

How to hold a conference people love

People



As a company that generally says “ no” to most things, a few years ago, we decided to take a leap and say “ yes” to a hosting a conference, that has forever changed the trajectory of our business.

The key to our success so far has been doing conferences our way. While many companies decide to partner with other companies give into temptations of maximizing revenue, we decided to do the opposite. Meaning, we don’t take on any sponsors, rent vendor halls, require badge scanning, or make sales pitches - there’s no noise. Our strategy is long-term—win the community, win the day. Four years later, our conference not only sells out, but people fly in from all over the world, and are eager to get involved.

Although our conference is focused on email design, I’ve listed a few things we’ve learned along the way that can apply to any company interested in running a successful event.

Don’t accept sponsorships

Sponsors take away from conference experience. There are, of course, plenty of exceptions to that rule, but we’ve found that it’s best to keep events focused entirely on the content, the speakers and the attendees. Event sponsorship tends to add clutter to the zest of the event; we’ve found that focusing on the attendees gets the most value. This strategy can work well for both user conferences and industry events as long as you aren’t focused on maximizing revenue.

Think about it this way: If you wouldn’t load your product with affiliate ads or publish sponsored content on your blog—why should your events be any different? As the CEO of a venture-backed company, I’m well aware that

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we're leaving money on the table. And that's okay. If we aimed to squeeze every last drop of profit out of Litmus or the email community, our company and our customers would suffer. Conferences would be so much more useful if the attendees and their companies weren't milked for every penny.

Always put the community first

Who does your conference serve? Considering the attendees will help focus the purpose of the conference and allow you to truly create an event that's in the best interest of your target audience.

Instead of paying big bucks for keynote speakers, which would force ticket increases, consider asking your community for pitches and recommendations about speakers they'd be interested in learning from, or tapping industry thought leaders to speak. Favoring expertise over status has also helped us create an environment that is inclusive and open.

At every fork in the road, ask, "does this speaker or deck have the community's best interests in mind?" If the answer is "no," move on to the next submission.

Get creative about partnerships

Not accepting sponsors can be limiting, but it can give you the freedom to try something new, without tying your hands. There can be some friction involved with planning and attending conferences; on one hand you have people who want to come, but can't afford the admission, hotel, flights, etc. On the other hand, vendors want to invest in your event. What's the solution?

Creating a patronage program can offer opportunities for both attendees and vendors. For example, vendors can “ sponsor” a person that otherwise would not be able to attend, fostering true learning and networking. Furthermore, attendees are likely to remember the goodwill of the vendors, more than they would an elevator pitch.

The business case for a community-driven conference

Is holding a community-driven conference worth it? The short answer is yes. And here are a few reasons why:

Face Time- Meeting customers in person can make a huge difference and helps translate how much you care about your work and industry. After meeting customers, they’re more likely to reach out for help when they get stuck, read your blog and recommend you to a friend.

Branding- Branding is a vague word, especially in the startup world -- however, the perception of branding is important. Encouraging attendees to tweet from your event, share their presentations online and blog about their experience afterwards, will enhance your brand perception. The halo effect, while difficult to quantify, works.

The Community- Investing in your community can be difficult to measure in terms of monetary value. However, creating an environment where people can teach, learn, and grow can be rewarding in so many ways besides revenue.

Team Camaraderie- Events are a great excuse to bring teams together for a few days. Everyone works hard, but also gets to celebrate, too. Gathering
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your staff's collective energy for one great event helps to strengthen existing bonds between colleagues and create new ones, especially as companies grow.

These learnings have helped create an experience and environment that people are truly excited about. Instead of a conference that tells people what to do, simply facilitate a forum for a community to share their expertise and experiences with their like-minded peers.