Conferences that WORK

CREATING EVENTS THAT PEOPLE LOVE

ADRIAN SEGAR

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About the Author

ADRIAN SEGAR has organized and facilitated conferences for over 20 years. Realizing that he loves to connect with people, and to create spaces for them to connect with each other, he created the first peer conference in 1992, and has been refining peer conference process ever since. Adrian was an independent information technology consultant for 23 years, taught college computer science for 10 years, and co-owned and managed a solar domestic hot water heating systems manufacturing company before that. He has an ancient Ph.D. in experimental high-energy particle physics, lives in Marlboro, Vermont, and loves to sing and dance.

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Preface

There is a widespread and unexamined assumption that the core purpose of a conference is to transfer knowledge from the learned few to the relatively uneducated many, and that this is best done through the familiar structures of pre-planned keynotes, presentations, and panels. In this traditional model, attendees are assigned a largely passive, secondary role with their spontaneous interactions relegated to mealtimes, socials, and perhaps a few "birds of a feather" sessions. Information is imparted, some good meals are eaten, perhaps some sightseeing occurs, and then attendees go home until next year, when the cycle is repeated.

I think we can do better.

Conferring: Isn't that what conferences should be about? Conferring: "To talk with somebody in order to compare opinions or make a decision." Traditional conferences attempt to disseminate information from a small number of speakers to the attendees. But suppose there was a conference where participants discovered and shared their collective body of knowledge in a way that was relevant and useful to each individual, creating a conference that directly responded to the needs and wishes of the participants; a conference where *the attendees themselves* created the kind of conference they wanted?

Such conferences exist; I call them *peer conferences*. Peer conferences focus on effectively exposing and sharing the vast body of knowledge that conference attendees collectively hold, knowledge that they are eager to share and thirsty to receive. *The goal of every peer conference is to provide a meaningful and useful experience for each attendee.* For this to happen, people

need to learn about each other early in the conference. They need to discover the interests they share and the experiences that they want to explore with other attendees. They need support for the resulting discussions, and they need a way to integrate their overall conference experience into their lives.

A peer conference provides a safe and supportive framework for all this to happen.

This book describes and explains the process that I have developed to build interactive peer conferences. It contains much of what I have learned through designing and facilitating conferences for many years. Although the key elements have been central to my conferences from the start, this is still a work in progress. I continue to learn from every conference I run.

Attendees' evaluations of peer conferences are extremely positive. Participants comment on how much they prefer the format. Peer sessions, the heart of the conference, are invariably highly rated. Informal interactions, which this kind of conference encourages, are almost always described as excellent.

A peer conference is appropriate for any group of people who have a common interest and want to learn from and share with each other. There are hundreds of thousands of such groups that could coalesce, meet, learn, and grow via the structure of a peer conference. My intention is that this book both provides the practical details needed to hold a successful peer conference and inspires you to create and participate in these powerful and rewarding events.

A peer conference community story

I still remember the last state consortium meeting I attended, back in 1991. The facilitator asked us to share noteworthy events at our schools. Several attendees from a large university described with pride how they had finally selected a vendor to provide a piece of software for their school—for $250,000. Nancy, Mike, and I looked at each other. We knew we were all thinking the same thing. This school was spending more money on a software package—one that handled just a small part of the administrative needs of the school—than the entire information technology budgets of our two small colleges combined.

At that moment the three of us realized that we were living in a different world from the other educational institutions at the meeting. Five years earlier, none of our jobs had existed. There wasn't anyone around who knew more about what we did than us. Where could we find support for the problems that we *faced?*

After the meeting I felt dispirited, but Mike was undaunted. "I think we should organize a meeting for information technology directors at small schools like ours," he said. Nancy and I agreed to help.

Working together, we publicized a conference that was held June 3–5, 1992, at Marlboro College, Vermont. Twenty-three people came. We didn't know what participants wanted to talk about, or what knowledge they might have, so we asked them to tell us at an initial roundtable. The first evening, we set up a "topic board" where attendees could suggest and review topics for breakout sessions during the following two days.

The conference was an immediate success, and we decided to hold it again the following year. That year 45 people came. The following year, we held two conferences, one on the west coast and one on the east, with more than 80 people showing up.

At the eighth annual conference, I was watching everything going on, and suddenly realized that I had helped to create a community of genuine value, one that would endure for the foreseeable future, even if I stepped away at that point.

As I write this, we are gearing up for our 18th year of conferences. I am no longer an information technology director at a small college, but I still facilitate the annual conference. Each year, 20 to 40 percent of attendees are new, broadening our community ever further.

It is indescribably satisfying to be intimately involved in the formation of a community like this and to get to enjoy its success. May you be so fortunate.

Introduction

In October 2005, my wife and I were riding a hotel shuttle bus to San Francisco International Airport. Two women, seated behind us, started talking:

> Woman #1: "Did you go to the Austin conference last year?"
> Woman #2: "Yes."
> [*Pause*]
> Woman #2: "I don't remember a thing about the Austin conference."
> [*Long pause*]
> Woman #2: "Probably won't remember a thing about this one either."

As part of the research for this book, I interviewed numerous people about their conference experiences. Although most of them had some positive things to say, a solid majority had serious complaints about the quality and worth of the events they'd attended.

> "We sit there like lumps, basically . . ."
>
> "The conference turned out to be essentially the same as one I'd been to a couple of years before."
>
> ". . . being locked in a room with someone who doesn't know what he's talking about."
>
> "Most conferences I go to have the same format. They're all pretty bad."

"You might as well read a book."

"600 people, 450 vendors. Cattle call!"

—*Some interviewee descriptions of less than desirable conference experiences*

Over one hundred billion dollars is spent every year on conferences. And this figure does not include the value of attendees' time. With this level of expenditure of time and money you'd think that significant efforts would have been made to create conferences that were effective and memorable. I am not deprecating the significant work that creating a well-run conference requires, but far too much energy is expended on the mechanics of organizing the conference, *while far too little energy is spent creating a conference that meets attendees' needs*. We are informed about conferences by email, we arrive by airplane, and we gaze at fancy PowerPoint presentations, but, year after year, over a hundred million people experience a conference process that has changed very little since the 17th century.

What you're about to read will show you a better way to design and run a conference. I've divided the book into three parts. In Part I, *Reengineering the Conference*, I hope to convince you of two things:

- Certain key assumptions made about the format and structure used in most conferences today are fundamentally flawed; and
- There is a better way to structure what happens at a conference, a way that significantly improves the conference experience for each individual attendee.

Once you're convinced, naturally you'll want to know how to put my ideas to work.

In Part II, *Planning and Preparing for Your Peer Conference,* I'll take you step by step through everything you need to know to prepare for your conference.

And in Part III, *Running Your Peer Conference,* I'll cover conference setup and the nitty-gritty details of running a successful conference, from start to finish.

I wrote this book because I've found that peer conferences offer a truly superior conference experience that facilitates intimate connections, supports powerful peer-to-peer sharing and learning, and generates lasting impact. I want to share what I've found with you.