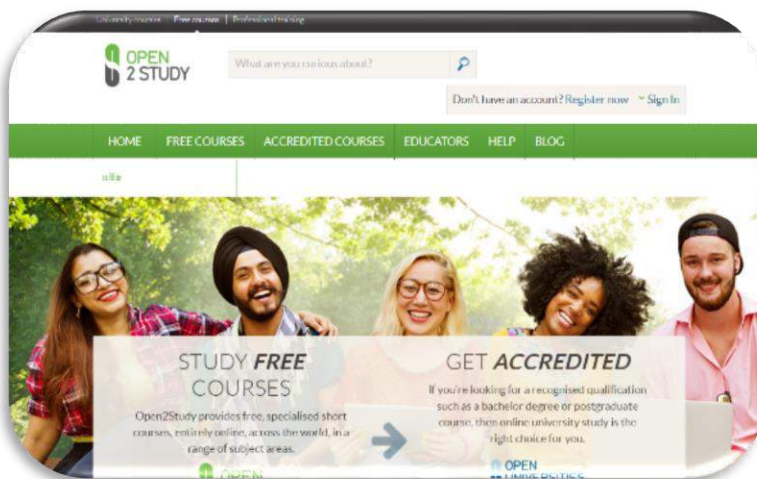
Browse Open2Study for courses related to your conference theme, and link to them from the conference Web site and event app.

9. From Event to Journey

A conference isn't a single event in a participant's life; it's one part of an engaging journey.

Good conference organisers show participants how to get more value from the conference material after they leave the room.

Great conference organisers create ways for participants themselves to keep the learning alive.

Delegates will place more importance on lifelong learning after an event — 65% yes

Start the learning before the event

We have already discussed ways to engage delegates before the event (see *"2. From Promotion to Preparation"* on page 7), so here's a summary of those ideas:

» Self-assessment tools

» Educational articles

» Customised pre-event videos

» Interviews with leaders and key influencers

» Twitter hashtag or event app

» Pre-event gifts

Capture and share key takeaways

Capture key takeaways during the event and share them with delegates later. The most common vehicle for this is a password-protected page on the conference Web site. But you can now do it in other ways – such as an ongoing e-mail campaign, a private Facebook group or LinkedIn group, or in the event app.

You can also use online content creation tools like Wakelet.com to share resources.

Ask speakers for post-conference activities

Many of your external speakers will also offer other services in their business – such as training, facilitation, mentoring, and coaching. Even if these services fall outside your responsibility (and budget!) as a conference organiser, you might be able to ask speakers to provide alternatives that empower delegates to do the activities personally or in-house.

For example, if a speaker provides a workshop that complements their keynote presentation, they might also licence in-house trainers to deliver that workshop material. This keeps the learning alive after the conference, and usually costs less than engaging the speaker to deliver that material. Either way, it costs a *lot* less than having delegates forgetting their learnings as soon as they leave the event!

Create mastermind groups

Help delegates create mastermind groups or "buddies" to keep each other accountable. You can do this in different ways, depending on your level of commitment:

» Simply remind delegates to share contact details and business cards with each other.

» Share delegates' details (with their permission) with each other.

» Set aside a "matchmaking" session near the end of the conference for delegates to find buddies and create mastermind groups.

» Show delegates how to use Meetup.com to facilitate future meetings of their mastermind groups.

Host follow-up sessions

If you want to go a step further, extend the event experience by hosting some of these follow-up sessions yourself. Of course, it's usually not feasible to bring delegates back to the venue every month (but if you're an internal conference organiser, you *could* host, say, regular "Lunch and Learn" events). But you can host online events, such as webinars, videoconferencing, and online mastermind groups.

10. From Online Substitute to Online Enhancement

Online collaboration tools can replace some of what happens at the conference. You can see that as a threat or an opportunity.
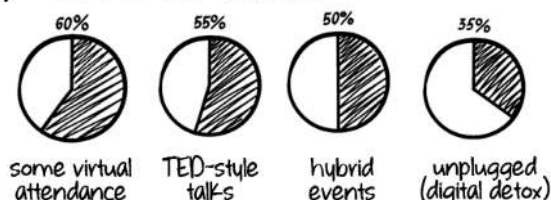
Good conference organisers use online tools during their event to increase engagement, especially with Millennials.

Great conference organisers treat the combination of online and in-person events as part of one continuous learning journey.

Despite the potential for online tools to enhance in-person events, it's also not surprising that event professionals worry about whether online meetings will cannibalise attendance at in-person meetings. It's a fair question, and largely depends on economic circumstances. For example, during the North American Financial Crisis in 2009, Forbes Insights reported that almost 60% of business executives said they were traveling for business less than 18 months earlier, with more than a third saying "much less frequently". And by 2010, Carlson Wagonlit Travel reported that virtual meetings had grown at 80% percent of companies worldwide.

But this isn't necessarily the end of in-person meetings. Done well, online collaboration tools enhance in-person meetings, and smart event professionals recognise their potential.

Which of these program formats will be very important in the future?

60% some virtual attendance | 55% TED-style talks | 50% hybrid events | 35% unplugged (digital detox)

Create Personal Learning Networks

Help each delegate create their own "Personal Learning Network" for ongoing actions after the event.

A Personal Learning Network includes the blogs you read, newsletters you subscribe to, podcasts you listen to, YouTube channels you watch regularly, and Web sites you visit frequently. Encourage speakers to share their favourite resources (including, but not limited to, their own Web site and social media channels), and gather all of these resources for delegates to browse later.

There are many different formats – or "channels" – for receiving and consuming information, so provide a variety of options to suit different styles.

Here are some of the main formats, with pros and cons:

» *Text:* Very common, easy to skim, fast to download, requires attention and concentration

» *Audio:* Can multitask, can listen at double speed to save time, not easy to skim, not suited to visual material

» *Video:* Highest-quality information (combines text, audio and visuals), but slowest to download and requires dedicated time

» *Slide shows:* Not as high-quality as video, but easier to grasp key information quickly

Ask speakers for online resources

It takes time to develop online resources, and busy event professionals usually don't have that time. But your first port of call should be your speakers, who often have additional online resources that complement their key messages.

This should go far beyond supplying just a PDF version of their slide deck. In fact, if their slide deck makes any sense in isolation without them presenting it, it's poorly designed!

Instead, the best speakers can provide additional resources in different formats:

» *Written*: Articles, blog posts, special reports, white papers, e-books

» *Audio*: MP3 downloads, interviews with key people at the event

» *Video*: Video tutorials, customised videos for delegates, narrated slide shows

» *Interactive*: Post-conference webinar, videoconference Q&A session, mobile app

For example, after my keynote presentations, many delegates ask me for help in how to think like a futurist, so I developed a free mobile app "Fit For The Future", and now offer it to all conference organisers and their delegates.

Most speakers won't have developed their own app (they should!), but they should be able to provide *some* post-event resources to keep the learning alive.

Get the app here: gihanperera.com/resources.html

Summary

Here's a summary again of the ten things great conference organisers do differently:

1. Networking is not enough. Your attendees want to make strong **connections** and build lasting relationships.

2. Their thinking starts before they arrive. Help delegates with better **preparation** so they make the most of the conference.

3. They are not just attendees sitting silently and listening; they want to be active **participants** in co-creating the conference.

4. They don't come to the conference for more information. They want actionable **insights** that make a lasting difference.

5. They don't want you to work at keeping them entertained and engaged; they want a conference that **flows** effortlessly.

6. Gadgets and gizmos don't impress anymore, unless they are **transformational tools** that enhance their experience.

7. They want to take their corridor conversations inside, and actively take part in **in-session collaboration**.

8. There are other places where they can learn new skills. They want the conference to **shift thinking** instead.

9. A conference isn't a one-off event. It can now be an integrated part of their entire **journey.**

10. Online events aren't the enemy of in-person conferences. They can **enhance and extend** the overall experience.

You don't need to implement them all at the same time. Add, mix, complement, enhance, and extend these ideas into your existing event, and you'll create a better experience for everybody!

Some images courtesy of Shutterstock

About Gihan Perera

Gihan Perera is a futurist, conference speaker, author and consultant who gives you a glimpse into what's ahead – and how you can become fit for the future, in your professional and personal life.

Since 1997, he has worked with business leaders, thought leaders, entrepreneurs, and other change agents – helping them with their strategy for thriving in a fast-changing world.

He has clients throughout Australia, as well as in New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Singapore, the USA and Canada.

He is the author of *"The Future of Leadership"* and 10 other books.

He has always taken the lead in embracing emerging technologies and trends, from his university thesis in robotics and artificial intelligence, to leading a software development team building the infrastructure for the early Internet, founding one of Australia's first Web development companies in 1996, teaching thought leaders how to engage in e-learning platforms, and helping business leaders build their personal brand and online influence.

Forbes magazine rated him the #5 social media influencer in the world (and #1 in Australia) in his area of expertise.

His formal background is in science and technology, with a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Western Australia. But he's always been interested in people and the way they communicate – and how to become fit for the future so they embrace change, act on opportunities, and live happier lives.

Gihan's Speaking Topics

Fit for the Future

Thriving, not just surviving, in a disrupted world

The world is changing faster than ever before. Digital disruption, global reach, and the changing workplace affect us all, and at all levels – individual, team, organisation, and community.

In the past, it was possible to resist the change and just get by, but that's no longer an option because the changes affect us in so many ways. That's bad news if you think you can get by with what has always worked before. But it's exciting news if you're willing to embrace the new opportunities.

The Future of Leadership

Building high-performance teams

Our volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world needs a new kind of leadership. The world is changing so fast that "command and control" leadership no longer works.

The most successful organisations and teams move fast, change quickly, and adapt to their environment faster.

The Future of Innovation

Using foresight to stay ahead of the game

In a fast, flat and free world, innovation is not just valuable – it's essential. Innovation today is far removed from the old idea of R&D silos, driven by structure, hierarchy, and striving to beat traditional competitors.

That doesn't work anymore, and most disruption happens from new competitors, and often even from outside your industry.