

# How to make your conference interactive – without touching tech

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You keep up with event trends. You know what the latest must-haves are on every list.

Livestreams of each panel. A chatbot to answer attendee questions. A virtual game that links to a delegate's FitBit and earns them event-themed special medals for every time they clock in at the main hall.

Sounds great, right?

You also live in the real world. One with budgets, and targets, and no event-themed medal for you for delivering a conference in the spaces that you have, that connects with the real, live humans who show up.

The shiny new toy, the next big thing. When you've been in the industry for a while you get used to seeing buzzy new tech trends come and go. While some – like video, like social sharing – become integral to your planning, others vanish and are not missed.

In fact, you may well find yourself growing resistant to the latest buzzword on principle. *Virtual tickets* break you out in a cold sweat. If *AI* had a face, you'd slap it. You're gritting your teeth at the merest whisper of *gamification*.

Hold that last thought.

Let's unpack that for a moment.

Gamification starts from a key principle: that playing a game is fun, and work (or learning, or absorbing new complex ideas) often is not. Ergo if work, and learning, and absorbing hard new things can be turned into a game, they too will be fun.

It's a good premise. Unfortunately, making something a game doesn't automatically make it fun. Some tasks are not fun.

And no conference is intrinsically better for a delegate because an animated wall personally greets them on arrival, or because they get to press a button to leave feedback instead of writing it down.

What will make a conference better, always, is a great user experience. And that means finding ways to engage your audience that respect their personal areas of interest, support information-sharing, and leave them inspired.

This ebook is here to give you some no-nonsense, straightforward, practical ideas for interactivity in conferences.

They're all well-tested. They all work. They're not only easy on your budget, but also simple to explain and deliver. And none of them will collapse because you can't find an HDMI cable.

Ready to learn how to make your conference interactive – without touching tech?

Let's get started.

# PART ONE

## Technology: what are you using it for?

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### Event tech: why it's great

Hang on: isn't this ebook about not using tech?

It is. But before you delete your Hootsuite password and chuck your tablet in the bin, first let's look at what tech does for you.

## Industry standard

When attendees consider a conference, they have expectations.

They probably find out about it in the first place via email, online advertising, or social media. When they want to know more, they'll seek out your website – for practical information about location, dates and times, what you have to offer.

They might book their ticket while they're there. Or, before they make the decision, perhaps they'll go hunting for testimonials from previous events. They might want to find out more about the local area, too, to see if they can make it a holiday and take in some culture while they're here. If you've done your job well, you'll have made finding those a breeze.

All using tech.

Those expectations continue throughout the run-up to the event, when you'll be keeping in touch with them.

And once they arrive, they'll expect a quick turnaround on registration, reliable Wi-Fi, and rooms set up with high-spec audiovisuals.

## **Engagement, data and metrics**

You can't plan or deliver a contemporary conference without using tech.

A registration system, a marketing platform, a CRM, perhaps a mobile app. You may not be using cloud-based products to run the schedule on the day, or aggregating social media data from individual attendees to tailor your comms. But you will be relying on essential tech from start to finish, whether it's to ensure your rooms are booked or to keep track of numbers.

That finish point is, of course, long after the event itself. And the data accrued will be used to support your next event, and your next.

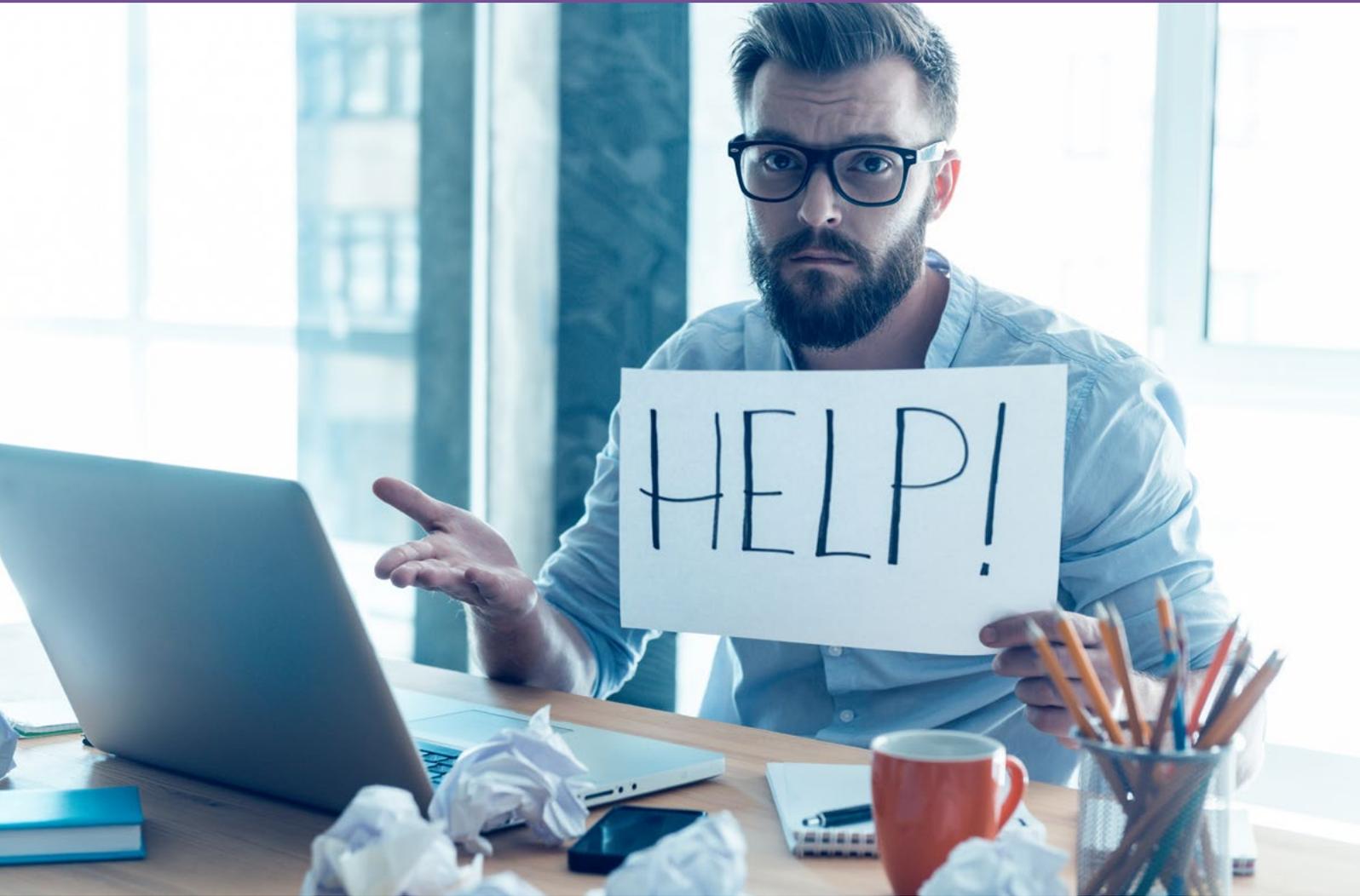
## **Social sharing**

Maybe you hate that everyone's attached to their phone. Maybe you're happily clutching yours tightly. That fact is, social media is firmly a part of your reality – in business as well as your personal life.

An effective social media strategy is as essential as any other element of your event marketing.

# Event tech: why it's not

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## **Failure**

Tech goes wrong.

Not always. Not even all that often.

But sometimes a screen you need to show a friendly welcome message, or a video, or an entire hour's presentation, decides it would rather show the blue screen of death. Sometimes the switch that controls the blinds chooses the most inopportune moment to strand them halfway down a window, leaving blinding sunlight pouring through. Sometimes your very important, very busy high-profile guest arrives and the speakers won't connect.

It happens. And while your delegates know it happens, because it's probably happened to them too, it's never great.

## **Distraction**

That mobile phone you might be clutching happily? Your event attendees will be doing that, too.

Concentration spans are getting shorter. When your presenter is battling for attention against the world's chattiest WhatsApp group, a political scandal unfolding on Twitter and a BuzzFeed quiz to find out which Harry Potter character you are, they're not getting their message across.

And that means a bad user experience, even if it's one your delegates are providing for themselves.

## **False innovation**

Tech trends move fast.

Event budgets, less so. By the time you've learned that the Next Best Thing in event planning isn't flying a drone through your conference to capture video footage of, let's be honest, slightly alarmed people – it's too late to spend your cash on some comfy sofas that will last for five years.

## **Overfamiliarity**

Once upon a time, Powerpoint was new.

No, really.

It was revolutionary for a time to have a visual support to the traditional academic format of a lecture delivered to a passive audience. And there's still a great deal of common sense behind a structured presentation, supported by additional material, easily shared with a large audience.

But it's now ubiquitous in educational contexts, from primary school to university. For millennials, it's a little bit like being back at school. That's not the atmosphere they're hoping to encounter at a dynamic conference.

It's also rarely used well.

# What not to do about it

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## **Total digital detox for attendees**

There's no need for your event to undergo a complete digital detox. Ask your attendees to sacrifice their phones to a secure locker at the start of the day, and watch your feedback scores plummet.

Your attendees want to stay connected to the world outside for myriad reasons you can't know. An unfolding social media crisis for which their office needs their response. Poorly kids at home who need to know they can call for help. A calendar alert reminding them to take medication.

They're not children. You don't need to limit their choices by removing something they care about, perhaps even need.

Instead, make them so invested in what's unfolding around them that only the most urgent message notification will draw them away.

## **Total digital detox for you**

Let's be clear: tech has value.

Business value, before, during and after the day of the event. Practical value, for gathering and sharing information efficiently and engagingly. Enjoyment value, too, when it's used creatively.

You aren't contacting your guests by paper invitation, and expecting a reply delivered by carrier pigeon.

You aren't going to personally track down a guest speaker, fly to the city they live in, and knock on their door to tell them the programme has changed and they now have time for a Q&A.

There's no need to sweep the laptop into the bin in favour of a clean Victorian desk and a spreadsheet written by dip pen and ink.

But it is worth taking a step back, and really thinking about the processes that are enabled by hardware, software, apps and platforms you're using.

## **Not or, but and**

Much of the technology you use on a daily basis is so familiar that you barely register it as tech.

Not the bells and whistles of animojis, Facebook Live, drone footage and social walls.

Phone calls.

Emails and spreadsheets.

Your digital calendar, synced across devices.

Those are all tech, too. Each of which grew from a hands-on, mundane, simple way of working.

Talking face to face.

Handwritten letters and figures.

A desk diary.

And each of which still have their place, even in our mobile-first, tech-driven business world.

You won't need to be persuaded to see the continuing value of face-to-face meetings; the interactions that cement relationships, pin down challenges in twice the time, and allow the 55% of our communication that takes place through body language to actually, well, communicate.

But what about those other two? Handwriting notes and jotting down dates on a calendar?

It might sound retro, unless you're the one person in the office whose desk is covered in post-its, and who isn't allowed the key to the stationery cupboard after that time you got overexcited in the presence of so many pens.

But take the merest glance at the appstore of your choice, and you'll find it stacked with writing apps for business.

While Bamboo, Graphiter et al look like fun for doodlers, they're useful too. When notetaking in a meeting directly onto your phone, tablet or laptop screen, the resulting document can be shared, added to, wiped clean and begun again - all without printing a page.

Windows developed Surface entirely to accommodate the virtues of a laptop with an active stylus able to draw and take notes. They've followed it up with Windows Ink, Windows 10's pen-friendly interface for all touchscreens.

Apps like FluidMath will read your numbers too, and calculate and apply formulae.

And while DocuSign will drop in a faux-handwritten signature for you – one that's legally binding in the UK, US and many other countries - it also has pen functionality.

It's tech *and* it's handwriting.

As for ye olde desk diary...

A paper diary may well be something you've always used, and always will.

If you're in the office right now, have a look around. Chances are there's a year planner on the wall to track staff holidays, significant project dates, office closures: anything which everyone needs immediate, easy access to.

Perhaps you have a branded desk calendar, promoting a product or service you've used. Maybe your business produces one of its own.

Depending on your friends, family, and tolerance for cute animal pictures, you might have a picture-a-day diary to brighten your corner of the office.

Paper is unlikely to be the only method you use to keep track of your week-by-week appointments. In fact, for most of us it's a secondary, parallel or distinct record: one which is primarily for noting personal details like family birthdays, or for a quick visual reference when you want to see how many weeks are left till the end of the month.

But those diaries and calendars aren't going anywhere, even if Outlook, iCal, Google Calendar or even Facebook's events stream seem like they're the boss of you.

It's digital *and* it's paper.

Now you've unpicked how tech and non-tech solutions actually function hand in hand in your day to day life.

Why would you want to throw out one half of that?

There's a simple answer: you don't.

But.

You do want to engage your audience.

You do want to surprise them.

You do want to act consciously when you plan an event, not just reach for the obvious familiar solution.

Read part two to find out how.

# PART TWO

## Tech-free interactive solutions

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In Part One of this ebook, you learned the core reasoning behind a tech-free - or a tech-reduced -approach to event planning and conference delivery.

Unless you skipped ahead to get to the good stuff?

If so, that's fine. No one is going to tell your mum. But if you find the solutions presented here engaging, fun, and persuasive, in principle or in practice, you may still find yourself asked to explain why. Why you aren't using those voting buttons installed at great expense in that one meeting room. Why your budget includes twenty rolls of tinfoil. Why you're not asking your speakers to submit their presentations via email as well as USB just in case – because you aren't expecting them all to bring a digital presentation at all.

When that happens – and it will happen – you want to be well-prepared.

That's when you're going to need Part One.

It's fine. It's still there. Pick it up whenever you like.

(And if you read it already: good job, and you should definitely tell your mum.)

A note on accessibility.

Anyone with additional needs will tell you: a standard conference is a bear to negotiate.

Sure, you can expect the basics: wheelchair spaces, in rooms with accessible doors, in buildings with accessible access and adapted bathrooms. A hearing loop in some locations. Appropriate lighting and taped, marked steps.

But then the lights are dimmed to give a spotlight to a VIP, or to show video.

The breakout sessions begin, on another floor that takes fifteen minutes to reach if you can't easily use the stairs.

Networking happens at a buffet, which needs you to be able to comfortably stand, queue, hold a plate with one hand and fill it with your other, see your fellow delegates at eye-level, and be able to hear well enough to tolerate and filter a substantial well of noise.

And if you need a quiet, private space in which to take medication, adjust equipment, just take some time away from the intensity of a large group – well, those spaces are not easy to come by at the average conference.

One of the ironies of opening up interactive spaces in events is: these things don't necessarily get better.

Not by themselves.

Accessibility never gets better by itself. You have to make it better.

As with any event, it's down to the co-ordinator to envisage an activity from a range of points of view, and to start from the core principle that accessibility means everyone gets to play. Not when you get the call to say a d/Deaf delegate is coming. Not when you learn that movable ramp will be needed. Start from the principle that everyone in your meeting room will have additional needs you need to accommodate.

You're used to helping speakers negotiate language barriers by providing translation, via audio or alternative documentation. You're used to planning ice-breakers to ease social awkwardness; to breaking activities into smaller groups to allow everyone an opportunity to share their view.

Make that accommodating approach your default starting point.

# Open Space

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## Why

Agenda-setting in advance means you attract the right people. Delegates who know what to expect; perhaps book their ticket because of one especially valuable-sounding session, or a guest speaker with a big industry story to tell.

But when you decide for your attendees what's on offer, you may easily miss out on what they can offer one another.

The Open Space approach allows individuals to set the agenda for the day or days of a conference themselves. To ask the questions they really need answers to – not thrown into a Q&A for a three-sentence answer, but given time and space and the energy of others as part of full sessions. To draw on what has been learned in one morning conversation to adapt what should be discussed in the afternoon. To allow an informal movement around groups, limited not by the room-size or schedule but by the relevance of the conversation to you as an attendee.

It's also incredibly empowering for them to feel like active participants, not passive listeners.

## Who

Open Space works best with large groups, from 60 to over 200. It's also effective when you're bringing people together over multiple days.

## What

You'll need:

- A variety of comfortable, accessible spaces: meeting rooms with tables, relaxed seating areas, outdoor space if possible
- A spacious central hub
- In this hub, series of display boards, such as pin boards, marked in a grid showing times of day on one axis, divided into 45-minute sessions, and available discussion spaces on the other
- Cards or paper, pens, and pins for the display boards (or tape, bulldog clips etc)
- Post-its

## How

Prepare your delegates for this approach in advance, so they arrive with an open mind and topics to cover.

At the start of the day, leaving at least twenty minutes to initiate the process, give your attendees the opportunity to post up discussion topics on the display boards, by simply writing a brief description on a card. This can be phrased as a statement, a question, a how-to; there is no single right way.

Other attendees may append their own related ideas to a topic using post-its, or create a new discussion topic of their own. Have a facilitator on hand to keep track of sessions, to encourage those which overlap to merge, and to support anyone who needs assistance accessing the information on the board.

At the starting time of the first session, attendees choose which session appeals to them most. The poster of the topic should be present at the beginning, to kickstart the discussion. After this point, the only rule is the 'law of two feet': you only stay in the room if you have something to learn or contribute. Free-flow between sessions is encouraged – as is amending or adding new topics to the board inspired by previous sessions.

Ensure sufficient breaks are available throughout the day to allow regular returns to the display boards in the hub.

At the close of morning and afternoon sessions, gather for a whole-group plenary where groups can feed back on what's been discovered.

# World Café

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## Why

Big groups of knowledgeable, authoritative, curious people aren't always great at sharing their knowledge, authority and curiosity. They need support.

The World Café approach developed by necessity, and quite by accident.

When a group of business and academic thinkers in California were unable to use their planned venue for a whole-group discussion, they were forced to split into smaller groups clustered around tables, recording their conversation on the paper tablecloths. As the groups moved around to share their ideas, these tablecloths allowed them to visualise the repeating patterns and divergences in their groups, and use these discoveries to intensify and deepen their continuing discussion.

## Who

This approach works well for large groups, with an extended period of time to work in: you'll want at least one hour and preferably more, with a break in the middle.

World Café is also highly effective when you're bringing minds from diverse fields together.

## What

You're going to need:

- A room with individual tables, well-spaced, which can each sit around 4 people
- Lots of paper, as big as possible
- Coloured pens, post-its, stickers
- Starting questions for each table
- A timer
- A facilitator
- In larger rooms, a microphone
- A display area available at the end of the session

## How

Ask your attendees to divide themselves up around the room, making sure each table has at least 3 people. They will be given a question and a set period of time (for example, twenty minutes) in which to discuss the question. Encourage them to record their thoughts visually – using colour, drawing and graphical representations as well as words on the paper. Not everyone finds this easy! Try suggesting they want the paper to be understood by someone who doesn't speak their language.

Set the timer, and use your facilitator to support the interactions.

At the end of the allotted time, encourage each table to write down a new question, which has arisen from their discussion. Then 'harvest' the work done at each table with a verbal feedback session (supported by the microphone if needed).

Each table group then moves around the room, to find their new question. The process begins again, inspired and propelled by the visuals left by the previous group.

When the groups have moved through all tables, leave time to 'harvest' the key points from both the final round of discussion, and the session as a whole. Revisit the original starting questions. You may find it valuable to display the visual representations to the group as a whole, to draw out more patterns and parallels for future discussion.

# Campfire

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## Why

A keynote speaker is your headline act. An industry leader, an authority in their field. The person in the room your audience most wants to listen to.

But not every great thinker is a great public speaker. Few experts will have the time or inclination to produce a presentation tailored solely for your event, and your audience may find themselves sitting through a reading from the VIP's latest book, or an old, not-quite-relevant talk, one they could watch on YouTube. For free. In their pyjamas. Your big hitter might be a total miss on the day – and that means disappointed attendees, and disappointing feedback for you.

As any regular conference guest will tell you, the Q&A is always the best part. The time when – if you're lucky – you get to ask the question you really need the answer to. And – if you're even luckier – the speaker has time to give a genuine, in-depth answer. Campfire places that Q&A in the spotlight. It doesn't replace a keynote speech or on-stage presentation (unless you want it to), but it will give your guests a one-off experience, and some face time with your star.

## Who

This one can't work with a large number of attendees; it's not practical to expect your guest to work through a huge number of tables all eager to have their moment. But if your numbers are fewer than 100, and your speaker is comfortable and on-board with informal interactions, this might be your event highlight.

## What

You'll need:

- An amenable guest speaker
- Round tables, well-spaced in a room that isn't too noisy
- Water on each table

## How

Campfire is simple. After the big speech, give your guest a break; a minimum of 15 minutes, more if you can. Meanwhile, gather your attendees in a new room seated around tables, in groups between 5 and 8, being sure to keep a spare chair at each table.

Your expert then works around the room, taking the opportunity to have a chat with delegates in a smaller, more relaxed setting. If need be, make sure someone's on hand to cue the expert to move on.

# Morph

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## Why

Conferences aim to bring together a range of voices and experiences: ones which can learn from one another. But in a world of opaque job titles and the silo-effect of compartmentalisation, it can be hard to fathom exactly what your fellow conference delegates do. Some individuals thrive more than others in environments filled with new people. Sometimes the loudest voices, not the most articulate or knowledgeable, are the ones which are heard most.

This hands-on activity-based format foregrounds visual thinking and creative analysis over words. It pushes the audience to take a wholly novel approach – to self-assessment, their own role, and to the challenges they are working to resolve. It can also bring the best out of delegates who don't shine in more traditional interactive settings.

## Who

This one is for smaller groups; fewer than twenty works best. It can work well as a breakout session, and even better as an introductory starter, to push attendees to begin the conference with an open mind and a refreshed sense of purpose.

## What

You'll need:

- Ordinary kitchen foil, pre-cut into sheets – budget for one roll between 3
- An enthusiastic facilitator
- That's it!

## How

This activity won't be a hit with everyone in the room at first; that means it needs careful introduction. Your facilitator will explain that they need to leave their preconceptions at the door, and that this hands-on creative process will be fun, but also valuable.

Each attendee is given a sheet of foil, and ask them to sculpt it into what they do at work. Encourage them to get on with the task however they like, even if it seems unexpected or childish. Some will make a simple physical representation of their body, their workplace or some equipment; that's valid and there may be some laughter in the room as the explanations come out for the more surprising shapes. Others will respond immediately to the creative challenge, and use abstract forms to represent ideas, goals and ethics.

It's this creative, indirect representation your facilitator will draw out as they continue to offer more opportunities to mould the foil to represent other key questions, both personal and appropriate to the wider content of the conference: what are our strengths and weaknesses as individuals? what is the public perception of our brand? what are your research goals in this field for the next 2 years?

It should be an upbeat, relaxed setting which generates conversation and opens the door for more open interactivity during the rest of the day.

# Walkball

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## Why

Sedentary desk work is bad for your back, your mental and physical wellbeing, and your attention span. Yet when you attend a conference, chances are you'll be at another desk, sitting, taking notes, working from a screen...

It's not hard to see why by the final session of a day, every delegate in the room is flagging.

Getting up and moving around brings a sense of the unexpected, a change of scene; you might even be fortunate enough to find some fresh air and sunshine. It's great for waking up a session when it's almost lunchtime, or that dreary mid-afternoon slot when the coffee's worn off.

## Who

This works well with small groups of up to ten, who are working on a collaborative project or discussing a topic to which they can all contribute. It can also work effectively in paired groups, using a 'ping-pong' approach from one side of an area to another.

Walkball is particularly valuable after groups have been presented with content that needs analysis.

## What

You'll need:

- An open space, somewhere you can all comfortably move around and talk: a level walkway on the way to a coffee shop; an empty hallway or reception area; somewhere outdoors
- A large brightly-coloured ball – an inflatable beach ball works well – for each small group
- An opening question or statement to prompt the discussion

## How

The group gathers in the space, and whoever picked up the ball first begins the discussion. Everyone begins to travel – towards the coffee shop, the other end of the conference centre, a chosen tree. This works best when there's a real destination in mind. When the first speaker has reached the end of their point or statement, they throw the ball (or pass it). The person to catch it talks next. If they find themselves at a loss, they can ask a question of the group and throw the ball again.

This activity is all about keeping the words flowing and the mind alert to the surroundings. It's impossible to keep the ball in play and be ready to respond without paying close attention.

If you're working in 'ping-pong' style, groups begin at opposite ends of the area, and walk towards one another. This adds an additional element of challenge to negotiate around the other group. It also provides the opportunity for two groups to be discussing the same or a parallel question or problem simultaneously, drawing inspiration from eavesdropping on the other team.

## Capturing outcomes

Your delegates may be accustomed to leaving a conference with a hefty stack of printed Powerpoint slides or links to them, as well as reams of their own notes.

Shifting the tone of your event towards a more experiential approach means less of that. After all, you want the best content to be what was generated by the room, not what was known before you got there.

Even if the experience itself was great, some may feel short-changed by a lack of take-home materials. None of us has perfect recall. After multiple sessions over a day or several, most people will need prompts of some kind to ensure the good stuff doesn't all get left in the meeting room.

That's why it's important to support the capturing of the outcomes of individual sessions and the conference overall.

Some of these techniques will do this naturally. World Café is great for producing an end-of-conference display for the final session. Morph's results won't be as immediately transparent to a wider audience – but it's guaranteed to be a conversation-starter at closing drinks. A Campfire, meanwhile, is all about the live experience; recording it isn't the point.

For those sessions and conferences where there's no integral note-taking process, no slides to share, as a co-ordinator you have the opportunity to get creative.

### **Graffiti Wall**

Since this one's also interactive, it fits seamlessly into a conference that's user-driven. Provide giant pages for attendees to share their takeaways. Give them cues: favourite session, one thing I learned, three words to describe today. Model the kind of notes that are welcome by drawing pictures and adding phrases to the wall before they start.

### **Wall report**

This is similar to the graffiti wall, but it's provided by a skilled individual or team. A business cartoonist will bring a sense of visual fun to an event round-up, using colour and wit to pull together content in an appealing large-scale artwork.

## Resources

Add Live Interaction to Events: <http://eventandconference.co.uk/add-live-interaction-events/>

Event Theming Masterclass: <https://www.eventmanagerblog.com/event-theming-masterclass>

21 Top Tips on Organising a Business Conference: <https://www.thebcec.co.uk/single-post/2016/10/06/21-TOP-TIPS-ON-ORGANISING-A-BUSINESS-CONFERENCE>

Keeping Your Attendees Engaged at Events: <https://www.eventmanagerblog.com/keeping-your-attendees-engaged-at-events>

Engaging Room Layouts: <https://www.eventmanagerblog.com/engaging-room-layouts>

4 Encompassing Trends in Event Design: <https://www.eventmanagerblog.com/4-encompassing-trends-in-eventdesign>

Is Nonverbal Communication a Numbers Game?: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beyond-words/201109/is-nonverbal-communication-numbers-game>