



CHAPTER

2

Why you need to crowdsource meeting content

“That we determine the session topics is incredibly useful since they are the latest issues that we all have/will experience in our schools.”

“There is more value in one day of peer sessions than a week of lectures.”

“This was a particularly powerful weekend for me and the format was especially conducive to allowing us to focus on self-identified areas of interest and the expertise we each already bring to the table.”

“The mechanics of this conference pretty much guarantee that the topics covered will be of interest to a large spectrum of the attendees.”

—Participant evaluations of crowdsourced conferences

An experiment

Let me convince you in three minutes that your events will be better if you crowdsource meeting content. All you'll need is a pen and paper and your own experience.

Interested?

If so, *do* the following right now. Merely *reading* the instructions won't work!

- Recall the last conference you attended.
- List the sessions you attended that offered *real* value to you. If there weren't any, your satisfaction score is 0%; go to Step 6.

- Add any sessions that you believe would have been valuable but which you couldn't attend due to scheduling conflicts. Don't include any valuable networking breaks you attended unless they were designed to be content specific.
- Now estimate a) the total duration in hours of the *valuable* sessions you've listed (V), and b) the duration in hours of *all* the sessions at the conference (A). "All" should include every session offered at the event.
- Divide V by A, and multiply by 100 to get your satisfaction score percentage for the conference.
- Finally, if the conference you analyzed was unrepresentative (i.e. unusually poor or good) compared to those you usually attend, feel free to repeat this process with one or more other recent conferences and calculate the average of the satisfaction score results.

What was your satisfaction score?

Most people who do this exercise report average satisfaction scores in the 10–20% range.

Can we do better than 10-20% satisfaction?

A 10-20% satisfaction score probably doesn't surprise you, because it's the norm for traditional meetings. You're used to reviewing a conference program to identify the few sessions that look interesting. In addition, you're typically disappointed by some of the sessions you choose.

But it doesn't have to be this way!

What if you learned how to achieve conference satisfaction scores of 80% or higher?

Imagine going to a conference where your problem *isn't* finding sessions you want to attend amidst a sea of uninteresting topics, or gaining little from some of the sessions you do attend. Rather, your problem is choosing between all the interesting and valuable sessions offered. And the sessions you choose turn out to be great!

As you might expect, participants at such meetings give the program rave reviews. The most common comment seen on evaluations is some version of "*This conference was fantastic! I only want to go to conferences like this from now on.*"

Crowdsourcing meeting sessions makes attendee experiences like this *routine*. Hard to believe? Well, I spent about ten years crowdsourcing sessions with an incredible variety of attendees and conferences before I realized that the consistently enthusiastic responses and subsequent adoption of crowdsourcing at future events were the rule, rather than the exception.

Crowdsourcing meeting sessions works!

One of the most important benefits from crowdsourcing programs at conferences is the abundance of sessions that attendees love.

And there are more.

Crowdsourcing also:

- Uncovers unexpected topics.
- Ensures topic timeliness.
- Avoids seemingly “hot” topics—that actually aren’t.
- Gives attendees the empowerment and freedom to contribute.
- Maximizes the likelihood that session content is relevant.

Let’s look at these benefits in more detail.

1. Crowdsourcing uncovers unexpected topics

Program committees sometimes make well-meaning attempts to poll attendees in advance about potentially appealing topics. I’ve found in practice that few attendees expend the time and energy to suggest subjects they’d like offered at an upcoming conference. And when they do, the topics suggested are a poor match to what people actually choose when the event program is crowdsourced *at the event*.

At every crowdsourced conference I facilitate, attendees suggest unexpected and subsequently popular topics during the opening process. These are topics that are off just about everyone’s radar, including the program committee’s. Such topics usually arise from expertise or experience casually shared by an attendee, who often has no idea that others would be interested. I routinely see uncovered topics turned into sessions attended by significant numbers of attendees.

Crowdsourcing meeting content at the event invariably uncovers important session topics that would otherwise be missed.

2. Crowdsourcing ensures topic timeliness

Conference programs developed in advance suffer from the curse of timeliness. Typically a multi-day conference program will be fixed many months in advance. In some fields, a lot can happen in the time between announcing the program and the meeting itself. I remember a conference-planning meeting held right after legislation had been passed that affected the conference’s target audience. Everyone felt it was very important to invite a legal expert to keynote the consequences for the attendees’ organizations, so we found a suitable speaker and publicized their keynote. But by the time the conference was held, eight months later, a host of articles in related trade journals had thoroughly covered the issue, and the keynote ended up repeating what had now become familiar information.

What can you do to ensure that prescheduled program topics are still relevant by the time your conference takes place? Not much. I’ve had little success over the years in predicting which topics will still be fresh and exciting when the presenter steps onto the stage. Although, in my experience, sessions on structural issues like the consequences of legal and accounting rule changes are more likely to become dated than sessions that cover new approaches or research.

A long lead time between the publication of a conference program and the conference itself also impacts presenters, who are often required to turn in session descriptions and handouts months in advance, without knowing what might prove pertinent in the intervening months.

Crowdsourcing ensures that your conference session topics are timely.

3. Crowdsourcing avoids seemingly “hot” topics—that actually aren’t

Besides worrying about scheduling topics that will have passed their sell-by date by the time the conference is held, you also need to worry about choosing topics that, while seemingly “hot”, draw little attendee interest come the day of the presentation. How can this happen? Well, sometimes a topic talked up as the “next big thing” just isn’t—it’s hype that attendees largely reject, either before the conference or when they get there and discover from conversations that no one else is really interested either.

Topics can also misfire at a conference when they’re *too far ahead* of audience needs or interests. For example, this can happen at information technology conferences when operating system updates or software applications are first introduced. Sometimes these products are available well before attendees are interested in or able to purchase or roll out the software for their companies. The lead time required to put a program together further complicates the decision of whether or not to feature such topics at a conference. While an experienced and knowledgeable program committee will help reduce this kind of audience-subject mismatch, it’s nearly impossible to prevent entirely.

Crowdsourcing programs prevents scheduling “dud” thought-to-be hot session topics.

4. Crowdsourcing gives attendees the empowerment and freedom to contribute

. . . perhaps the real task of leadership is to confront people with their freedom.

—Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*⁴

At traditional conferences, attendees have very little say in what happens. The event revolves around a set of limited preselected session choices made by a small group. Such an event culture fosters a default passivity, where program committees, not attendees, make decisions.

It’s perfectly possible, however, to offer freedom to conference participants. Crowdsourced designs provide structure and support for participants to determine what they want to learn, share, and discuss. Participants are then free to make the event their own.

Most of us who are asked to try something new feel a natural reluctance or wariness. First time attendees often feel apprehensive about the prospect of taking a more active role. That’s why I think Peter’s phrasing, “confront people with their freedom,” is appropriate. The event crowdsourcing

process offers an environment that gently confronts attendees with their power to influence what happens. In my experience, once attendees experience what it is like to have a real voice in shaping their event, the vast majority of them embrace this new freedom.

Crowdsourcing programs allows attendees to become leaders by contributing and influencing what happens during the event.

5. Crowdsourcing maximizes the likelihood that session content is relevant

Seasoned meeting-goers know that session titles do not always accurately reflect what the session will actually cover. In addition, every attendee has different desires and expectations for a session which may be very different from what a presenter has in mind. Finally, even if a session description is accurate and the issues covered pertinent, a presenter may assume a level of prior knowledge that doesn't match that of the attendees who show up.

As a result, traditional presenters usually have little idea how much of their content is truly relevant and comprehensible to their audience.

Another kind of problem can occur during sessions that are discussions of a topic or issue. Without appropriate facilitation, such discussions tend to be taken over by more voluble participants, preventing the wants, needs, and potential contributions of other attendees from being heard and addressed.

Session crowdsourcing mitigates these problems. The wants and needs of all participants are uncovered, and used to create a session that responds to them as well as possible in the time available. Later in the book, I'll also cover session crowdsourcing techniques that prevent discussion sessions being dominated by a few individuals.

Crowdsourcing sessions helps ensure that session content is as relevant as possible to those who attend.

A crucial change for meetings

Meeting crowdsourcing's many benefits, as I've outlined above, suggest that meeting stakeholders take the following radical step.

*To ensure that conferences and sessions turn into what participants actually want and need them to be, we need to take the radical step of **largely replacing pre-planned meeting programs and presentations with programs and sessions that are developed in real time at the event.***

If you've never experienced an event where some or all of the agenda is developed on site, or a session where the content is shaped by the participants, this change might feel a little scary.

But consider how you currently learn what you need to know to do your job. Do you learn most of it from classroom lectures? Unless you're highly atypical, the answer is *no*! As I explained in detail in *The Power of Participation*, adults now learn most of what they need to know to do their job *informally*: through *peer coaching, personal networks, and self-directed learning*.

An event crowdsourcing success story

The Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) is the world's largest network of business events strategists. In 2015, I facilitated PCMA's Annual Education Conference in Fort Lauderdale. 675 meeting planners attended the three-day event, which included twenty-one pre-scheduled sessions.

I suggested that PCMA experiment with adding crowdsourced sessions to the program. The event team gave me the go-ahead, so immediately after Day Two breakfast I ran *Post It! For Programs* (Chapter 22). In fifteen minutes, hundreds of sticky note topics and offers for sessions were posted on a long wall. A small team of volunteers quickly clustered the topics, picked a dozen, found leaders, and scheduled them for a ninety minute time slot after lunch the same day in various locations around the Broward County Convention Center.

The experiment was a big success; all the sessions were well attended, and greatly enjoyed and appreciated. Many participants told me afterwards how surprised they were that such a simple process could speedily add fifty percent more excellent sessions to a predetermined conference program.

One of the crowdsourced sessions, "Women and Leadership", was so popular that it has now been implemented as a regular feature (*Women @ Work*) at PCMA annual and chapter meetings. The crowdsourcing process uncovered this previously unmet need. Such unexpected discoveries are a frequent outcome from crowdsourcing programs.

Because of the success of program crowdsourcing at this 2015 conference, PCMA now incorporates some form of crowdsourcing into most of its major events.

This means that meetings—where you're surrounded by people who share your professional interests—provide an incredibly rich opportunity for peer-centered learning. During professional meetings you invariably have face-to-face, real-time access to many more peers than you do at work.

Unfortunately, traditional events squander this learning and connection opportunity by defaulting to lecture style formats on pre-planned topics. Attendees sit in sessions and never say a word to each other, while listening to someone speak about something that isn't really what they want to know.

We can do better!

This book shows you how to leverage the wealth of knowledge, experience, and expertise available at a peer event to figure out *early on* what people actually want to talk and learn about, at both the program and the session level. It also covers how to consolidate the resulting learning, to generate relevant personal and group outcomes that lead to fruitful professional change and growth.

These simple and powerful improvements to the meeting process transform traditional top-down events, by providing the opportunity and support for attendees to shape what happens in ways that benefit each attendee as well as the entire group.

What event crowdsourcing is and isn't

The word “crowdsourcing”, coined in 2005⁵, is a term used by writers and businesses to describe ways to obtain goods, ideas, or services from a group of people. Its invention coincided with the rise of the internet, which allows the crowdsourcing recipient, typically a business, to procure from a formal or informal online group of providers. This has led to crowdsourcing being defined primarily as an *online* way to outsource work or wants. Examples include the development of Wikipedia, modern design contests, and crowdfunding.

Of course, the essence of crowdsourcing—using the collective power of a group for creative purposes and to make informed choices—existed millennia before “crowdsourcing” existed as a term. Evidence of such decision-making by groups and social institutions exists throughout recorded human history, and even the development of formal methods for decision-making in business began in the 1950s.

Event crowdsourcing, as I define it, limits the contributing group to those present and active

at an event. Consequently, it's not an asymmetric process like crowdfunding or a product design competition, where a single individual or organization obtains the majority of the benefits created by the efforts of others. Such “traditional” crowdsourcing provides little, if any, benefit to individual contributors; the focus is on what is being created either by cooperation or competition.

The promise and power of event crowdsourcing rests in its ability to create significant benefit in real time for *everyone* involved at an event. Meeting attendees determine and shape what they want to learn and discuss, making useful and appropriate connections with their peers in the process, and receiving real value. Thus, participants are the main beneficiaries of event crowdsourcing. Event stakeholders benefit indirectly through favorable evaluations and, often, the strong meeting community developed, leading to the increased likelihood of holding successful future events.

The resulting participant-driven meetings:

- Successfully address attendees' *actual* wants and needs.
- Help attendees discover and connect with other attendees they really want to meet.
- Are truly relevant to attendees' real issues, challenges, and desired learning.

I have been crowdsourcing meeting programs for almost thirty years. *When implemented well, event crowdsourcing has no downside.* There is no question in my mind that giving attendees the power to choose the content, issues, challenges, and topics that they want to learn about and connect around significantly improves their meeting and session experience, their post-event evaluations, and the likelihood they'll return in future.